

## **RUCS Forum Focuses on Local Food, Rural Jobs, & Infrastructure**

On December 10th, 600 local farmers, advocates, residents, and leaders came together to think about how to preserve our rural communities in the coming decades.

SACOG is developing the Rural-Urban Connections Strategy (RUCS) to help business owners and policymakers better understand today's rural issues and find ways to create viable rural economies while protecting open space and habitat.

Our region's farms may be feeding the world, but very few support themselves on farming. U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) Rural Development California State Director Dr. Glenda Humiston said nationally that only about 11 percent of farmers can support their families from farming alone. Many farmers, especially smaller producers, are working off the farm to make a living.

Dr. Humiston also talked about the vast economic opportunities in our rural areas of the Sacramento Region. Dr. Humiston pointed to many innovative ideas, including using food banks as distribution hubs for farmers to get their products into local markets. She also discussed USDA Rural Development's loans, grants, and technical assistance that help producers, local governments, and rural residents. On the RUCS project, Dr. Humiston said, "this regional effort is truly an amazing thing." She went on to say how unique it is in the country and that it is something USDA is paying attention to.

RUCS Project Manager David Shabazian introduced the audience to some of the information SACOG has collected. In El Dorado, Placer, Sacramento, Sutter, Yolo, and Yuba Counties together, agricultural products are worth \$1.6 billion annually. Add in all the jobs and economic activity related to agriculture, and it's a \$3.3 billion industry. To help grow the agricultural economy, SACOG has developed technical tools that estimate aspects of agriculture from revenue to road use.

Local food markets, while now just 2 percent of all food grown in our region, present a large opportunity for consumers, farmers and ranchers. Local farms can be economically viable by selling at farmer's markets, through CSA boxes, to wholesalers and to institutions such as schools and hospitals. Scaling up the local food system will require aggregation, processing, distribution, and storage improvements. This infrastructure is critical if the region is going to source more of its food from local growers.

A panel of small-scale and large-scale producers talked frankly about the future of agriculture in our region, and whether the goal of increasing the amount of locally grown food was an achievable one. Paul Muller of Full Belly Farm in Yolo County put the value of local food this way: "In the long term, it returns dollars locally, it keeps resources in the community, and it empowers people in the community to be producers rather than having an expectation that what's always been so easy will continue."

Speakers also discussed the needs of small communities, many of which are growing just to pay for basic services and infrastructure. Where people live and where crops are grown directly affect rural roads. Transportation is a key part of the infrastructure that supports agriculture, and SACOG is looking at ways to plan and fund rural transportation. Looking at land use and transportation, the Rural-Urban Connections Strategy can help reduce pressure on agriculture lands when combined with smart growth in urban areas.

Throughout 2011, SACOG plans to continue meeting with stakeholders to discuss transportation, land use, local markets, forestry, water, and other issues that are critical to the sustainability of our region. You can find more information on the project and the event at [www.sacog.org/rucs](http://www.sacog.org/rucs).