

From “California Country”

<http://www.californiacountry.org/features/article.aspx?arID=660>

Farming for our future

January/February 2010

Stories by Ian Nachreiner, Tracy Sellers and Barbara Arciero

Photos by Paolo Vescia

The Leopold Conservation Award recognizes landowner achievements in voluntary conservation and public education.

Land stewardship and conservation are nothing new to California agriculturalists. With ever-changing demands on natural resources, farmers and ranchers must constantly anticipate and adapt in order to keep their lands productive—all while maintaining nature's delicate balance.

In short, they work to leave the land better than they found it.

“Long-term sustainability is a big part of what we're trying to do here—better fertility, better overall soil, better plants and to actually be good stewards of the water that we're entrusted with for society,” said John Diener, in describing how he farms.

Diener is the winner of the 2009 Leopold Conservation Award, which recognizes landowner achievements in voluntary conservation and public education.

The Fresno County farmer, and three other California finalists, are considered innovators for steps they've taken to conserve resources and improve the environment around them for future generations. These steps allow farmers to do more with less, an especially important pursuit as Californians struggle through an ongoing drought. Some farmers are also recognized for their efforts to rehabilitate wildlife habitat—improving biodiversity, reducing the risk of fire and aiding the recovery of at-risk species.

Here are their stories.



John Diener

**Red Rock Ranch,
2009 Leopold Conservation Award Winner,
Five Points, Fresno County**

“Good stewardship is nothing more than green technology from days gone by, but there are good things to be learned,” said John Diener. The Fresno County farmer uses innovative approaches to land, water and wildlife management on his 5,000-acre Red Rock Ranch, where he grows row crops such as processing tomatoes, peas, alfalfa, canola, corn and wheat.

Because most plants are highly sensitive to salty conditions, farmers have long been challenged by the buildup of salts in the soil. Diener's solution—a natural filtration system that uses salt-hungry plants to clean the soil and purify the drain water—is one example of how he has applied existing technologies in new and innovative ways.

Diener has also pioneered work on conservation tillage, in which farmers reduce the number of times they plow or disk their fields with a tractor. This practice helps limit dust emissions and fuel use, while improving the health of the soil. Diener is now coupling conservation tillage with water-efficient irrigation systems.

As a leader and innovator in agriculture, Diener doesn't work alone. He travels extensively and partners on research and other projects with University of California researchers, USDA Natural Resource Conservation Service, the California Department of Water Resources and others at the state and national levels.

“We're engaged in all of these different programs to help farmers be better stewards of the soil,” Diener explained. “And that's what it's all about—stewardship.”

Video: Check back in late January 2010 for a TV segment about John Diener.



Bill and Kay Burrows

**Burrows Ranch,
2009 Leopold Conservation Award Finalist,
Red Bluff, Tehama County**

Bill and Kay Burrows were in dire straits. Their 100-year-old cattle ranch had experienced seven years of negative cash flow and they had watched neighbor after neighbor go bankrupt. Then, in 1985, they discovered a decision-making process called holistic management.

“It completely changed my paradigm of how I thought,” Bill Burrows said.

Holistic management begins with the recognition that all ecological systems are part of an even larger system, which encourages farming and ranching practices that more accurately mirror the natural environment. Today, thanks to their commitment to improving the ecological diversity of their land, Bill and Kay Burrows have a thriving agritourism base, a successful carbon sequestration program, a wetlands project for migrating birds and a management plan that uses cattle as well as meat goats and sheep for brush control.

The couple—who work in partnership with 65 other area landowners and multiple government agencies—share their passion for the land through an annual stewardship day. Attendees learn about fire suppression, livestock management and other techniques that reduce the human impact on natural resources.

“I think it would be wonderful if not only we, as one little unit, preserve and enhance our land like we are trying to do, but if many, many throughout the state of California and in other states would do the same,” Kay Burrows said.



Steve and Jill Hackett

**Howe Creek Ranch,
2009 Leopold Conservation Award Finalist,
Ferndale, Humboldt County**

The 4,000-acre Howe Creek Ranch has been in Steve and Jill Hackett's family for nearly a century, providing beef and forest products to a growing population. But the couple points out that there are always things to be learned. By serving as land managers rather than land users, the Hacketts work to maintain a healthy ecological balance for future generations.

