

The Tens: Farmers face tough row to hoe in coming decade

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For California agriculture, what will the next decade be called? A decade of hard, brutal work, and most of us will fall down. Yet the real question is: Will we get back up?

The coming decade will be marked by sacrifice. The economy will recovery very slowly, and the disparity between haves and have-nots greater than ever.

California agriculture will continue to be an invisible \$36 billion economy, weathering the economic storms and will remain a thriving part of the recovery. We will have no widespread dust bowl farms, no mass "Grapes of Wrath" migration of struggling souls.

Yet agriculture will remain part of the "other California," relegated to images of dusty fields and dull people. We aren't sexy enough, we don't have celebrity rock-star farmers, and trendy technology is not central to our work of growing food.

We will feel left out and discouraged, maligned and disparaged. Production agriculture, like manufacturing, is the forgotten part of the state's economy.

As the decade unfolds, agriculture will get little respect. The concentration of political power will continue away from the farms and fields. City folk will dominate California agricultural policy. Farmland will continue to be an untapped resource for development. Cities will win the water wars, especially if price dictates value.

Production agriculture will divide based on size: big vs. little, agribusiness vs. artisan. The creative destruction of capitalism will destroy those in the middle. Large operations will focus on productivity, smaller enterprises emphasize human capital. All will survive only with increased efficiencies and creativity.

Genetically modified organisms will be controversial, challenged in courts and in the fields. More farmers will use this technology, but many will bitterly fight to keep it out of the human food chain. This food fight will divide farmers beyond the decade.

Another decade of mobility will unfold. Farms will leave the state, driven out by economic and regulatory forces. But other sectors of agriculture will relocate in the state. Farms do have legs. There will be renewal of local farms near urban areas, including farms within cities. While their production levels will be small, they symbolize a new agriculture that connects urban and rural.

The coming decade will create a huge opportunity. Youths (not necessarily from farming backgrounds) will enter and bring a new energy. Equally as significant, this will be the decade of women in agriculture: more farming operations run by women.

In the 2010s, a huge demographic shift will occur – the current age of the typical farmer is over 60. Women and youths will bring a new sensibility. California farming will be less about

dominance and more about cooperation and compassion: working with nature not against it. A new generation will challenge existing priorities and re-examine values.

California will lead a good food revolution, food that's healthy, green, organic and sustainable. As aging baby boomers make the connection between health and food, a new food morality will sweep into our kitchens.

Food will become part of a cost-effective national health plan. It's better and smarter to eat right than take pills. This will be "the decade of food" and hopefully the farmer is part of that equation. (Too often we talk about food as if farmers play no role.)

California agriculture is perfectly positioned: we already supply the majority of fruits and vegetables to the nation, we lead in organic farming, and we will continue to be leaders in innovation with new cutting-edge sustainable farming practices.

We will have a connected agriculture, fostering a relationship between urban and rural through social networking. The personal values of good food for the body and planet will become the drivers of change and survival.

Yet, this will also be a decade of price increases. The basic staples can't get much cheaper. Those who can will pay more for added value beyond convenience. High-quality foods for your health and for your palate will be rewarded. A tragic side effect: the poor will not always have access to good food.

And I worry about the fragility of these new agricultural systems. An ecological approach implies all the parts are interdependent. The marketplace can be cruel, and short-term shifts will crush some operations. The water wars will result in abandoned, dusty fields. Labor-intensive agriculture will require hard workers – often undocumented. Food safety requires a broader systems analysis, not isolated food scares.

The challenge of growing real food is hard work. The economic rewards will not always justify the efforts. There are and will be easier ways to making a living. Farming will be only for those willing to sacrifice, with a passion to continue.

This is a decade for those who can persevere. A Japanese parable from my late father for the 2010s: fall down seven times, get up eight.

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