



# **FERN** **NEWS**

Food & Environment Reporting Network  
Annual Report  
2015

## MISSION STATEMENT

*The Food & Environment Reporting Network (FERN) is the first and only independent, non-profit, non-partisan news organization that produces in-depth and investigative reporting on food, agriculture, and environmental health through publication partnerships with respected local and national media outlets.*

The Food & Environment Reporting Network is pleased to present our fourth Annual Report, following our fourth full year of operations.

In 2015, we produced 24 stories, including eight international stories, on subjects ranging from the impact of pesticides on California's Latino communities to the hidden toll of World Bank-financed development projects on some of the planet's poorest people. We added new partnerships for a total of 34 mainstream media publishing partners, including the *The Guardian*, *Sunset*, *Fast Company*, *Harper's* and more.

We were gratified to learn in May 2015 that FERN won a second James Beard Foundation Award for our story, "The Quinoa Quarrel: Who Owns The Greatest Superfood?" Written by Lisa Hamilton, the story appeared with original photography, also by Hamilton, in *Harper's Magazine*. FERN, *Harper's* and Hamilton took home the award for best reporting in the category of Food Politics, Policy and the Environment. In addition, our story "Fields of Toxic Pesticides Surround the Schools of Ventura County," by reporter Liza Gross for *The Nation* won an investigative reporting award from the *Association of Health Care Journalists*.

For the full year of 2015, we raised \$850,000, our highest total ever (a 16% annual increase) with grants from the Woodcock Foundation, Emerson Collective, the 11th Hour Project, the TomKat Foundation, the McKnight Foundation, Gaia Fund, the Soros Fund Charitable Foundation, the Doris Duke Foundation, and the Claneil Foundation among others and including \$310,000 from individual donors. We also earned \$49,000 in fees in 2015. Our expenses for the year were \$730,000. We have set a 2016 budget of \$945,000 and have \$805,000 in committed funds and another \$170,000 in prospective funding.

The budget increases allowed us to increase our reporting capabilities, including hiring photographers and creating graphics and explainers to accompany stories. We also were able to add a full-time Social Media Editor and full-time Development Coordinator to staff as well as developing our daily newsletter, the Ag Insider, into a paid subscription service.

In May we hosted our fourth annual fundraiser in San Francisco, a sit-down dinner prepared by Sylvan Mishima Brackett of Rintaro at the home of Kat Taylor and Tom Steyer. The event was co-hosted by Stuart Davidson. In October, 2015, we held our annual fundraiser dinner for at Haven's Kitchen in New York City, hosted by board member Alison Cayne, which featured a talk by Michel Nischan, co-founder and CEO of Wholesome Wave, and a meal of sustainably-caught seafood by chef Camille Becerra of Navy.

## Engagement and Business Line Developments

In 2015, FERN revamped its social-media strategy to expand the impact of its reporting, including increasing and routinizing the posting of content to our social-media accounts and using popular Twitter hashtags (such as #FollowFriday) to “join” social-media conversations and increase the reach of our tweets each week.

In January 2015, FERN Editor-in-Chief Sam Fromartz took part in the 2015 Food Tank Summit as part of the “Telling the Story of Food” panel, and spoke about what makes FERN unique as well as offering advice for journalists covering food and agriculture.

Our April 2015 deep dive into the issue of farmworker health “Fields of Toxic Pesticides Surround the Schools of Ventura County,” by reporter Liza Gross in partnership with *The Nation*, revealed how California’s Latino communities—and the schools they attend—get disproportionately dosed with pesticides, many of which are linked to a range of health problems. The story began to accrue impact in May and June. Starting May 28 in Sacramento, the California Department of Pesticide Regulation (DPR) held five workshops, getting public input on new standards to improve school pesticide notification procedures and reduce the risk of exposure. There were four other meetings in key farming communities, including Ventura County, which has more schools with high concentrations of nearby pesticide use than any other county in the state. The DPR workshops followed a briefing on pesticide use near schools for legislative staff in Sacramento last month, hosted by the advocacy group Pesticide Action Network North America. Gross was invited to lead off the briefing by sharing the principal findings of her story, in which she reviewed six years of data for 66 pesticides identified by health officials as most likely to drift and cause harm.

