

## **Ag needs to be a priority**

*Sacramento area farmland under pressure from all directions*

### **Capital Press Notebook**

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From where Michael Eustice stands, agriculture is having a mighty tough go of it.

He's farmed his whole life in the Sacramento area and has driven truck there nearly two-thirds of his 60 years, yet today he sees agriculture fighting for its life in an area that was once a farmer's dream-come-true.

Urban sprawl, a lack of processors, high fuel prices, over regulation and drought threaten farmers from every direction.

Houses - many of them now empty, courtesy of the mortgage debacle - have taken over many areas with rich bottom soil that were among the most productive in the state.

The problem with subdivisions is they aren't good neighbors, Eustice said. The use of pesticides and fertilizers must be curtailed near houses. When farmers can't plant crops on their land, they sell out to developers. It's an unending cycle.

As cropland has given way to suburbs and warehouses, one by one, the processors have also disappeared.

"Sacramento used to be called 'Sacra-tomato,'" he said. Of the six tomato processing plants in the area, one remains.

As a trucker, Eustice is acutely aware of the spike in diesel fuel prices last year. His employer's fuel bill jumped 94 percent, from \$37,500 a month to \$72,750. Prices are lower than at the peak, but they're still a burden for truckers, farmers and others who rely on diesel fuel to run their trucks, tractors and combines.

Then there's Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger - "the Governorator," he calls him.

"I've somewhat given up on him," Eustice said. He points to regulation after regulation that have hit farmers and truckers in the pocketbook. One calls for trucks 10 years old or older either to be retrofitted or taken off the road by the year 2010.

Then there's the mother of all agricultural issues: water. Eustice has been informed that he will have no water this year, so he's letting his land lie fallow. Some rice farmers in the area - those who don't have deep wells - face a similar situation, as water districts shuffle water to meet the demands of urban areas as the reservoirs shrink.

With a growing number of houses, malls and other developments, Eustice wonders what the future holds for agriculture and the production of food. "What are people going to eat, the asphalt

roofs when they run out of food?" he asked.

That's a mighty good question for the governor and other denizens of the Capitol to ponder.

They need to figure out that those farms in the Sacramento area are not building lots waiting to be developed. They produce the food that Californians - and people around the world, for that matter - rely on.

Agriculture must be a priority for California's leaders, not an afterthought.