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Cultivating A Movement

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Congressmember Sam Farr

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Sam Farr



Photo by Tana Butler

United States Congressman

United States Congressman Sam Farr, one of the political heroes of the sustainable agriculture movement, was interviewed by Ellen Farmer on August 23, 2007. A fifth-generation Californian, Farr was born in 1941. He is the son of California State Senator Fred Farr, who sponsored a law requiring toilets in the fields for farm workers, as well as other landmark environmental legislation.

Sam Farr began his career in public service in 1964, in the Peace Corps in Colombia. Before his election to the House of Representatives in 1993, Farr served for twelve and a half years in the California State Assembly. In 1990, Farr authored the California Organic Standards Act, which established standards for organic food production and sales in California. This piece of legislation became one of the models for the National Organic Program's federal organic standards. Farr now serves as co-chair of the National Organic Caucus in the House of Representatives, and worked with organic policy

activists to increase support for organic farming research in the federal Farm Bill.

Recognizing the contributions of the UC Santa Cruz Agroecology Program to the field of sustainable agriculture, Farr secured a line item for the program in California's higher education budget. Speaking before the 110th Congress on October 4, 2007 (in remarks entered into the Congressional Record), Farr said, "Since entering Congress, I have worked hard to share the story of the UC Santa Cruz Farm's important work with my colleagues. Congress has responded with a total of over \$3 million in direct appropriations to the UC Santa Cruz Farm since 2000 to assist with its important research and extension work with the rapidly expanding organic farming sector. Indeed, the UC Santa Cruz Farm's influence has been far-reaching, inspiring many sustainable agricultural programs at other universities, including UC Riverside, Cal Poly, and USDA's Agricultural Research Service."

Ellen Farmer had some previous contact with Sam Farr through her graduate studies in public policy at California State University, Monterey Bay—a program with which Farr has close associations. She interviewed Farr at his office in Santa Cruz.

Additional Resources:

Congressmember Sam Farr's website: <http://www.farr.house.gov/>

Information on the Congressional Organic Caucus:
http://ofrf.org/policy/organic_caucus/organic_caucus.html

Farmer: This is Thursday, August 23rd, 2007. I'm here in Santa Cruz with Congressman Sam Farr, who is going to talk about his involvement with organic and sustainable agriculture. I want to ask you a few personal questions first, to get a sense of how you got involved in this. So can you talk about any early influences—

Farr: [Chuckles.]

Farmer: —in your life that created an interest in agriculture?

Early Influences

Farr: Early influences in my life that created an interest in agriculture. Good question. I think of my mother, growing up in Carmel. The south side of our house was the sunny side, and she would plant gardens. I would love to get in the garden and plant. I got interested in flowers and vegetables. I always say my first experience in being a businessperson was selling flowers in front of my house on a little lemonade stand, because I learned a lot about psychology. Actually, not all the flowers came from my yard; a lot of those flowers came from the neighbors' yards. And when I sold the flowers, I noticed that the neighbors bought the flowers that came from their own yards.

Farmer: (laughs)

Farr: So I learned a little bit about consumer choices in this little flower stand that I had.

I was a biology major, and obviously took botany courses, and I've always loved the out-of-doors. I worked in the Forest Service when I was in college, as a firefighter. You learn a lot about riparian vegetation and forest health and things like that, not at a degree level, but just for practicality purposes. Now my hobby is landscaping my property in Big Sur, and figuring out what kind of plants could grow there. I'd love to get some stone-fruit plants, but we live right on the coast and you don't get a lot of very cold winters. You have to find trees that

have a very low chill factor in order to be productive. I've experimented with different varieties and different types of plants. What's really taken off is avocados.

One of my other hobbies is photography. I love to do outdoor photography, and I love to do macro photography, which is really close in. Take a flower with a bee on the petal or something like that, and get as large a shot, the biggest magnification possible. It makes you very observant about flowers and agriculture. All of these things—it's a high interest for me.

Peace Corps

Farmer: What years were you in the Peace Corps?

