

Transitioning to Organic & Sustainable Agriculture in Marin County

*Report to the Clarence E. Heller Foundation and the University of
California Sustainable Agriculture and Research Education Program*



UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA COOPERATIVE EXTENSION

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TRANSITIONING TO ORGANIC & SUSTAINABLE AGRICULTURE IN MARIN COUNTY

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California Sustainable Agriculture and Research Education Program*

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Section 1: Statistical Profile of Organic Farming in Marin 2002-2004

Organic production continues to grow in Marin County as more conventional and first-time growers transition to certified organic operations. Consumer demand is fueling increases in certified organic acreage, registered growers, and gross value. In a recent survey conducted by UCCE Marin, 61 percent of growers surveyed indicated an interest in transitioning to organic practices. In response to the grower interest in transitioning to organic practices, the Marin Agricultural Commissioner created a USDA-approved organic certification program in late 2001, and Cooperative Extension created a new position, the Organic and Sustainable Agriculture Coordinator, in 2002. Farmed organic acreage in Marin has increased dramatically from 2000 to 2004. The overall picture for continued growth of organic agriculture is getting a further boost from more conventional farmers and ranchers who are interested in transitioning to organic practices.

- *Figure 1* reflects the geographic locations of organically farmed parcels in Marin County. The following bullets and graphs provide more detailed numerical data.

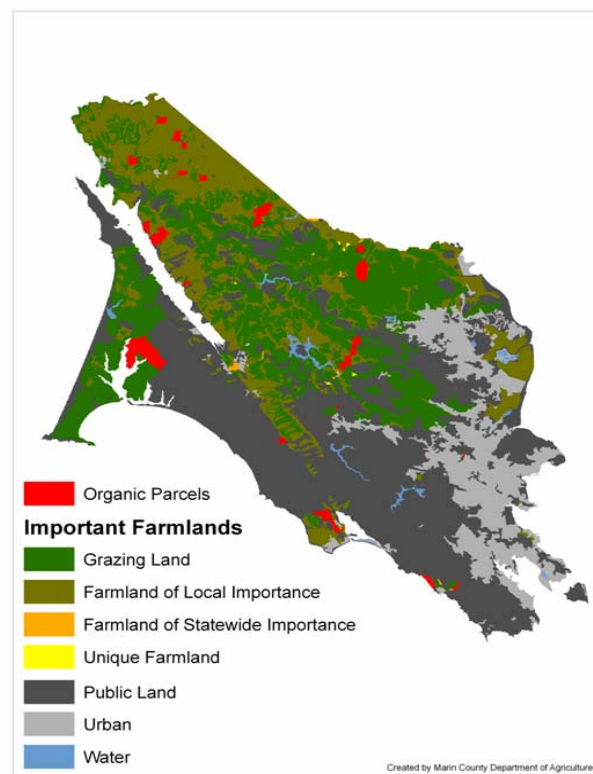


Figure 1. Organically farmed parcels in Marin County 2004

- *Figure 2* shows that farmed organic acreage in Marin has increased from 357 acres in 2000 to 2,330 in 2003 (Marin Crop Report 2003). As of November 15, 2004, there are 2,530 acres in certified organic acreage (as reported by Anita Sauber from the Marin Agricultural Commissioner's Office), with another 2,000 acres pending.

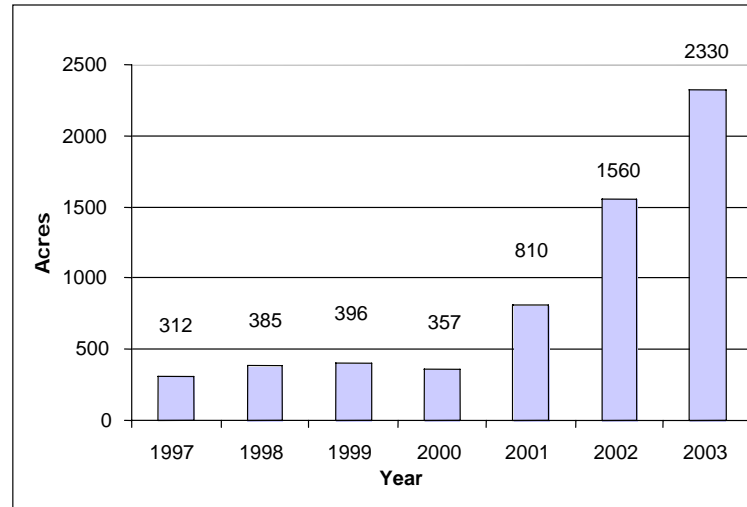


Figure 2. Farmed Organic Acreage in Marin

- Certified organic growers increased from 23 in 2000 to 37 in 2004, an increase of 35 percent.
- Organic production (includes animal and crop production) gross values increased from \$3.2 million in 2000 to \$3.98 million in 2003 (see *Figure 3*).

