



Sonoma County CAFF Chapter Annual Meeting Summary

Approximately 60 community members gathered at the Sebastopol Center for the Arts for the CAFF chapter's Annual Meeting on January 14, 2026. [See photos here](#). After a delightful potluck and an engagement activity soliciting input from farmers, we broke into five discussion groups led by representatives knowledgeable about key issues in our local farm and food system realm. Summaries of those discussions are below.

Vineyard land transition:

- Vineyards are seeing a moment of ramping down production, vines getting pulled, land going fallow
- Is there a nexus/opportunity for other crops to enter the scene, diversifying local agriculture and increasing local food security?
- There is market for grain production and a local producer with equipment and a mill is looking for more land. Grain production requires larger parcels, at least 30 acres, and can be grown on slopes of up to 40 percent.
- Concerns for changing land use – soil compaction (risk from overgrazing), cleanliness of site (vineyard stakes, etc.), water access and infrastructure are needed for veg and most other fruit production.
- Need match-making, based on acreage and help with leases; KTA's Finding Farmers toolkit, Farmlink and others can help.
- Discussion of perennial crops – people are reluctant to do this on leased land
- Specialty crop leases typically bring in more per acre than grain
- We're as close as we've been in decades to farmers actually being able to purchase land due to declining vineyard land prices
- Land equity task force just put out their report. [Advancing Agricultural Land Equity in California](#)

Local procurement

- With the recent slashing of several federal funding sources that once provided millions of dollars to assist institutional purchasing from small local farms, including both the LFPA "Farms Together" program and the Farm to School program, there's been a huge loss of local procurement dollars
- Nonetheless, local school districts have expressed interest and willingness to increase local procurement, but lack not just the financial resources but the infrastructure and staff to process raw products: e.g. wash, chop, pack, etc. Many schools don't have scratch cooking equipment or space.
- FEED Cooperative already serves as primary aggregator from local farms, but does not provide the necessary processing facilities



- Healthy local food is a public good, especially ensuring those with few resources such as kids and families struggling financially, can access it, therefore it should be possible to spend public money on such infrastructure.
- Processing, like aggregation, serves either as a bottleneck or as a keystone business service, enabling not just one but many dozens of businesses to survive and thrive. This is especially true when cooperative or publicly owned.
- To achieve this, we need to have better local distribution and processing (middle of supply chain) owned and operated in a *secure* way – cooperatively owned by the farmers themselves
- Lastly, given recent closures of both schools and wineries, given declining population and wine sales, there exists excess property, some of which already has processing facilities. But despite the downturn in the industry, prices still remain out of reach for programs and small businesses like these.
- Ballot measure concept: In the same way we fund large-scale ag land conservation to save farms from otherwise untenable market (i.e. Ag & Open Space) we set aside a small portion of sales tax to fund a program that would afford the necessary real estate (light industrial), equipment, and operation of this middle-of-the-supply chain survive, especially for use by those aggregating and processing for such programs that buy from small farms and supply public schools, food banks, etc. This could easily be achieved with just a fraction of what Ag & Open Space currently spends on direct payments to large parcel landowners and would likely benefit a greater number of farm businesses, with the added benefit that it ensures these public investments actually produce food—and even better: food for those who really need it.

On-farm visitors/Agritourism

- Sonoma County has recently allowed some ag zoned properties to build luxury event centers even though little to no agriculture is being practiced. They have also allowed carnival type rides and the majority of product sold to be brought in from out of county or even out of state. What is appropriate agritourism?
- We want people to learn about agriculture and develop relationships with farms and producers. How do we keep the benefits of agritourism while keeping agricultural production the primary land use?
- Do we fear that by asking these questions we will bring even more regulation that makes it even harder for small farmers?
- There currently are unclear, inadequate and scattered regulations regarding on-farm visitors. If a farm is participating in a Farm Trails scheduled tour, no additional permit is needed but there are insurance and other requirements.
- Our CAFF chapter feels that there is need for an agricultural visitor services ordinance and circulated draft definition/standards for input. (There already is a Winery Event ordinance.) We also have draft standards for a “Low-impact Camping ordinance”; base standards for this were approved by the State last year so now up to each County to implement. Input requested. CAFF and Farm Trails hope to move forward a Low-impact Camping ordinance this year.



- “I feel like I’m sifting through regulations more than I am farming”
- “People just want to do very simple things and share their farm”

New Apple Processing Facility from Gold Ridge Organics

- Very exciting; they feel they are close to securing a lease.
- Their goal is to help revitalize the apple industry in our region. They will be launching a Gold Ridge brand apple juice; will only press CA grown apples.
- They want to celebrate our local apples which taste better than most mass produced in WA and OR. Also to encourage apple tourism.
- Many questions not able to answer yet, eg. storage capacity, specific products that can be made.
- They will be sending out a survey to all of the stakeholders which will include opportunity to ask questions and give input.
- First year focus is on apple juicing and related products, (vinegar, syrup). Custom crush will be available with minimum of 1 bin. Also marketing fresh apples including to schools. Cold storage to extend season.
- Later there may be capacity for processing other crops.

Contract Grazing & Fuel Reduction

- Grazing has been successful locally as a farm business production model. More recent evolutions:
 - Grazing as a service (fuel reduction); production is secondary
 - Smaller-scale, movable contract grazing
 - Grazing for soil improvement
- Need to increase awareness of how closely-managed contract grazing can rebuild the soil, improve biodiversity and increase water infiltration.
- Alternative metrics are needed for measuring soil carbon such as root depth, microbes and mycelium. Measuring soil carbon does not always paint an accurate picture of the benefits. However, understandable that quantitative metrics are needed for grants
- Financial model should include the economic costs of not grazing– from flooding/natural disasters, paying workers to weedwack, etc. Even a simple grass fire will cost a city over \$30,000 to put out. Mowing may be relatively cheap in some situations but doesn't provide the additional holistic benefits of grazing
- Changes in grantmaking – hopefully seeing a shift towards grants that support ongoing maintenance and spending on infrastructure
 - Expenditure on infrastructure is more justifiable if you are seeing grazing as a long-term fuels reduction project



- Different animals are used for different situations. Cattle are less prone to predator attack and more likely to have marketable meat than goats or sheep when used for fire control.

Summary of Farmer Input Activity

Positive Experiences in 2025

- Defeating Measure J
- Long term, affordable lease!
- **New connections, mentorships, interns, networking (esp with women and BIPOC farmers) - 4 comments**
- Successful website launch
- Buyers visiting farm
- Helpful grant
- Increased direct sales

Challenges in 2025

- Finding outlet for apples that used to go to Manzanita
- Trying to get support from Permit Sonoma
- Direct meat sales marketing
- Fascism
- Finding skilled labor
- More regulations and paperwork
- Managing pests
- Finding stable, consistent buyers
- **Loss of grant funding - 2 comments**
- Rough economy
- Loss of lease
- Farmers Market challenges - high booth costs, low attendance

How Chapter/ CAFF can support

- Water quality advocacy
- Navigate rules and regulations
- Help navigate immigration issues
- Create a SoCo “food sovereignty” ordinance
- Deregulate direct sales
- **More opportunities to connect with other growers - 4 comments**
- Put pressure on Ag + Open Space to help BIPOC buy land
- Farm volunteers
- Guaranteed basic income for ag workers



- Prioritize farmer housing on land
- ‘Right size” regulatory compliance for small scale growers
- More spaces for farmers to openly share thoughts/concerns without an agenda

Folks want a chance to connect in person and learn from each other in a relaxed setting.