

Organizational Background

CAFF's mission is to advocate for California family farmers and sustainable agriculture. For over 35 years we have played a crucial role in supporting, creating, and leading campaigns and actions to advance the local food movement. As a community organization, we build upon shared values around food and agriculture to create strong partnerships between family farmers and their neighborhoods. These collaborations create local economic vitality, improved human and environmental health, and long-term sustainability of family farms.

For the first 15 years of its existence, CAFF's primary activities were concentrated in the political arena, making great strides on topics related to pesticide exposure, organic farming, and direct marketing. CAFF continues to play a crucial role in supporting, creating, and leading campaigns and actions to advance sustainable food systems.

Assisting farmers in becoming more environmentally responsible and sustainable

In the 1990s, CAFF operated the Biologically Integrated Orchard Systems (BIOS) program, which was a farmer-to-farmer extension program in almonds and walnuts to promote integrated pest management techniques. Many participants later became certified organic farmers. CAFF also obtained funding from the State for a similar program in other crops at the University of California (Biologically Integrated Farming Systems, or BIFS). We worked in conjunction with a number of government agencies to expand the work of BIOS and BIFS to assist whole classes of farmers in adopting sustainable growing techniques. This project led to various commodity groups creating their own sustainability programs, as for instance in wine grapes and almonds.¹

For 18 years, until 2001, CAFF published the National Organic Directory, and was one of the principal proponents of organic farming in the country. In the 1980s CAFF was involved in creating regulations for the use of pesticides, such as re-entry rules and birth defects monitoring. We also created the Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education Program at UC Davis.

More recently we have started several programs to continue our work on sustainability:

- We have partnered with several other organizations to create a coalition focused on climate change and its relation to agriculture, the California Climate and Agriculture Network (CalCAN). This policy effort in Sacramento has addressed on-farm renewable energy and net metering, farmland preservation, outreach on optimal nitrogen levels, and the use of cap and trade funds for sustainable agriculture.
- We also partnered with organizations to create the California Agricultural Water Stewardship Initiative (CAWSI). Our project web site (www.agwaterstewards.org) is a repository of case studies and technical

¹ This evolution is documented in Keith Warner, *Agroecology in Action: Extending Alternative Agriculture through Social Networks*, MIT Press, 2006.

information for farmers on how to optimally manage water on their farms. At present, we are holding a series of workshops with wine grape growers on how to minimize the use of water in vineyards.

- We operate a food safety program to advise farmers on how to create a food safety plan for their farms that also preserves biological diversity and conservation measures. We have also co-chaired the National Sustainable Agriculture Coalition's food safety committee, which has engaged in dialogue with the FDA and USDA over how to address food safety issues in the context of sustainable, diversified family farms.

Assisting farmers with sales and marketing

Though CAFF at its inception had promoted direct marketing and had in the 1990s operated a program to promote Community Supported Agriculture (CSA), by the end of the century the organization was almost exclusively focused on technical assistance to farmers about their farming practices. **As our work with farmers progressed, we realized that helping growers with their on-farm practices was successful, but did not go far enough in supporting our mission. Farmers also needed to be able to stay in business. We decided to re-create our marketing efforts by supporting both direct marketing channels as well as finding ways to help family farmers sell to institutions.** Because the organic market had become less profitable with the entry of large farming operations, we focused on promoting local food systems.

In 2002 we began our Community Food Systems Program, with the goals of supporting infrastructure changes that assist small family farmers in bringing their products to market, increasing awareness among consumers about the environmental and nutritional benefits of small-scale family farms, and improving the health of Californians through increased consumption of fresh fruits and vegetables. We developed three project areas to meet these goals: the Buy Fresh Buy Local (BFBL) campaign, Growers Collaborative, and Farm to School.

Buy Fresh Buy Local was started by the Kellogg Foundation through a non-profit called FoodRoutes, which is now managed by the Pennsylvania Association for Sustainable Agriculture. CAFF was one of the original partners and was given the rights to the campaign in California. We have conducted this campaign in various regions of California over the past decade, issuing local food guides, buying advertising, and staging events. In addition, we have a database of local food system participants on our website with an online search function.

