

ENSURING GOOD STEWARDSHIP OF OPEN SPACE AND FARMLAND FOR FUTURE GENERATIONS

by Ventura County Supervisor Linda Parks, January 2011

Our children will see the world's population double in their lifetime and while housing and shopping centers can be built anywhere, high quality farmland is finite and large swaths of natural open space near urban areas is a rarity. By preserving these resources now, we will help future generations. However there are currently approved plans to pave over thousands of acres of farmland in Ventura County, particularly along the 101 freeway.

While conservationists in our county have spoken out against the conversion of farmland into housing and shopping centers, there has been no opposition voiced from agricultural organizations. Instead, people in the development industry - and owners of farmland and ranches who want to develop - have joined together in support of more development and against land use regulations.

Part of their strategy is pitting farmers against open space advocates. An example of this was a recent op-ed by William A. Miller entitled "Let Farmers Control Land." In the article Mr. Miller, who lists himself as a builder/rancher, states his support for the grading approval process of the Ventura County Resource Conservation District (RCD).

Unfortunately, the RCD approval process intended for farmers who grade hillsides for crops, was misused by construction companies that dumped construction debris in violation of health, safety and environmental laws. For example, one landowner with an RCD approval filled ravines on his ranch with rebar, window frames, trash bags and tarps. Even the author of the op-ed, Mr. Miller who has a construction company, also created dump sites on his land that violated the requirements of multiple agencies.

The County of Ventura is currently looking into RCD processes, including the part played by the Executive Director in selecting members of the RCD Board--which then decides his employment and salary. The RCD Board has primarily been composed of people in farming and ranching, though the mission of the RCD also includes broader conservation goals such as protecting open space and restoring creeks. For broader representation and accountability it is beneficial to have people on the Board of the RCD who not only understand farming and ranching, but also have expertise in the environmental sciences and law. Towards that end, the Board of Supervisors approved a professor of wetland ecology to replace a member who had been serving consistently on the RCD Board for over 50 years.

Other Resource Conservation Districts in the State are doing exciting projects partnering with the National Parks, restoring creeks, reintroducing endangered species, and other worthy resource conservation projects.

While some people have a political agenda to pit farmers against open space supporters, I believe most open space supporters support agriculture, just as most farmers support open space. I also believe that there's room for both farmers and open space advocates on the RCD Board, and in this county.

Ventura County farmland feeds the world, buoys our economy and offers locally grown food that contributes to the health of our residents. These benefits far outweigh the use of the land as a bank for future development.

By 2050 it is projected that 70% of the world's population will be living in mega-cities. To keep Ventura County from being swallowed up into a Los Angeles mega-city, we need people with foresight ensuring good stewardship of open space resources and the protection of farmland for future generations.