



## **Starting An Ag Futures Alliance Frequently Asked Questions**

### **What is an AFA?**

An Ag Futures Alliance (AFA) is county-based coalition of people working to create a vibrant local food system. The local food system includes food producers, distributors, and consumers. A vibrant local food system is one where local growers are economically viable, the physical environment is unpolluted, and consumers have access to healthy food.

### **Who is part of an AFA?**

The coalition is based on three primary legs: food production and distribution interests including farmers, ranchers, processors, wholesalers, farm labor, and support organizations such as Farm Bureau; environmentalists including individuals and organizations interested in smart growth, air and water pollution, habitat, and pesticides; and independent community leaders who are interested in the problems of agriculture and the environment such as members of the League of Women's Voters, local health organizations, and chefs, cooks, and other advocates of good food.

### **Should we have AFA in our county?**

Ag Futures Alliances are powerful tools to bring a community together to deal with problems in the local food system. In California these problems are typically the loss of farmland, farmers, and locally grown food, the environmental impacts of large-scale agriculture, and the health impacts of commercialized and processed foods. Often these problems polarize communities and create ballot efforts, lawsuits, or other expensive divisions. Where these problems are acute an AFA can be a vehicle to overcome polarization. The AFA process builds understanding and ultimately consensus on how to act between people formerly at odds.

Another scenario where AFAs can be very effective is when the community knows it wants to preserve or create a strong food system as part of economic development or community enhancement efforts. In this case the AFA is a perfect way to bring diverse interests together to create informed action.

### **What do AFAs do?**

AFAs are built to take action on the most pressing problems facing agriculture and the community. However, unlike some groups that come together to address a single issue and disband or which are geared for action driven by one polar

view of a problem, an AFA is designed to become a community institution which is durable, adheres to enduring principles, and acts in the long-run interests of everyone involved in food.

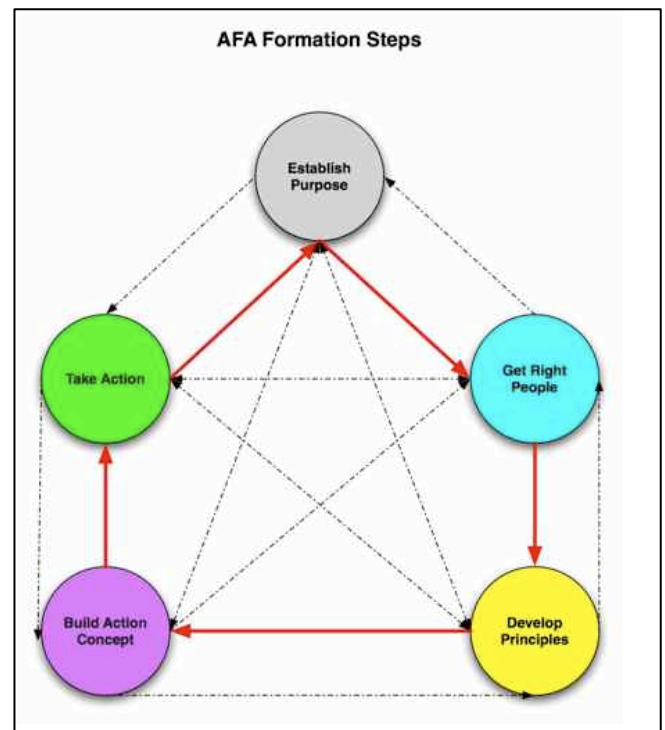
AFA's take on a variety of projects. In Ventura, California the AFA has written 7 white papers (through 2008) addressing issues including pesticide use near schools, farmworker housing, land use, and community stewardship. These papers have become the basis for efforts to change public policy and create community action. In the case of the farmworker housing effort, the AFA's work has resulted in the formation of citizen committees working for farmworker housing in each city in Ventura County and the construction of new farmworker housing. In Yolo County, the AFA has addressed county agricultural land loss mitigation programs and has been active in influencing county land use planning.

In general AFAs identify one problem per year to tackle. They spend the first part of the year learning from each other and other sources about the issue and identifying points of consensus within the group. Later in the year they develop a policy document or an action plan to address the issue. Once the AFA position is clear, a sub-committee that includes AFA members and others from the community will implement long-range plans and programs recommended by the group. These subcommittees may operate for as long as it takes to make all the changes the community needs.

### What happens during the first year of an AFA?

The first 10 meetings of an AFA are dedicated to building a very strong level of understanding and communication between AFA members. Members work to identify two sets of principles: how to create successful change in their community and how they can best work together as a group. Based on these principles the group identifies local issues they want to address. This information comes together in the form of a Constitution that guides the AFA and its efforts.

The process is captured in this chart. The red arrows capture the main flow of work. At each step of the process, earlier work is revisited to make sure it still makes sense. The group works until a 'good enough' understanding is reached and then moves on.