The California Growers Collaborative was started as a means to aggregate and deliver local produce to schools in Ventura, since at the time no commercial distributor wanted to do it. It expanded to northern California as well and functioned to supply local produce to universities, schools, and institutional food service. Eventually, most commercial distributors developed local food programs and we closed this demonstration project.

The Farm to School program has several aspects that have been implemented in regions throughout California:

- CAFF partners with food service directors to help them procure local food from regional farmers, work with distributors to get their needs met, and provide professional development to staff to support working with fresh, whole product.
- CAFF's Harvest of the Month (HOTM) program provides a different produce item to classrooms each month, teaching elementary and preschool students about different local produce items. The HOTM kit also includes educational materials for teachers, which are linked with state standards. The program reached over 20,000 students during the 2012-13 year.
- Know your Farmer brings farmers into the classroom and takes students on field trips to farms in their area.
- In addition, CAFF is the lead of the CA Farm to School Network, a collaboration of Farm to School practitioners throughout the state, and serves as the host for FoodCorps (a project of the national AmeriCorps program) in California.

While the Growers Collaborative was very successful in creating and proving the demand for locally sourced food from California farmers, we have since worked to connect these farmers to existing mainstream distributors. Over the past 12 years, we expanded our BFBL programs, technical assistance to farmers in food safety and marketing, and Farm to Institution projects throughout California so that these farms could remain viable businesses.

To respond to the need for engaging/connecting farmers and distributors, CAFF coupled the consumer education campaign with technical assistance in tracing value through the supply chain. This program shifted the focus from the consumer to the farmer by providing technical support to growers and buyers in sales, marketing, and food safety. This next phase of our work has focused on recruiting farmers and businesses, providing them with a suite of tools and marketing materials, and coordinating product availability with aggregated purchasing to ensure supply and demand grow together.

Direct marketing

In addition to our work linking farmers with local produce distribution, we have also realized that no organization in California is focused on working with family farmers engaged in direct marketing through farmers markets, CSAs, and farm stands. This was once a principal focus of CAFF and the need has not abated, since this is where most beginning farmers start. With 850 farmers markets, 300 CSAs, and an untold number of farm stands in California, direct marketing has become a crucial channel through which family farms can receive retail prices for their products, as well as the principal arena of interaction between farmers and urban consumers. We seek to ensure that these marketing channels are well-organized and accessible as well as to promote them to the broader public.

With the support of the True North Foundation, we held an international CSA conference in 2013 with CSA network representatives in order to inspire California CSAs to join together to build a supportive network here. We put the audio recordings of the conference on our website for farmers (and others) to access, and we have started to compile useful “how to” information as well. In addition, we passed legislation—AB 224 (Gordon) in 2013—to regulate CSAs in California, in order to ensure food safety considerations and avoid more onerous regulation. The bill allows for single farm and multi farm CSAs and is meant to restrict the use of the term to actual California farmers. We have also called all of the CSAs in California in order to verify their contact information and we are inputting all of their drop sites onto our online Buy Fresh Buy Local database so that consumers can search for CSAs that deliver close to their homes. This is the start of our California CSA network that we hope will assist CSAs to prosper by obtaining more subscribers and retaining them.

This program will serve as a model for other states. At our conference, we committed to forming a national network of CSA networks, which has been delayed by the absence of Farm Bill funding for such programs (this work would be funded by another funding stream). A new Farm Bill was signed by President Obama February 7, 2014, and it includes increased funding for the Farmers Market and Local Food Promotion Program, which we plan to access along with CSA groups in Washington, Oregon, Wisconsin, New York, New England, Pennsylvania and elsewhere to create a national CSA coalition.

In addition to the work on CSA, we have also begun to work with the 4,000 California farmers that sell at farmers markets. In 2013, we mailed them all a letter about food safety and the changing laws, and offered to help them devise on-farm food safety plans. We have received many responses from farmers who would like further assistance with food safety, and/or have further questions about the policies. We are also working on legislation in Sacramento with the Farm Bureau and the farmers’ markets associations to combat fraud in the markets.