



Riverside County

AGRICULTURE

The official publication of Riverside County Farm Bureau, Inc.

A private, nonprofit organization serving farmers throughout Riverside County since 1917

Reflecting Back to June

Preserving Agriculture

GOAL: The new Riverside County Farm Bureau manager is determined to protect the freedom to farm.

By Leslie Berkman and Tim O'Leary / The Press-Enterprise

Sharon Bolton, who on Monday became the Executive Director of the Riverside County Farm Bureau, said she will enlist the support of the public, including environmentalists, in the fight to preserve agriculture in Riverside County.

"It is critical to us to protect the freedom to farm," Bolton said. One of her priorities, she said, will be to make urban residents aware that agriculture remains the most valuable business in Riverside County, generating products last year worth \$1.19 billion.

Bolton said she is particularly anxious that county planning efforts to protect animals species not restrict essential farm practices such as tilling and the use of pesticides. She said farmers are also concerned about other mounting constraints on farming in the Inland Empire, including the rising cost of water and energy.

Bolton, who raises thoroughbred racing horses at her Temecula ranch and formerly pursued a long career in the building and land development industry, said farmers and builders generally understand one another and share an interest in upholding property rights.

But she said the relationship between farmers and environmentalists is more strained, even though, she said, "we may be more alike than different. We are both stewards of the land."

Bolton said she sees her role as a fence mender who wants to preserve and promote agriculture in Riverside County while recognizing that development will continue to occur in rural areas and that steps are needed to protect endangered and threatened plants and animals.

"It was always a them-against-us situation, rather than 'how do we get there from here?'" Bolton said. "It doesn't have to be that way. We can work it out."

Bolton replaces Bob Perkins, who served as the executive manager of the Riverside County Farm Bureau for 22 years before he left May 1 to head the Farm Bureau in Monterey County. Bolton was the bureau's director of governmental affairs and had assumed Perkins' responsibilities pending the selection of a new general manager.

Mark Draper, a past Riverside County Farm Bureau president who chaired the committee that promoted Bolton, said about 15 people applied for the executive manager post, and three were interviews.

"We thought Sharon could handle both the administrative details as well as the public relations part of the job, which includes not only speaking to various task forces and committees but to the Board of Supervisors," Draper said.

"I look to Sharon as being a positive approach for the Farm Bureau," said Dan Silver, coordinator of the Southern California-based Endangered Habitats League. "I think Sharon is seen as being a person who is collaborative and who wants to solve problems and is practical."

Bolton launched her career in the marketing department of Orange County's giant Mission Viejo Co. and later sold land for the former Bedford Properties in Rancho California. Since 1992, she has operated a property rights consulting firm and published a newsletter for absentee owners of land in southwest Riverside County.

Bolton said while she is Executive Director of the Farm Bureau, she will suspend consulting firm, called California Land Institute. Bolton served as Director of Governmental Affairs for The Building Industry Association of Southern California's Riverside County chapter before resigning last August to become director of governmental affairs for the Farm Bureau. In her last two positions, Bolton was deeply involved in the politics of the Riverside County Integrated Project, first as an advocate for builders and then as an advocate for farmers.

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Bolton said because of the importance of land use planning to the future of farming in Riverside County, she will continue to represent the bureau's interests in the integrated planning process, which is expected to be completed next summer. The complex endeavor involves the planning of new communities, future roads and vast tracts of wildlife habitat.

Silver said farmers have tended to identify with the interests of builders in order to preserve the option of developing their land.

"There is development pressure, I can't deny it," Bolton acknowledged. "But these farmers want to stay farmers. I guarantee it."

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