



Supporting the Urban Foodbelt

WHY IT MATTERS AND WHAT IT NEEDS TO FLOURISH

VIP Tour Event Summary

On October 29th, 2021, the Sonoma County Chapter of the Community Alliance with Family Farmers (CAFF) invited local elected officials and other decision-makers to the 2021 CAFF VIP tour. Guests heard directly from producers and urban agriculture advocates about the benefits and challenges facing food production in and around urban areas in Sonoma County. The event sparked a number of conversations about what can make a difference to the success of our local farms, and how important it is to create policies and regulatory systems that support their success. Leadership and advocacy are key to the future of sustainable urban agriculture. Please read on to learn more!

PANEL #1 - PRODUCERS

The VIP Tour, which took place at host Merlin Coleman's historically farmed property in Cotati, opened with a welcome from Evan Wiig, CAFF Director of Membership & Communications, and Wendy Krupnick, Vice President of the CAFF Sonoma County Chapter. Our first panel featured [Sarah Keiser](#) of [Wild Oat Hollow](#), [Suzi Grady](#) of [Bounty Farm](#), and Wendy Krupnick on behalf of [Tierra Vegetables](#), three urban farms located here in Sonoma County. The following are some takeaways.



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TABLE 1 - Panel #1 - Producers

<p>1. Farms can be viable at any size</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Smaller parcels are often dismissed as not worthy of ag designation or protection, but even a 1/2 acre property can be a viable, productive farm, and policies need to reflect this.• Small operations are not immune to the pressures that affect larger operations. For example, predator conflicts affect small farms as much as they do large farms, but the laws don't reflect that.• Parcels not in primary agriculture zones lack "right-to-farm" protections.• The CA Community Food Producers Law passed in 2014, setting a common standard for regulation of small farms. Codes that were written prior to that time need to be updated to reflect these updates.• Viable pathways must exist for gardeners with excess produce to transition to commercial farming, either as supplemental income or as a future livelihood. <p>2. Zoning considerations</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• City zoning codes should be in compliance with the CA Community Food Producers Law to support urban agriculture.• Right-to-farm protections would encourage more production in AR and RR zones.• Zoning maps need to be developed with on-the-ground knowledge; the mapping process must include ground-truthing zoning designations to check for existing agriculture and opportunity areas.	<p>3. Urban farms benefit local residents</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• People want farm stands within walking distance of where they live.• People want to have a say in how the produce they eat is grown and growing locally allows for that option.• Neighborhoods have varying cultural tastes and needs, and growing locally allows greater responsiveness to those communities.• When living near urban farms, neighboring families learn about food production from planting seeds to harvest, soil care, and labor in action.• Access to locally grown food means fresher food is available and community food security is increased.• Growing locally reduces transportation impacts and costs.• Grazing can reduce fire danger and control invasive weeds; community grazing programs connect neighbors, save residents money on mowing and supply local animal products. <p>4. Urban areas impact farms</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Urban farms are surrounded by urban infrastructure, and agriculture is sometimes blamed for issues that originate in those urban surroundings.• For example, water run-off from impermeable surfaces can overflow onto farms, with downstream effects that are then blamed on the agricultural operations.• While urban farms provide a social and educational opportunity for members of surrounding communities, engaging with visitors can impact the efficiency of urban operations.• Urban farms can also become a place of refuge for unhoused individuals, and can be affected by vandalism, both of which can have negative impacts on the farming operations.
<p>5. Economic Success Factors</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Urban farms use a diversified approach to achieve economic success.• At Tierra Vegetables, sales outlets include the CSA, farm stand, and sales in San Francisco, which adds considerably to farm income. They also have a commercial kitchen and make value-added products, which are sold both at the farm stand and online.• Value-added products increase revenue/sustainability, whether produced on site or with a co-packer, restaurant, or other method. For example, Wild Oat Hollow Farm creates an outstanding line of body products from their goat milk, using herbs and other materials that they have bought from other local farms.• Sonoma County farms are well situated to provide specialty crops to restaurants and buyers that serve the Bay Area.• On-Farm Days, tours, and workshops are other options for income.	



FARM TOUR

The tour welcomed the VIPs to see a portion of Merlin Coleman's eight-acre parcel. The tour was led by Farm Manager [Jibril Kyser](#), who studied agroecology as a Conservation and Resource Studies major at UC Berkeley, and has farmed in several countries. Originally zoned for agriculture, this parcel had been changed to RVL zoning some years ago. A coalition of local organizations, including CAFF, recently succeeded in their [petition](#) to the Cotati City Council to change the zoning code to allow for commercial agriculture in the city. With this change, Coleman and Kyser will be able to continue with their farm on a portion of the property.

During the tour, Kyser noted market diversification as a key to the business strategy of the farm, such as through sales to farmers markets (across the Bay Area); to a farmer co-op aggregator, FEED Sonoma, that provides an outlet to small as well as larger scale producers; to Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) members; and via a farm stand. He also spoke about how he plans to differentiate his business by growing and selling organic Afrikan heritage crops for the CSA and farmers markets; as well as for restaurants and grocery stores in the Bay Area. The farm will also donate produce to low income community members.