Gross says an acquaintance at EPA told her confidentially that the story was remarkable for having put environmental justice back into the framework of civil rights, and that staffers at the agency who are on the “right side” of the Environmental Justice program are trying to figure out how to capitalize on the way the story “moved the discourse” in a way they hadn’t seen before. Gross’s article instigated a potential legislative solution and has caused federal regulators to pressure the California DPR to explain how this inequality persisted for so long. State pesticide regulators finally said they will seek to strengthen restrictions on pesticide use near schools.



From June through December, 2015, we earned over 680,000 impressions on Facebook, 150% increase over the previous six months. FERN Facebook page followers increased to 7,000, 33% jump. On Twitter between June and December 2015, we earned a total of 2.5 million impressions, an impressive 178% increase over the previous six months. FERN's Twitter followers went from 16,500 to 20,000, an increase of 22%, in that period.

In September 2015, we launched FERN's Friday Feed newsletter, a.k.a. the #FFF, a weekly survey of the stories in our areas of interest that have been published by other outlets. Some selections are at the top of the news while others are prescient or in-depth features that we think our readers should know about. We send this newsletter weekly to a subscriber base of 3,100 as a way to enhance engagement with an audience that is mostly distinct from our social-media audience. This initiative is designed to establish FERN as a source for curation and guidance in navigating food media, and not only a producer of original journalism.

In October 2015, we released "With No U.S. Standards, Pot Pesticide Use Is Rising Public Health Threat," by reporters Erica Berry of FERN and Katie Wilcox of *Rocky Mountain PBS I-News*, which explored the glaring absence of oversight on the legal marijuana industry. Our collaborative pot-and-pesticide story was the top story of a rolling 30-day period surrounding its publication on the I-News site in terms of traffic.

*Rocky Mountain PBS I-News* distributes stories to its news partners and other institutions, including all members of the Colorado Press Association, public radio and commercial TV stations, some schools and universities, and several foundations and businesses. The story received strong interest and engagement from this audience. It was the lead story in their newsletter, *Rocky Mountain PBS I-News Weekly*, an opt-in subscription list of RMPBS members which has 1,100 subscribers. The story also was featured on its weekly public-affairs television show, *Colorado State of Mind*, on Oct. 2. It drew an audience of 5,557 households.

In the wake of the story, Jim Jones, who heads the EPA's office of Chemical Safety and Pollution Prevention, reached out to *I-News*. He said his office had gotten specific approval from the Justice Department to begin working with states that had legalized marijuana cultivation to test which pesticides can be used safely on marijuana.

During 2015, we also added a new business line to diversify revenue, introducing a paid "professional" product. Originally launched as a free email newsletter in

early 2014, FERN's Ag Insider includes daily policy reporting, analysis, and aggregation by long-time agriculture reporter Chuck Abbott. The product is aimed at an audience of policymakers, advocates, and food-industry representatives. The free newsletter acquired an immediate following with ten-fold subscriber growth.

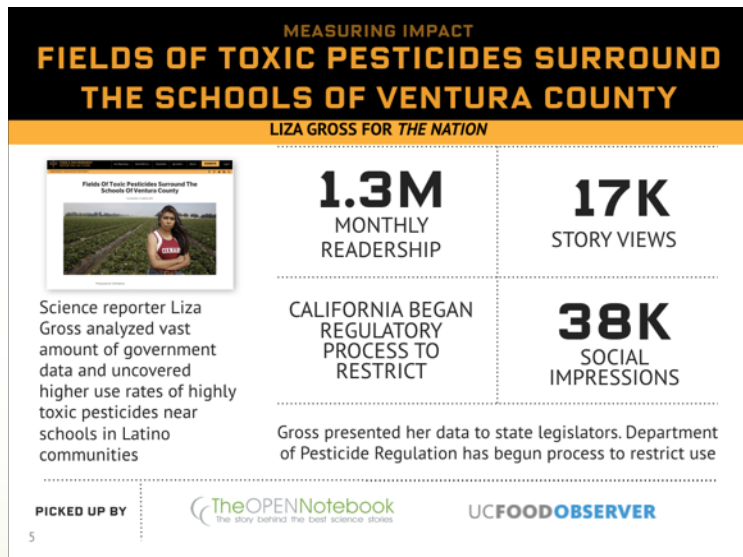
Given the Ag Insider's value to its audience, in the fall of 2015 we re-launched it as a paid subscription product. For a small annual fee, subscribers gain access to reporting, including a full archive on our website, with a subject-tagged organization. The email newsletter, now including only summaries of the full stories, remains free. With a minimal marketing effort, we have gained over 150 paid subscribers and made several sales to university libraries, including Stanford University and New York University. We see FERN's Ag Insider, particularly institutional and corporate sales, as a significant area for earned revenue growth.