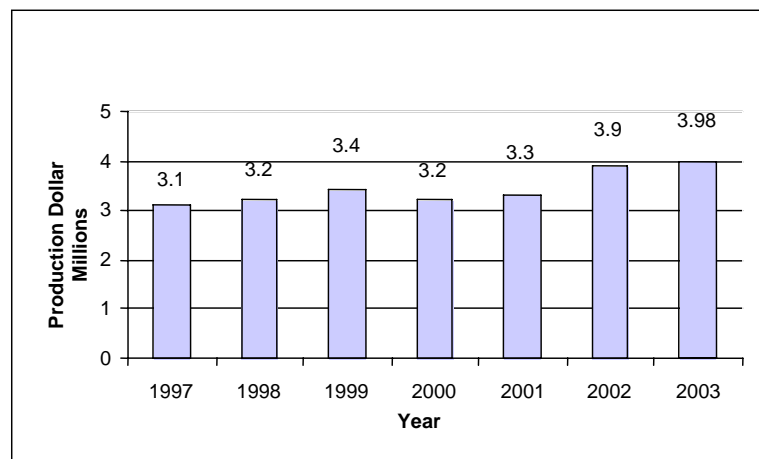


Figure 3. Organic Gross Crop Value in Marin

- The top ten value crops in 2003 (Marin Crop Report 2003) were dairy products and fluid milk, beef, cattle, turkey parent stock eggs, cool weather greens, strawberries, oil olives, potatoes, vegetable starts, tomatoes, peppers, and pumpkins.

- Membership in Marin Organic, a local organic farmers' guild and marketing label, increased from six in 2001 to a current membership of 40 local producers.

Section 2: Organic Production Field Research Activities

In 2002 we surveyed the farms and ranches in Marin County to determine current practices and trends. The report provides a current profile of Marin County agriculture — the producers, their farms and ranches, their products and markets, and plans for the future. The report is available online at <http://cemarin.ucdavis.edu>. The data in this report are the result of a four-page, 35-question survey mailed to 186 Marin County agricultural producers in July 2002. A total of 95 producers returned completed surveys for a response rate of 51 percent. A \$6,000 UC intern scholarship grant allowed us to hire Charisse Corda, a senior in ag business from Chico State, to conduct this survey. Survey results confirm many positive aspects of Marin County agriculture - from the variety of products being grown here, to the increasing interest in organic production. It also revealed the troubling fact that a majority of Marin agricultural producers either find their operations marginally profitable or unprofitable.

Respondents reported that:

- A majority of Marin County agricultural operations are family owned
- The average age of producers was 54 years
- 27 percent have protected their ranches with agricultural conservation easements and another 19 percent are considering a conservation easement for their property
- Only 2 percent do not intend to keep farming
- 63 percent of agricultural operations were unprofitable or marginally profitable
- 44 percent rely on land leased from other owners
- 64 percent consider farming to be their principal occupation
- 78 percent own their own land
- 86 percent had between one and four family members involved in their operation
- 71 percent have a family member who is interested in continuing ranching or farming
- 60 percent are working on farm succession plans
- 90 percent have no plans to sell all or part of their property within the next five years
- 29 percent have added new productions or enterprises over the past five years
- 46 percent indicated that they farmed all or part of their operation organically
- 24 percent are making value-added products

In addition, of 83 respondents, 27 percent (22) said that they farmed all of their operations organically and 19 percent (17) farmed part of their operation organically. The remaining 54 percent (44) do not use organic farming methods. When asked about their interest in transitioning their operations to organic, 33 percent said that they were interested and 28 percent said maybe. Thirty-nine percent said that they were not interested. Of those interested in transitioning to organic, respondents asked for: assistance with certification (37 percent), help with organic methods (31 percent), more information on various crop or variety opportunities (22 percent), and 9 percent asked for assistance with animal parasiticides, antibiotics, and financing.