As for barriers to urban farming, zoning codes for farm stands were discussed. Farm stands were emphasized as being a crucial part of an urban farm's business model, as they enable farms to sell directly to their neighbors. Farm stands provide a local source of food that can help mitigate disruptions in the supply chain brought on by climate change, shipping interruptions, and other issues. Whether within city limits or on a rural parcel that is not zoned primarily for agriculture, the ability to have a farm stand can also create a neighborhood hub, increase access to fresh produce, reduce travel to grocery stores, and provide additional income to producers. Zoning codes should allow for farm stands wherever appropriate.

Another barrier to urban farms that was discussed is access to processing. Processing is essential for farmers who want to reduce waste and increase the resale value and shelf life of their products, for example by turning tomatoes into pasta sauce. However, many processors require a larger quantity and uniformity of product than small urban farms can typically provide. Allowing alternatives, such as processing on-site, or zoning for shared processing space, is key to the economic viability of our small farms.

PANEL #2 - URBAN AGRICULTURE ADVOCATES

The second panel focused on the benefits of urban agriculture and the policy changes needed to support it. [Janeen Murray](#), Director of [GO LOCAL Sonoma County](#), opened the discussion, speaking to the need to recognize the economic benefits of smaller farms. Economic resilience, she noted, is tied to local self-reliance, including that of food grown locally. [Julia Van Solen Kim](#), North Bay Food Systems Advisor for the [UC Cooperative Extension](#), spoke next. She has been researching urban ag at the local, state, and national levels. With her colleagues, she has developed valuable resource materials for urban farmers, available through the [UCANR web site](#). And finally, [Suzi Grady](#), Program Director for [Petaluma Bounty](#), described the ins and outs of running a non-profit farm in the city. Please read on for takeaways from this discussion.



TABLE 2a - Panel #2 - Urban Agriculture Advocates

<p>1. Economic Resilience</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">● Economic Data<ul style="list-style-type: none">○ Consumer buying makes up 70% of our economy.○ With \$2.1 billion spent on food and beverages annually in Sonoma County, we're only 5% self reliant on fresh food in Sonoma County.○ This indicates tremendous room for improvement for increases in: self reliance within our food system, local economic activity, access to fresh local food, and jobs in the food sector.○ Oliver's Market found that there's a 2 times greater economic impact when we purchase locally produced food from a locally owned grocer; and that in 2019, 29% of their Cost of Goods Sold were paid to local producers, supporting the enterprises of local farms and producers.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">● Economic resilience is tied to local self-reliance, which is supported by growing food locally.● Economic resilience also depends upon businesses of different sizes surviving, including microbusinesses.● To encourage microbusinesses to stay in Sonoma County, we need to make zoning regulations and information more easily accessible and understandable.● Another aspect of resilience is prioritizing the purchasing of local food for disaster response and recovery, as during emergencies supply lines may be disrupted or slow to respond.● Sales benefit not only the farms themselves, but they also circulate revenue in the local community and the entire region.
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TABLE 2b - Panel #2 - Urban Agriculture Advocates

