

## **Survey: Ag producers 'just making it' financially**

**James Tressler The Times-Standard**

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EUREKA -- Humboldt County agricultural producers say they're having a tough time getting by -- the result of overregulations, limited land availability and falling profits.

That's some of what came out of a survey of hundreds of landowners and residents conducted and paid for by the Humboldt County Farm Bureau and Humboldt State University. The mail-in survey, conducted last year, has just been released and is expected to be reviewed at Tuesday's Board of Supervisors meeting.

Here are a few highlights from the survey:

\* 92 percent of producers agreed current real estate prices have made it difficult to purchase or lease land for agricultural production, and 84 percent agree that residential development is reducing the amount of land available for production.

\* 71 percent of producers feel overregulated by government agencies, limiting their ability to make business and land improvements. Half of the producers said regulations have forced them to consider selling their land or retiring.

\* Less than one-third of the producers had increasing profits over the past five years, and less than one-third expect increasing profits over the next five years. Eighty-four percent of producers who saw declining profits said they expect the same or worse in the near future. Only a small minority of dairy and beef producers, the county's largest private agricultural land owners, expect increasing profits over the next five years.

The survey included 300 local agricultural landowners and producers, as well as nearly 200 residents. It was conducted by Ben Morehead, a graduate student at HSU's Department of Environmental and Natural Resource Sciences, with help from the farm bureau.

Humboldt County Supervisor Roger Rodoni, himself a rancher, said the issues raised in the survey are "right on the money," adding that the concerns over regulations are what prompted him to enter politics in the first place.

However, Rodoni added he doubts any real reforms will be accomplished because he said the general public these days is largely ignorant of agricultural issues because they're not raised around agriculture.

"It's difficult to reform anything when your audience is not of that experience," he said. "They just can't understand what your problems are."

Rodoni said one solution is to continue fostering agriculture education classes, such as have been offered at College of the Redwoods. But such programs have suffered budget cutbacks in recent years -- a sign that Rodoni said unfortunately confirms his view that public officials largely don't value the importance of agriculture.

One glaring omission from virtually all studies and reports on Humboldt County agriculture is the marijuana industry, which has an especially strong presence in Rodoni's southern district. Rodoni said he agrees it's time to get a better grasp on how this so-called "underground" economy impacts the overall agricultural community.

"I've tried for years to get that conversation started," he said. "It just won't ever take off. I don't know why."

Michael Smith, assistant professor with HSU's Department of Environmental and Natural Resource Sciences, oversaw the survey, which his student Morehead did for his master's thesis.

Smith, who also is on the board of directors for the North Coast Regional Land Trust, said the survey's findings do seem to indicate that agriculture in the county overall seems to be on the decline.

"I hate to say the sky is falling," Smith said. "But it's a downward trend and without a significant policy change I don't see that changing."

One possible solution, mentioned in the survey, could be to bolster existing laws, such as the Williamson Act, to compensate landowners for giving up their right to subdivide land out of agricultural production. Another solution would be to develop "urban growth boundaries" around residential centers, keeping agricultural production outside. Seventy percent of the respondents agreed with that measure.

Still, less than half of the respondents were enthusiastic about a hypothetical local sales tax increase to pay for state and federal programs that protect agricultural lands.