Field Consultation and New Crop Development

Marin County has a diversified crop history. Most of these crops were lost by 1960. In the early 1970s, sparked by the organic and back-to-the-land movements, row and truck crop operations returned to the rich alluvial bottomlands of Bolinas and a few other locations, to become the foundation for the current expansion of diversified farming operations in Marin today. These farms are growing cool-weather vegetables. Now, with the heavy demand for organic products by consumers, coupled with increased local competition, diversification strategies have become important. The “*Grown in Marin*” Farm Diversification Program helps farmers diversify and fill new market niches. As with the grass-fed beef program, UC Cooperative Extension and the Sustainable Agriculture Coordinator, Steve Quirt, have been key players in bringing knowledge and expertise to the field, resulting in an increase of product in local markets.

Field Trials and Organic Transitions

Transition #1 – Lunny Ranch, Point Reyes

Historic “G Ranch” is located on the Point Reyes peninsula within the Point Reyes National Seashore. The Lunny family ranch is currently transitioning its 300-pair beef operation to organic, beginning with recent certification of 1,400 acres of prime coastal pasture. Three generations of the Lunny family are diversifying the entire operation with the guidance of Steve Quirt, including the recent trial planting of four acres of organic heirloom green globe artichokes, cane berries, and mixed vegetables. The farm-marketing plan includes an educational farm stand.



Kevin Lunny and his father check one of the 500 heirloom artichokes that they obtained in Davenport, California. Steve Quirt and UC Specialist Sean Swezey helped access the rootstock and continue to advise with planting, growing, and harvesting.

Transition #2 - Sartori Ranch, Tomales

The Sartori Ranch has been a family dairy for four generations. The dairy was closed in 2000 and converted to a replacement heifer operation. In 2002, Russ Sartori decided to transition eight acres of prime, fertile, alluvial pasture to organic strawberry production. The combination of cool coastal Mediterranean climate, lack of traditional pests and pathogens, and a close-by market hungry for premium quality organic produce has made the operation a profitable and successful example of transitional organic agriculture. Steve Quirt and Specialty Crops Advisor Paul Vossen have assisted Russ with cultivar selection, pest problems, and marketing direction.



Organic strawberries from the Sartori Ranch, Tomales

Transition #3 - Poncia Ranch, Fallon

Al Poncia runs a 900-acre cattle and sheep ranch in northern Marin County. Al has fostered a profitable and environmentally sound alliance with organic potato grower David Little by leasing certified pasture for farming. When the spring grass dries out, David plants his potatoes, harvests in 80 days, and then reseeds for winter cover. In the spring, the cows come back to graze the cover crop, then David moves to another field, allowing for a three-year rotational program. This combination of rotational grazing, row crop production, and reseeded make for an ideal situation for both the farmer and the rancher. Steve Quirt helped to broker the farmer-rancher lease.



Al Poncia of the Poncia Ranch and David Little of Little's Organic Potatoes

Section 3: Producer and Consumer Outreach

The *Grown in Marin* program has had excellent press and media coverage since its inception in January 2002. Workshops and other events are regularly advertised in the local daily and local county weeklies. Summaries and excerpts from some of those features can be found at the *Grown in Marin* website at <http://growninmarin.org>. A recent feature was co-authored by Ellie Rilla and Steve Quirt in the *Coast & Ocean* magazine (summer 2004). The article is titled: *Grown in Marin Sets New Course for Coastal Agriculture*. It can be found at <http://ceres.ca.gov/coastalconservancy/coast&ocean/summer2004/pages/one.html>. Our program was also featured in an article in the summer 2003 edition of *California Agriculture* that can be found at <http://danr.ucop.edu/calag/0303JAS/editover.html>.

Grown in Marin Newsletter

Beginning in April 2002, we published 15 bi-monthly newsletters to our house mailing list of 600 along with 400 loose pieces that get distributed through our collaborators (see list of

collaborators under “Grown in Marin Website Directory”). All 15 issues are available in PDF form on our website <http://cemar.in.ucdavis.edu>.



