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## **Survey digs into opinions on ag land**

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By **VICKIE HORNER** Freelance Writer

ARCATA, Calif. — The results of the first survey on the importance of agriculture in Humboldt County, Calif., are a "wake-up call" for area planners, policy makers and producers.

Humboldt State University Natural Resources Planning graduate student Ben Morehead recently released the Humboldt County Agriculture Survey, which he compiled for his masters thesis.

"The purpose of this study was to express the voice of agriculture because I believe it is under-represented," said Morehead in his office above the Arcata, Calif., plaza. "I think the results are a wake-up call to planners and policy makers."

Morehead will present the results of his study to the Humboldt County Board of Supervisors Dec. 16.

The study's data quantify and confirm the threats, attitudes and realities of Humboldt agriculture, said Morehead. He found that fewer than half of the producers surveyed had increased profits in the past five years.

"People hear that times are tough and farmers don't like regulations, but the survey goes a step farther," said Morehead. "It helps us understand the hard realities of being a farmer or rancher in Humboldt County."

The conversion of agricultural land to non-agricultural land is one of the main factors that threaten the future of agriculture in the county. The producer survey found that 40 percent of those surveyed do not have heirs to continue their operations, 65 percent do not have an

estate plan and 45 percent are older than 60 years.

Funded by a \$4,000 grant from the HSU Foundation and a \$1,000 grant from the Humboldt County Farm Bureau, Morehead conducted a two-part study surveying county agricultural operators and the general public on the values of working landscapes, the threats and opportunities in agricultural production and their opinions on ag land protection policies and programs.

The survey results show that area agricultural producers aren't familiar with many of the policies and programs that can help them.

The majority of the public surveyed was unfamiliar with local agriculture and thought a lot of it was run by corporations.

"Basically everyone (surveyed) thinks these lands have public benefits," he said.

"People don't make the association between the agriculture landscapes and the local businesses, but we need to make that connection before we lose the working landscapes."

#### GROUPS ENDORSED

Morehead was endorsed by and given access to the mailing lists of the Humboldt/Del Norte Cattlemen's Association, the Buckeye Conservancy, the North Coast Growers Association and the Humboldt Creamery Association.

In 2002, surveys were sent to 800 county agricultural producers, of which 38 percent responded. A separate survey, with a nearly 50 percent response rate, was sent to a random sample of 400 of the county's 64,000 registered voters.

The Humboldt Creamery Association sweetened the deal for some of the respondents by providing Morehead with 400 certificates for free Humboldt Creamery ice cream, which he sent at random with the surveys.

In January, after the results were compiled by a data analysis company, Morehead began analyzing the statistics and writing the report.

#### 'INCREDIBLE SURVEY'

The survey's results are extremely beneficial in understanding how Humboldt County's farmers and ranchers feel about important issues, said Humboldt County Farm Bureau Executive Director Katherine Ziemer.

"So we're learning what people need," said Ziemer. "It's an incredible survey."

As a result, the Farm Bureau held an estate planning workshop for its members in November, which was presented by FarmLink.

Ziemer said Humboldt County's producers are flexible and willing to try adding value to their products because they want to stay in agriculture.

The Farm Bureau's main "fight" is to keep agricultural land in large parcels, she said. Ag land is lost when producers subdivide productive land into ranchettes for homes.

"That will totally destroy the ag community in Humboldt County if we allow that," said Ziemer.

Morehead, also a land conservation consultant, left his job with the North Coast Regional Land Trust to complete the project six months ago.

#### APPLYING FINDINGS

The next step is applying the information, which he hopes will validate the need for economic development in agriculture.

Outreach efforts to county government and ag groups and public service announcements on the county's agricultural industry will help educate the community, Morehead said.

"People think that the beautiful dairy and ranch vistas in Humboldt County are always going to be here, but the public needs to make the connection that producers need to make profits to prevent the loss of open space."