

Contra Costa farmers lose foothold

- East County growers struggle with financial hardships brought by regulations, development

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Meredith Nunn is ready to fence up her 19-acre fruit orchard and quit farming in East Contra Costa County.

Because her property is within the county's protected agricultural core, Nunn is not allowed to operate a bed-and-breakfast on her farm. She can't build a small restaurant or host events there, either.

Nunn can't even sell pastries, pies or jams from her roadside stand, which she says would help put more money in her pocket.

Once passionate about farming, Nunn's hopes for thriving in the agricultural heart of Contra Costa are fading.

"I'm going to close down," said Nunn, 41, who has operated the Farmer's Daughter Produce fruit farm for more than 20 years. "I want to keep it, but I need to make some money; you need other niches in the market to compete."

Like Nunn, many small farmers say they are struggling to survive in an era in which development has gobbled up acres of rich farmland and county laws continue to cripple growers economically.

At the same time, the globalization of food production has pinched farmers' profits while the cost to operate a farm continues to rise.

In Contra Costa, a region dominated by small family farms, growers pump nearly \$300 million annually into the local economy, according to agricultural studies. Yet the average income per farm in Contra Costa County was \$42,000 in 2002, according to the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

Without more moneymaking opportunities within the agricultural core, including agriculture tourism and agriculture-supported business, some growers question whether East County is an economically viable region to farm in the long term.

"It's increasingly difficult to justify farming," said Kristie Knoll, who grows fruits and vegetables on her 10-acre farm along Highway 4 outside Brentwood. "I would hate for farming to not exist in East County, and we're headed in that direction."

Development has already pushed many growers out of Contra Costa County, where the number of farms has declined by about 30 percent in the past two decades, according to a 2007 Contra Costa County/Brentwood Agricultural Marketing study.

As the region lost its farmland, agriculture-supported businesses in East County also disappeared, forcing farmers to travel as far away as Stockton for farm supplies and equipment.

Gradually, farming faded into the background of housing developments and suburban coffee shops.

"It's a new aspect of agriculture: the survivability of farming on the edge of an urban area," said Al Sokolow, public policy specialist emeritus at the University of California Cooperative Extension. "It's an issue that must be addressed."

Despite the challenges, some say East County farmers are well-positioned to prosper with their diverse crops of fruits and vegetables. Once located 50 miles away from the nearest metropolitan area, farmers are now situated in the backyard of growing urban communities that are demanding local produce, agriculture experts say.

"I find this is an ideal location to succeed in farming; we have the finest soils and the greatest climate," said Al Courchesne, owner of Frog Hollow Farm in Brentwood. "It can be done."

There are now untapped opportunities beyond local farmers markets and the annual U-pick events, which draw thousands of Bay Area residents to Brentwood's fruit orchards for a fruit-picking frenzy.

Many farmers are eager to create a booming agricultural hub in East County. The envision it as a destination with wineries, bakeries, bed-and-breakfasts and farm stays, which are currently not allowed within the county's 12,000-acre agricultural core.

"If it promotes farming and it promotes farmers, I don't see what's wrong with it in the ag core," said Knoll, who wants to have a small restaurant on her farm. "It doesn't make sense the county would keep this from happening."

It's a tricky balance many counties are facing: protecting valuable farmland from development but not so much that it puts farmers out of business, said Kurt Richter, a graduate researcher with the University of California Ag Issues Center.

Historically, Contra Costa County has resisted easing restrictions for farmers in the agricultural core, intending to preserve and protect Contra Costa's most productive soil, county officials said.

"There is a strong concern from the Board of Supervisors on allowing any breach of that ag production," said Supervisor Mary Piepho, who represents portions of East County. "In lifting the restrictions, some perceive that as opening the floodgate of losing highly valuable farmland."

The county Board of Supervisors in 1978 created the agricultural core, which lies east of Brentwood. In 1991, supervisors tightened restrictions in the core, limiting the land to farming and some recreational activities.

But as the farming industry evolved and profits dwindled for some, farmers began demanding more flexibility. They wanted wineries, olive oil mills and commercial kitchens.

