

Redefining Environmentalism

Ever since the passage of the Clean Water Act and the Environmental Protection Act nearly 50 years ago, the rise of environmental consciousness has spread throughout the next generations of Americans. More than ever we are aware of our footprints on the environment, our use of resources including water, and our conservation of critical species to the balance of natural selection.

Until recently, this environmental cause was led by organizations and non-profit groups that established after the passage of the legislative acts into law. In many instances, these legislative vehicles have become weapons to stop growth, limit the harvesting of timber, and dedication of private property to habitat. While there have been some benefits such as improved surface water quality and recovered species, there has been more litigation and conflict generated than in any of the centuries prior to these laws taking effect.

But now we're seeing a change in how the environment is being managed. More collaborative efforts are coming together to manage resources, find solutions that make sense and allow for development and working environments, with common goals that benefit multiple groups and users collectively. There seems to be a widening gap of those who collaborate well from those with extreme, my-way-or-no-way approaches to environmental solutions and improvements.

This new collaborative effort includes local agricultural producers who are early adopters for many new farming practices and conservation methods, and that are forming alliances with environmental groups to further the protections of our resources and habitats. Sustainable farming is no longer just a buzzword but something that many farming operations and ranches have implemented as part of their 'company culture' throughout their workforce and marketing efforts.

While the Salinas Valley boasts some of the most fertile soils of the state, if not for modern farming and conservation practices in place there could be no bounty of yields each year. Healthy soils, along with water and climate, are key to successful crops, and local farming operations have implemented crop rotations and other practices that ensure soil health for each successive year of production.

Water use has become critically analyzed during and after the past drought, one of the worst ever recorded in our state. Yet, here in the Salinas Valley we managed our water resources to provide irrigation supplies for crop production, mainly due to the highly developed water systems in place during the past seven or more decades. Estimates of recent groundwater extractions put us at only 4% off sustainable yield, which is less than 25,000 acre feet per year. This has been achieved through conservation efforts utilizing micro-irrigation and implementation of the Castroville Seawater Intrusion Project (CSIP), as part of a larger water management strategy. While we aren't quite there yet, we are within achieving sustainable yield by implementing low-hanging fruit projects (pun intended) such as clearing the Salinas River Channel of exotic and invasive vegetation.

More than ever farming operations are aware of what they put into the environment. Crop protection tools are more benign than ever, targeting specific pests and diseases with little impact to other parts of the environment. In our global economy, it is critical that we not harbor exotic pests and diseases as they are imported; we need to be at the ready to ensure that a pest with no known natural predator doesn't escape into our environment unmanaged. Think Dutch Elm disease or, more recently, citrus greening, that have nearly destroyed entire species of trees.

So now its time to re-envision the term environmentalism for it's not just about stopping development, conserving resources, or protecting species, but its about managing our working environment for the benefit of food production. Our hungry nation demands constant feeding with a healthy, safe, and affordable domestic food supply that depends on farming operations producing fresh veggies, berries, protein, and fiber every year. Who better to do this than the local farmer who understand the importance of a healthy working landscape?

From the time our country was founded, farming has been an important part of our economy. Up until the last century, when the industrial revolution took hold, farmers were in the majority of citizens and provided food for not only their families but for growing urban centers. Now that less than 2% of our country's population claims farming as their livelihood, yet feed the other 98% each year, farming has truly become a model of how a working environment can benefit both humans and nature.

Consider this as you learn more about some of the benefits of farmers and ranchers as environmentalists today. It's no longer just about plowing the soil and planting some seeds; the modern farmer or rancher is truly the original environmentalist as there is so much at stake if the balance of nature collapses and our food supplies dwindle.