

News Release

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California "Community" Farmer Wins National Sustainable Farming Award

Capay Valley, CA – Paul Muller, whose well-integrated, diversified farm harvests year-round and sells to outlets like Alice Waters' Chez Panisse, has been named the 2006 Western Region winner of the Patrick Madden Award for Sustainable Agriculture. The award honors exemplary farmers around the U.S. and will be presented on Aug. 16 by the Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education (SARE) program at its national conference in Wisconsin.



Growing up on the family dairy in rapidly urbanizing San Jose gave Paul Muller an understanding of farming's many challenges. As he weighed his options, he concluded that organic farming had a tremendous upside.

"I wanted to create a different model than what I grew up with," Muller says. He describes his 250-acre Full Belly Farm, which sells nearly 80 crops – vegetables, fruits, nuts, flowers – and animal products and employs 40 workers as "a wonderful adventure."

In 1984, Muller leased 12 acres in the Capay Valley, 45 minutes northeast of Woodland, growing fresh market vegetable seed crops. Razor-thin margins on seed crops led him to grow and sell the vegetables themselves.

Today, Muller's "different model" of agriculture focuses on diversified products and varied, lucrative marketing outlets. Full Belly Farm products sell at farmers markets in Marin, Berkeley and Palo, and another quarter of the harvest goes to the 800 members of Full Belly's community agriculture enterprise. (People joining a community farm, also known as CSA, buy into a farm season, then receive weekly portions of the harvest.) Fully half of Full Belly's products end up on retail shelves and the tables of 20 Bay-area restaurants.

"Paul Muller's farming operation exemplifies each of the essential elements of what Western SARE considers as sustainable agriculture," says Phil Rasmussen, regional coordinator for the Western SARE program hosted at Utah State University in Logan. "His integration of environmental stewardship, including alternative energy sources, coupled with savvy marketing and economic sustainability, typifies what we are trying to encourage and showcase."

Muller regularly tests new crops and growing methods, continually working to achieve higher quality and better flavor, picked fresher. Fertility-fixing, erosion-preventing cover crops are mainstays of the farm's rotations, alternating with summer crops like corn, melons and

tomatoes and winter crops like broccoli, beets and a wide variety of greens. Calcium, gypsum and a lot of urban compost flesh out the soil management program.

The cropping rotations mean year-round production -- and year-round sales -- so the farm can employ steady workers and enjoy continuous cash flow. By harvesting and delivering fresh produce directly to most of its customers, Full Belly captures most of the end user price.

Full Belly, which became fully organic in the 1980s, also nurtures beneficial insects and a wide variety of wildlife by planting hedgerows of native plants and preserving the riparian area along a creek bordering the farm. This spring, the farm installed a 17-kilowatt photovoltaic solar system, which will pay for itself in eight years and provide a good rate of return for 30, and it's experimenting with biodiesel filtered and refined from cooking oil from Bay Area restaurants.

"Paul Muller is one of the most dedicated, caring individuals we know," said neighboring farmers David and Ann Scheuring, who nominated Muller and his partners for the Madden award. "He is committed to a sustainable life, from the use of natural resources to the community he lives in. His 'family' on the farm is an inspiration for others."

Muller gives credit to that family, what he calls a "fairly unique amalgamation of partners," each contributing a distinctive set of skills and aptitudes. The first farm partner -- now Muller's life partner and mother of their four children -- is Dru Rivers, whom Muller met at UC Davis where she coordinated the student farm. Judith Redmond and Raoul Adamchak joined as partners in 1989, and Andrew Braitt in 1993.

Braitt, a former farm intern, is a tangible result of Full Belly's educational program. Of more than 100 interns, 15 or so have become full-time farmers. "We're not regenerating our farm population very well, so we're committed to growing farmers," Muller says.

Muller is joined by other regional Madden Award winners, including:

- Alex and Betsy Hitt, vegetable growers in Graham, N.C.
- Edwin and Marion Fry, organic crop and dairy producers in Chestertown, Md.
- Rex Spray, an organic crop and beef producer in Mt. Vernon, Ohio

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