We also have begun to expand our reporting team for Ag Insider. We recently added Kristina Johnson as our Western states correspondent. And two freelance correspondents attended the recent Paris climate talks, from where they filed a number of pieces for AI. We intend to do more of this in the future, leveraging our reporting contacts to augment Ag Insider coverage. In addition, we began syndicating content from Ag Insider to other outlets, such as Agriculture.com, that serve a similar audience, both as a revenue stream and a marketing opportunity. We will leverage existing writer relationships to generate these moderate-length stories, and bring infographics to the column as well.

Finally, we expanded our board to include two additional members. Naomi Starkman was a founding board member and subsequently served as FERN's strategic communications adviser from 2011 until 2015. She is a founder and the Editor-in-Chief of *Civil Eats*, a daily news source for critical thought about the American food system, and the James Beard Foundation's 2014 Publication of the Year. She also is a 2015-16 John S. Knight Journalism Fellow at Stanford.

Susan West was executive editor of FERN from 2011 to 2015. As a principal of West Gold Editorial consulting, she has helped launch magazines such as *Dwell* and advised publications and websites from *Cooking Light* to *WebMD*. She co-founded *Health* magazine, which won four National Magazine Awards during her tenure. She was the founding editor-in-chief of the travel magazine *AFAR* and executive editor of *Smithsonian* magazine.

## Impact Visualized



## Our Work

Our stories from 2015 include:

- Seven Ways Climate Change Could Kill You (Really), another piece from our partnership with *The Guardian*, delivered a disturbing roundup of all the health problems that researchers have connected to climate change—from deadly bug bites and asthma to obesity and depression.
- Everything You Need To Know About Nanopesticides provides a fascinating look at the under-reported darker side of the promise of using nanotechnology in agriculture. This appeared in *Modern Farmer*, which draws 2 million readers each month.
- Leave It To Beavers, which appeared in *OnEarth*, the magazine of the Natural Resources Defense Council, examines an unexpected twist in the California drought cycle: Beavers, long reviled as a nuisance, are actually helping mitigate the water woes that pit farmer against fisherman.
- Unraveling The Gluten-free Trend separates fact from fiction in the raging debate about the role of gluten in a range of maladies, from skin rashes and joint pain to gastrointestinal distress and depression. It appeared in *EatingWell*, which has nearly 2 million total readers of each issue.
- The Lethal Legacy Of The Vietnam War is one of our most-successful pieces to date in 2015: George Black's powerful cover story in *The Nation* showed how the tons of unexploded ordnance, herbicides, and defoliants the US dropped on Vietnam during the war plague farmers, and agriculture, there today. *The Nation* has 1.3 million monthly readers in print and online. Prominent and longtime political activist Tom Hayden was among the many who sent *The Nation* letters praising Black's work.
- Climate Change Poses Serious Threats To Food Distribution introduced a new and troubling frame to the conversation about climate change, agriculture, and access to good food. Published March 4, 2015, by the *Earth Island Journal*, it was shared on social media 500 times and the 1,500 (and counting) folks who read it on the Journal's site spent an average of five minutes with the piece—pretty good engagement in our click-and-flit digital world.



