

A photograph of Charlie Hoppin, an older man with glasses and a blue plaid shirt, sitting on a green John Deere tractor. He is looking towards the camera with a serious expression. The background is a blurred outdoor setting with trees and a bright sky.

“...endangered or threatened Delta fish should be managed as a total species package rather than just considering an individual species. We need to rethink how our efforts for one species might impact another to ensure the best results for all.”



- Charlie Hoppin

Pictured: Charlie Hoppin

NCWA
Northern California Water Association



The Farmer Who Defied His Father

As thick white smoke filled the air, Charlie took a moment to soak in the moment. This former small-town farm boy was with one of the biggest action movie stars in history, who also happened to now be the governor of California. If only his father could see him now.

For most of his life, Charlie's father drove an oil truck around the Sacramento Valley making deliveries to farmers and ranchers. It is a job that the elder Hoppin would serve loyally to until the day he would retire.

Charles R. Hoppin Jr., better known as Ross, lived life frugally. Taking chances was not in his nature, which is why it was a bit surprising to see him purchase land for farming. With money from the G.I. bill in hand, Ross would purchase 280 acres in the Sutter Basin. He never wanted to be a farmer but he saw it as additional income to help his family.

"My father saw many valley families who had trouble paying their monthly oil bills," said Charlie Hoppin of Hoppin Family Farms. "That really shaped his view of life in agriculture."

Dad offered to pay tuition and gas money if Charlie would attend California State University – Chico after high school. Charlie obliged, but there was always something that pulled him to farming and ranching.

"At Chico State I started working as a sheep herder. I was asked to bring my flock in to help cut down weeds on the rice checks for farmers in Sutter County and rented winter pasture in the Chico area."

Charlie would leave Chico without graduating. Not able to understand why his son had gone against the advice he had bestowed upon him; Ross nearly disowned his son. By 1983 – Charlie was \$380,000 in the hole.

"The hardest part for me is that my father died in 1992 having heard stories of how I owed money, and he never saw the turn around that I always knew would come."

With control of the family farm, Charlie "planted a seed" that would eventually change it all. Charlie was one of the first to grow seedless watermelons – making the family one of the most successful growers in the Sacramento Valley. Charlie was not only out of debt, but was now thriving.

As the farm flourished, Charlie looked to make a difference elsewhere. In 2001 he played a vital role in getting a bill passed that would provide tax relief to farmers. Building a strong coalition of water users, Charlie curated a unique understanding of the complexities each group faced. It ultimately set him up for that meeting with the governor.

It's 2006 and we're back at the Hyatt hotel with cigar smoke swirling. The question he knew was coming was bestowed upon him. Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger wanted Charlie to serve on the State Water Resources Board – a position no other farmer had held in the history of the appointed body.

"There was so much frustration in the valley by farmers who felt they did not have a voice. I was elated to serve in this role to help bring a balanced approach to water management in our state."

Part of the task was to reevaluate how water is allocated for farms, cities, and wildlife. One of the issues of water management continues to be the effects it has on endangered species. "I felt that endangered or threatened Delta fish should be managed as a total species package rather than just considering an individual species. We needed to rethink how our efforts for one species might impact another to ensure the best results for all."

Charlie would become the chair of the board in 2009 and held that position until his voluntary retirement in 2013.

With all that he has accomplished, the one man who so desperately wanted success for his son will never see what Charlie has become. Ross Hoppin wasn't there to witness Charlie turn his farming business around. He didn't get to see his son return to school for those final few credits to graduate, and he even missed the time Chico State recognized Charlie as a Distinguished Alumni. Charlie has surely surpassed any expectations a father could have dreamed up for his son. To be able to see the lasting impact Charlie Hoppin is leaving is something Ross never would have imagined, but it is surely something he would be extremely proud of.

