



## GENERAL ARTICLES

### ▶ THE POLITICS OF FARMING

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North Bay farm bureaus are enmeshed in an epic battle between politics and land use, and *NorthBay biz* has the insiders' perspective on what that means for the future of local farming.

How would you imagine the leader of the local farm bureau starting his day? If it's Marin dairyman Dominic Grossi you're thinking of, first the cows are milked and the ranch hands are directed to the day's tasks, but there's no time to gaze out over the meadow or sit around the pot-bellied stove and tell stories.

For 21st century farmers and ranchers, every extra minute is spent dealing with threats to agriculture. Grossi, president of the [Marin County Farm Bureau](#) and a fourth-generation dairy farmer, might get on the phone with an elected official to talk about how environmental regulations impact farming, or sit down with a thick regulatory proposal and look for provisions that might be harmful to agriculture.

"There's a million things, it never stops," says Grossi. "Everything we do is related to land use. We worked on the county general plan, worked on policies. Most of them were horrible for agriculture."

Grossi isn't the only farm bureau leader who sounds exasperated in an interview. But before we enmesh ourselves in the exhausting politics of farming today, let's start with a quick review.

#### Looking back

A federal law, the Hatch Act, was enacted in 1887 and established a network of "farmer's institutes" that provided education and support for rural American farmers. In the early 1900s, agricultural colleges began to develop "extensions" with professors and staff. The boll weevil plague of the early 20th century gave a boost to the concept of continuing education for farmers. Dr. Seaman Knapp, with a grant from the [U.S. Department of Agriculture](#), took to the backroads to "teach by doing rather than telling."

In 1911, John Barron, a former farm boy with a degree from [Cornell](#), was hired by New York's [Binghamton Chamber of Commerce](#), with funding from the USDA and the Lackawanna Railroad, to be a "farm bureau" representative of the Chamber. The Broome County Farm Bureau, an offshoot of that initial project, was formed in 1914. The idea spread quickly, and by the end of the first World War, there were thousands of farm bureaus all over the country.

The Napa County Farm Bureau was created in 1913, Sonoma County formed its farm bureau in 1917 and Marin County had a farm bureau by 1923.

At first, farm bureaus had powerful social and marketing functions as well as offering advocacy for farmers. Transportation was limited, so the bureaus were organized in "parishes" throughout each county. Representatives of each parish traveled to the county seat for meetings.

The influence of the farming community grew. By the early 1920s, the [New York Times](#) called the [American Farm Bureau Federation](#) "the most forceful group of influence in national politics today."

It seems even in their earliest days, farm bureaus, by necessity, waded into the murky waters of government regulation and public policy. A fast forward to the present day reveals how much has changed—and how much has remained the same.

#### Fighting for agriculture

Marin County is all about contrasts. The wealthy hillside residents of Mill Valley look down—literally—on the crowded

tenements of Marin City. The eastern bayside communities bustle with boaters and tourists, while the western hills are home to century-old ranches and livestock dreaming in the sun.

According to the Marin County Farm Bureau, the top five crops are milk, cattle and calves, poultry, pasture (hay) and aquaculture (shellfish). Cows are king in Marin County agriculture, and they need a lot of land to be cost-effective.

Marin is the smallest of the three North Bay farm bureaus, with 450 members and a part-time executive director, Leslie Klein, who refers questions to Grossi.

With 250 dairy cows, Grossi's operation is a little smaller than the Marin County average of 390 cows per dairy. He's been the Farm Bureau president for a year and a half, and he served on bureau committees before that. He says "fighting for agriculture" is a full-time profession, with battles being joined from all sides.

"Now we have Congressmen and Senators saying cow manure is hazardous. The EPA is on our side [on a question about phosphate content in cow manure], but that doesn't stop Congress from trying to regulate us."

Grossi and other agriculture advocates were able to convince county planners that the Marin general plan had to be more friendly to agriculture. With general plan battles now largely won, Grossi is working to shape the [Marin County Local Coastal Program Update](#). "It will regulate almost everything in West Marin, and we're fighting for all the things that regulate agriculture," says Grossi.

Other Marin County Farm Bureau projects include assisting [Indian Valley College](#) with opening a teaching farm and helping the [Marin County Farmers' Market](#) find a home. "They're in a parking lot now at the Civic Center. We want them to have a permanent building year-round."

Grossi is also lobbying on behalf of the [North Coast Railroad Authority](#) to get freight service reestablished in the North Bay. "Commodities like corn and grain come by rail from the Midwest to the Central Valley, then they get loaded onto a truck and brought to Marin. It costs me \$17 to produce 100 pounds of milk, but the Central Valley dairies can produce it for \$14 per 100 pounds."

Grossi says the extra \$3 per hundredweight is directly attributable to the cost of trucking feed. "I can lose \$500 a day trying to compete with them."

#### [Watching all the issues](#)

Sonoma County has the largest farm bureau in the North Bay, with 3,400 members. Executive Director Lex McCorvey says his organization is in the top 10 in the state in terms of size. Its "Ag Days" program brings 6,000 schoolchildren to the Sonoma County Fairgrounds every March, the largest event of its kind in the nation. McCorvey is proud of his education program. "We want children to know where their food and fiber comes from," he says.

