



**“These fish will suffer
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adapt our practices
to improve their
habitat.”**



- Fritz Durst

Pictured: Fritz Durst

NCWA
Northern California Water Association



In firm defense of staring at the ground

While the rest of the world was watching a flying DeLorean, humming along with a material girl and marveling at a man taking flight on a basketball court, Fritz Durst's attention was transfixed on the ground. It was 1985 and Back to the Future was a box office smash, Madonna was leading a musical revolution and Michael "Air" Jordan was taking the NBA to new heights. Despite all the flashing fluorescence of this new material world, Durst had other things on his mind. He didn't grow up idolizing pop culture figures. His heroes were out in the fields, muddied to the knees by sunrise.

"From a young age, I felt a strong tie to our family farm. It is a place that was special to me as far back as I can remember," said Durst, currently leading Tule Farms into its sixth generation. At five years old, Fritz was an extension of his father Oscar's shadow, eager to learn the ropes of a proud family business. Most days, you'd find young Fritz following his father up and down the steps of his tractor. At this young age, Fritz was unaware of an ongoing struggle his father endured, fighting to making their land productive. In one of the most fertile landscapes in the world, Oscar's crops remained defiant.

"My father tried adding nitrogen and phosphorus fertilizers to the soil, even rotating crops from field to field, but there were still shortcomings that we couldn't quite explain." After earning his degree from nearby UC Davis, Fritz returned to the farm in the mid-1980s with a new perspective on the stubborn crops. When the winter months passed, trenches as deep as grave sites stretched hundreds of yards in the fields. "6 feet deep is where our farm will be if we don't do something to rejuvenate the soil," Fritz recalls. Bucking the trends of traditional farming, the Dursts decided to try something radical - and left the tiller parked. By any usual standard, soil is tilled before seeds are sown but Fritz knew - if they continued to farm by the usual standard, there wouldn't be any soil left.

"We began using a no-till technique. Which means we plant wheat and barley directly into the residue of last season's crop." It was a revolutionary idea, but Fritz believed there had been too much focus on the crop and not enough attention to what lies beneath it. "If I give back to the soil, the soil will give back to me." And that it did. As the rains no longer washed away the loose soil, never again would Fritz's farm resemble a mass grave site.

Since that day, Fritz watched his soil produce increasingly high-quality crops and hold more moisture throughout the year, which led to far less watering and in the case of dry farmed fields, higher yields. The unforeseen gift inspired this Yolo County farmer to rethink the scope of his operation entirely and to give back in ways that benefit the bigger picture.

Today, Tule Farms in Dunnigan Hills is more than rows of wheat, wine grapes and sunflowers - it is a beacon of environmental stewardship and home to several endangered species, as well as numerous other forms of wildlife; garter snakes, longhorn Elderberry beetles, Swainson's Hawk, bald eagles and even Kangaroo rats, to name just a few.

As the Durst family name becomes more synonymous with conservation and stewardship, Fritz doesn't rest his laurels on name recognition. He has joined a team of other farmers in the Sacramento Valley who use their own farm fields and water to help benefit California's native species. From birds overhead to fish underwater, Durst is lending a hand to maintain bird refuges, increase critical reptile habitat and feed more fish.

Times have surely changed since the 1980s - Back to the Future has been replaced with Wonder Woman, Madonna with Lady Gaga and Michael Jordan with LeBron James. Fritz's fields have gone from rough to lush to natural habitat, and he now sets his sight on helping young endangered salmon. "The world has been changing for a long time" Fritz says, "the most important thing we can do is manage that change. If we stop adapting, we'll end up like the dinosaurs - extinct. And these fish will suffer the same fate if we don't adapt our practices to improve their habitat."

Today, living amongst a cornucopia of crops and native wildlife, Fritz continues to keep an open mind for any lessons the earth might have to offer. Ready to uncover any other parts of the valley that might need his attention, he offers a simple reminder - "it all started by peering a bit deeper into the ground."

