There is consensus amongst a broad coalition of citizens and organizations in Stanislaus County that the City of Riverbank’s proposed 1,522-acre border expansion, to accommodate the River Walk project, is in direct violation of Stanislaus County policies and its mandate to discourage sprawl, protect farmland and encourage orderly government. It is not in compliance with the Land Use and Agricultural Elements of Stanislaus County’s General Plan.

In 2016, the county supported Riverbank’s 1,479-acre expansion, intended to accommodate Riverbank’s growth for twenty years, and the largest border expansion in the county’s history. Stanislaus County’s formal response to the proposed River Walk project states, “It is premature and does not maintain a logical land use pattern.”
Farmland Working Group has been a consistent, persistent advocate for protecting our best farmland for over twenty years.

In 1999, FWG made its first video, “A Vision and a Legacy,” capturing the essence of what makes the Central Valley of California an agricultural power house. FWG newsletters chronicle the depth and breadth of our commitment. Each issue tells the stories of people committed to the land, taking steps to stop sprawl over our best soils.

In 2007, we questioned the logic of the Stanislaus County Board of Supervisors adopting the Salida Now initiative rather than sending it to a public vote. Our “Salida How?” headline challenged adding thousands of acres of urbanization in an unincorporated area without the structure and means to pay its own way for urban services.

In 2008, the public came out and voted for the Stamp Out Sprawl initiative with a super majority; the law of the land became “no more residential development outside of cities within Stanislaus County.” We celebrated this landmark vote with our spring issue proclaiming “E Changes Everything!” And, so it did! For nearly 12 years, no new housing subdivisions have sprouted up over our best county lands.

2009 was our 10-year anniversary and we wrote about not allowing urban use in the ag buffer north of Turlock. We highlighted the need for “Rethinking the North County Corridor.” The subsequent public outcry to “make Kiernan work” became reality and Kiernan Road continues to be the main four-lane divided corridor on the east side of the county.

In 2010, we encouraged Turlock to “hold the line” along their west side, and documented the courts upholding the Stanislaus County Farmland Mitigation Program when challenged by the building industry.

In 2014 began with “No Annexation of Wood Colony” and ended with Stamp Out Sprawl urban limits qualified for the ballot in Modesto. Unfortunately, in November 2015, less than 25% of registered voters cast ballots and Measure I was defeated by 215 votes. 2016 and 2017 brought an ever-present concern about water and what state mandates may do to the future of agriculture.

In 2018, the Central Valley Farmland Trust merged with the Brentwood Farmland Trust of Contra Costa County, becoming California Farmland Trust. This is very dear to us; both of us served on the county committee that explored the feasibility of forming a farmland trust.

And now, in 2019 and beyond, our focus remains true to our mission: To preserve the agricultural foundation of our region and promote smart growth in our urban communities through education, outreach and action.

Denny Jackman and Jeani Ferrari are founding members of Farmland Working Group. They wrote this for The Modesto Bee

“our focus remains true to our mission: To preserve the agricultural foundation of our region and promote smart growth in our urban communities through education, outreach and action.”
Jeani Ferrari, Chairwoman

Jeani Ferrari has lived in the Central Valley her entire life. The Ferrari family farms in Merced and Stanislaus counties. She served on the Turlock Downtown Revitalization Committee, the Yosemite Association Board, and the Yosemite Fund Council. Jeani currently serves on the Carnegie Arts Center Foundation Board. She helped launch Turlock’s first Certified Farmers’ Market, which opened in 2010 in downtown Turlock. Jeani was a founding member of the Stanislaus Farmland Trust which evolved to become California Farmland Trust. In 2015, Jeani and John co-chaired Turlock Gospel Mission’s Hope Lives Here fundraising campaign. They served as co-chairs in 2020 to secure funds for Turlock Library, and most recently co-chaired the Next Chapter fundraising campaign for Stan State’s Vasche Library.

