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Rominger Brother Farms: Continuing a Family Tradition of Conservation

by Kate Laddish & Paul Robins

The Rominger Brothers belong to a family long-recognized as conservation leaders in Yolo County. Their ranch is dotted with ponds and corners for wildlife habitat. They manage their fields with a variety of soil management techniques that promise to reduce inputs, maintain or boost productivity, and sustain their farm's viability for future generations. Over the years, members of the family have provided (and continue to provide) leadership for the Yolo County RCD, Western Yolo SCD, Yolo County Farm Bureau, Yolo County Flood Control and Water Conservation District, UC Davis agricultural programs, the California Department of Food and Agriculture, and the US Department of Agriculture.

Bruce Rominger is a fifth generation member of this legacy. Recently, Bruce spoke about his family's operation, motivations, and methods for pioneering local conservation on their ranches. According to Bruce, the Romingers learned about conservation just as other farmers might: through word of mouth, observing neighbors' activities, and attending workshops.

The range of products the Romingers grow, which includes row and field crops, rice, and wine grapes, affords them opportunities to experiment with a number of different conservation methods.

Hedgerows and Perennial Grasses

When the Romingers started growing organic vegetables at the request of a processor, they had to stop using herbicides near their organic fields. As Bruce explained, "We thought we would plant perennial grasses with insectary shrubs to control erosion on the hill and [to eliminate] spray[ing] and disk[ing] to keep the weeds down." This



method has also been successful in other areas of their land that are difficult to reach with tractors and that would require frequent hoeing. Using native plants has been very useful for the Romingers and has enabled them to maintain their organic production in an efficient and ecological fashion.

Hedgerows are another key component of the Romingers' conservation farming methods. Hedgerows can provide valuable habitat for beneficial insects and small wildlife and can be a particularly good weed defense along a roadside. Even though this goes against the "clean farming" approach that many producers learned, establishing native plants on hard-to-farm land can be a much more effective method of weed suppression than continual disking and spraying.

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- Yolo County Weed Management Area tour.
- Roadside Vegetation Support Program field meeting.
- Yolo & Solano conservationists put on their thinking caps.



Important Dates:



- May 15 - Annual RCD Dinner at Nelson's Grove
- June 13 - Weed Management Area & District Project Tour

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Yolo County Farms and Ranches Get Cleaned Up

RCD Watershed Coordinator Vance Howard has been helping Yolo County landowners prepare to clean up their properties through the California Integrated Waste Management Board's successful Farm and Ranch Solid Waste Cleanup and Abatement Grant Program. Interested rural landowners must work with their local RCD, county, or city in order to apply for available funds to remove and dispose of solid waste illegally dumped on their properties.

So far Vance and Putah Creek Streamkeeper Rich Marovich have enrolled ten landowners who will potentially receive some of the \$200,000 available this year for eligible projects such as removal of illegally dumped trash (i.e., appliances, furniture, and scrap metal), removal of old tires and concrete from streambanks, streambank revegetation, and the excavation, regrading, and revegetation of an old dump site. Installation of barriers to restrict access to frequently used illegal dump sites may also qualify for funding.

For more information contact Vance Howard at 662.2037, ext. 121 or howard@yolorcd.org. ☞

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Ponds

Long ago, the Romingers constructed multi-purpose stock and tailwater ponds. "Originally the stock ponds were for the sheep we ran in the hills," says Bruce, "but they also had good water for deer and ducks." The ponds also provide local groundwater recharge and winter runoff attenuation that Charlie estimated could provide significant downstream flood protection if enough ponds were constructed. The tailwater ponds have proved to be extremely valuable for capturing sediment and water so that both can be reapplied on the ranch instead of lost to the nearest agricultural ditch.

Conservation Tillage and No-Till

The Romingers are also adapting and refining conservation tillage and no-till practices developed in the Midwest to the realities of farming in the Sacramento Valley. Bruce points out that the equipment is transferable, but irrigation methods are different. "We have compaction problems they don't have because we have clay-rich soils and we don't have freezing and thawing to break up the soil," explained Bruce. He added that one of the big prob-

lems he faces is trying to fit tomatoes into the rotation because they are extremely sensitive to irrigation quantity, and the equipment used to harvest them requires level ground. Therefore, no-till tomatoes are still a dream to Bruce, although he and his brothers have been experimenting with various degrees of working up the ground, "we've done some experimenting with the tomatoes over the last couple of years but I can't say that I have it figured out."

Carbon Sequestration

One important benefit of no-till is that untilled soil (and its organic matter) does not contribute to global warming. Untilled soil is not exposed to oxygen and consequently doesn't release broken down carbon into the atmosphere to cause a greenhouse gas (the cause of global warming). Bruce believes that "agricultural and forestry practices may be some of the solution" to preventing the buildup of greenhouse gasses and attendant global warming. Whether it's in the atmosphere, a tree, a stalk of wheat, or a fragment of organic matter in the soil, it is "all the same carbon." The benefits of conservation may indeed reach far beyond the boundaries of any given farm. ☞

NEW VEGETATION MANAGEMENT EQUIPMENT FOR RENT OR HIRE

Want to plant or maintain a roadside or plot of native grass but lack the equipment? The RCD can assist you with specialized equipment for native planting and maintenance, including a harrow, seeder, and mower—all pullable by ATV.

