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PRESS RELEASE

New Volunteer Community Group Seeks “Common Ground” for the Future of Santa Barbara County Agriculture

Santa Barbara, CA- The Santa Barbara County Ag Futures Alliance (SBCAFA) introduced a new approach to addressing the many complex issues surrounding the use of land and natural resources in Santa Barbara County. This is the culmination of a year-long process gathering interested members, from agricultural, labor, environmental, and community groups interested in tackling these very issues with an open mind and a willingness to find common ground.

The Alliance, with 12 founding members, represents viewpoints from a variety of community groups, professions, and perspectives; each group member has made the commitment to working within the collective to come up with real solutions to problems facing the county within the scope of their purpose.

Teri Bontrager, an AFA founding member and Executive Director of the Santa Barbara County Farm Bureau stated, “I am looking forward to working within a process based on open dialogue and cooperation that respects the values of all involved, so that the viability of agriculture in Santa Barbara County remains for generations to come.”

The Santa Barbara County AFA is the most recent group of its kind to be supported by the Ag Innovations Network. There are currently five active AFAs in California counties, including Ventura. All of these AFA groups are based on the premise that building relationships and working together with stakeholders from a variety of oppositional viewpoints can produce new, innovative solutions to traditionally unresolved conflicts. SBCAFA has met monthly for the past year to build a level of trust and demonstrable commitment to the idea of cooperation between community members who, at times, had strongly opposing viewpoints.

"The old style politics that have dominated this County are no longer welcome," said Eric Cardenas, program director at the Environmental Defense Center and one of the founders of AFA. "AFA is about building bridges where there were none, and to cross those bridges in the hopes of finding common ground on which to stand."

Jennifer Dolan, AFA member, teacher, and board member for the League of Women Voters Santa Maria Valley states, “These are real people around the table. It is hard to ignore the values and ideals of individuals who you have come to know and respect.”

Larry Lahr, of the Rincon Corporation, and AFA member, says of the Alliance, "I think it's important that instead of arguing polar positions in the media or another public forum, that opposing forces are able to sit down in a quiet room and listen to each other openly, respectfully, and with genuine interest. From this we can determine common ground, middle ground, or at least, have a better understanding of what each side is saying and why."

AFA has identified the preservation of agricultural land and the pressing need for farmworker housing as two priority issue areas. In addition, AFA seeks to establish and maintain a future that includes a healthy agricultural economy, healthy citizenry, and a clean, beautiful landscape for all to enjoy.

To find out more, please visit the website <http://santabarbaracoafa.org>

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