The newsletter has been very successful and has become a regular pipeline and educational tool for the growing population of farmers and sustainable agriculture partners. The newsletter connects farmers, school lunch programs, educators, non-profit organizations, and decision makers, and provides for cross-fertilization of these groups. We have used contributors in each issue from the Agricultural Commissioner's Office, Marin Organic, and the Marin Food Systems Project, thus strengthening our county-wide collaborations and partnerships.

Grown in Marin Website & Directory

The site became active in July of 2003 and has since received 12,000 hits. The site catalogues 36 producers and describes the operation, product availability, and other information, such as farmers' market schedules, resources, support organizations, farm stays and tours, agricultural history of the county, and the ability to search the farms for products by keywords. An under-the-hood study of website statistical tracking shows that visitors to the site are looking for information about Marin County agriculture, about specific farms, about specific crops grown in

Marin County, and about the history of local agriculture. The site is updated weekly and contains a library of recent articles written about producer members. Colorful postcards highlighting the site are made available to all the producers and collaborators for use at public events and workshops.

We also provide a guestbook where users can tell us about our site. On November 9, 2004, teacher Lisa Hanley from Laurel Dell School wrote, *“I used your site for research and information for my second grade class at Laurel Dell School in San Rafael. We are preparing for our farm field trip through MALT. We love the pictures.”*

And on November 1, 2004, *“We have used your website to teach our fourth graders about the farms in Marin County. Thank you for spending the time and energy putting this together for everyone to use!”* says Patti Smith-Knippert of San Rafael.

The newsletter can be accessed at our office website or at the *Grown in Marin* website, as PDF downloads. The site also lists relevant events in a calendar that is updated weekly.

The web-based guide is part of a county initiative to help connect our local producers with local consumers. While our offices took the lead on this project, the following organizations are participating in and providing guidance to this project.

Website partners include:

Marin Organic
Marin Agricultural Land Trust (MALT)
County of Marin
UC Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education Program
UC Small Farm Center
Marin Food Systems Project
Marin County Farm Bureau
Marin Agriculture Commissioner's Office



The funders are credited on the site, in each newsletter, and on all other public outreach documents and mailers.

Section 4: Workshops, Presentations, and Other Activities

Grown in Marin Farm and Ranch Diversification Workshops

Fourteen workshops have been offered over the past three years. They included the following topics:

Medicinal Herb Farming

Farm Diversification

Organic Strawberry Growing

Direct Marketing of Farm Products

Organic Row Crop Farming

Small Animal Agriculture

Organic Certification

Cut Flower Production

Adding Value to Farm Products

Growing Indigenous Micro-organisms

Cover Crops and Soil Fertility

Organic Olive Production

On-farm Composting

Seed Saving

The combined attendance for the fourteen workshops was 650, and combined approval rating for all workshops based on evaluations was 88 percent. During the most recent workshop, *Seed Saving*, held on November 4, 2004, 12 Spanish-speaking participants attended as the workshop was delivered in English and Spanish.

These workshops are extremely popular. Farmers and ranchers have learned and put into practical application knowledge gained through over 40 speakers, including UC Extension specialists, experts from the agricultural industries, and trade professionals. A total of 81 percent of the attendees said they would use the knowledge they have gained in their operation. Local farmers and sustainable agriculture advocates



come together to mix and talk shop. Information and cultural exchange are key elements of the program. The success rate has been very high, and the farmers are asking us to continue the program.

Other Presentations

Steve Quirt presented informational sessions at three high schools in Marin County, giving an overview on local agriculture that reached 150 students. He has given keynote addresses and panel talks at College of Marin and Santa Rosa Junior College to bring the vision of local sustainable agriculture to many students. Both Ellie Rilla and Steve have given presentations on

the *Grown in Marin* program at the 2002 Healthy Foods Forum, the 2003 Bioneers Conference, the 2004 Ecofarm Conference, and they presented an educational poster at the 2004 Biological Control conference at UC Berkeley and at numerous other local events.

Producer Workgroups

In 2002 we began the formation of informal workgroups to get resources and results to our producer base by utilizing UC Cooperative Extension specialists, agricultural professionals, and local governmental agencies to meet the needs expressed to us by local farmers and ranchers.