The county two years ago lifted its ban on wineries and olive oil mills within the core, yet farmers say slow-moving bureaucracy and high fees have hindered many vintners from building wineries. To date, the county has approved applications for three wineries and one olive oil mill. A winery is currently under construction in Byron, county planners said.

Piepho said she is working to lower fees specifically for wineries and olive oil mills so that vintners will be encouraged to open wineries here instead of going to Livermore.

Meanwhile, farmers have operated roadside stands illegally, selling produce and nonagricultural products that are not allowed within the county's agricultural core, including bottled water and soda.

"It was driven by the desire to survive," said Ken Hagan, a Brentwood fruit farmer who says he has a second job because farming accounts for only 5 percent of his family's annual income. "If you can't make money from (farming), why do it?"

County supervisors said they are working to help make farming in East County more profitable without compromising the purity of the agricultural core.

The county is set to review a new ordinance to allow farmers to operate larger roadside stands where they can sell a wider variety of produce within the core. It also would permit growers to have commercial kitchens, where they could process produce to make jams, pastries and pies, according to county planners.

"It's well-recognized that the best stewards of agricultural land are farmers and ranchers," said Patrick Roche, a county planner working on the roadside stand ordinance. "If they can't stay in business, then all your efforts to preserve farmland will be frustrated."

Contra Costa growers point to regions such as El Dorado County, a booming agricultural area dominated by small family farms. There, growers are allowed to operate wineries, commercial kitchens, dining facilities and bake shops on their farms.

They also can host special events and public tours, all of which regularly draw people to El Dorado's agricultural area, said Bill Stephans, agriculture commissioner for El Dorado County.

Although the soils might not be as rich in El Dorado County, there are still highly productive areas that need to be protected from development and commercial activity, Stephans said.

However, there are ways to allow farmers to thrive with agricultural businesses and tourism while protecting productive farmland, he said.

For instance, El Dorado County limits agricultural-supported activities and businesses to five acres or 50 percent of the property, whichever is smaller, and planners heavily scrutinize proposals so that events or buildings are not compromising the area's most valuable farmland, Stephans said.

"It's the only way to promote and protect agriculture," Stephans said. "You have to give them a little leeway to allow some of these activities to take place."

But it's going to take more than loosening land-use laws to help make farming viable in East County, agricultural advocates said.

There needs to be a greater investment in directly linking farmers and consumers, said Kathryn Lyddan, executive director for the Brentwood Agricultural Land Trust, a local nonprofit group working to preserve farmland and promote agriculture in East County.

BALT created the "Buy Fresh, Buy Local" campaign, a program designed to get restaurants and businesses to buy fruits and vegetables directly from local farmers, Lyddan said. So far, two businesses have signed up.

But the overall effort to market local produce has been stunted by the lack of money, Lyddan said, adding that the campaign has been entirely funded by grant money.

"We have no financial support to continue the project," Lyddan said, adding that local governments have not committed any money to the "Buy Fresh, Buy Local" campaign.

The organization's efforts were stifled when the Brentwood City Council recently decided to strip city money from BALT, suggesting the group become more self-sufficient, Lyddan said.

Brentwood collects developer fees that are used to buy land conservation easements, which further protect farmland from future development. The city tapped some of that fund, spending nearly \$600,000 in the past four years on administrative costs for BALT.

City leaders said Brentwood should not be entirely responsible for putting money toward East County agriculture.

"We need the county involved much more than they have been," said Brentwood City Councilman Erick Stonebarger, who is also a local farmer. "They can't be absentee landlords."

County supervisors said they are starting to make a bigger push to introduce East County produce to new local markets.

Supervisor John Gioia, who represents West County, said he envisions bringing East County produce to low-income communities in North Richmond where fresh fruits and vegetables are scarce.

"We know it's an economic challenge for agriculture to continue to exist," Gioia said. "I think we all could do a better job to make Contra Costa a destination."

But farmers cannot count on politics to play to their favor. With very little political clout, East County farmers will have to form a cohesive, organized force to push their agenda forward, agricultural experts say.

"Frankly, the problem is that (farmers) have experienced so much adversity that they don't have the visions for success," Courchesne said. "The system has worked against them. There's a belief it's hopeless."

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