

# Developing Trust

Loss of arable ground inspires the American Farmland Trust to cultivate new tools for preservation.

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By Jessica Lyons



**Photo: The Agriculture and Land Based Training Association helps farmworkers develop the skills needed to run their own farms.**

Between 1988 and 1998, California converted almost half a million acres of farmland into housing tracts, parking lots and other types of development, according to Mary Nichols of the California Resources Agency. It's part of a well known and nationwide trend. Two acres of farmland is lost to sprawl each minute, according to the American Farmland Trust's recent study, published as *Farming on the Edge*.

"Much of that is tied to really poor planning," says Ralph Grossi, American Farmland Trust (AFT) president. "The good news is, by our calculations, there is about \$5 billion in the public pipeline for purchase of development rights around the nation. More resources are available now for land conservation than at any time in our history."

Grossi and Nichols were preaching to the choir--some 300 people from 36 states and Canada, who spent the earlier part of this week at Asilomar attending the AFT's national Farming on the Edge Conference.

"We're not just concerned about houses and strip malls," Nichols says. "Development of the five- and 10-acre lots on forest land or grazing land may be one of the greatest threats to the natural resource base."

The development of grazing land fragments wildlife habitat and riparian corridors, and creates fire hazards, Nichols says. It also puts an additional strain on water supplies and city-provided services like roads and other infrastructure needs. It's an argument familiar to Monterey County residents who do not want to see ranchettes blossoming on hillsides.

The American Farmland Trust is a nonprofit organization formed in 1980 by a group of farmers and conservationists concerned about the loss of farmland. Today, its 40,000 members also include agency personnel, wildlife biologists, policy experts and land use planners.

The Monterey County Agricultural and Historical Land Conservancy (AHLC) partnered with AFT to acquire 580 acres for a conservation easement near Gonzales, according to AHLC director Sherwood Darington.

"We just sat back and they did all the work and we got all the credit," Darington says. "So we enjoy working with American Farmland Trust."

The three-day conference featured dozens of workshops about how to keep agriculture viable as federal, state and local budgets continue to tank.

On March 10, the opening day of the conference, some attendees took a bus tour of Steinbeck Country, visiting conservation easements in Gonzales, Blackstone winery and strawberry fields in the Elkhorn Slough watershed, and watching asparagus move from the fields, down the production line and into ready-to-sell bundles for market.

Others watched a slideshow highlighting Elkhorn Slough--its estuary, tidal marshes, strawberry fields and

oak groves surrounded by fishing operations, a major transportation corridor and agricultural facilities.

"So here is this interesting juxtaposition of all this human activity and in the heart of it is this truly remarkable estuary," says Mark Silberstein, executive director of the Elkhorn Slough Foundation.

In the same session, Brett Melone, the executive director of the Agriculture and Land Based Training Association, (ALBA,) detailed his organization's farming operation at the Triple M Ranch in the Elkhorn Slough Watershed. The 195-acre Ranch includes sensitive riparian grasslands and 68 acres of crops, including strawberries, zucchini and flowers.

ALBA, a Salinas-based nonprofit, trains and educates small- and limited-resource farmers, mostly recent migrants from Mexico who work in the fields and want to learn how to manage their own farms. ALBA schools the farmers on everything from English and math to conservation practices, business skills and marketing. At the completion of the training, each farmer assumes responsibility for a small farm.

"It's an economic issue, but it's also an environmental and social issue," Melone says.

After sitting in workshops with names like "Private Property Rights, Fairness and Farmland Protection," and "Defining Sustainable Agriculture on the California Coast," conference-goers dined on Salinas Valley veggies, beef and chicken and listened to California state officials talk about new conservation programs.

"It's the beginning of making stewardship payments to farmers for taking care of the resources" rather than paying farmers per ton of cotton or soybeans produced, says Richard Rominger, the former Deputy Secretary of Agriculture under President Clinton.

The keynote speakers also discussed the major economic, conservation and land-use challenges facing agriculture in the state.

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