- The **Grass-fed and Organic Livestock Workgroup** formed in the spring of 2002 to address the needs of an emerging interest in raising and marketing organic and grass-fed natural beef. This group of local producers assisted in the development of a cost of production study through UCCE and a government certification program through the Marin County Agricultural Commissioner's Office. The production study is accessible as a PDF from the UC Davis Ag Economics Department site at

<http://coststudies.ucdavis.edu/>. The

program is considered a stepping stone toward developing an organic certification program for Marin

livestock. Today, we have 3,400 acres of beef operations that both have been (or soon will be) organically certified and grass-fed certified. Two producers are in the process of certifying up to 500 cow/calf units. This is a direct outcome of the Grass-fed Livestock Workgroup. The group also contributed comments to a concurrent health study co-sponsored with Chico State professor Cindy Daly and Marin-Sonoma livestock advisor Stephanie Larson. The results are available online at

<http://www.csuchico.edu/agr/grsfdbef/>.



- The **West Marin Compost Workgroup** was formed in the summer of 2002 to address the need for a commercial certified organic composting facility in West Marin. This workgroup has developed a long-range plan to build and operate a compost facility in Nicasio. Currently, a pilot project is operating on the LaFranchi Ranch, and Kevin Lunny, a Point Reyes Seashore rancher, is planning an on-farm facility in Inverness. The Compost Workgroup meets at the UC Cooperative Extension office for working meetings and to consult with both the Agricultural Commissioner and UC staff.
- **Miscellaneous ad hoc workgroups** have included a new farmers' workgroup, a young farmers' workgroup, and a dairy and cheese workgroup.

Taking Charge of the Future Conference:

This November 2004 event was a day of national and local speakers, practical workshops and a social mixer for our next-generation farmers, ranchers, and agricultural leaders. Its purpose was to explore ways for young people to remain connected to their agricultural heritage, while offering ideas and options for expanding interests and horizons in farming and ranching in Marin and Sonoma counties. The presentation consisted of:

- A keynote session with Neil Koenig, nationally recognized author on family businesses
- A fast-paced mix of twelve concurrent workshops with 30 speakers on topics such as:
 - Grass-fed and Specialty Livestock
 - Options for North Bay Dairy Farmers
 - Building a Profitable Business Identity
 - Using Environmental Themes as Positive Marketing Tools
 - Finding Your Niche in Animal Specialty Products
 - Accessing \$ Resources for Your Farm
 - Becoming a Family Decision Maker

One hundred people attended this event, with roughly one-third being 40 years of age or under. The satisfaction rating was high, with 84 percent of the attendees reporting that the information obtained from the conference would be useful in their work.

Sponsored tours

We have organized multiple tours of our area for the following groups:

- September 15, 2002 USDA tour with South African delegate from the Ministry of Agriculture
- January 7, 2004 Marin Economic Commission (MEC) members.
The MEC is a 20-member advisory commission of local business leaders in Marin.
- February 11, 2004 Phillip Morris Agricultural Diversification Presentation
The audience consisted of 40 tobacco and row-crop farmers from the southeast U.S. on a California tour of sustainable farming operations.
- August 5, 2004 National Park Superintendent Rolf Diamante
Rolf is from the Marsh-Billings-Rockefeller National Historic Park on the east coast and was producing an “Atlas” of products made in and around National Parks that included products from Marin.
- August 13, 2004 Western Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education (SARE) Advisory Council
- September 9, 2004 Sustainable Agriculture Funder Tour of West Marin.
The purpose of this tour was to educate philanthropic funding organizations that do not ordinarily fund agriculture issues.

In 2002 and 2003 we hosted visits from visiting researchers from North Carolina, Oregon, Ivory Coast, South Africa, and Bahrain.

Section 5: CE Heller Budget Report

The CE Heller Foundation funds, as administered through UC SAREP, provided a strong base of support through the funding of the Coordinator position, that in turn has fostered the creation of new marketing opportunities via Marin Organic, a local grass-fed livestock certification, new crop diversification venues, and a total of 2,960 acres of newly certified organic acreage (pending acreage in certification process). Additional support from the Marin Community Foundation funded the development of the 2002 producer survey, a bi-monthly newsletter, the creation of the *Grown in Marin* website, the development of 14 local producer workshops, and a young farmer/rancher conference. The County of Marin support was invaluable in providing Steve Quirt's position with travel, training, and computer cost assistance. Both the County of Marin and the UC Division of Agriculture and Natural Resources, CE's administrative unit, are providing bridge funding until June 30, 2005, in anticipation of CE Heller and other grant renewals. None of this would have been possible without the mix of support we received, and for this, we are most grateful.