Farr: Oh, early Peace Corps. It was 1964 to '66. In the Peace Corps in Latin America, I wasn't really in agriculture.¹ But living as a minority in another land, you learn a lot about the fresh fruits and vegetables. The difference is that you've never seen any of these things before. I laugh about this, because I remember when looking at stuff I didn't know, it would be like somebody looking at a banana and not knowing how to eat it. Do you just eat the thing raw? No, you got to peel it. Or do you have to cook it? Or whatever you have to do. A lot of the fruits in Latin America are like that. You've never seen these fruits anywhere, and you don't know what— You know, do you peel them? Do you cook them? What do you eat? It's interesting how much of our foods are cultural.

Farmer: Yes, and it also creates conversations, then, with people to explain to you how to eat them.

Farr: Yes, and this way we got to know our next-door neighbors, because we kind of ended up figuring out, we don't know what the hell we're doing—

Farmer: [Laughs.]

Farr: —so we hired them to cook for us, and then they showed us. We said, “We'd like to learn.”

Farmer: So your involvement in the Peace Corps was not in a rural area?

Farr: I was an urban community development volunteer. I went into the Peace Corps right after college to organize people living in the barrios on the outside of town. The rich people lived inside, and the poor people lived on the outside, just the opposite of what's happening in American cities. The job was really not very well defined, but it became one of teaching them how to set priorities and then go down and petition their local government to give attention to building sewers and schools and health care centers and playgrounds and things like that.

Farmer: So were they migrating in from the rural areas?

Farr: Oh, people came from all over. Then they lived next to each other and they wouldn't trust each other because somebody came from the north and the other person lived from the east: “We know about those people that are in that part of the country. They are evil or bad or mysterious.” So you didn't talk to your neighbor. You had to break all those cultural barriers. You had to break those biases. When you're dealing with people that are illiterate, it's a little more difficult. You do it usually socially because they don't read and write. Everybody likes to have a party, and that was one way to get people together.

The Environmental and Farm Workers Movements

I came home in 1966. President [Lyndon B.] Johnson had declared the War on Poverty in America, and people were discovering—oh, my God, we've got poor people in America? I didn't know what I wanted to do, and all of a sudden I was getting these job offers from all over the United States because I had been in the Peace Corps; I had done this cross-cultural [work], and they knew that I'd been in community development. They were hiring community development directors all over the country. I think I had twenty-seven job offers without ever asking or seeking them. I didn't take any of them. I went to law school. But my interest was there, in the Salinas Valley, and it was honoring the struggle of the farm workers. My father [Fred Farr] had done a very interesting [thing] before the farm workers ever got organized.² He was a social liberal and an environmentalist. And, again, in reference to my mother, we were driving down Highway 101 through the Salinas Valley to go to Los Angeles, as we did annually at Christmastime, and my mother said something to my father in the car. She said, "You know, you may be in the State Senate and [have] a big, powerful title up there, but why haven't you done anything to protect these women out in the fields who have to tinkle in the out-of-doors? It's so unsanitary, and it's so humiliating. Farm workers can harvest these crops, which we all enjoy. Can't they at least be provided some sanitary facilities?"

So my dad carried the bill in the state senate to require contractors to bring toilets to the fields so that you could have outhouses for the workers.³ To this day, those

contractors and others carrying those latrines out to the field nickname them locally as the “Farr’s Chariots.”

Farmer: That’s great.

Farr: My mom died in 1965. I think these bills passed before the UFW really got involved in trying to bring attention to the plight of farm workers.

Farmer: So there were people paying attention to them.

Farr: There were always people paying attention.

Farmer: Would you call yourself an early environmentalist?

Farr: Oh, yes, because of the way I lived. I was dyslexic. I wasn’t comfortable in grammar school. I thought I wasn’t very bright, because I couldn’t read very well or pronounce words right, or spell words correctly, and so I would cut school anytime I could avoid it. And we were living in a town where you didn’t go home, you just went to wherever kids were having fun. You’d grab a bunch of neighborhood kids and go to the beach, and go to the tidepools, and go to the lagoons, and hike whenever you can. It was before television, before anything that would keep you inside the house. So you just lived outdoors all the time. And in the process, you become very aware that there are different kinds of birds out there, and different kinds of songs the birds make, and there’re marine mammals and marine animals. You got interested in different kinds of trees and plants.

