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Winters farmer wins top honors at meeting

Craig McNamara earns 2007 Leopold Conservation Award

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Winters farmer Craig McNamara checks fava beans grown on his 325-acre farm in Yolo County. Forty acres of his land is dedicated to the activities of the Center for Land-Based Learning which cultivates in high school students and adults valuable lessons about farming, ranching and natural ecosystems.

His next project is planting a new block of organic walnuts and allowing the students to bisect it with a meandering riparian corridor to connect the Center for Land-Based Learning with the newly planted oak habitat along the creek. The project will remove about 400 walnut trees from the middle of his new orchard.

"This land can earn easily \$500 an acre per year. So why do we do it? I think because of the long-term benefit to us and to society, to biodiversity - all of these reasons are so important," McNamara said.

He said he was honored and humbled to receive the Leopold Conservation Award.

"I think today recognizing the good work that people are doing across the state is so important and any way we can do that to a greater degree behooves us all," he said.

In honoring McNamara, Brent Haglund, Sand County Foundation president, said his group views it as an important investment in private lands conservation.

"The \$10,000 that accompanies the award wouldn't go very far as a direct investment in a conservation project," Haglund said in a statement. "But by using it to highlight Craig McNamara's outstanding stewardship, we indirectly support hundreds of thousands in voluntary improvements by other private landowners who make measurable and lasting improvements to land, water quality and wildlife habitat."

Ashley Boren, executive director of Sustainable Conservation, a program sponsor, added that California farmers and ranchers continue to lead the nation in living the land ethic described by Aldo Leopold.

SPARKS, Nev. - Craig McNamara is an organic walnut grower, but it's his role as a conservationist and agricultural teacher where he's making his greatest contributions to society.

The Winters farmer was honored this week as the California winner of the 2007 Leopold Conservation Award at the California Farm Bureau Federation's annual meeting in Sparks, Nev. The award recognizes extraordinary achievement in voluntary conservation efforts.

McNamara, owner of Sierra Orchards, accepted the honor and a \$10,000 cash prize and vowed to plow it back into the Center for Land-Based Learning, a program he and his wife, Julie, started in 1993. The program teaches inner-city, suburban and rural high school students about agriculture and the environment.

"We are the stewards of this incredible land and I think it is incumbent upon us to share that with our fellow citizens and to use it as a teaching model and an open door classroom," McNamara said. "It is very important that we look at the pressures that we are experiencing in agriculture today - the urban pressures, the growth pressures - and we need to do everything we can to help the next generation of decision makers connect to nature, to land, to agriculture, or I feel we won't have it because the pressures will be so great, we either be paved over or housed over."

The McNamaras dedicate 40 of their 325 acres in Yolo County to the program's myriad activities so that about 2,000 students and a like number of teachers and parents each year can have hands-on experience in becoming more aware of where their food comes from. Their goal is to create a respect for the farm's natural ecosystem in the program's participants.

Examples of his farm's contributions include native plant propagation, a California agricultural pollinator project, an old farmhouse that is used to host groups for workshops and special events, and demonstration projects where students roll up their sleeves, literally digging into agricultural and habitat restoration work.

McNamara has moved back his farming operation 75 feet from the crest of the bank of Putah Creek to allow students to create an upland oak forest and habitat for erosion control and to "build a dynamic habitat area" of hedgerow plantings.

Students from 35 high schools in the region make multiple trips to the farm to plant cover crops and hedgerows, install irrigation and build bluebird and owl boxes.

"These are our sons and daughters, and these are our citizens' sons and daughters. They come in every shape and form. They are the kids that you wonder what is the future for them," McNamara said. "We see a tremendous future for them. When they make this connection out here, they get it. ... They realize how important it is."

"Craig McNamara's environmental stewardship and educational programs demonstrate unequivocally that sustainable farming practices are good for the land and good for the bottom line," Boren said. "These practices are even more critical to preserving biodiversity as wildlife adjusts to climate-related changes in their habitat and food supply."

The Leopold Conservation Award, named for world-renowned conservationist Aldo Leopold, is presented annually in six states.

Four other finalists for the award in California were: Jim, Mary and James Rickert of Prather Ranch in Shasta County; Chet Vogt of Three Creeks Ranch in Glenn County; Jack Varian of V6 Ranch in Monterey and Fresno counties; and Andy Zylstra of Zylstra Dairy in Stanislaus County.

In California, the Leopold Conservation Award is presented by Sand County Foundation, California Farm Bureau Federation and Sustainable Conservation. The program is supported by several wildlife and conservation groups.

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