Matt Beekman

Matt Beekman is a commercial beekeeper born and raised in Stanislaus County. He is a graduate from UC Berkeley with a double major in Political Science and Political Economy of Industrial Societies (PEIS). As part of his PEIS course-work, he took two City Planning courses that triggered his interest in local municipal governance. He served in various capacities for the City of Hughson as a Planning Commissioner, City Council member, and Mayor from 2004-2015. During his tenure as Mayor, the City of Hughson adopted a 2:1 farmland mitigation policy. Matt Beekman also served on the Stanislaus County Council of Governments, Stanislaus County Local Agency Formation Commission (LAFCO), was elected City Representative for CALAFCO Central Region encompassing all Central Valley, Sierra Nevada Counties. In 2015 he was selected as the LAFCO City Commissioner of The Year for the State of California. Matt Beekman resides with his wife and three children in Turlock.

Steve Stewart

Steve Stewart is a Central Valley native. He was born and raised in Ripon, CA and has a lifelong involvement in Agriculture. After graduating from Fresno State with a degree in Plant Science, he started a career as a winegrape grower that has afforded him the opportunity to see the changes in the landscape of the San Joaquin Valley over the past 30 years. Steve, his wife Kathleen and two daughters, currently live in Stanislaus County. He is focused and committed, working to preserve the agricultural resources that the Central Valley provides.

Denny Jackman

Denny Jackman is a native of Modesto, CA, and current resident. He is a former Modesto City Council member. He is a founding member of FWG and the Central Valley Farmland Trust, now called the California Farmland Trust. Denny co-authored the Stanislaus County farmland protection Measure E (Stamp Out Sprawl) in 2008, which requires a public vote before housing development can occur outside of the nine cities within the county. He is passionate about protecting the best agricultural area here on earth!

Suzanne Byrd, Vice Chair

Suzanne Byrd is a fifth generation California farmer living and farming in the Wood Colony area west of Modesto. She and her husband, Tim, raised their family on their almond orchard. After volunteering on several political campaigns, she understands the urgency to educate our elected officials on the unique farming industry of Stanislaus County. An early supporter of the California Farmland Trust, she is passionate about preserving the rare and beautiful farmland of the Central Valley and wants to support growing local food because no matter where we live, we all need to eat!

S. Chance Carrico, Secretary and Treasurer

Chance Carrico’s connection to the agricultural heritage of the Central Valley runs deep, rooted in multiple generations of family farm laborers. His involvement in the 4-H Club, during his childhood, further nurtured this bond. He is a Certified Public Accountant (CPA) with an Economic Studies degree from California State University, Stanislaus. Chance, alongside his wife and son, proudly calls Stockton home.

Karen Conrotto

Karen was born and grew up in Modesto, surrounded by orchards, vineyards, dairies, and fertile growing fields. She raised two daughters in the Valley, both of whom she and her family are extremely proud. Karen recently retired as a Speech Language Pathologist and enjoys working on the persimmon orchard her parents purchased in the 1980’s, as well as swimming, kayaking, and gardening with friends and family. Karen considers it a privilege to serve on the FWG board and work to protect farmland, rivers, riparian habitats, aquifers and groundwater basins, knowing how important it will be to protect one of the world’s most important growing regions for future generations.

Garrad Marsh

Garrad Marsh is a life-long resident of Modesto. His grandmother and father built the ‘modern’ Modesto Bowl in 1948. Ten years later, his father built McHenry Bowl – way, way out in the country. After graduating from high school Garrad joined the US Navy. Following his return to Modesto, Garrad attended and graduated from Modesto Junior College. In 1978, Garrad earned his B.A. degree from the University of California, Berkeley. Garrad returned home and bought McHenry Bowl from his family. For the past thirty-five years, he and his wife, Dallas, have owned and operated McHenry Bowl. Garrad’s interest in the community led him to enter local government where he served on several committees. After serving on the planning commission, Garrad decided to run for city council. After serving two terms, he served four years as Modesto’s mayor. In 2006, Garrad joined Denny Jackman to run the SOS (Stamp Out Sprawl) campaign — the Yes on E initiative to limit growth outside of incorporated cities of Stanislaus County; the ballot measure passed.
“It has become clear over the last few years that farmland conservation in a rural agricultural region like the San Joaquin Valley is linked to how cities grow and where public investments are made. Recent citizen advocacy over general plans, sustainable community strategies and urban limit lines holds hope that the future long term economic development - both agricultural and urban - of the San Joaquin Valley will save farmland and grow cities.”

- Dan O’Connell, PhD