I was told by a sixth-grade teacher in science class that I was a pretty good student. I hadn't been ever complimented in school. So with that compliment, I ended up deciding, I'm going to keep studying these things I'm being complimented on. I'll follow the praise. I was a biology major all through high school and in college.

Farmer: Would you say that at that time you had any awareness or concern about the pesticides that the farm workers had to apply?

Farr: Nobody was talking about that that early. I think the environmental movement in America was led by the Sierra Club, which was *the* environmental organization. But when you think back on it, the appeal to join the Sierra Club was to go on these hikes. And there were a lot of people who were either too old to go on hikes, or didn't want to go on hikes but still appreciated the Sierra Club. As the Sierra Club moved into defining its role on clean air and clean water and on pesticides and herbicides and other toxics, their ranks tripled. So the environmental movement in the late sixties became much changed—from concentration on land use into a much broader scheme.

I think out of that evolved ([but] not until the eighties) the legislation at the state level to set up the pesticides regulation, Proposition 65.⁴ California to this day has the strongest herbicide and pesticide regulations in the United States. We also have the strongest labor standards in the fields, because we allow for organized labor. We also have some strict OSHA [Occupational Safety and Health Administration] standards. You remember the fight about the short-

handled hoe where we had to sue the growers, that this short handle was ruining the backs of farmers by requiring them to do stoop labor all day long?

Farmer: Yes.

Farr: No one thought you could still do the same kind of work with a long-handled hoe, which is what everybody used in their home in their own garden. The Supreme Court ruled that the short-handled hoe violated labor standards, and now I don't think you could find a short-handled hoe if you wanted to.⁵

The farm worker movement in California did a lot of things for agriculture. It made people pay attention to the workforce and to the sanitary conditions, the pay scales, the benefits, who the farm workers were. It gave them an identity. Until then, farm workers were sort of faceless and nameless. That changed, and is now obviously Cesar Chavez's heritage. But I also think it began people thinking about: well, what is agriculture? It became broader than food. It was people, machines, water, chemicals, and climate. I think that's still today one of the biggest things. We just take it all for granted. "Oh, there's agriculture." Agriculture is a generic word. But it has a lot of specifics, because agriculture is really—depending on the microclimate and the soils—what can be grown. You can grow sugar cane in Louisiana, but not in Oregon. What we're beginning, and still struggling to do in America, is to define where our crops come from and what can be done to protect them. For example, in the Central Coast in this fog belt—in cool climates we can grow strawberries like nobody else. We can grow [crops like] Brussels sprouts that people can't grow [elsewhere]. We can grow artichokes that the San Joaquin Valley and hotter climates can't grow. We can

grow lettuce. And when we grow these things, we end up growing more than anybody in America. At one time, I think almost ninety-nine percent of all the Brussels sprouts in the United States came from Santa Cruz and Monterey County, and maybe southern San Mateo County. We still grow forty crops in California that no other state grows. For example, all the pistachios in the country come from California. The Watsonville area, the Pajaro Valley, [was known] for apples, and Hollister was a fruit capital. Big, big fruit orchards all over San Benito County, and shipping facilities for fruit out of that area. And, of course, walnuts. We were kidding last night that Hollister has been known as the “earthquake capital” of the world, but it frankly has been the agricultural center for “fruits and nuts.” And in California, we in the California delegation particularly protecting agriculture, we always say, “We are from California. We represent all the fruits and nuts.”

The California Organic Foods Act of 1990

Farmer: [Laughs.] So you were elected to the California state legislature in 1980, and between 1979 and 1990 there was tremendous activity concerning the California Organic Food Act.⁶ I think that’s the first in the nation. What do you remember about your role in the statewide organic debates?

Farr: My district didn’t include Salinas [the county seat of Monterey County], but it included all of the county of Santa Cruz. I’d been a county supervisor in Monterey County, but I’d only represented the Monterey Peninsula; we didn’t have any farm bureaus there. But when I started working with Santa Cruz County, I got very close to the Santa Cruz County Farm Bureau. Frankly, they

were my first instance of learning the needs of farmers. And it's very interesting, looking back, because then I worked with farm bureaus all over the state. Santa Cruz was a very progressive group of farmers—young, taking over their parents' businesses, or going into farming for the first time; interested in problem solving. The Pajaro Valley was the first place to have a thing called a bug vac, before we ever had organic or integrated pest management.⁷ They actually invented a machine that would go up and down the rows that vacuumed the bugs out so you wouldn't have to use pesticides.

