

El Dorado County, small farmers find compromise

By Cathy Locke, Sacramento Bee

An advocate of grass-roots family farming says a newly adopted El Dorado County ordinance is a compromise, but it boosts efforts to reduce state and federal restrictions on small agricultural operations.

"The big thing for me is it has established the family farm as having a valued place," said Pattie Chelseth, co-owner of the 10-acre My Sisters' Farm in Shingle Springs. "It needs to be cherished and nurtured."

Chelseth earlier this year sought the Board of Supervisors' backing for a campaign against regulations that hurt small farmers.

This month the board adopted a "local food and community self-governance" ordinance, which prohibits the county from establishing licensing and inspection requirements on what are termed "family farms."

The county counsel's staff report notes that the definition of family farms is quite restrictive. It essentially means a farm that maintains only a one-to-one relationship with its patrons.

The definition excludes farms that have commercial aspects to their operations, or that sell to anyone for resale.

Chelseth sought the board's support for the rights of small farmers after she was issued a cease and desist order by the California Department of Food and Agriculture. She was selling shares of cows on her farm in an attempt to deal with rules that prohibited her from selling raw milk directly to

consumers.

Fifteen people own shares of two cows that she keeps on her property, but to comply with state regulations, Chelseth said, those people would have to consume the milk on her property.

Chelseth is part of a group that is working on state legislation to create a home dairy exemption for operations with three cows or fewer.

The El Dorado County ordinance, adopted Dec. 18, does not exempt family farms from general licensing and inspection requirements, such as those associated with zoning, building and business license codes.

The staff report also stresses that it does not affect the applicability of state or federal law in the county, and county personnel will continue to carry out their functions and duties to enforce such laws.

The ordinance states, however, that the county may, but is not obligated to, challenge legislation or regulations in court in appropriate cases.