



EDITOR'S COLUMN

"The care of the Earth is our most ancient and most worthy, and after all our most pleasing responsibility. To cherish what remains of it and to foster its renewal is our only hope." - Wendell Berry

The protection of native salmon in our watersheds, the environmental importance of responsible grazing to produce food, adapting to an energy-challenged future, and the education of our children about family farming are all part of the diverse mix of agricultural activity today in Marin County.

Our farmers and ranchers are caught in a whirlwind of economic and production pressures mixed with changing environmental, cultural, and consumer trends. The demands of global commodity agribusiness affect our farmers and our environment directly. At the same time, the desire and demand for local, sustainably farmed foods has blossomed into mainstream living.

Caught in the middle, our family farms are beginning to look for ways to adapt to this new landscape. Schools, hospitals, restaurants, and campuses are lining up for local healthy food. The teachers and staff of San Pedro School went out of their way to

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Good grazing benefits Bay Area grasslands

Just about one half of the total land in Marin County is agricultural, about 167,000 acres. All but a few hundred of those acres is used for the grazing of cattle and sheep. Grass from wildlands, open space, farmed pastures, hay and silage feed about 33,000 head of cattle. The real land managers are the ranchers and their animals, and the importance of good range management practices can't be underestimated. Sheila Barry from the University of California Cooperative Extension has just finished conducting research on the beneficial effects of grazing on public lands. Her scientific and documented research is also applicable to our county and bioregion.



To conservationists, it seemed like a good idea. Pull lumbering, voracious cattle from grasslands acquired for preservation, and the land will return to its primeval glory.

However, natural California has changed in the last 200 years. The changes have given non-native plants an edge over native species when there are no cattle grazing the land.

University of California Cooperative Extension (UCCE) natural resources farm advisor Sheila Barry has researched the modern evolution of California grassland and low-impact rangeland management techniques. She works closely with land managers in the Bay Area, which is now witnessing a resurgence of managed grazing on open land.

A major benefit of grazing open grassland is fire fuel management, Barry said. However, she believes an even more important outcome is improving the habitat for threatened and endangered species, such as the red-legged frog, the California tiger salamander, the Western burrowing owl, and the Golden Eagle.

Even insects profit from grazing. Barry considers the Bay Checkerspot Butterfly to be the "poster child of grazing benefits."

"It's a classic story," she said. "The only remaining populations of this butterfly are on grazed lands. In areas that were specifically set up for conservation and where cattle grazing was eliminated, the butterfly populations have disappeared."

In ancient California, ground sloth, bison, camels, mammoths, mastodons, and oxen survived on a diet of native flora. When these large herbivores became extinct about 10,000 years ago, pronghorn antelope, black-tailed deer, tule elk, grizzly bear and small mammals continued to impact California grasslands.

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Marin farmers go to school

Dec. 7, 2006, San Pedro Elementary School, San Rafael

Four hundred kids and the dedicated staff at San Pedro Elementary school were treated to an all-organic, locally-produced lunch through a project from UC Cooperative Extension, San Pedro School, the Marin Schools Food Service Director Miguel Villarreal, and Marin Organic. The added bonus was not just local organic food, but the farmers themselves, who showed up to talk to both the student body and the school staff. Liz Cunninghame from Clark Summit Farm in Tomales talked about the environmentally positive methods of free range grazing that she employs for her organic egg production, and the benefits of pasturing her cattle, hogs, and chickens on green grass. Peter Worsley, a Point Reyes Station vegetable grower,

talked to the teachers and staff about the importance of good organic farming practices and how his methods produce healthy and nutritious food. Liz Daniels from Cowtrack Ranch mingled with the enthusiastic students and talked to them about farming. These kids are very bright. One fifth-grader asked Liz, "Just how long does it take to organically certify your farm?"



The organic, locally-produced lunch was a huge hit with the students. While munching fresh carrots and veggies, a group of kids sang a beautiful song in honor of the farmers and displayed hand-painted posters in appreciation of our agriculturists.

