

# AGRARIAN ADVOCATE



COMMUNITY ALLIANCE WITH FAMILY FARMERS

## Smart Food, Smart Kids: Farm-to-School in Fresno County

BY JEREMY HOFER

Since 1970 Fresno Metro Ministry has been promoting social and economic justice by addressing issues that affect low- and middle-income residents, including hunger, lack of access to healthcare, and the Valley's bad air quality. With the leadership of coordinator Edie Jessup, Metro's Hunger and Nutrition Project works for better access to food for low-income families. Through forums, task groups, and surveys of Fresno's neighborhoods and stores, the project has gained a better understanding of the barriers that low-income families face in getting good food. Despite the agricultural richness of this valley, children in Fresno's low-income neighborhoods have little access to fresh produce. It is clear that we need to create avenues that address food insecurity and under-nutrition among our youth. We want to find ways to strengthen family farms and educate the community on the benefits of healthy eating. Farm-to-School programs provide one such avenue by linking local farms with school food services that feed children on a daily basis.

### Food as Curriculum

Bringing in fresh alternatives is just as important as limiting the sway of large corporations on our children's diet. Just as children can learn bad eating habits, they can also be taught good eating habits—but this depends on what is available to them. About 65,000 meals a day are prepared and served by Fresno Unified School District food services (the third largest in the state). By law, a portion of these meals have to be fruits and vegetables. In a district where 85% of kids receive free and reduced-price breakfasts and lunches, there is great opportunity to bring fresh local produce into children's diets, while creating a substantial market for Central Valley farmers.

### Farm Fresh Wednesdays

When school starts this fall, Metro and CAFF, along with the local UC Extension, will be providing curriculum materials and visiting classrooms in an effort to tie together what students are learning and what they are eating. Participating teachers, farmers, and community volunteers will promote fruits and vegetables in the classrooms and the produce will be featured in the cafeteria on a "Farm Fresh Wednesday." The goal of the program is to develop connections between food service and classrooms while increasing students' consumption of local seasonal produce.



School Children enjoy the fresh produce of a Farm-to-School lunch.

### Farm Fresh Growers' Collaborative

All of the education in the world will not increase consumption of fruits and vegetables if they are not offered at lunchtime. Getting local produce into schools is a logistical challenge. CAFF and Metro have been working with Stephanie Johnson of the African American Farmers Association in developing a business that will bridge the divide between local farmers and food service. This entity must be able to provide seasonal produce offerings, take orders from school food service purchasers, collect and distribute the product—and eventually make a profit at it!

"Farm Fresh Wednesdays" and the Farm to School Growers Collaborative will put healthy food into the hands of children in Fresno County schools.

Metro's established community expertise combined with CAFF's know-how has made these fledgling farm-to-school efforts possible, but it will take consistent effort and collaboration over time to see them come to fruition. Metro looks forward to working with CAFF on Farm-to-School. Our five-year goal is for every school to offer fresh seasonal produce from Fresno's surrounding family farms.

### Farm-to-School Meets School Breakfast

Since Jeff Davidson, Director of Nutrition Service at nearby Sanger Unified School District, started offering local fruit in the universal classroom breakfasts, fruit consumption has jumped from 20,000 to 200,000 units per month among the 8,000 students that he serves. This fruit is purchased from local packing houses throughout the school year. Not only are Jeff's kids eating better, he is actually improving revenue by serving a fruit in place of a juice because he is able to purchase fruit directly from local packing sheds at a lower cost than what he previously paid for the less-nutritious juice option.

To gauge the effectiveness of his "Farm to Classroom" program, Sanger Unified conducted a study of student health and performance before and after implementation of the program. They found a dramatic drop in students' headaches and stomach aches and an increase in test scores. Sanger's "Farm to Classroom" program not only benefits local farmers and the District's budget, but also student performance.