Contact Jenny Drewitz at 662.2037, ext. 114 for more information on specifications and rates for rental or hire.



Upcoming Weed Tour & Day in the District

Come see why the Yolo County RCD and Weed Management Area are considered state-wide models in conservation and collaborative solutions! On June 13 from 8:30 to 3:30, RCD, Yolo Ag Department, Cache Creek Conservancy, and Audubon staff will lead a bus tour of selected Yolo County project sites geared towards area representatives and legislators.

Participants will enjoy a hands-on look at the RCD and WMA's cutting edge restoration work, including areas of yellow starthistle and perennial pepperweed control at Grasslands Regional Park in Davis, Arundo and tamarisk control along Cache Creek, and restored native perennial grassland (conducted by Audubon, CA) on a ranch near Winters. The tour will wrap up with a ranch-style lunch and tour at the Yolo Land & Cattle Ranch and a brief presentation by Winters farmer and former Deputy Secretary of Agriculture Richard Rominger.

The tour, including transportation, food and materials, is free of charge and open only to the first 40 registrants. Support for the tour, which begins at Grassland Regional Park in Davis, comes from CDFA, CALFED, Yolo County Department of Agriculture and the Yolo RCD. To sign up, contact Sue McCloud at 662.2037, ext. 119; and for more information, contact Jenny Drewitz at 662.2037, ext. 114. ☞

Roadside Vegetation Field Meeting a Success

On a refreshingly sunny March morning on the bike path along Russell Blvd. near County Road 97, about 45 people stood in the crisp breeze to learn how the RCD and partner agencies transformed the adjacent roadside from weeds to native grasses. The field meeting was the fourth in a series hosted by the RCD that teaches on-farm vegetation and water quality management techniques. As Jeanette Wrynski, Jenny Drewitz and other speakers explained, using native perennial grasses not only helps manage roadside vegetation, it also provides soil stabilization, controls weeds, enhances wildlife habitat and increases the aesthetic value of the area.

Ms. Drewitz took the crowd through the procedures used to revegetate the area, from the initial spraying of glyphosate to kill the unwanted vegetation, to the maintenance and weed control currently in effect. She also enthusiastically answered many questions about the seed mix, procedures, herbicides, and equipment used in the project.

Both Ms. Drewitz and Rick Landon, the Yolo County Agriculture Commissioner, described the county



roadside “no spray” and revegetation permits that are currently being drafted. Mr. Landon explained that the new permitting requirements were created in an effort to ensure, among other things, effective communication and coordination among agencies and maintenance of “standards of care” along the roadsides.

Ms. Wrynski reminded those in attendance that the RCD and the NRCS have many valuable resources,

such as experienced staff, equipment (including a mower and a seeder for rental or hire through the Roadside Vegetation Management Support Program), funds for purchases, and cost-share programs. John Weatherford of the NRCS spoke briefly about the latter programs and clarified that the Environmental Quality Incentive Program (EQIP) is available to registered agricultural producers while the Wildlife Habitat Incentive Program (WHIP) is available to all landowners.

Many people stayed after the presenters concluded to examine the area and the plant samples that were available and to ask additional questions of the speakers. One thing that the attendees said they most valued about the field meeting was the ability to see the actual site and touch the grasses that had been planted there. Many commented that this wasn't merely theory, but rather the actual practice put into effect and that being able to examine the physical results was invaluable. ☞

First-ever Yolo & Solano Conservation Summit Held in Winters

Representatives from 16 farm, conservation and restoration organizations from Yolo and Solano Counties attended an unprecedented restoration summit on March 16th in Winters. FARMS Leadership, Inc. convened the meeting with expert facilitation by Kim Stokely of Adopt-A-Watershed. The purpose of the meeting was to learn more about each organization's activities, create a common vision for future work, identify opportunities for collaboration, develop improved communication among organizations, and develop strategies to maximize financial resources to the region.

The summit was a first step in engaging regional restoration organizations and area landowners, citizens and agencies in discussion about the common conservation and restoration issues they face. The group drafted vision and mission statements and selected representatives responsible for finalizing the language and for following up with other attendees. The collaborative effort will continue at the next meeting, which is open to the public and tentatively scheduled for June.

Participants completed a pre-summit survey, the results of which will aid them in future discussions about potential products, collaborations, and projects. The survey revealed that most of the respondents consider the greatest obstacles to accomplishing their goals to be funding (especially long-term), the need for more landowners and sites to implement restoration projects, infrastructure and staffing, partnership overlaps and territoriality, community interest and volunteerism, and regulatory barriers.

The participants shared ideas on how organizations and other stakeholders can work together to create a unified voice, increase landowner and knowledge base, and improve communication and understanding throughout our communities regarding the public's appreciation and awareness (or lack thereof) of the health of our local ecosystems.

For more information contact Mary Kimball, at 795.1520, or kimball@quiknet.com or Vance Russell, at 795.2921, or russell@yolo.com. ☞

**Don't Miss the Legendary RCD Annual
Dinner at Nelsons' Grove!**



Thursday, May 15th
5:30 - 8:00 p.m.



Co. Rd. 99E, between Co. Rd. 18 & Coil Rd.

Call the RCD at 662.2037, ext. 119 for information or tickets.