Bringing the farmers to school provided them with a vivid picture of the importance of making farm-to-school connections. Educating farmers about the importance of their products in the children's diet and overall well-being is as important as school kids and food service workers understanding the farmer's role. They are two sides of the issue. Let's hope the fresh local food at this event and the connection between the kids and farmers will grow into a balanced and healthy food and social system for us all.

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The discovery of gold in 1848 caused a population explosion in the state, a population that brought with it a hunger for meat. The ranch industry boomed. Under more intensive grazing, and with long-distance travel becoming commonplace, non-native plant species, mostly from Europe, became the dominant plant species on California grassland. Today, only 5 percent of plants on grassland are native species.

"The European plants are very prolific and very competitive," Barry said.

"Removing domestic grazers does not make them go away."

Early ranchers, perhaps instinctively, began managing their cattle using a combination of fencing, water trough placement, and salt licks to disperse the livestock over the range. That helped control the most problematic exotic plant species.

"We don't know if the ranchers really understood all the benefits of these common practices, but we now recognize what can be achieved when grazing is carefully managed using these and other techniques," Barry said.

Local conservation organizations and environmental groups became alarmed by poorly-managed, overgrazed pastures, trampled plants, and eroded hillsides in the 1990s. They pushed to acquire grassland and remove the cattle. However, a landscape of unsightly coyote brush, poison oak, and pampas grass generating abundant fuel for potential fires wasn't the outcome they were looking for. Working with UCCE, the California Farm Bureau Federation, U.S. Department of Agriculture, Natural Resource Conservation Service, and consultants, the groups began to develop a plan for reintroduction of grazing.

This is not the first example of public lands being managed by grazing. Barry said the East Bay Parks District owns and manages 100,000 acres. They graze 7,000 cattle on 60,000 acres of the land. Cattle also graze the San Francisco Bay National Wildlife Refuge in Fremont and land around the San Antonio and Calaveras reservoirs owned by the San Francisco Public Utilities Commission.

Barry credits ranchers' efforts over the years to implement conservation-minded management practices for illustrating the benefits of grazing to control vegetation and preserve wildlife habitat on public land.

"These land management agencies are conscientious about the total ecosystem impact from grazing," Barry said, "just as ranchers have been for decades." *Reprinted from-UC ANR News ucanrnews@ucop.edu*



Doug Gallagher, Warren Weber, and Annabel Lenderink with their new solar installation that powers the farm

Solar powered Star Route Farms

On November 10, 2005, UC Cooperative Extension put on a workshop called, "Alternative Energy on the Farm." The presentations were informative and fascinating. At one point, John Williams from Frogs Leap Winery stated, "You cannot afford not to install a solar system on your farm." Definitely a bold statement. John operates his winery from a solar energy system, and related to the audience of farmers that between federal, PG&E, and state funding sources, significant savings helped implement a renewable energy program.

In the audience that November were Warren Weber and Doug Gallagher from Star Route Farms in Bolinas. Warren and Doug aren't hasty in bringing spanking new enterprises to the farm. After all, they have been successful and viable for 34 years, so they definitely have a handle on things.

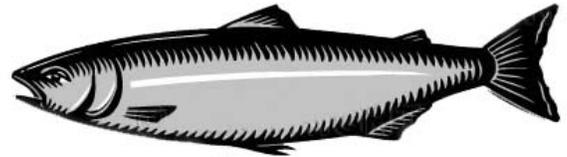
So it was no surprise that they would set up half of their operation in solar power this fall, just one calendar year from the first workshop. Today, the shining cluster of solar panels that have been planted between the culinary herbs and romaine lettuce have a strangely aesthetic feel about them. Warren says, "I was really surprised at how natural they seem here right in the middle of the farm. They provide us with power to run our farm so quietly and efficiently." This blend of traditional horticulture and twenty-first century clean technology just seems to feel "right."

The solar power installation will be paid off by 2009, and all the power from then on is without a bill from PG&E. Warren recommends that if you are thinking of going solar for your operation, now is the time to do it as the subsidies, both from PG&E and the federal government, are beginning to be reduced. He says, "After all, you can't afford not to."

Salmon Safe certification available in Marin County

Marin Organic is pleased to introduce its newest program "Salmon Safe" - a certification program designed to verify local producers' environmental stewardship of waterways and riparian habitats. The program is the result of a partnership between Marin Organic and Salmon Safe Oregon, in collaboration with the Environmental Action Committee of West Marin.

