

Chuck Schultz on the Making of *The Last Crop*

Good Humus Produce
Capay, CA

"Sustainability is the big new catch phrase but what does it really mean? The true issue to me is sustaining farmers." —Annie Main, Co-owner, Good Humus Produce

Nearly two-thirds of our nation's estimated 2 million farmers are now over the age of 65. More than 6 million acres of U.S. farmland—an area roughly the size of Maryland—were bought up by developers for housing between 1992 and 1997, and today we continue to lose two acres of land per minute to development. These staggering statistics offer up a rather bleak picture for the future of the small family farm in America.

The Last Crop, my current film project with co-director and co-producer David Raghelli, examines these issues in the context of California's Central Valley. Approximately 400 miles long and 60 miles wide, the Valley is considered one of the most fertile on our planet (earning it the title "the fruit basket of the world," yet is under increasing threat from urban sprawl. *The Last Crop* tells the personal tale of a farm family caught in the delicate interplay between urban and agricultural space in the Central Valley. The film, which I am now in the process of shooting, explores the mounting struggles of sustaining a small farm when set against the pressures of competition with sprawl, large-scale farm production, and the difficulties of passing land onto the next generation, a generation that increasingly leaves farming for other opportunities, thus making "the last crop"—the sale of the family farm to the highest bidder—an increasingly common reality.



Harvested eggplants from Good Humus Produce

Some 90 miles northeast of the San Francisco Bay Area, on the western fringe of the northern Central Valley, lies the Capay Valley. Nestled within the protective perimeter of Australian beefwood trees is the 20-acre farm Good Humus Produce, owned by Annie and Jeff Main. Both Annie and Jeff came of age in the 1970s, when California was the epicenter for environmental activism and the "back-to-the-earth" movement. The Mains' land, once a wheat field, is now an organic, biodiverse farm that grows a variety of fruits, vegetables, and flowers. Besides running their farm, the Mains are political advocates for the local farm to market to fork movement, and helped to found the Davis Co-Op, the Davis Farmers' Market, and the local community-supported agriculture program (CSA). Now in their mid-fifties, Annie and Jeff have farmed their land for more than thirty years, and are finding it increasingly difficult for Good Humus Produce to remain viable in this rapidly changing environment.

The Mains have learned that it takes more than one generation to build a healthy, sustainable farm. The usual path to protecting a farm comes through passing property within a family, none of the Mains' three children—Zack, 24; Allison, 21; and Claire, 18—are interested in taking over the running of the farm. Zack, a part-time firefighter and carpenter, succinctly sums up his own and his siblings' feelings: "I respect what my dad does, but working eight days a week is not for me."

True to their pioneering nature, Annie and Jeff have decided against selling off their farm. Instead, to insure that their farm will continue to remain vital, they are working to create a new model for agricultural easements in California, guaranteeing that places like Good Humus will continue as productive farms into perpetuity. This particular easement, only the second of its kind attempted in California, also provides that farm costs be affordable for future generations. The easement would work something like this: the Mains need to raise some \$300,000 in grants and donations from land trusts, local community organizations, and individuals in order to create an easement for their land. That sum is the Mains' compensation for the land which will then be owned and administered by a local land trust.

The Mains would still retain the farm business, buildings and equipment, and the farmhouse, and also be allowed to continue to work the farm until they are no longer willing or able. They could then sell their farm operation to a qualified young farmer for approximately \$200,000-\$250,000. A qualified buyer must live and work on the farm, earn 50 percent of their gross income from the land, practice sustainable farming methods, and agree to not owning the land. Although not perfect, this type of easement insures the farm's productivity for future generations living in the San Francisco foodshed. Over the past five years, the Mains have managed to raise some \$120,000 for their easement project.



Annie and Jeff Main, co-owners of Good Humus Produce

As is the case with many documentaries, unforeseen events can alter or add a new emphasis to a storyline. The current drought in the Central Valley—potentially the worst in California history, according to the California Department of Water Resources—adds a dramatic element, an urgency, and perhaps a tragic new meaning to *The Last Crop*. This year the state's vegetable growers have already lost some 60 million dollars of crops because of dry conditions. The drought presents a severe challenge to small family farmers like the Mains, who have very limited resources, as well as to the majority of farmers who maintain large-scale farming operations, all of whom are dependent upon the 16,000 miles of irrigation canals fed from the depleted Sacramento-San Joaquin River Delta. The challenge is to find a balance between the Main's personal story that draws the viewer in, and the much bigger issues of ecology and climate, and whether continuing with current farming practices in the Central Valley is even realistic.

Why would I, as a native New Yorker, choose this story for a film? A half a lifetime ago, in the late 1970s, I began my career in the Capay Valley producing two educational videos on migratory beekeepers and almond farming while attending San Francisco State University. I have been visiting this Valley ever since. In the 1990s I witnessed the sad arrival of track housing and ranchettes that serve as bedroom communities for commuters to Sacramento and San Francisco. Today, the 800-room Cache Creek Casino Resort, built in the '80s and located in the tiny town of Brooks (population 375), recently received county approval for construction of an additional 400 hotel rooms for their casino.

In many ways I see the Mains' choice not to sell out as a parallel to my own work as a documentary filmmaker. They are small family farmers with little capital but a big vision to preserve their Central Valley. There is no certainty that they will raise the funds necessary to complete their easement in the current economic environment, but they are determined to persevere. Annie and Jeff are working-class people who desire to leave a legacy that is not solely about accumulated wealth, but rather an alternative vision for the future of their community and generation. I hope that *The Last Crop* will raise awareness and empathy for our nation's farmers, and in so doing become an organizing tool that mobilizes citizens to demand that sustaining our nation's farmers and their locally grown fruits and vegetables become a prominent component of our nation's policy—in the 2012 Farm Bill* and beyond.

*The 2008 Farm Bill heavily subsidizes commodity or "cash crops" such as corn, wheat, rice, soybeans, and cotton at an amount totaling some 110 billion dollars. Domestically grown fruits and vegetables, on the other hand, are considered "specialty foods," received a meager 3 billion dollars of support from the 286 billion dollar Farm Bill Budget.

Chuck Schultz is a media artist living in New York City. His work in documentary film,

radio drama, and video installation centers around social issues and provides a voice to the underserved. His documentary *The Rural Studio*, on Samuel Mockbee's sustainable architecture program at Auburn University, has been exhibited around the world. To view the trailer for *The Last Crop* and find out how to contribute to the making of this film, go to www.blueprintproductions.biz.

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