

## Farmer tenants work San Francisco-owned land

Matthew Green, Special to The Chronicle

Saturday, October 4, 2008



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Follow the water pipes roughly 40 miles southeast of San Francisco to a landscape of rolling hills, lean creeks and groves of oak and madrone. It's a stone's throw from Fremont, but in the stillness of arid grassland and open sky, the city is a world away.

In an impressively fertile 18-acre tract of land, tucked in a small valley near tiny Sunol, a group of middle-aged Laotian women from East Oakland scamper through a jungle of crops, harvesting Southeast Asian varieties of long beans and massive squash.

In the adjacent plot, demarcated only by a row of bristling sunflowers, youths from West Oakland gather buckets of chard, peppers and eggplants to sell at small streetside markets in their neighborhood. Beyond them, unique tomatoes ripen in the heavy heat of late summer, the result of heirlooms crossbred by a Hayward plant biologist-turned-organic farmer.

It's all part of a project bridging urban and rural worlds. The land, owned by the San Francisco Public Utilities Commission, is known as the Sunol Water Temple Agricultural Park, beneath which are mighty pipes carrying water from the Hetch Hetchy Reservoir in Yosemite to San Francisco. On the periphery of the field stands a majestic, if somewhat peculiar, monument to the vast watershed that hydrates the city. Beneath its dome, engraved with biblical verses heralding the taming of nature and greening of the desert, Sierra water rushes to its final destination.

An agricultural park "seemed to be a very promising concept," said Sibella Kraus, executive director of the Berkeley nonprofit Sustainable Agriculture and Education (SAGE), which pioneered the idea of urban edge agricultural parks: undeveloped plots on the outskirts of urban areas to be used both by small farmers without access to their own land and as public parkland. She first heard about this land a decade ago, while working on San Francisco's sustainability plan, when a Sunol resident asserted that San Francisco's commitment should include all the lands it owns, not just the parts inside the city.

In 2006, Kraus persuaded the Public Utilities Commission to grant her access to the unused land for a one-year trial period. In exchange, her organization found applicants in search of fertile ground and committed to growing food sustainably and providing educational opportunities.

After the first year proved to be a success, Kraus secured a nine-year lease agreement with the SFPUC, which granted \$65,000 to cover basic infrastructure costs. The utility has been consistently supportive, she said. The 18 acres, all recently certified organic, are now occupied by six farming projects of varying

sizes, including a containerized fig-growing operation and a garden producing for a Pleasanton buying cooperative. All tenants pay a modest rent.

"I think the basic idea is we need to share resources," said Peter Rudnick, the project's farm manager, who helped start Green Gulch Farm in Marin County 30 years ago with his wife, author Wendy Johnson.

"It's no longer (true) that people can just go out and buy land," Rudnick said. "When public agencies have land, it's really a benefit for everyone's land-use needs, especially for people to come out and grow food."

Over the past two years, Rudnick has taught new farmers not only how to set up irrigation lines and maintain their plots but also how to market what they grow.

"Farming is much harder than (most) people out there know," he said.

Rudnick also farms a 1.5-acre plot on the property, working with a handful of teens from the Hunters Point Family who go there on Saturdays. The melons, okra, pumpkins and other crops they harvest are sold at a Wednesday morning farmers' market in central Hunters Point in San Francisco.

"It's been very rewarding," he said. "It's just a beautiful place and really close. It's only 30 minutes from Oakland, and sometimes you feel a coastal breeze."

The heavy workload, he added, is made much easier by prime soil and a long, hot growing season. An alluvial plain at the confluence of Alamo and Alameda creeks yields a deep loam of rich silty soil, and while largely dormant in recent times, the land had been farmed since the late 1800s.

### **Small but fruitful plot**

"Everything here grows like wildfire," said Hubert McCabe, the farm manager of the 2-acre People's Grocery plot.

It's a sweltering late summer day here, and shade is in short supply. Sandwiched between the other projects, the People's Grocery's relatively small plot, with more than 30 400-foot-long beds, produces an impressively robust and diverse harvest. "The West Oakland community is so diverse, we just plant everything," he said, noting that at least three varieties of each crop are grown.