In farming there were a lot of controversial issues. I carried a bill to the California legislature to require all products in the state to have their origin label on them. I think we were more interested in what was coming in, than what we were growing locally. The debate got to be very heated in Sacramento. And curiously, it was killed by the Grocers Association, who said if they had to put above every display where that vegetable came from, "it would cost us" (I remember them telling us) "a million dollars in additional money just for the ink." They're a very powerful lobby, and they killed the bill. And ironically, now you can't sell vegetables unless you tell as much you can about them. I'm a big fan of origin labeling, and I think the growers here—they're proud. They're proud of what they grow. So that's just telling the consumers where the products come from.

Mark Lipson⁸ came to me and said, "You know, we really don't have any regulations protecting us. We've got an organic label in California, but it doesn't mean anything [without a] law. Somebody can just slap [on] an 'organic' label and nothing can be done to stop non-organic being labeled organic." I thought he

made a really good argument. I said, "If organic is really going to be organic, then we've got have some rules and regulations. Do you have any proposals?"

He said, "We got all the ideas. We know how to set it all up. We have to go out and get farmers to adopt the best management practices for organic growing. And after we've seen that they can do that and the soil hasn't had any pesticides or herbicides in it, there'll be a certification process. If they meet the test, we can write 'certified organic.'"

I said, "That sounds good to me. Is there much interest in it?"

He said, "Well, I'll bring a bunch of farmers together, and we'll come and talk to you."

So we did that. I'll never forget the meeting. It was up in the top floor of the state capitol, in a hearing room. It was a very candid meeting. I looked around the room and I said, "Man, these are all hippies of the sixties, and we're up against the biggest agriculture in the country, which has just defeated me on this origin labeling." So I said, "Look, you guys have a great idea. It's smart for California. But it's going to be hard to get this passed. I want to know how hard you're willing to work on this, because I'll put the bill in, but if you want me to just put in a bill and it gets killed, you have given the wrong message because if you're defeated, why would anybody do it again? So are you really willing to work?"

They said, "Yes, we are." I said, "Well, look, I'm a coach. This is my job. My job is to make a law. I'll show you how you do that. You go through seven gates to get to the governor. And each one of these gates has lawmakers sitting on them.

They're sitting on the Ag Committee; and they're on the Appropriations, and Ways and Means Committee (as they call it in the Assembly), and then to the Assembly floor; and then you've got to go over to the Ag Committee in the Senate; and then you got to go to the Senate Finance Committee; and then you got to go to the Senate floor; and then you got to bring it back to the House to correct the amendments, adopt the amendments that were taken in the Senate; and lastly you've got to get it to the governor and he must sign it. I'll tell you who the votes are at each one of those gates, but you've got to call those people, and you got to make contact, and you have got to do it from the district they are elected from. This is a lot of work. Are you willing to do it?" They said, "Absolutely."

So I was the teacher, and they were the students, but boy, were they great. I'll tell you, the politics on it was phenomenal, because we got the bill out of the Agriculture Committee in the House, and we got it through the Ways and Means Committee, and we got it off the floor. And then all of a sudden, traditional agriculture was waking up. They had never taken any interest in this little nothing bill. All of a sudden, somebody started reading it and said, "No, this isn't nothing. This is launching a whole new industry in California."

And at that time, I found out that Senator [Patrick] Leahy from Vermont had introduced a similar bill in the United States Congress.⁹ Senator Alan Cranston came to Santa Cruz. We took him up to the Agroecology Center [UCSC Farm and Garden Project] at UC Santa Cruz, and we had a wonderful meeting there with all the folks and the students. He talked about how he was going to get involved with Senator Leahy, who was a good friend, and help him get that bill through

the Senate, and he would like to be helpful to us too. So with his endorsement— Usually you don't have federal people endorsing state legislation. He did, and it was news.

