



- News Search
- Web Search
- Classified Search
- Advertising
- Circulation
- Reader Services
- Traffic
- Stocks
- Weather
- Home
- News
- Sports
- Business
- Opinion
- Entertainment
- Features
- Columnists
- Community
- Subscribe
- Previous Issues
- Letters
- Obituaries
- Place An Ad
- Send Feedback

Wednesday, June 8, 2005

Last modified Wednesday, June 8, 2005 12:17 AM PDT

California farmers lobby for relief to save sinking family farms

By: DAISY NGUYEN - Associated Press

LOS ANGELES -- Edwin Camp has spent most of his life working on his family's farm, tending the potatoes, carrots and grapes grown in California's fertile Central Valley -- famously known as "America's salad bowl."

But in recent years, he has logged less time in the fields and more days politicking against what he calls stringent labor and environmental laws threatening family farms.

He is being joined by more and more California farmers to lobby for relief from the economic pressures forcing many to downsize or sell their land to developers and quit farming altogether.

"We're just getting hammered," said Camp, 49, manager of D.M. Camp & Sons farm, near Bakersfield. "We need to get involved with people we're not traditionally involved with."

California is losing about 1,000 farms a year, the U.S. Department of Agriculture said in a 2003 survey, the latest figures available. In 1950, the state had 144,000 farms. Two years ago, the number had dropped to about 78,000, with more than 95 percent operated by families, the agency said.

Farmers said the decline has hurt national farm production. In June 2004, the country imported more food than it exported, marking the first time since 1986 that agricultural trade showed a monthly deficit, the USDA said.

"We've reached a breaking point where you have a lot of families going out of business and leaving the state and more farmland is taken out of production," said George Gomes, administrator of the California Farm Bureau Federation, which launched the "Protecting California Family Farms" campaign last month.

Farmers are pushing for tax breaks and other incentives on a number of issues, including estate taxes, workers' compensation rates and water and fuel costs.

During a recent trip to Washington, D.C., a group of farmers met with Sen. Dianne Feinstein, D-Calif., to press for relief from the federal estate tax.

Feinstein's spokesman, Howard Gantman, said the senator is having ongoing discussions in the Senate to find a way to provide help for family-owned farms.

"She's been exploring ways in which there could be additional relief provided to help ensure that family farms are not jeopardized because of the estate tax," Gantman said.

When his grandfather died 10 years ago, Grant Chaffin said his family inherited 3,000 acres of alfalfa, cotton and wheat rows in eastern Riverside County. Tax laws at the time required that anyone inheriting property valued at \$600,000 or more pay 55 percent of that value in estate tax, he said.

"We had to take a 30-year mortgage on some of the land in order to pay our estate tax obligation," said Chaffin, 38. "It further tightens the very small margin we have in this business to make a profit."

Chaffin explained the situation to Feinstein in a recent meeting and came away feeling optimistic.

"She listened to what I had to say, and I felt like she's going to be an advocate," he said.

Farm manager Richard Silva inherited 150 acres of vegetable fields in Hollister, east of Monterey, when his father died. To offset the tax expense, the third-generation farmer has leased his land to a company that markets pre-packaged salad mixes. As part of the deal, he is also paid to manage 1,500 acres.

"It was a business decision I had to make to keep this operation viable," he said.

He also got more politically active, meeting with politicians and learning farm policies and regulations.

"It's important to put a face on farmers, especially in an urban state," Camp said. "It's important because we tend to be so busy with what we're doing, it's easy not to be politically active."

Chaffin's farm in the Coachella Valley is five miles from the California-Arizona border. The location is a constant reminder of the difference that regulations can make.

"They're growing the same products across the (Colorado) river in Arizona," Chaffin said. "They pay lower fuel, material, health insurance and workers compensation insurance costs. And yet we compete against each other for the same consumer."