The operation, which has been here for all three growing seasons of the project, follows a modified community-supported agriculture model. It's meant to provide affordable fresh produce to West Oakland residents, a neighborhood lacking in healthy food options. To offset costs of the program, veggies are also sold at market rate to supporters, as well as to a number of Bay Area restaurants, including Chez Panisse. Young people from West Oakland work on the farm weekly as part of a summer program; school groups come out throughout the year as well.

McCabe explained that working alongside other growing projects has been valuable. All six endeavors here serve different markets, so competition doesn't enter into the equation, and it gives the farmers an opportunity to share knowledge and exchange work and harvests.

Fred Hempel, who runs Baia Nicchia, a farming plot next door, is the only one out here with a tractor and

recently tilled the soil for People's Grocery in exchange for their excess basil, which he needed for a big restaurant order.

A plant biologist and former biotech worker, Hempel has long experimented with tomato breeding in the backyard of his Hayward home. Upon finding out about the Sunol land three years ago through Farmlink, a service that connects would-be farmers with affordable plots, he quit his office job and now farms nearly 7.5 acres of heirloom and original tomato varieties, along with various types of squash and peppers. His newest creation - 'Maglia Rosa' - is bred from two heirloom cherry tomato varieties.

It's one thing to know about plants, said Hempel, a towering man who strides proudly through his near-bursting rows. But farming, he admits, is a whole other thing, something he had never tackled before.

Through long days and much trial and error, Hempel, who works the land with his wife, stepson and some farm interns, sells his unusual tomato varieties to a handful of nearby restaurants and caterers who pay high prices and demand large volumes.

He routinely sells more than \$1,000 worth of tomatoes to Wente Vineyards in nearby Livermore, which hosts nightly concerts and serves audiences high-priced organic meals.

"We're benefiting from the fact that people still want to see Peter Frampton, Chicago and the Doobie Brothers," said Hempel, who also operates a nursery out of his house and sells his produce and plants at several Bay Area farmers' markets.

### **Seas of squash**

But it's the 4-acre farm plot closest to the park's entrance that is perhaps most striking, with its thick tangle of bean stalks, seas of squash and 7-foot-high corn rows with dry leaves that rattle in the occasional breeze.

Called Iu-Mien Village Farms, the land is worked by mostly middle-aged Mien women who come from their East Oakland apartments. Part of a rural ethnic group from Laos, many spent years in Thai refugee camps and arrived in U.S. cities without knowing any English. Some also never learned to read.

A large contingent, though, has farming roots and a deep-seated knowledge of how to grow their own food, a skill that seemed irrelevant in their new surroundings. So when this land became available, through a partnership with the East Bay Asian Youth Center, a number of them eagerly rushed to plant seed varieties they had brought from their native soil.

In their first year alone, when they farmed just 2 acres, Iu-Mien produced roughly 2,000 pounds of food, much of which went directly back to the farmers' kitchens. The project is reaching beyond subsistence, hoping to sell enough of its harvest to pay for their land costs and provide the farmers with some basic compensation.

In addition to selling produce at farmers' markets and a handful of restaurants, Iu-Mien is also growing cash crops like strawberries and hoping its greens will be purchased and used in Oakland public schools

cafeterias.

"They really like it. It's like a stress release," said Lew Chien Saelee of the women who come out to work the land. Saelee, the farm coordinator and parent organizer for the East Bay Asian Youth Center, worked through local schools to notify parents and grandparents about the farm. She describes how some participants come religiously every weekend, and in some cases, several times a week. "They miss so much what they had done in Laos. When they feel sick and tired at home, they come here."

### Who's farming?

Six farmer tenants are digging in at Sunol Water Temple Agricultural Park in Alameda County. For more information, go to [www.sagecenter.org](http://www.sagecenter.org) and click on Projects and then on Sunol Water Temple Agricultural Park. The tenants are:

- East Oakland's Iu-Mien Village Farms
- West Oakland's People's Grocery
- Baia Nicchia, a small family farm
- Fico, a specialty fig grower
- Terra Bella Family Farms
- Sunol AgPark Farm Manager Peter Rudnick

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<http://sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?f=/c/a/2008/10/04/HOF712P4KG.DTL>

This article appeared on page **F - 1** of the San Francisco Chronicle

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