*Jeremy Hofer is the Hunger and Nutrition Project Assistant at Fresno Metro Ministry. You may contact him at [Jeremy@fresnometmin.org](mailto:Jeremy@fresnometmin.org) or (559) 485-1416. Visit [www.fresnoministry.org](http://www.fresnoministry.org) for more information.*



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PO Box 363, Davis, CA 95617  
(530) 756-8518 Fax: (530) 756-7857  
Web site: www.caff.org

**Mission:** CAFF is building a movement of rural and urban people to foster family-scale agriculture that cares for the land, sustains local economies and promotes social justice.

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**Agrarian:** 1. Relating to land or to the ownership or division of land. 2. Of agriculture or farmers generally. [from the Latin ager: a field or country]

CAFF is a nonprofit membership organization. Members are part of an active, effective voice for CAFF's mission. Benefits of membership: subscription to this newsletter, voting privileges and timely updates on CAFF activities. Membership levels are \$50 Basic, \$250 Gardener, \$500 Tiller, \$1,000 Steward.

CAFF encourages contributions of any size to support our work. Contributions to CAFF are tax-deductible to the extent allowed by the law.

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### CAFF Contacts

**Central Coast**  
Sam Earnshaw, Regional Coordinator . . . . . (831) 722-5556  
Liv Nevin, *Buy Fresh Buy Local* Campaign . . . . . (831) 761-8507

**Gold Coast**  
Judy Blue, Ventura Regional Coordinator . . . . . (805) 684-1997

**San Joaquin Valley**  
Jeremy Hofer, Farm-to-School . . . . . (559) 485-1416

**North Coast**  
Deborah Walton, Farm-to-School . . . . . (707) 766-7171

**Sacramento Valley**  
Temra Costa, Regional Coordinator . . . . . (530) 756-8518 x18

**Davis Office**  
Marcia Gibbs, Sustainable Cotton Project . . . (530) 756-8518 x34  
Mark Cady, Biological Agriculture . . . . . (530) 756-8518 x20  
Anya Fernald,  
Community Food Systems . . . . . (530) 756-8518 x31  
Molly Johnson, Community Food Systems . . . (530) 756-8518 x30  
Joy Rowe, Membership . . . . . (530) 756-8518 x17  
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Managing Editor . . . . . Karen Van Epen  
Associate Editor . . . . . Clara Okrongly  
Design & Production . . . . . Timothy Rice  
*Farmer to Farmer* Contributors . . . . . Sam Earnshaw,  
Marcia Gibbs, Clara Okrongly

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# CAFF Goes to Market

BY DAVE RUNSTEN

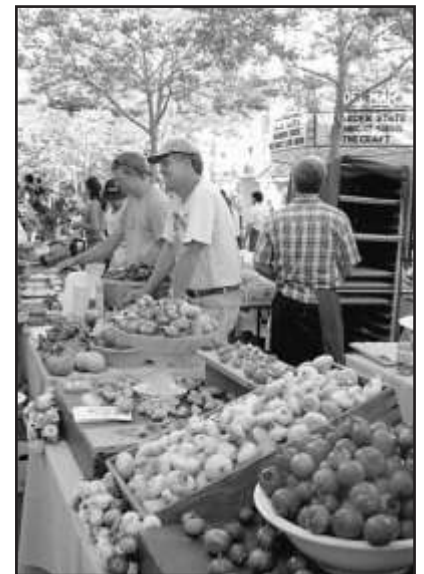
**A**s we bid good-bye to Community Food Systems program director Karrie Stevens Thomas and welcome her replacement, Anya Fernald—who comes to us via Slow Food in Italy—it is time to reflect on where we are going with this program. Under Karrie's hard-working leadership, CAFF's Community Food System activities saw a twentyfold increase, and many of our members may not be aware of what we are accomplishing.

We started the Community Food Systems program in response to some of our farmer members who pointed out that, while reducing the negative environmental impacts of farming was a worthwhile endeavor, it would not be much use if our members couldn't run an economically viable farming enterprise. CAFF has always been involved in marketing issues in California, including the re-creation of farmers' markets and the development of community operated agriculture. According to the census of agriculture, there are about 80,000 farms in California, many of them part-time operations, including a large number of farms that control land and produce crops and livestock. They are coming under increasing economic stress due to the lowering of world trade barriers and market consolidation. Finding ways for these farms to prosper will be important to maintaining the quality of life in California.

