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Protecting Livermore's Agriculture

Livermore Valley has always been an area with open, spacious, and rolling hills, supple land for growing. Nestled inside the coastal intermountain valley, Livermore is the easternmost city in the San Francisco Bay Area, with a mild Mediterranean climate perfect for viticulture and farming. It spans 26.44 square miles and has an ever-increasing population of over 85,000. It has become a hub for tech and government, but it keeps its rural charm. While cities around it continue to urbanize, Livermore maintains a strong connection to its agricultural roots through its preserved farmland and vineyards and ongoing conservation efforts.

Livermore's early agricultural development began in the 1700s and grew through the nineteenth century, propelled by early vineyards, land grants, and railways. Spanish missionaries broke ground on the first wine grapes in the Livermore Valley in the 1760s. In the 1820s, Robert Livermore, an Englishman who arrived in California, and his partner José Noriega were granted land known as Rancho Las Positas by Governor Juan Alvarado. By 1846, Robert had planted the first commercial vineyards in Livermore on that property ("History & Terroir"). William Mendenhall, known as the founder of Livermore, brought train tracks through Livermore in 1869, allowing the city to become an agricultural hub (Livermore Valley Chamber of Commerce). In the early 1880s, C. H. Wente, Charles Wetmore, and James Concannon established their wineries, and in 1889, Wetmore's dry white wine won America's first international gold medal for wine at the Paris Exposition (Livermore Valley Wine Community).

Shortly before the Prohibition era, the Smith-Lever Act and the Farm Bureau allowed for Livermore farmers' voices to unite and educate farm families and the public. The Smith-Lever Act of 1914 created “a national Cooperative Extension Service that extended outreach programs through land-grant universities to educate rural Americans about advances in agricultural practices and technology. These advances helped increase American agricultural productivity dramatically throughout the 20th century” (“The Smith-Lever Act of 1914”). The University of California, Berkeley, was responsible for creating the Cooperative Extension for California farmers (Homan 161). On June 27, 1914, the Livermore Herald published an ad asking farmers to join the newly formed Alameda County Farm Bureau. The extension service required 500 farms to sign up by July 1st, 1914, for a Berkeley advisor to approve. However, only 300 farms had enrolled by this due date, so application postcards were sent out to all farmers listed in Alameda County’s voter rosters. On August 5, 1914, a Berkeley advisor met with farmers in Livermore, giving local farmers and ranchers a unified voice and support system to advocate their interests and policies affecting local agriculture in regional and state government.

While the years before the 1920s were a heyday for wineries in the Livermore Valley, as they produced wine for rapidly expanding cities in the Bay Area, Prohibition, lasting from 1920 to 1933, made a huge dent in the production of wine in Livermore. According to Jim Concannon, whose family opened the Concannon Winery in 1883, “‘Ninety-nine percent of the wineries closed down’” during this time (Rosato Jr). The prohibition of producing, importing, transporting, and selling alcohol forced wineries across Livermore to shift from wine production into raising livestock like cattle for dairy and growing crops such as grain and hay. These agricultural changes diversified the local market and inspired more ranchers to prioritize horticulture instead of viticulture. As wine production slowed, Livermore's open space and rural

isolation began to attract attention for entirely different reasons. The remoteness and land availability of Livermore brought over entities interested in using the land for experimental purposes.

The Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory (LLNL) officially opened in September 1952, shifting Livermore's economy, agriculture, and development as a city, attracting different types of people and businesses. The construction of the Lab led to increased demand for housing and infrastructure, and transformed the town's demographic and character. During 1953-1954, the Atomic Energy Commission purchased 4000 acres of land in Livermore for high-explosive experiments, and in 1957, they acquired 3000 more acres of land (Homan 278). The amount of available agricultural land decreased after the National Laboratory was established, raising concerns over the remaining land usage, existing plans for open spaces, protecting habitats, and future developments.

Both the Alameda Farm Bureau and the Tri-Valley Conservancy currently work to protect agricultural interests in Livermore. The Tri-Valley Conservancy was created in 1994 to preserve agricultural land and support the 1993 South Livermore Valley Area Plan (SLVAP), which protects Livermore's open space and agricultural areas. Livermore's approximately 2,800 acres of farmland are far below the goal of 5,000 acres, and the Conservancy strives to meet that objective. Likewise, the Alameda County Farm Bureau is working against the loss of agricultural lands. As their website explains, "The decline of small and family-owned farms and ranches in Alameda County has meant less local food. We are dedicated to protecting the Bay Area's local food and restaurant culture and encouraging the next generation of farmers through advocacy, education, and collaboration" ("Home: Alameda County Farm Bureau"). Locally grown produce benefits the local economy and contributes to food security and environmental

resilience. Jenessa Hofmann, the current manager of the Alameda County Farm Bureau, states, “The Bureau is not just for people directly connected to agriculture . . . It is for everybody in this county . . . If you put clothes on your back and food in your stomach every single day. Agriculture should be important to you” (Cavallaro). The Farm Bureau reminds people that they interact with agriculture daily, from getting dressed in the morning to the first meal of the day. Humans' relationship with agriculture is symbiotic, and they need each other to thrive. Thus, the current Farm Bureau works to maintain the historical context of Livermore's viticulture while adapting to new advancements in the world of agriculture.

Livermore’s ideal location and deep agricultural roots have built a strong foundation for the local economy, one that the people of Livermore have worked hard to preserve through generations of community effort and pride. Agriculture has been the foundation of human civilization by providing a stable food supply, economic progress, and technological innovation. Agriculture not only sustains humanity, but it also gives it purpose and pleasure. The town of Livermore certainly recognizes this with its lengthy agricultural history, organizations like the Farm Bureau and the Tri-Valley Conervancy, and over 50 wineries. Each reflects how agriculture builds a lasting legacy and provides the community with a deep sense of purpose. Today, Livermore continues to thrive by adopting modern advancements and sustainable practices while retaining its old-fashioned charm through historic wineries, family-run farms, and a deep-rooted agricultural heritage. This mix creates a unique community that honors its past while embracing the future.

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