

Coastal Grower

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Feeding the Minds That Will Feed the Nation

I Love Farmers: They Feed My Soul



BY MARY DUAN

You may have been a bit startled to pull this issue of Coastal Grower from your mailbox, because instead of a beautiful pastoral shot that usually graces the cover, this cover features what at first glance looks like a biker tattoo.

Take a closer look, though, and read the words. "I Love Farmers. They Feed My Soul." It's the logo of an eponymous group that this summer sprung out of San Luis Obispo—I Love Farmers is a grassroots campaign aimed at educating teenagers and young adults, ages 14 to 24, about how this nation's food is produced and the importance of the family farmer to the food supply.

The look and feel of the website, the logo and the t-shirts the group sells in order to cover its expenses are decidedly hip, but delve into the website and you'll find a deadly serious message: if we don't get serious about protecting our nation's farmers and their ability to farm, we may find ourselves becoming wholly dependent on food imported from other countries.

A chilling quote from Henry Kissinger on the website perhaps says it best: "Control oil and you control nations. Control food and you control the people."

As the site states. "American family farmers operate in the most expensive, heavily regulated, closely watched farm-



ing environment in the world. They care about the environment, they care about their farm workers and they care about the consumers. In other countries this is not the case."

Annalisa Clarke, an ag communications professional, and Cal Poly-SLO professor Scott Vernon, lead the group, along with five twentysomethings who

have either started or are on the verge of starting their careers in agriculture.

They include 22-year-old Alexis White, an SLO native who plans a career in ag communications; Salvador Hurtado, 23, from Callexico, CA, who is developing the Central and South American divisions of U.S. Agriseeds Inc. and hopes to earn a PhD in ag education;

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21-year-old Steve Parsons from Ducor, who is studying to be a certified pest control advisor; Taylor Gilkey, a 20-year-old from Corcoran who grew up as a farm kid and is deciding on a career path; and Joe Prescott, 23, a Porterville farming and ranching kid who aspires to work to bring farmers, government, the public and special interest groups

together on farming issues.

Clarke said Vernon decided to launch the group after witnessing how farmers "got their katooshies handed to them" over Proposition 2, the Standards for Confining Animals Initiative, which passed in November 2008 with 63.5 percent of the vote.

"We let a group dictate production practices," Clarke said, "with a lot of emotional pleas and tugs used to sway an uneducated population."

Vernon realized that in his job as an ag communications professor, he needed to be sure he was preparing students to work in an industry that would still be available to them in 10 or 20 years.

The project is not affiliated with the university, and is funded strictly by donations. California Women for Agriculture recently partnered

with the group on a t-shirt run, and I Love Farmers is looking at other opportunities to spread its message via talks and t-shirts with various organizations.

I Love Farmers set out to target the Millennial generation, starting with 14-year-olds, because in four years those teens will become voters, ones used to communicating digitally and creating dialogue with digital platforms.

"The most important piece right now is awareness. We see this as a trusted information source and a dialogue about food production," Clarke said. "And it's a way to help educate consumers on having a political voice."

I Love Farmers can be found online at ilovefarmers.org. In addition to hats and t-shirts bearing their iconic logo, you can also buy—you guessed it—temporary tattoos. **CG**

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