But what are the most significant and time-intensive efforts of the [Sonoma County Farm Bureau](#)?

Yep. Politics and land use. "You have to do more than just be a farmer today, or you'll get steamrolled," says Bob Muelrath, president of the Sonoma County Farm Bureau. "We watch all the issues."

McCorvey agrees. "We advocate on behalf of the ag community. We want policy makers to recognize the needs of agriculture," he says. "Especially in public policy issues that affect the ability of farmers to run a sustainable operation."

According to McCorvey, a farm bureau is "like a Chamber of Commerce for agriculture. We represent every commodity group there is, everything from wine grapes and dairy to small vegetable operations."

All farm bureaus offer training opportunities to members, but Sonoma County has the largest program in the North Bay. "With the increasing number and complexity of regulations, we offer input and guidance in the development of regulations, and also how the ag community implements them," says McCorvey. "We have to be leaders in new ways of doing business that keep us in compliance with regulations."

The farm bureau hosted a packed seminar in April on how to combat heat stress, in part to address new state rules that came about after several well-publicized farmworker deaths in California due to heat stress. The seminar was held in both English and Spanish.

McCorvey is diplomatic in responding to the question of whether the farm bureau—traditionally a politically conservative organization—responds to calls for increased environmental regulation over agriculture. “Agriculture was implementing conservation before conservation was cool,” he says. “Conservation and stewardship have always been integral to the sustainability of a farm.”

Muelrath is less subtle. “Look at the [Light Brown Apple Moth](#),” he says. “It feeds on 250 different types of crops, but we haven’t been able to control this thing because of the environmental community. These folks go to an extreme.”

Muelrath’s pumpkin farm is in a potential Light Brown Apple Moth quarantine area. He says efforts to control the moth using natural pheromones were fought by the environmental community, and that if these less-invasive methods can’t be used, “the alternative is to go in and spray” chemical moth-killing agents.

The Sonoma County Farm Bureau was also involved with the county’s [General Plan Update](#), with bureau leaders sitting on committees for eight years. “Now we’re involved in policy,” says McCorvey, hoping to influence how the general plan is interpreted and how policies are written and enforced.

For the foreseeable future, the biggest land use issue in Sonoma County will be water, and the farm bureau is at the table, shaping how regulations are written and enforced.

“Water is critical to agriculture. Food is water,” says McCorvey, who says the farm bureau is also involved in local salmon recovery efforts (see [“Fish Out of Water?”](#)).

Muelrath agrees. “Water is the big issue that’s coming,” he says, pointing out that water issues can be much more complex than just having enough coming out of the tap. For example, Muelrath uses recycled water from the city of Santa Rosa to irrigate pasture land he leases from the city. “People started reducing their water use last year, so less water went into the treatment plant, and there was less recycled water for irrigation. Last year was the first time in 30 years that my pasture dried up.”

How is that impacting how water gets used by farmers? “We’re tightening up,” Muelrath says. “We’re conserving as much as we can. Some people are irrigating at night [when there’s less evaporation].”

The Sonoma County Farm Bureau also hosts meetings of the “Animal Resource Management Committee,” which tries to prevent pollution of waterways by animal waste. According to McCorvey, most regulatory agencies with local jurisdiction are part of the committee, including the [California Department of Fish & Game](#), the [Environmental Protection Agency](#), the [North Coast Regional Water Quality Control Board](#), [National Marine Fisheries Service](#) and the [Sonoma County Public Health Department](#).

The committee hired a consultant who regularly tests the water at dairies, as well as horse and poultry farms. “That [committee] has been extremely successful,” says McCorvey. “It lets us educate producers.”

McCorvey says his organization’s good relationship with regulatory agencies even extends to assisting with policing and prevention. “We might get a call from an agency about a problem. They ask us to go check it out before they go. Sometimes education is needed.”

What’s next for the Sonoma County Farm Bureau? “We’re constantly retooling our organization to meet the needs of our members,” says McCorvey. “Over the last 20 years, we’ve seen an influx of people in agriculture who don’t have roots in Sonoma County. We have to keep growing and changing.”

McCorvey notes that he wants to increase the involvement of grape growers in the farm bureau. “We have maybe 30 to 40 percent of Sonoma County growers, and we’re just doing an outreach program to them.”

“If you’re a rural property owner—if you have a well and a septic tank—you need to belong to the farm bureau,” says Muelrath. “We do a lot of things for you.”

### Engaged in the lifeblood of policy

In Napa County, most members of the [Napa County Farm Bureau](#) are part of Napa Valley’s signature industry. “We have about 1,000 members, mostly in the winegrape business,” says Sandy Elles, executive director.

According to Elles, “our key issue of the moment is water rights.” Elles and her board are watching new rules about how water is used and when it can be taken out of the water table. “The tension is between water for fish and water for farms,” she says. “We advocate a balance of water allocation that will sustain both fish and farms.”