UC SAREP/CE Heller funds:

Expenditures of \$48,791 were made annually to cover Steve Quirt's salary and benefits from 2002 through 2004, totaling \$146,373.

Program Evaluation

In April 2004, 25 local producers and decision makers met over two days with UC SAREP staff and an evaluation team from UC Davis to assess the results and impacts made by the *Grown in Marin* program. The group overwhelmingly praised the program and encouraged staff and funders to continue the program and to create a permanent staff position. They identified these areas of focus as the top three priorities for this position: (1) cooperative marketing and distribution with more attention to livestock; (2) increasing support and information about organic transition; and (3) connecting local agriculture to consumers.

Section 6: Resources Leveraged

Collaborative Alliances

We collaborate with our third-party organic certification program housed in our Agricultural Commissioner's Office to add operations, go on site visits, and coach organic transitions. We worked with the newest staffer to develop a "sustainability survey" for our Marin certified growers.

We work closely with Marin Organic in adding new growers to its membership, which has increased from eight in 2002 to 24 today. We assist the certified growers in developing new crops and farming methods, getting products to market, and becoming more profitable. We also are working with Marin Organic and the Marin Food Systems Project to provide fresh, local organic food to private and public schools. The three partners have supplied farm-fresh lunches at Novato Elementary School, a public school, and at San Domenico, a private school. We work closely with Marin Organic and with Marin Agricultural Land Trust on our *Grown in Marin* speaker series and workshops. Marin Organic provides the local food and snacks and volunteer set-up, while Marin Agricultural Land Trust provides the press and media outreach. Our office organizes and conducts the workshops.



Steve Quirt represents local producers and organic farmers on the following advisory boards: Marin Food Systems Project, Marin Organic, Santa Rosa Junior College Sustainable Agriculture Program, North Bay Children’s Center Garden Project, the Point Reyes Farmers Market and the UC SAREP Organic Workgroup.

Our office received the 2003 Marin Economic Commission’s Award of Excellence for Agricultural Viability for our efforts to support a viable county economy through encouraging product diversification as a means to increase overall farm profitability and creating market and brand recognition for Marin producers.

Additional funding totaling \$120,050 was secured from FY 2002/03 through FYH 2003/04 to support the Coordinator position. This additional support is detailed below.

2002:

County of Marin	\$6,000 for travel and supplies
Marin Community Foundation	\$37,200 for producer survey, website, newsletter and speaker series
UC SAREP	\$1,300 for speaker series honoraria
UC Intern Scholarship	\$6,000

2003:

County of Marin	\$6,000 for travel support
Marin Community Foundation	Continuation of 2002 grant

2004:

County of Marin	\$4,000 for travel and supplies
Marin Community Foundation	\$19,200 for young farmers and ranchers conference
Private donations	\$1,350

2005 to 6/30/05:

County of Marin

\$20,000 bridge funding for Coordinator salary

UCCE

\$19,000 bridge funding for Coordinator salary

2005-2008:

Western SARE grant pending

\$64,348 30% Full Time Equivalent for Coordinator

After the “*The Status of Marin County Agriculture*” survey was presented to the Board of Supervisors in March of 2003, the Board authorized the hiring of a consultant for two years to assist farmers with the county permitting process.

In addition, Marin county local government, and local non-profits working in the area of agriculture have collaborated on several fronts. With the support of the local county Board of Supervisors, an agricultural educator forum was held in 2003. The following joint vision was created:

Marin has vital agricultural industries and food systems that are economically and environmentally sustainable and that provide diverse products to a community which values and actively supports local agriculture. Agricultural education is an integral part of the Marin school community-from lessons and projects in the classrooms, farms and school gardens, to local food products in school lunch programs.

The forum highlighted needs in the following areas: local food security, land protection and regulation, farmer support, networking and marketing, and agricultural education. Local organizations are working collaboratively in all these areas and have leveraged over \$1.5 million in the past two years towards accomplishing our joint vision statement, while MALT has successfully raised \$10 million in its capital campaign to help preserve our agricultural lands. Please see <http://growninmarin.org> for a complete list of agricultural support organizations and a listing of local products, farms, and ranches.

References

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