I remember being in the Senate Ag Committee. This is the first time the opposition had showed up. What they were opposed to was requiring that land be free of chemicals for three years prior to growing organic. They didn't want that in there, because they wanted to transition right away. Immediately. "If people are going to buy organic and we're farmers, we can't label it organic without doing this protocol. But we don't want to wait three years. We want market access right away."

The room was full because there was a lot of interest in this bill. I remember Senator Russell on the committee from Southern California, who'd gotten a message from the ag lobbyist that suggested that they take this provision out to require that the land be free of chemicals for a number of years. He made the motion, and some other senator seconded it. I said to the chairman, "Mr. Chairman, can I speak on the motion?" They said, "Certainly, you're the author of the bill." (Well, normally you don't.) [Earlier] they had asked me, "As the author, will you take this amendment?" I [had] said, "No, I'm against it." So they knew I was opposed to the amendment, but they didn't know exactly why.

So I said, "Can I speak to this motion?" He said yes. They gave me the courtesy. I said, "If this motion is successful right now, all the work that's been created on this bill and all the support around this bill will walk out of this room. This is dead on arrival. We're not carrying this bill a day more." And you could hear a

big sigh in the whole room. I mean, the author of the bill had just threatened the committee that this was a killer amendment. Then the committee started talking about the motion, suggesting maybe they ought not to do it, that they ought to take my advice. They called the roll, and the motion was defeated. That was truly a great victory, a great victory on that bill.

Well, when we got into the Senate Finance Committee, Senator Art Torres from Los Angeles, [who was] a big supporter of the UFW, but didn't know a lot about agriculture, started taking on this bill on technicalities. I was there with Mark Lipson. This is central casting. I always kid Mark that I think he had his overalls on, which is not how you appear before a Senate Finance Committee. But [Lipson] turned to me, and he says, "I can answer this question."

So the senator laid out all his concerns, and why he thought that we ought to amend the bill to do this, because it didn't take care of this or that. Mark got up, and he said, "Senator, I'm just a farmer down in the fields, but I'm really interested in this bill, and it would really do a lot for organic agriculture. That question you asked is really a very good question. We thought you'd probably ask it. So if you'll turn to page nineteen and you look at the sentence, line seventeen, I think you'll agree that that language takes care of your concerns."

Farmer: Oooh!

Farr: And everybody went, "Whoo!"

Farmer: [Laughs.]

Farr: So then Torres asks his second and third [questions], and Mark answers them both like that. And finally another senator [said]. “That farmer knows more about this bill than you do, Senator Torres. You better shut up.”

Farmer: [Laughs.]

Farr: It was quite a moment. It was comic, but it was real, and Mark was just— I mean, he looked so much the part of the organic farmer. I think in politics so much you hear all these big, fancy lobbyists, but what I have noticed is people still make decisions on good, old-fashioned instincts. When you have a person like Mark, people will listen. You know he’s not getting paid to get up and do this. He cares about this stuff. This is how he makes his living, and he knows what he’s talking about. I’ve always told people that it’s much better in a hearing to forget all the figures and numbers. Just tell some passionate story. Tell what this means to you. Because underneath all that crusty political titles, is fathers and mothers and people who care.

So Mark did it, and the bill passed out of committee. The governor signed it. We had to lobby him heavily, and he signed it. Everybody thought, well, this is really not going to mean anything very important in this industry. They even put the burden on the industry for the certification: “You got to raise the money to pay for the certification.”

Farmer: Was it [Republican governor George] Deukmejian?

Farr: Deukmejian was the governor. So we had a lot of problems. We had to put together the administration of it and the costs of that administration. But look what it's grown into.

When I went to Congress and got on the Appropriations Committee under the Clinton administration, they had not yet adopted the rules for the Leahy bill that had been adopted the same year, back in '91 in California. Now we're talking about 1998, '99. I told Secretary Glickman, who had been a colleague from Indiana, and who had been defeated and Clinton appointed him Secretary of Agriculture—he was a good friend of Leon Panetta's (who recommended that Glickman be appointed the Secretary of Agriculture)—he was a great secretary, but I told him, "I'm not interested in even having you get paid for your job unless you finally get that department to promulgate the rules to adopt the organic legislation that's been sitting here for nine years waiting for your department to act."