Throughout the North Bay, tensions exist between rural and urban uses, but Peter Nissen, president of the Napa County Farm Bureau, says Napa handles it well. “The people of Napa County are great,” he says. “They support agriculture.”

Napa residents have proven their support twice at the ballot box. Measure J, enacted in 1990, requires a vote of the people to convert agricultural land to non-agriculture use.

Measure P, passed last year, renewed and bolstered the Measure J rules for 50 years, until 2058. “Napa County established the nation’s first Agricultural Preserve in 1968 and continues to be forward-thinking in developing policies that protect our land from urban pressures,” Elles says.

Even so, according to Nissen, “when I became involved with the farm bureau board, I was amazed at how much pressure there is on farming, with urban sprawl and residential development.”

Nissen says, “It’s harder to tell your story with so many new people moving in. They don’t understand agriculture. We have to take time to explain our values and introduce them to what Napa County really is and why it’s a treasure. We’ve worked hard to preserve ag land and not succumb to the pressures of a place like Santa Clara County.”

Nissen adds, “It’s not an easy battle, but it’s rewarding. We go to a lot of City Council and Planning Commission meetings and speak up about projects. Two of our board members sat on a task force for two years during the [Napa County General Plan Update](#). We’re engaged in the lifeblood of policy in both city and county areas.”

Like other bureaus, the Napa County Farm Bureau reaches out to schoolchildren. “We want people to understand farming and what it entails,” Nissen says. “We set up an endowment that gives scholarships to [FFA \[Future Farmers of America\]](#) kids.” Additionally, Napa promotes an Ag Day in March and an ongoing Ag in the Classroom program.

The bureau promotes sustainable farming and hosts a monthly organic farming discussion group, sponsors the “[Napa Green Certification/Fish-Friendly Farming](#)” program and endorses Best Management Practices (BMPs) for soil and water conservation among its members.

Despite all these community outreach efforts, the Napa County Farm Bureau may be most famous for a marketing effort called “Napa Uncovered,” a calendar featuring photos of farm bureau members in their birthday suits.

Naked farmers? “Well, yes, but they’re strategically posed to be in good taste,” promises Elles. In other words, the naked farmers are standing behind the fruits (and vegetables) of their labors. “The photos show the bare essence of Napa. It’s an entertaining and subtly revealing look at Napa agriculture.” The 2010 Napa Uncovered calendar will be released this month. Visit the farm bureau [website](#) to find out more.

### Looking ahead

What’s next for local farm bureaus? Well, we all want to keep eating, and the wine industry shows no sign of slowing down, so prospects look good on the demand side of the equation. On the supply side, the pressure to convert agricultural land to commercial and residential uses will continue. Fortunately, North Bay voters have shown a willingness to enact agricultural land protections and elect county supervisors who vote for ag-oriented general plans.

Forward-thinking land use policies, such as [Sonoma County's Agricultural Preservation & Open Space District's](#) decision to pay for agricultural easements for small farmers, are encouraging signs.

The best indicator of the future success of farm bureaus—and the farmers they represent—may be the quality of community outreach. Farm tours, the growing success of farmers' markets and programs in schools all educate us about the value of farming. According to the USDA, less than 2 percent of Americans farm for a living today, a precipitous drop from a century ago, when it was 30 percent.

The growth of "Buy Local" campaigns helps as well. You can buy a tomato in January, but it doesn't support local farmers if that tomato comes from Argentina. We all love our summer tomatoes—now more than ever, it's important to remember who grows them.

## FARMING, LEADERSHIP AND SERVICE

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Bob Muelrath has decades of community service in Sonoma County under his belt, serving 29 years as a trustee of the [Bellevue Unified School District](#). He also served on the board of the [Sotoyome Resource Conservation District](#) for 12 years, and a variety of boards of milk and dairy groups. He spent six years on the Sonoma County Farm Bureau board of directors, working his way up to the president's chair. "I've been a farmer my entire life," he says. "I'm third-generation, and I've been on the same property since 1946."

Muelrath benefited from a unique training program, the [California Agriculture Leadership Program](#), from which he graduated in 1984. The program, founded in 1970, lets farmers and ranchers spend two years of their spare time in a leadership development program that emphasizes how agriculture connects to the world, being prepared and motivated to assume leadership positions in their communities. "It takes the farmer off the farm and teaches them the way of the world," Muelrath says.

## FARM BUREAU RESOURCES

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Sonoma County Farm Bureau  
Lex McCorvey, executive director  
Bob Muelrath, president  
[www.sonomacountyfarmbureau.com](http://www.sonomacountyfarmbureau.com)  
(707) 544-5575

Marin County Farm Bureau  
Leslie Klein, executive director  
Dominic Grossi, president  
(415) 663-1231

Napa County Farm Bureau  
Sandy Elles, executive director  
Peter Nissen, president  
[www.napafarmbureau.org](http://www.napafarmbureau.org)  
(707) 224-5403

California Farm Bureau Federation  
[www.cfbf.com](http://www.cfbf.com)

American Farm Bureau  
[www.fb.org](http://www.fb.org)

California Agriculture Leadership Program  
[www.agleaders.org](http://www.agleaders.org)

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