- The Fisherman's Dilemma is a story about a radical experiment that closes hundreds of miles of California coastline to fishing. It was featured in *California Sunday*, which has a readership of 700,000.
- As Himalayan Glaciers Melt, Two Towns Face The Fallout was a story for which reporter Daniel Grossman traveled to the remote mountains of northern India to describe the lives of people living at the edge of global warming. His story appears in the online magazine *Yale Environment 360*. We also produced a stunning video of this valley at the top of the world, our first short documentary.
- Battling Drought On A California Farm was a profile of Cannon Michael, a Central Valley farmer who devised a water-sharing scheme to help his struggling neighbors cope with the epic drought. After more than 60,000 views on *Ensia* and its syndication partners, *Business Insider*, *Quartz*, and *Climate Central*, it had nearly 2,000 social-media shares. Twitter highlights include *Ensia* (30.3K followers); *Sunset Magazine* (62.6K followers) and *NPRFood* (48K followers). Michael also began appearing in stories about the drought in outlets like *The New York Times* and *NPR*.
- Fields Of Toxic Pesticides Surround The Schools Of Ventura County, with infographic which was published in *The Nation*. As of April 15, the story--which was online only--had more than 8,000 views at *The Nation's* website and nearly 5,000 social-media shares.
- Borderlands Food Bank: Cutting Food Waste At The Border is a story about a woman who singlehandedly changed the game on the sprawling and complex problem of food waste. This story established an important partnership with *Latino USA*, which airs on 141 *NPR* stations nationwide, was featured on *NPR's The Salt* blog, and was picked up by *Georgia Public Broadcasting* and cited on *The Huffington Post's What's Working* blog.
- Urban Farming Is Booming, But What Does It Really Yield? explores whether community gardens and rooftop farms can really play a role in feeding our burgeoning population. It was published with *Ensia*.
- Scorched, our newest California drought-related story in which reporter Lauren Markham focuses her lens on the human cost of this slow-motion environmental crisis. The story was published online and in print with a new partner, *Pacific Standard*.
- Zambia: Wildlife Poachers Trade Guns for Gardens about an anti-poaching strategy that puts hunters to work. Written by Bridget Huber and published with *Al Jazeera America*.
- A Little Fish with Big Impact In Trouble on U.S. West Coast investigates the devastating 90-percent decline in the Pacific sardine stock from a

daunting list of culprits, from climate change to aquaculture to burgeoning demand for fish oil and other supplements. It could be disastrous for marine animals farther up the food chain. For *Yale Environment* 360.

- Heart of Agave which appeared in *Mother Jones*, tells the story of an optometrist who is trying to wean the Mexican tequila industry from agrochemicals--and is distilling a superior product in the process.
- The Forgotten Filipino-Americans Who Led the '65 Delano Grape Strike by Lisa Morehouse in collaboration with *KQED's The California Report* uncovered a little-known story about the origins of the most significant labor action of the modern era, the farmworkers' grape strike that dragged on for five years in the 1960s.
- Uncharted was published in collaboration with *California Sunday Magazine*. Writer and photographer Lisa M. Hamilton travelled to one of the most remote corners of Australia with a group of plant geneticists searching for wild relatives of rice.
- Meet the Scientists Hunting and Saving Wild Sunflower Seeds published in *Modern Farmer's* fall issue, Nelson Harvey takes a close look at sunflowers, which are native to North America. They are a vital oil-seed crop, a dietary staple in China, and the second-most-cultivated hybrid in the world after corn.
- With No U.S. Standards, Pot Pesticide Use Is Rising Public Health Threat by reporters Erica Berry of *FERN* and Katie Kuntz of *I-News*, found a glaring absence of oversight on the legal marijuana industry.
- Children Left Vulnerable By World Bank Amid Push For Development by Jocelyn Zuckerman and Michael Hudson for *The Huffington Post* in partnership with the International Center for Investigative Journalists part of "Evicted and Abandoned," a year-long investigation into the hidden toll of World Bank-financed development projects on some of the planet's poorest people.
- Allan Savory and the Science of Tracking where we partnered with *Discover Magazine* to send writer Judith Schwartz to Zimbabwe to talk to Savory, a global guru of sustainable land-use, about the lost art of animal tracking. Travel for this story was supported by the Pulitzer Center on Crisis Reporting.
- 10 Ways Big Food is Changing to Meet Consumer Demand published with *EatingWell* magazine, was a smart, end-of-year roundup of how the food industry has begun to rethink what it serves.

**Audited Financial Statement  
For Year Ended December 31, 2015**

Statement of Financial Position

	December 31	
	2015	2014
<b>ASSETS</b>		
Cash	\$ 547,054	\$ 433,417
Accounts receivable	10,951	51,568
Total Assets	<u>\$ 558,005</u>	<u>\$ 484,985</u>
<b>LIABILITIES AND NET ASSETS</b>		
Liabilities		
Accounts payable		
Accrued expenses	\$ 11,944	\$ 15,958
	35,442	23,584
Total Liabilities	<u>\$ 47,386</u>	<u>\$ 39,542</u>
Net Assets		
Temporarily Restricted		50,000
Unrestricted	510,619	395,443
Total Net Assets	<u>510,619</u>	<u>445,443</u>
Total Liabilities and Net Assets	<u>\$ 558,005</u>	<u>\$ 484,985</u>