"This is an important program for Marin and beyond," Marin Organic Executive Director Helge Hellberg said. "There are many in this county who are pleased that the Coho salmon have returned. Marin Organic's Salmon Safe seal is another layer of verification that our local and organic producers are excellent stewards of the land."



Hellberg points out that the program is not just for organic farms, but for any local producer that uses non-toxic, integrated pest management practices and meets the Salmon Safe standards. Salmon Safe certified operations follow strict guidelines developed over three years by California Certified Organic Farmers (CCOF.org) and Salmon Safe Oregon (salmonsafe.org) to ensure that the wild Coho salmon and Steelhead populations in Marin's waterways continue to grow and flourish.

Through the program, Marin Organic offers certification to producers, technical assistance if needed, and incentives in the form of a recognizable label which designates a product as grown with the health of local waterways and their residents in mind.

"We are excited to be involved in partnerships that support both environmental concerns and sustainable agriculture," Executive Director of the Environmental Action Committee Fred Smith said. "Salmon Safe is a great example that environmental sustainable practices can be beneficial to businesses."

"This program demonstrates that collaborative efforts and mutual understanding can result in an improved environment, farming viability, habitat improvements, enhancement of biodiversity, and the protection of threatened and endangered species," Marin Agricultural Commissioner Stacy Carlsen said.

Eleven operations have been inspected to date and should be fully certified by mid-February. Producers interested in participating are invited to contact the Marin Organic office at 415-663-9667. - Sheila Foster

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bring local Marin farmers into their classrooms to share with the children their farming experience. Star Route Farms is moving into the energy-conscious future of agriculture by running their 80-acre farm on renewable solar energy. Marin Organic is hosting one of the first environmentally friendly eco-standards, with their "Salmon Safe" certification to marry organic agriculture with beneficial environmental management.

Another kind of management is featured in the main article, **"Good grazing benefits Bay Area grasslands."** Along with threatened species preservation, renewable energy efforts, and building healthy food systems, our traditional ranchers are managing 167,000 acres of agricultural lands in an increasingly challenging economic environment. They are not only food producers, but land stewards as well, and are an important element of environmental and agricultural growth and sustainability. Less understood and perhaps farther away from us than renewable energy and endangered species preservation, the importance of good grazing as beneficial land stewardship and the sustainable nature of grass farming benefits us all in quieter ways. - *Steve Quirt, editor*

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News from Marin County farms, ranches, and producers

- ☞ **Organic Farm Worker Position** for Chinese Medicinal Herb Farm. Part-time skilled farm and nursery worker. Harvesting skills, knowledge of farm machinery, irrigation, nursery work and physically fit. English or Spanish speaking. Wages commensurate with experience. Resume to pschafer@sonic.net, or call 707 765-9611.
- ☞ **The 2007 Niche Meat Marketing Conference** is scheduled for March 20-21 at the Chico State Farm. Presentations and group activities on processing, organic production, meat goats, sheep, pet food, and marketing are scheduled. A panel on 3rd party certification will help you learn more about these programs. Keynote Speaker: Paul Willis, Niman Ranch Pork. Contact Roger Ingram at rsingram@ucdavis.edu, or 530-889-7385
- ☞ **Straus Family Creamery has a new website:** <http://www.strausfamilycreamery.com/> The family-owned creamery will be introducing a 1% lowfat milk in glass quart bottles soon.
- ☞ **UC Cooperative Extension** is announcing the availability of several **student intern positions for spring and summer**. Applicants should be familiar with local agriculture and also media savvy. Call **415 499-4204** or email inquiries to wsquirt@ucdavis.edu.
- ☞ **The 1st Annual Artisan Cheese Festival** is planned for March 9-12, 2007, at the Sheraton Sonoma County Petaluma Hotel. Activities include presentations by celebrated cheesemakers, an Artisan Gala Dinner, and the opportunity to sample and buy handcrafted products. For more info and to purchase tickets: www.artisancheesefestival.com - Call 707-283-2890.

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