The USDA set up a rule-making committee, and it seemed like it had credible people, and they came up with the first set of recommendations. They put them out as a draft, and I think to this day the Department of Agriculture got more responses, something like 270,000 responses, on why their promulgated rules were wrong. So they amended those rules, and finally published those rules. Now it's what we know as the [national] organic law today. It's changed a little bit, but not much.

Chairing the Organic Caucus in Congress

I tell the world that the organic movement started in California, in Santa Cruz County, and the guru of that is Mark [Lipson]. I'm very proud to now be chair of the Organic Caucus in Congress and have colleagues that are members of it. A lot of good things are coming out of it. For example, the new House Farm Bill. The Senate hasn't done their version yet, but we have twenty-five million in that House bill for organic research, the first time it's ever been authorized. We are going to allow the food stamps to be distributed and used at farmers' markets along with the WIC [Women, Infant and Children nutrition] program so that there is actually purchasing power by authorized consumers under these programs to buy fresh fruits and vegetables right there in the farmers' market. This will be both a great draw for new customers to come to the market, and, I think, for the vendors, a lot more possibility to increase their income. Santa Cruz County, again, I think is leading the country in this, because we have a farmers' market in Watsonville where the Santa Cruz Social Services Department, who administers the WIC, the Women, Infants and Children program, hands out the vouchers at the market. So the women come to get their vouchers, and they're going to shop right there. They're already there. When I asked the vendors about it, I think they even told me that about sixty-five percent of their income came from these vouchers. So it's heavily used. The vouchers also include a private voucher in this county—the Repass family that owns West Marine (Inc.) has a voucher that they match.

So what we've done in this county, is we've brought the government to the people, and we brought organics, to make them accessible. We've seen this industry take off in this region. As I said, I think its market reach is growing now at about twenty to twenty-five percent a year. Of all agriculture in America, the hottest niche is in organics. And I don't see it stopping, because we are now as a nation becoming really interested in nutrition. If you're going to think and act on nutrition, you're going to buy fresh fruits and vegetables, and you'll probably, given a preference, buy organic.

Farmer: Now, was there something about institutional purchasing of organics in the new farm bill?

Farr: Yes, we have that in the new bill, too. The U.S. Department of Agriculture is allowed to use what we call Section 32 funds to make timely purchases of fresh fruits and vegetables, and these go right into things like [the] School Lunch program [and the] School Breakfast program. We've expanded these purchases of fruits, vegetables and nuts by another \$406 million. The total authority in the bill is much stronger than that, but [the] U.S. can directly purchase and then donate a variety of the non-price-supported commodities, including fruits and vegetables and tree nuts to the food assistance programs, like Second Harvest [Food Bank].

Farmer: It sounds like it has to be managed locally in order for the shipping to work with fresh fruits and vegetables.

Farr: Well, the federal government doesn't get into what you purchase. You do have to have an ability to distribute, but Second Harvest and Food Bank really

know how to distribute. And we have the School Lunch program, which is a national network of food distribution.

Farmer: I guess the network is set up. I'm thinking that would be hard for them to get used to not just doing that commodity cheese and stuff.

Farr: That is the problem. And frankly, it's interesting that you ask, because schools are controlled by school boards, but within the schools is this federal program that the federal government pays for, called the School Lunch program. What I've noticed in all these years when there've been issues going on in schools, it's always been, "What are you teaching my kids in math and science?" and maybe the arts. But nobody's been asking, "What are you feeding my kid in the lunchroom?" That is changing. School boards are now beginning to ask that question. And as you know, they've taken Coke machines and soda pop machines out of the schools, even though it's been to their detriment because the soft drink companies put them in there and then give them a share of the profit so they can buy band uniforms and support extracurricular activities. Despite that, school boards have said, "We don't want your machines in here. Your product is not healthy for our kids." That is what we need, more school board politics. The local community wants to see their kids having access to fresh fruits and vegetables and organics. What the food managers tell me in these schools is that kids mimic their parents. When their parents were eating pizza and McDonald's, they wanted pizza and McDonald's in the school. The parents are now eating in salad bars, and there are salad bars in the school. They're eating fresh fruit. Salinas was the first place in the nation to start serving all these fresh vegetables in schools.