# Statement of Activities and Net Assets

	Year Ended December 31	
	2015	2014
<b>CHANGES IN UNRESTRICTED NET ASSETS</b>		
Revenues and Other Support		
Contributions	\$ 738,848	\$ 669,887
Net assets released from restrictions	50,000	-
Editorial revenue	44,927	22,619
Subscription revenue	19,421	-
Sponsorship revenue	-	11,500
Other revenues	2,476	4,372
Total Revenues and Other Support	<u>855,672</u>	<u>708,378</u>
<b>EXPENSES</b>		
Program Services		
Payroll and related	177,406	77,775
Consultant fees		
Writers	99,713	96,090
Editors	58,900	66,818
Ag Insider Service	52,200	-
Design/Development	51,426	53,275
Communications	44,188	36,139
Project manager	20,762	50,400
Multimedia	17,638	14,052
Photographer	13,070	15,600
Digital Engagement	-	33,402
Other	-	37,811
Travel and meetings	25,682	11,450
Administrative and general	7,418	3,821
Total Program Services	<u>568,403</u>	<u>496,633</u>
Supporting Services		
Management and general		
Payroll and related	84,667	77,775
Travel and meetings	28,315	29,622
Professional fees	23,950	21,222
Insurance	13,218	11,494
Administrative and general	14,068	10,709
Fundraising	7,875	95,653
Total Supporting Services	<u>172,093</u>	<u>246,475</u>
Total Expenses	<u>740,496</u>	<u>743,108</u>
Increase (Decrease) Increase in Net Assets	115,176	-34,730
<b>CHANGES IN TEMPORARILY RESTRICTED NET ASSETS</b>		
Contribution	-	50,000
Net assets released from restrictions - unrestricted	(50,000)	-
(Decrease) Increase in Temporarily Restricted Net Assets	<u>(50,000)</u>	<u>50,000</u>
Increase in Net Assets	65,176	15,270
Net assets, beginning of year	<u>445,443</u>	<u>430,173</u>
Net assets, end of year	<u>\$ 510,619</u>	<u>\$ 445,443</u>

# Statement of Cash Flows

	Year Ended December 31	
	2015	2014
<b>CASH FLOWS FROM OPERATING ACTIVITIES</b>		
Increase in Net Assets	\$ 65,176	\$ 15,270
Adjustments to reconcile increase in net assets to net cash provided (used) by operating activities		
Changes in Assets and Liabilities		
Decrease (Increase) in accounts receivable	40,617	(48,568)
(Decrease) Increase in accounts payable	(4,014)	13,350
Increase in accrued expenses	11,858	4,108
Net Cash Provided (Used) by Operating Activities	113,637	(15,840)
Cash, beginning of year	433,417	449,257
Cash, end of year	\$ 547,054	\$ 433,417



## **Our Publishing Partners**

*Al Jazeera America*

*California Sunday Magazine*

*Discover Magazine*

*Earth Island Journal*

*Eating Well*

*Ensia*

*KQED's The California Report*

*Latino USA*

*Modern Farmer*

*Mother Jones*

*OnEarth*

*Pacific Standard*

*Rocky Mountain PBS I-News*

*The Guardian*

*The Huffington Post*

*The Nation*

*Yale Environment 360*

## **Personnel**

Samuel Fromartz, Editor-in-Chief  
Tom Laskawy, Executive Director  
Brent Cunningham, Managing Editor  
Chuck Abbott, Editor, Ag Insider  
Dana Dugan, Social Media Editor  
Dennis Chamberlin, Director of Photography

Courtney Eshleman, Director of Development  
George Black, Editor-at-Large  
Elizabeth Royte, Contributing Editor  
Kristina Johnson, Assistant Editor

## **Board**

Dan Pullman, Board Chair and Treasurer  
Michael Rankowitz  
Nathaniel Brown  
Alison Cayne  
Leslie Williams  
Samuel Fromartz  
Susan West  
Naomi Starkman

## **Editorial Advisors**

Ruth Reichl  
Charles Wilson  
Katrina Heron  
Brian Halweil  
Elizabeth Royte

## **Major Foundation Supporters:**

The 11th Hour Project  
Doris Duke Foundation  
McKnight Foundation  
Woodcock Foundation  
Clarence E. Heller Foundation  
TomKat Charitable Trust  
Claneil Foundation  
Sand Dollar Fund  
Betsy and Jesse Fink Foundation  
Joyce and Irving Goldman Foundation  
Zegar Family Fund



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