

# Ag Ombudsmen help bridge the divide

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## What is an Ag Ombudsman?

The Agricultural Ombudsman serves to bridge the divide between farmers/ranchers and the many agencies that regulate their operations.

The AO provides free, confidential assistance to producers, helping them understand and navigate the regulations that affect their plans to start, grow or diversify the businesses.

The AO may also help local, state and federal agencies to understand the impact of rules on agricultural producers and even streamline their processes to support long-term success of the local ag community.

1

Farmer has an idea, but worries how regulations might impact the project.

2

Farmer calls the Ombudsman - describes idea and project specifics.

3

AO researches topic and prepares report - including review of rules, potential red flags.

4

Farmer decides on best course. AO may meet with agency staff to clarify options.

5

AO may assist during permit process, checking status until project is complete.

## How does the AO work?

In Marin County, the AO also serves as the Sustainable Agriculture Coordinator. Time is divided between Ombudsman work and producer outreach aimed at improving the environmental and financial sustainability of local agriculture.

Some Ombudsmen fill other administrative roles such as:

- Grants management
- Website development
- Other special projects within the entity where they are housed. (The Ombudsman in Yolo County manages the Cannabis Taskforce.)

In addition to fielding inquiries about new ag endeavours and the relevant rules or permits, Ombudsmen are also looking for patterns - places where questions repeatedly arise- and developing proactive resources like factsheets, how-to guides or even workshops to get information out to the broader community.

Ombudsmen frequently collaborate with partner organizations like local land trusts, RCD's, NRCS, farmers market groups and other ag-related non-profits.

## What can the AO achieve?

- In 2017, the Marin Ag Ombudsman worked on 23 projects ranging from new barns to meat rabbit operations, cut-and-wrap facilities, a grain mill, food safety improvements and new manure management systems
- New factsheets include:
  - ✓ Registering irrigation ponds
  - ✓ Selling eggs at farmers markets
  - ✓ On-farm poultry processing
  - ✓ Establishing agricultural worker housing
- Additional time has been invested in working with county, regional and state agencies to shape regulations related to on-farm composting, commercial slaughter, the local coastal program and ag worker housing

## How do you pay for one?

*That depends on your county...*

The Ag Ombudsman in Marin County reports through UCCE with funding from:

- ✓ County Board of Supervisors as part of their commitment to agriculture's longevity in the county
- ✓ State Agricultural Commissioner funding for work related to direct marketing, organic production, pest management, etc.

Other counties have attached the role (and funding) to local RCD's, Ag, Weights & Measures, or a local SBDC office.