### Who is selected to be part of the AFA?

Ag Innovations Network works with one or more local sponsors to create an initial list of individuals that are invited to a kick-off meeting. The guiding principle in the creation of the initial membership list is to bring together the people that are needed to make the local food system sustainable. We recommend the sponsors seek wide diversity in the membership including people from all corners of the county, all parts of the food system, and all views on how to move forward. The only constraint is that individuals invited must be genuinely willing to engage in a process of collaboration and learning with other AFA members. The inaugural members of the AFA then develop their own methods for identifying and seating new members to the group.

### How is the AFA governed?

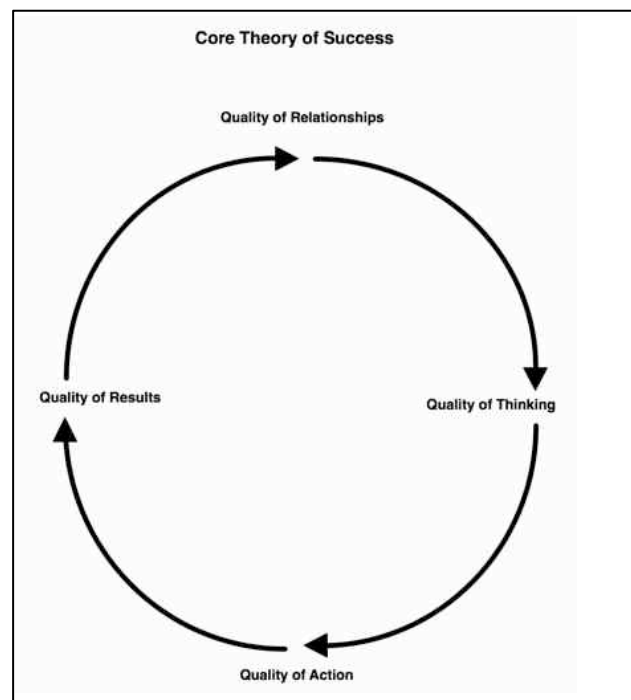
AFA's work as 'roundtables' where everyone has an equal say. Decisions are made by consensus. Ad Hoc committees form to work on special issues and bring back items and issues for the discussion by the whole roundtable.

### What is the role of the facilitator?

The AFA process is supported by a facilitator who is both knowledgeable about ag and environmental issues and skilled in working with diverse groups. The facilitator's job is to help the AFA achieve its goals. Facilitators are neutral about what principles are established or what projects are undertaken, but are very active in protecting the AFA process and helping the group move forward.

### Why do AFAs work?

...Because they create new relationships in the community that spark new thinking. The theory of success AFAs work from is shown in the diagram below. By creating solid relationships between people in the community, we improve our ability to see the whole picture and create new ideas. These high quality ideas lead to effective action. Effective action leads to real results for the community and further cements the relationships between AFA members. Many people find participating in the AFA one of the most rewarding and effective experiences in their lives.



**What do I need to do as an AFA member?**

All AFA members need to do four things to be a productive member of the roundtable:

- Listen carefully to all views
- Be open to new ideas and changing their own views
- Have respect for the different 'truths' that may be expressed
- Speak the truth – say what is on your mind

**Do I represent my group or myself?**

This is an issue that each AFA must grapple with. The Ventura AFA is structured so that only individuals are seated at the roundtable, not organizations. This means that members are free to speak their minds and not commit their organizations. At other times members are specifically asked to get the endorsement of their organization or even work to change the policy of their organization based on the work of the AFA.

**Is it fun?**

It can be! You will learn a lot and meet and get to know people in a new way. The Yolo AFA has a principle that captures the spirit of the AFA effort: "A sense of humor and humility is essential to our success."

**How much does an AFA cost?**

It depends on the level of support the new Alliance requires. When Ag Innovations Network helps form and facilitate the group, the costs include facilitation, travel, and coordination and range from \$20 to 25,000 per year.

**How is the AFA funded?**

AFA's are funded from local sources such as community foundations, local interest groups, and contributions from AFA participants. Ag Innovations Network may be able to partially subsidize the costs of an AFA during its first years of operation with grant funds it receives. Contact us about this possibility.

**What is the history of the AFAs?**

The first AFA was started in Ventura County in 1999. In the six years since the Ventura AFA was founded the group tackled projects including control of pesticide use near schools, land use policy, and community resource stewardship. Its work has resulted in changes to California law (AB 947, which regulates the use of pesticides around schools) and the creation of a countywide coalition for building farmworker housing. The group's position papers are often cited in Ventura County newspaper editorials and its members are sought after as representatives to a host of County initiatives.

In 2004 the AFA movement expanded with new a new roundtable being launched in Yolo County. In 2006 the San Mateo County Food System Alliance kicked off as did the Santa Barbara County AFA.

**Who is Ag Innovations Network?**

Ag Innovations Network is a California-based non-profit organization that works to enhance the long-term sustainability of communities by serving agriculture. We believe the food system, from production through consumption, is the cornerstone of a healthy eco-system, economy, and society. Our work includes sponsoring the Ag Futures Alliance project and providing strategic planning support for farms, ranches, ag organizations, and others involved in the food system. Ag Innovations Network was founded in 2000 and is based in Sonoma County, California.

**Your question not here?**

Contact us at [info@agfuturesalliance.net](mailto:info@agfuturesalliance.net)