

**COLUMNS & OPINION**

# O'Neill: EcoFarm Conference left me stoked with ideas and hope

by **Casey O'Neill**

January 25, 2026

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(Illustration by Joe Dworetzky/Bay City News)

*Casey O'Neill is a farmer and owner of Happy Day Farms in Laytonville, Calif. The opinions expressed in this column do not necessarily reflect the views of the Mendocino Voice.*

One of my favorite things in the world is to compare notes with other farmers. I love getting into the minutiae of tools, tactics, practices, plant spacing, seed choices, sowing methodologies and all the other tricks of the trade. Two days at the EcoFarm Conference at Asilomar filled my cup with joy and excitement for the year to come, and I'm brimming with ideas about crop planning, weed management, bed prep and partnerships.



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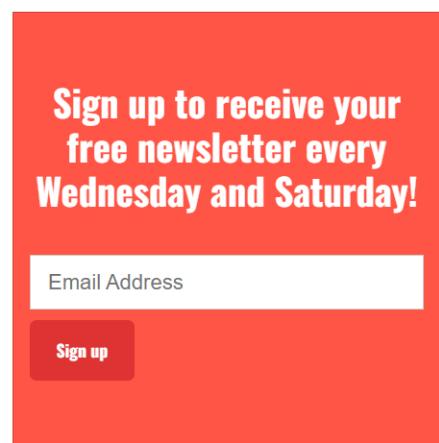
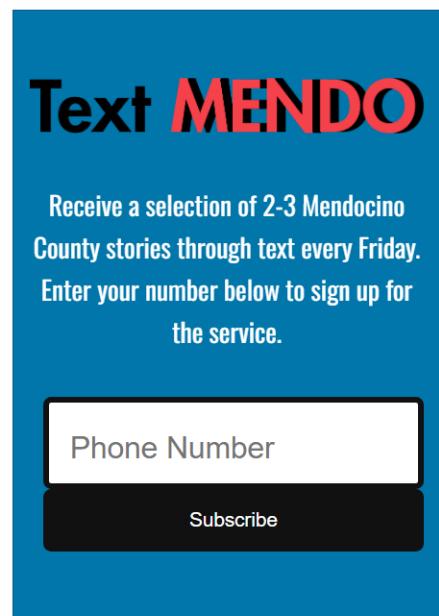
I got to be one of the workshop panelists for “Cultivating Resilience, Habitat Conservation on Working Lands.” My focus for the panel was that farmers need to think of relationship development and outreach as a necessary skill just like fertility management and soil-building. That we need to partner with organizations like the Rural Conservation districts, the NRCS, Farm Services Agency, Point Blue, and other NGOs and farm-support organizations.

Farmers tend to prefer to stay on the farm, farming, but the reality of changing climate and economic conditions make it even more important for us to be out in the world exchanging information and gathering resources by building mycelial networks of give-and-take. The ways we adapt, learn, and create bridges will define how successful we are in the years to come in terms of the economic viability of our operations and the land-use practices we use to heal and support thriving ecosystems around us. We need to focus on indigenous land practices and teachings, seeking the reciprocity that Robin Wall Kimmerer speaks of in *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge, and the Teachings of Plants*.



It was awesome to be part of a panel that included representation from the San Mateo RCD by Mia Riddle, Point Blue by Emily Mecke, and friend, fellow farmer and grant writer/land-use consultant Chris Moore of the North Coast Growers Association (NCGA). It was the first time in 10 years that I have been to EcoFarm, and I am reminded of the importance of face-to-face gathering, and I'm going to be saving up to make the trip again next year.

Being able to attend a full day of workshops on Friday gave me the opportunity to learn from other farmers and scientists about weed management and nitrogen use in organic production systems. I also attended a deeply hopeful panel about significant efforts to get organic food into school lunch programs at large scale.



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Attendees listen to a speaker at the 46th EcoFarm Conference held at the Asilomar Conference Grounds in Pacific Grove, Calif. The conference took place from Jan. 21-24, 2026. (Casey O'Neill via Bay City News)

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I think my favorite parts of the trip were the conversations with other farmers about Paperpot practices, seed selection, plant spacing and the wide variety of local food systems efforts in which we're all engaged. I learned about software solutions available for CSA producers and talked more deeply about a program called Tend that I have used in the past to manage crop planning.

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It was super exciting to get to spend time with the folks from Humboldt representing the NCGA and learning more about their efforts as a farmers market association and the management of their FoodHub. Chris and I have been talking for years about connecting FoodHubs and the food systems of counties here on the North Coast, and it was a deep highlight for me to be steeped in conversation on these subjects.

A big part of my life's work is focused on food production and the systems we need to distribute local food, so that farmers can thrive and community members have access to fresh, high quality farm goods. Being able to connect with so many people who are doing this work has given me fresh perspective and deep excitement for the year to come. I have deep hope for

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the bridges we will continue to build as we strengthen our local food systems in concert with other local production regions.

My message to farmers and land managers is to seek out and build relationships with your local Resource Conservation District, with your Ag Extension service, with your county Ag Department and the FSA, and to ask these folks what opportunities are available and who else you should be talking with. The Healthy Soils grant program will be coming back online in the next year or two, and the RCDs often have funding to help with compost and cover crops.

Hopefully the Point Blue funding will be renewed. These efforts and solutions take time, but so does building soil and establishing a farmers market presence. It takes effort to build skill, and this type of network building is worth putting time and energy into so that your farm/land can be part of a more integrated and supported system of localized efforts to foster thriving farm operations that heal and support the ecosystems in which they are nested.

When we think about the Green New Deal, the core of the concept is the mechanics of targeting resources to increase beneficial practices that sustain land and the people who tend it. When we reach out in good faith, we create the mycelial networks that will help us to build a better future, where farmers thrive without such intense economic and production stress and where landscapes are cared for at the human level by deep interaction and mutually supportive relationships. Let us seek this reciprocity, and as always, much love and great success to you on your journey!

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### Willits dude

January 26, 2026 at 7:42 AM

The green new deal: enslave the west with authoritarian ai energy and tax restrictions while the rest of the world is prosperous then outsource resource destruction to other countries to build our green tech. Big AG will be the only "carbon neutral" solution, local farmers are a pawn in this game sadly.

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