

VENTURA COLLEGE

AN ECONOMIC ANALYSIS OF AGRICULTURE IN VENTURA COUNTY

Pacific Agribusiness Alliance Meeting Report

The entire October 15, 1996 breakfast meeting of the Pacific Agribusiness Alliance was devoted to a presentation of the Hansen Trust study entitled "The Value of Agriculture to Ventura County: An Economic Analysis." The presenter Larry Rose, President of the Ventura County Agricultural Land Trust and Conservancy, *highlighted the following items as the major contributions of agriculture to the Ventura County economy:*

- Agriculture is the leading industry in Ventura County.
- Ventura County currently produces nearly \$1 billion in annual agricultural sales. *Every year the industry generates \$1.25 billion for the local economy* via 20,000 jobs, crop processing, shipping and other related industries.
- *Ventura County is one of the world's most productive farmlands.* The mild climate, throughout the year and fertile soil enables farmers to harvest many fruits and vegetables more than once a year.
- Although Fresno ranks first in California and the nation in total agricultural sales; the *net return per acre in Ventura County is almost three times that of Fresno County, due primarily to the use of technology.*
- Ventura County produces 61% of all lemons and 20% of strawberries grown in the State of California.
- *On the national level, Ventura County produces 47% of all lemons and 15% of all strawberries.*
- Strawberries produce the highest gross returns per acre, \$29,000 in 1994. Other high value crops, for the same year, include celery, \$8,300 per acre; lemons, \$7,400; avocados and peppers, \$4,500; and cabbage, cauliflower, lettuce and spinach all grossing over \$4,000 each per acre.
- Fresh fruit exports in Ventura County rose from 50,000 tons in 1992 to 178,000 tons in 1994. *The Port at Pt. Hueneme is fast becoming the nations leading international exporter of citrus fruit.*
- Net income return per farm in Ventura County is about \$40,935; three times the United States average.
- Ventura County, compared to other Southern California areas, is self sufficient, with little dependency on state water and has not participated in federal crop subsidies.

Agricultural Land Use

Ventura County farms and ranches currently occupy 321,000 acres or 29 percent of county land. About three-fourths is used to grow fruits and vegetables. The growing loss of prime agricultural land in Ventura County was a major topic of discussion. The study outlines the following:

- Over a ten year period, 1984 to 1994, Ventura County lost 7,500 acres of classified prime agricultural land to urbanization; with an additional grazing land loss of 3,600 acres.

- The major portion of prime agricultural land is geographically located in the unincorporated areas of Ventura County, making the Board of Supervisors key policy decision makers on the land use issue.
- During the 70s and 80s Ventura County lost 10% of its agriculture land to urbanization compared to 80% lost by San Jose and the Santa Clara Valley.
- The increasing value of land in Ventura County has been the major source of conflict between developers and farmers. According to the study, twelve farms were sold for \$25,000 per acre between 1990 and 1994; establishing a price too high for local farmers to compete for the purchase of the land.
- According to Larry Rose "New technology has allowed farmers to grow the same amount of produce on less land, or grow orchards on hillsides once thought inaccessible or too steep to irrigate." "But we've gotten to the point where we don't have the flexibility anymore." (taken from page 5 The Broadcaster Magazine/ Fall '96).

Solutions

The report notes that the farmland protection policies of Ventura County are among the most aggressive and far-reaching in the state of California. The County's "Guidelines for for Orderly Development" urges development towards the cities and away from the unincorporated areas where the bulk of agricultural prime land lies (taken from page 17 The Broadcaster Magazine/ Fall '96). These policies need to be followed and effectively enforced by city and county planners.

The "Local Agency Formation Commission," was created by the California legislature in each County for the purpose of "discouraging urban sprawl and encouraging orderly government boundaries." This commission needs to be consistent, better organized and strong in all its deliberations and planning mechanisms. The commission needs to take seriously the mandate which has been entrusted to it.

Finally, Sheri Klittich, Hansen Trust manager who sponsored the Agricultural Economic study hopes the information will be utilized by elected officials along with county and city planning departments for serious economic impact implications of current and future urban development programs. The desired goal is effective and smart planning so as not to destroy the County's existing rich and thriving agricultural economy.

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