The Hacketts have been able to make valuable improvements to their ranch by encouraging increased public access to their lands and partnering with environmental groups, industry groups and government agencies.

For example, students from Humboldt State University have conducted graduate work leading to improved mapping of the property. And tree-planting projects have been completed in conjunction with the California Conservation Corps, AmeriCorps and a variety of youngsters from local elementary schools.

In addition, the Hacketts have improved salmon and steelhead habitat by clearing stream obstructions and replanting native shrubs and foliage along stream banks to control erosion—important work that has increased habitat for at-risk species.

“In February and March the steelhead come in,” said Jill Hackett. “One of my favorite things to do is hike upstream and film the spawners.”



Al Montna

**Montna Farms,
2009 Leopold Conservation Award Finalist,
Yuba City, Sutter County**

Al Montna feels strongly about efforts he and other rice growers have taken to enhance the environment. Farmers like Montna have led the way with increasing efforts to improve water use efficiency, provide wildlife habitat, and improve air and water quality.

“If you talk to any biologist, without the rice industry in the Sacramento Valley you have no Pacific Flyway. It's the major food source for millions of waterfowl,” Montna said, in describing how rice farmers in California provide up to 300,000 acres of temporary wetlands each year for migrating ducks, geese and shorebirds.

The Sutter County farmer was one of the first to stop burning rice fields after harvest, decreasing air pollution in the region. He has also taken steps to conserve resources by cutting his water use by half. In addition, his installation of a solar power system provides 65 percent of the energy needs for his 2,500-acre farm.

“All of us here at Montna Farms are always surprised that he never stops thinking about what we're going to do,” said Nicole Van Vleck, Montna's daughter. “The only thing constant is that we're going to change.”



An internationally known conservationist, ecologist and educator, Aldo Leopold devoted his life to planting seeds of thought about how farming should be productive, but not interfere with natural systems. Photo courtesy of University of Wisconsin Digital Collections.

About the award

The Leopold Conservation Award recognizes landowner achievements in voluntary conservation and public education. The award is named after Aldo Leopold, considered one of the most influential conservation thinkers of the 20th century for his collection of essays in “A Sand County Almanac.”

Leopold wrote, “We shall never achieve harmony with land, any more than we shall achieve absolute justice or liberty for people. In these higher aspirations, the important thing is not to achieve but to strive.”

In California, the Leopold Conservation Award is presented by the Sand County Foundation, California Farm Bureau Federation and Sustainable Conservation. The S.D. Bechtel Jr. Foundation and The Nature Conservancy are major sponsors.

This marks the fourth year the Leopold Conservation Award has been given in California. Past winners are:

- **2008:** Chet Vogt, Three Creeks Ranch, Glenn County—The core of Chet Vogt's holistic approach to his 5,300-acre, 500-cow/calf operation is intensive managed grazing, which rotates the cattle among 32 fenced paddocks. This supports native grasses, healthy cattle and increased water retention in the soil. His practices also provide abundant nesting habitat for wildlife.
Past winners and finalists: Read the story, [The art of conservation](#)
- **2007:** Craig McNamara, Sierra Orchards, Solano County—Craig McNamara runs a 450-acre diversified farming operation that includes field, processing and marketing operations and produces organic walnuts and grape rootstock. Sierra Orchards is proof that an agricultural operation can be green without going into the red.

Video: Watch the story, [Farm transforms into classroom for city kids](#)

Past winners and finalists: Read the story, [Land Lovers](#)

- **2006:** LangeTwins Wine Estates, San Joaquin County—Brad and Randy Lange are third-generation winegrape growers on their 6,500-acre vineyard near Lodi. The Langes have improved natural habitat on their property through restoration of a riparian area along the Mokelumne River and the implementation of unique, eco-friendly pest-control methods.

Video: Watch the story, [Farmers, ranchers find ways to prosper and protect the environment](#)

Past winners and finalists: Read the story, [For the love of the land](#)

Ian Nachreiner, Tracy Sellers and Barbara Arciero are reporters for California Country. They can be reached at 800-698-FARM or info@californiacountry.org.