

Prop 2 Aftermath - Farmers Say They Weren't Kidding About Prop 2 Ruining Their Lives

November 12, 2008 by Johnny California

For all of us city slickers that thought the No-On-2 campaign's threats about farmers being run out of business was a bunch of campaign hoo-ha, the proverbial egg may be on our collective faces (except ours! We told you to vote "No"!)

California Farm Bureau Federation Reports: "The problem is the language in the ballot measure is so ambiguous that nobody knows what it means," said Arnold Riebli, an egg producer in Sonoma County. "It doesn't tell you what you can do. I don't know what kind of equipment I can or cannot use. So I think we're going to have to sit down and wait for the regulators to interpret whatever it is going to be."

Others, such as San Joaquin County egg producer Richard Jenkins, are less steadfast about their prospects in the state. With one daughter who's already in the business and a college-aged son who's interested in getting in the business, Jenkins said the passage of Proposition 2 puts him in a disheartening position of telling his children they will need to find other careers.

"We're just going to close our doors and go out of business," he said. "That's what I'm discussing with my family. We're going to have to discuss an exit strategy."

A second-generation farmer, Jenkins said he's already spent more than \$2 million in the last 12 months upgrading his facility to a state-of-the-art system that improves efficiency, air quality and the health of his birds. But in six years, his facility will be worthless, he said. What's more, he'll likely have to spend more money to rip the chicken houses down and get the land back to bare ground before he can sell it.

Jenkins already farms a small percentage of his eggs as cage-free organic and said he could possibly expand that part of his operation if there is more of a market for the eggs. But he said that despite passage of Proposition 2, he is not convinced that California consumers will buy cage-free eggs if they can choose the less expensive eggs, produced conventionally elsewhere.

He noted that specialty eggs—cage-free, cage-free organic or free-range—make up only 5 percent of the state's current egg sales.

"The farmer will produce whatever the public wants," he said. "If they would buy it, I will convert everything we've got into cage-free. But out of the 95 stores that I supply, I have not gotten a phone call saying that they're out of cage-free eggs. Why is that? The shopper doesn't care. They voted for (Proposition 2), but they're not going to buy (cage-free eggs)."

The Turlock Journal spoke with Steve Gemperle of Gemperle Enterprises, a large Turlock-based egg producer.

"It's a death sentence for the industry," Gemperle said. "We're not going to be able to keep up with producers in Mexico and the Midwest."

Stanislaus County, one of the top egg-producing counties in the state, was one of only 12 California counties to vote against Prop 2. But while 55.5 percent of Stanislaus County residents voted against the measure, citizens in 46 other counties in the state voted in favor

of Prop 2, with an overwhelming 72.3 percent majority of San Francisco County voters approving the measure.

Gemperle said that the future of Gemperle Enterprises' operations - and the 200 local workers they employ - was in question in the wake of Prop 2. The industry is currently working to ascertain what exact specifications would be required of enclosures under the letter of the new law, but an early projection states that statewide retrofit of hen cages alone could cost more than \$500 million over the next six years.

We still say these guy's ain't going without a fight and to look out for the lawsuit.