So it's catching on, but it's a two-way street. We can put some money in at the federal level; we can order that the system buy more fresh fruits and vegetables. But the real ability to get them in the specific school is up to the parents and school board members. And we need to put pressure on them to guarantee or make sure that our school lunch and school breakfasts are nothing but healthy, delicious, nutritious meals.

Farmer: And that benefits the farmers that are farming that way.

Farr: Well, it helps all of our specialty crops—including organic. A specialty crop is everything that is not subsidized by the federal government. And subsidies—we've heard about that. The Farm Program, it's called. There're only about five crops that make it, and that's wheat, corn, beans, soybeans, rice, and the fifth one is cotton. We don't eat cotton, but if you look at rice, beans, corn, soybeans, and wheat, those are all agricultural commodities that you store. The reason the federal government got into the subsidy or the help to these farmers was because people could buy these products, put them in silos and storage bins, then wait for the market price to fluctuate, and then sell them. Well, in the meantime you're trying to be a farmer, and you haven't gotten paid, and you're falling apart, and you can't be sustained. So the Department of Agriculture stepped in with this program to try to keep farmers economically viable by giving them price supports and so on. Well, those have grown to be abused. People with multimillion-dollar incomes have been getting access to them. The rest of agriculture says, "You don't help us. None of the crops around here get any of that stuff." If it rains, or the bugs eat them, or the market price falls, they just have to take it. They lose.

So the big push here now is to match up this desire for Americans to be healthy, and to start being healthy by eating fresh fruits and vegetables. And in order to do that, we got to get the bad stuff out of the diet. The bad stuff is what the government has been giving all the schools from commodity programs. We're suggesting maybe the federal government ought to spend some money, a lot more money, on buying fresh fruits and vegetables and giving them to the schools to serve. In the meantime, if the school boards are demanding that that's what they want served in the lunchroom, it'll happen. So this is the new direction the country is going in, and there's a lot to be said for buying fresh, buying organic.

The last thing I'd like to say is, it's all a whole system. You can't change anything without restructuring top to bottom. You can't just have the grower growing organics, or farmers' markets selling fresh fruits and vegetables, or schools serving them. You also have to have research to stay ahead. How do you get rid of methyl bromide? How do you do integrated pest management? You've got to have the brain trust for that change. Well, I've been successful, as a member of the Ag Appropriations Committee, [at] getting a federal researcher at our federal research station in Salinas, just on organics.

Farmer: Oh, great!

Farr: And he's been terrific! He's so skilled at what he does that when he does field discussions (and I've been to them), there've been a lot of what I call the traditional agriculture at those discussions.

Farmer: They're interested.

Farr: I say, “Are you guys going organic?” They said, “Nah, we’re looking at it. We’re just thinking. But we’re learning so much from listening to his discussions, and we’re starting to incorporate that into how we manage our fields, because it makes such good sense and we find in the long run we’re saving money.”

So it’s not just about not spraying. It’s all about how you manage the bugs that are in there, and what kind of plants are around the fields, and how do you care for those. Instead of just pulling out all the weeds, some of those weeds attract the right kind of beneficial insect that eats the bad insect. So it’s this whole new movement of sustainable agriculture that’s very exciting. And it doesn’t just mean that your end product is going to be organic. You may not be ready to go there yet. But it means that everybody is looking to move more in that direction. It’s certainly not back to more chemicals, more water.

Farmer: Well, it’s exciting to hear that the Santa Cruz County area and your leadership is still putting us at the forefront, and still inspiring other people, because that’s what this whole project is about. This oral history is about why did it happen here and how did it happen here.