Michael Porter of the Harvard Business School, the guru of competitive business strategy, says there are only two ways to compete in a market economy: 1) be the low-cost producer, or 2) differentiate your product in some way. It is unlikely that small farmers can be the low-cost producers in most crops due to advantages that large producers have in markets, both in buying inputs and in selling outputs. Many people thought that organic farming would provide a means for small farmers to differentiate their products, but organic farming production techniques can be adopted by large farmers too. Most of the organic produce now sold in grocery stores is produced by the same large farms that dominate conventional produce markets. There is simply no future for most California farmers in the mass-produced commodity sector. They must differentiate their products in some way or be driven out of business.

Conveniently, there is a natural tendency in a competitive market economy for firms to try to compete by cheapening the product. Clothing gets thinner, plastic is substituted for glass, and so on. These changes always create opportunities for someone to create a higher quality product and charge more. Agricultural products are no exception. The dominant mass-produced food sold at the lowest possible price can be competed with by creating qualitatively different products for those people willing to pay more or who are seeking a different relationship to their food. The key ideas in this differentiation strategy are "quality" and "local." CAFF is currently working on two programs that support these ideas: *Buy Fresh Buy Local*, and *Farm-to-School*, and I will discuss those in the next issue. 🍌

*Dave Runsten serves on the CAFF Board of Directors.*



Tom Broz, of Live Earth Farm in Watsonville, showcases his produce at last August's Taste of Santa Cruz.





Community Alliance with Family Farmers  
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## California Food & Farming Policy Update

BY PETE PRICE

### The CAFF-Sponsored Farm-to-School Bill is Popular with Legislators

Strengthening local farm economies is a core part of CAFF's strategy for sustainable agriculture in California, and encouraging the growth of Farm-to-School programs across the state is an important way to create new local markets for farmers. Legislators apparently agree, because Assembly Bill 826 (Nava), the California Farm to School Child Nutrition Improvement Act, is garnering widespread bi-partisan support in the Legislature.

Co-sponsored by CAFF and the California Food and Justice Coalition, AB 826 establishes a state-level Farm to School (F2S) program in the Department of Education to help farmers and school food service directors who want to create an F2S program in their area or help improve an existing program. The bill passed 77-2 out of the often-contentious Assembly in June, and has steamed through two Senate policy committees with bi-partisan support. In fact, while the bill was still in the Assembly, it had across-the-aisle credibility.

The bill has no formal opposition, but Western Growers Association has expressed concern that the bill gives a preference to local farmers over other California producers. Assemblyman Pedro Nava, the author of AB 826, has initiated discussions with Western Growers to ensure that while F2S emphasizes the value of making local connections between farmers and schools, the bill does not exclude any

farmer who wishes to work directly with a school district.

AB 826 will be heard in the Senate Appropriations Committee when the Legislature returns in August. It is not too early to let Governor Schwarzenegger know that you support AB 826 and want him to sign the bill when it reaches his desk.

### Legislation to Protect Farmers from GMO Contamination Stalls...

AB 984, introduced earlier this year by Assemblyman John Laird (D-Santa Cruz), takes on the thorny issue of GMO contamination of crops and the resulting liability for the contamination. Under AB 984, farmers whose crops are contaminated by GMO drift or commingling are shielded from suits by biotech companies for illegal possession of their GMO product, but GMO manufacturers can be held liable for contamination by their product if it results in economic loss for the farmer.

CAFF actively supported AB 984 in legislative hearings this spring, and the bill enjoyed important support from Rice Producers of California, California Certified Organic Farmers, and Rominger Brothers Farms, among others. The bill passed its first hurdle in the Assembly Judiciary Committee, but ran into a brick wall of opposition in Assembly Agriculture Committee. When it was clear the bill

**Policy Update** *continued on previous page*