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**Farmers in the Brentwood Region of Contra Costa County Are Poised to Take Advantage of Consumer Demand for Local Food, New Report Finds**

**San Francisco -**

SAN FRANCISCO -- Growing consumer demand for fresh, local food offers Contra Costa farmers with profitable new markets, according to a new report produced for the Brentwood Agricultural Land Trust and the Contra Costa Wine Grape & Olive Growers Association.

The report looks at the local agricultural industry's financial struggles and identifies ways farmers can improve their economic fortunes, including marketing their products as "local" to six million Bay Area consumers who are increasingly concerned about the quality, environmental impact and safety of the food they eat.

While the report offers a stark description of how Contra Costa farmers have been squeezed by the forces of rapid development, consolidation of agricultural businesses and increasing global competition, the report suggests that the tide may be turning for the small scale family farmers of East Contra Costa County.

Between 1984 and 2004, Contra Costa County saw more than 20,000 acres of agricultural land, including 9,100 acres of prime farmland, converted to residential and commercial uses as population growth soared. Rising global competition has depressed agricultural prices at the same time farming costs have increased. As large supermarket and discount outlets have proliferated, farmers' share of consumer spending has dropped from 30 percent in 1970 to 19 percent in 2000.

"For the past 150 years, the Brentwood region has been one of California's premier agricultural areas because of its excellent climate, ample water and rich Delta soil," said Kathryn Lyddan, executive director of the Brentwood Agricultural Land Trust. "Now the diversity of crops produced in East Contra Costa County and the proximity to Bay Area markets make Brentwood farmers well positioned to take advantage of increased demands for fresh, local food. The report finds that, with stronger marketing and timely reforms to some of the county's rules prohibiting agricultural enterprise activities, Brentwood farmers can be more competitive in the local marketplace."

The Brentwood Agricultural Land Trust and Contra Costa County Wine Grape and Olive Grower's Association commissioned the report last year using grant funding from the U.S. Department of Agriculture. The report will be presented to the Contra Costa County Board of Supervisors and the Brentwood City Council in an effort to seek their help in addressing the critical farming issues in the county, particularly in the Brentwood region of East County.

Among the report's key recommendations is to reform county zoning that restricts agricultural enterprise activities within the 12,000-acre County Agricultural Core near Brentwood, Oakley and Byron. The County Agricultural Core is where most of the county's prime farmland is located, although there are other areas throughout the county where farming is being revived.

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The county is currently considering lifting some of the restrictions by allowing farmers to operate expanded roadside stands and make and sell jams, jellies and other value added products, all of which are currently prohibited under county zoning. However, the pace of change has been frustratingly slow as farmers have watched their profitability decline and the acres of productive farmland dwindle.

"Ironically, the restrictions were created to help protect disappearing county farmland," said Tom Powers, chairman of the Contra Costa Wine Grape & Olive Growers Association. "Now, they are preventing farmers from the kinds of reasonable entrepreneurial activities that are necessary to ensure their survival and the long-term viability of our valuable agricultural industry."

According to the report, the time is certainly right for Contra Costa farmers to take advantage of changes in the marketplace and consumers awareness about the importance of local food. Health and safety concerns about industrial farming practices and the environmental impacts of global food distribution have generated growing consumer demand for fresh, locally grown agricultural products. Increased understanding about the importance of healthy eating in preventing obesity and other health problems is also expected to drive consumers to include more fresh fruits and vegetables in their diet.

The report recommends that farmers create a regional, place-based marketing campaign that directly tells consumers in the Bay Area marketplace that the food they are buying was grown right in their back yard. Twenty-five local farmers already have begun participating in a "Buy Fresh Buy Local" marketing campaign that the report concludes provides a good way of identifying locally grown food for consumers.

The report also recommends that growers, the majority of whom operate small family farms, explore partnerships and growers' collaborative to help them meet the demands of large wholesale and retail markets. The report identified institutional buyers, including schools, hospitals and local employers, many of whom are adopting local food purchasing policies, as an important new market.

"Contra Costa has a long, rich agricultural history," Lyddan said. "This report and the recommendations in it give us a good roadmap for ensuring that farming in Contra Costa has a healthy future."

The Contra Costa Wine Grape and Olive Growers Association will be discussing the report and its recommendations at its annual meeting on Wednesday March 7, at 6 p.m. at the Tamayo Family Vineyards in Brentwood.

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