Farr: I think what’s happened here, if you look at it, the people that came here were all adventurers. A lot of them came here out of the gold fields, and what they did in the Salinas Valley, a lot of the Italian, Swiss, they [had] raised milk cows in Switzerland. When they couldn’t find gold, they didn’t go back to Switzerland. They came here and said, “Well, maybe I better do what I know how to do,” which was dairy farming. And then along came the input of the Chinese, and other people coming in and bringing their cultural values. The

Chinese did a lot [with] specialty crops because the Salinas Valley eventually, after dairy farming, became wall-to-wall sugar beets. Claus Spreckels built the whole town of Spreckels, built a big factory there, and we were the sugar-beet capital of the world for a while. But they're water intensive. People started feeling you could grow other crops and make more money than sugar beets.

And what happened is that one year, when they were growing all the sugar beets, there was a huge crash in the market. I don't know whether it was because of environmental factors or price factors, but the people that had anything to sell were the Chinese that were working all the fields. They were kind of sharecroppers, and they were given enough land to grow their own gardens for domestic purposes. The one thing the Chinese really specialized in was the gathering of mustard seed. All of a sudden this valley was crashing, and the only thing that they had to sell were the mustard seeds that had been gathered by the Chinese.

So the Japanese came in and we [became] the largest center of flower growing until the South Americans kind of beat us out, but we've got back some niche markets. This is the berry capital of the world right here, the Driscoll berries and all kinds. They're expanding. They're going to double in size in the next five years. There're not many companies in the world that can ever say that.

Farmer: I think they work with small family farmers, basically.¹⁰

Farr: They do. Essentially it's an old-fashioned kind of co-op idea. They do the science, they do the plant breeding, and then they give you the latest, hottest, sweetest kind of strawberry. You plant it. You manage it all. You take the risk.

They help market it. I went into Pajaro Valley just this week with them, and they showed me their demonstration garden, their science garden for strawberries. Twenty-three hundred different strawberry plants. And somebody has to go through and pick out what is the best tasting.

Farmer: (chuckles)

Farr: There are white strawberries. They're just doing all these different kind of varieties. Wouldn't that be a job? "My job is to be the strawberry taster." They do the same thing with blueberries. They do the same thing in raspberries. And when they get the right plant and figure out the right breed, the mix—and they're always testing new stuff. And that's all being done here. Well, I have to go to another appointment now.

Farmer: Thank, you Congressman Farr.

¹ Farr served for two years in the Peace Corps in Colombia, near Medellin.

² Senator Fred Farr was elected to the California State Senate in 1955, the first Democrat in forty-three years to represent the rural Central Coast. He held that seat until 1966.

³ SB 899 (1965). Farr, Cobey and Stiern. Chapter 1417. An act to add Chapter 6.5 to Part 3, Division 5 of the California Health and Safety Code to read Food Crop Growing and Harvesting Sanitation: "The Legislature finds and declares that the people of the State of California have a primary interest in the sanitary conditions under which food crops are grown and harvested for human consumption and in the health and related sanitary conditions under which the workers are employed in the growing and harvesting of food crops. The Legislature hereby finds and declares that the provision of sanitary and hand-washing facilities for those employed in the growing and harvesting of food crops is necessary to the preservation of such sanitation and health and that such facilities are necessary to maintain the dignity of such workers."

⁴ Proposition 65, known as the "Safe Drinking Water and Toxic Enforcement Act," was approved by California voters in 1986 and is based on the premise that the public and workers have a right to be informed about exposures to chemicals that are known to the state to cause cancer, birth defects, or other reproductive harm. See

<http://www.cdpr.ca.gov/docs/dept/factshts/prop65.htm>

⁵ See Sebastian Carmona et. al. v. Division of Industrial Safety, January 13, 1975. See Douglas L. Murray, "The Abolition of El Cortito, The Short-Handled Hoe: A Case Study in Social Conflict and State Policy in California Agriculture," in *Social Problems*, Vol. 30, No. 1, October 1982.

⁶See HEALTH AND SAFETY CODE SECTION 110810-110958:

<http://caselaw.lp.findlaw.com/cacodes/hsc/110810-110958.html>

⁷See the oral history with Sean Swezey in this series for more on the bug vac.

⁸See the oral history with Mark Lipson in this series.

⁹ Organic Foods Production Act of 1990. See:
<http://www.sarep.ucdavis.edu/Organic/complianceguide/national6.pdf>.

¹⁰ See the oral history with Roy Fuentes, who grows for Driscoll's.