<p>2. Climate Change</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Urban agriculture can reduce the intensity of urban heat islands.• Climate-beneficial ag and regenerative ag reduce greenhouse gas emissions and increase biodiversity and positive health outcomes.• These practices can also increase carbon sequestration (such as in grasslands/rangelands), which can help to mitigate the effects of climate change.• Agricultural practices that reduce emissions or increase sequestration of greenhouse gasses can be used to produce carbon offsets, offering an additional source of income for farmers.• It is important to build urban ag into climate plans. <p>3. Relational Model vs. Transactional Model</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Both non-profit and commercial operations have important economic benefits; relational, non-profit models bear the additional costs of supporting the local social infrastructure.• Non-profit urban ag plays a large role in the local social infrastructure through food distribution, maintaining CalFresh programs, and by providing job training and support for the local workforce.• Relational models also focus on equity and inclusion, cultural interests, and building the next generation of food advocates and enjoyers. <p>4. Ag Land Incentives and Succession Planning</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• For farms to succeed in the long run, the speculative value of land must be stabilized in order to ensure affordability, especially for new farmers.• We should incentivize urban farms through tax breaks and other support. Incentives and support for small farms should also be equivalent to that received by existing larger operations.• Agriculture should be integrated into new development projects. Examples include agrihoods, community land trusts, and co-housing models with easements or shared outside space.• To increase neighbor rapport, educate communities on what cities and counties can gain in quality of life, when ag is situated in urban neighborhoods. <p>5. Ideas from the UC Cooperative Extension (UCCE) - pdf</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Make zoning and regulatory information accessible.• Develop a transparent process for use of city-owned land.• Create an urban agriculture incentive zone.• Update zoning to make it urban-ag friendly.• Make water accessible while promoting efficient use.• Provide guidance and support for soil testing and remediation.	<p>6. School Programs</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Schools provide examples of urban settings where farmers and schools can collaborate on programs. For example:<ul style="list-style-type: none">○ Integrating gardening and farming programs into school curriculums offers a wide range of benefits to students and can provide a new avenue to land access for urban farmers.○ Working with farmers, schools can create summer garden programs for students to harvest and cook food grown on the school grounds, so that students can see the full cycle of farm production.○ Students get excited to eat fruits and vegetables that they grow, even if they refused to try them prior to learning about and experiencing a school garden.• Other reasons for farmers and schools to collaborate:<ul style="list-style-type: none">○ Allowing full-time farmers to farm on school land provides an opportunity to use the land for production while in parallel maintaining an educational school garden program.• How to create successful school programs:<ul style="list-style-type: none">○ Provide dedicated funding to school districts for implementation of school garden programs.○ Jurisdictions could work collaboratively with the County Office of Education and SRJC to implement educational programs.○ Jurisdictions could additionally work to aggregate and streamline program responsibilities, by creating a dedicated staff position(s) to provide oversight and continuity to a network of school farming and gardening programs.• Some resources on supporting school gardens:<ul style="list-style-type: none">○ National Farm to School Network○ USDA Grants and Loans○ USDA FNS Office of Community Food Systems○ How Cooperative Extension Professionals can support Farm to School Programs○ Community Food Systems Fact Sheets○ Sonoma County School Garden Network○ The Edible Schoolyard Project <p>7. Agricultural Education & Outreach</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Community engagement is higher when communities have the opportunity to learn about agriculture through activities and events, such as Ag Farm Days.• Local markets experience higher sales when events are held on-site, as customers want to support what they connect with.• Examples of markets connecting the community with local agriculture include: Singing Frogs Farm hosting workshops, Dahlia & Sage Market hosting events, and Penngrove Market selling locally made products.
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IMAGE 1 - Panel #1 - Producers



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IMAGE 2 - Farm Tour



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IMAGE 3 - Panel #2 - Urban Agriculture Advocates



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The Farms Represented in Panel #1

WILD OAT HOLLOW (Penngrove)

- **Size:** Approximately 2 acres
- **Outlets:** Local Stores, Online Sales
- **Other activities:** Grazing Cooperative, Classes, Value-Added Products, Buy from Local Producers (for use in their products)

PETALUMA BOUNTY FARM (Petaluma)

- **Size:** Approximately 3 acres
- **Outlets:** CSA, Farm Stand, Restaurants, Low-Income Boxes
- **Other activities:** Education, Food Gleaning, Internships

TIERRA VEGETABLES (Santa Rosa)

- **Size:** 20- acres
- **Outlets:** CSA, Farm Stand, SF & Santa Rosa Farmers Markets, Local Chefs
- **Other activities:** Value-Added Products, On-Site Kitchen

Wild Oat Hollow is a "regenerative family farm located in Sonoma County, CA. We practice sustainable, soil building methods to produce climate beneficial skin care products, fiber goods & we provide consulting services in ecological land stewardship and fire mitigation. We sustainably manage our pastures with prescribed grazing, working to increase plant root depth and sequester Carbon from the atmosphere into the soil. These grazing and farming methods keep our pastures greener, increase water absorption in the soil, create habitat for wildlife and keep our creeks flowing longer." They also run a Community Grazing Cooperative.

"Bounty Community Farm is located on approximately three acres near downtown Petaluma. Surrounded by four affordable housing sites, this green oasis is the hub and heart of our activities where we grow more than just nutritious food. We also grow skills, leadership, hope, and we promote understanding of sustainable agriculture and its role in a healthy food system. We employ sustainable agricultural methods to cultivate over 12,000 pounds of vegetables and fruits."

"Through drop-in volunteer work, academic internships, Sonoma County Eco-Youth Corps (a job training program for youth), service learning projects, corporate workdays and more, everyone participates in making our community more food secure. The majority of our produce goes to low-income families and seniors in our community who would otherwise not be able to afford locally grown food."

"In addition to growing diversified and unique market crops and some of the sweetest strawberries in the county [at Tierra Vegetables], the farmers also specialize in a vast array of chiles and sweet peppers, dried beans, and dried corn varieties for popcorn, cornmeal and masa. Lee and Wayne bring the harvest to market through the Tierra Vegetables CSA Program, as well as selling produce at the Farm Stand located in the Big White Barn on the farm itself, and at the San Francisco Ferry Plaza Farmers Market on Saturday mornings; Tierra produce can also be purchased at the Santa Rosa Original Certified Farmers Market on Wednesdays only. A variety of local and regional chefs also regularly source their ingredients at the farm."

"The folks at the farm have been practicing the tradition of food preservation performed for generations by farmers and families alike, bringing in the bounty of the harvest and preserving it through canning, freezing, drying and other forms of processing, thereby increasing the ability to consume and enjoy produce grown at the farm throughout the year... there is little or no food waste from a bountiful crop!"