

HOW THE LOS ANGELES WILDFIRES COULD HIT THE COOP

February 18, 2025



ILLUSTRATION BY ERIK SCHURINK

February 18, 2025

By Anita Bushell

The Park Slope Food Coop contains a great many fruits and vegetables from Califor-

nia. As I walked down the produce aisle the week after the Los Angeles fires broke out, I wondered how the situation unfolding 3,000 miles away would affect the produce on offer at the Coop.

In the warmer months that constitute the Northeast growing season, the Coop mostly sources from nearby farms and growing cooperatives. Produce Manager John Horsman said, “We try to buy locally as much as possible,” noting that the California produce buying season usually lasts from the late fall through the early spring.

In the short term, the Coop doesn’t expect the Los Angeles fires to have a major impact on the availability of California produce. “Based on my experience, it will be minimal” said General Manager Joe Holtz.

STRONG SANTA ANA WINDS ARE CAUSING EXTENSIVE DAMAGE TO AVOCADO GROVES AND VINEYARDS.

While exact figures are not available as to how much of the Coop’s produce comes from California, my walk down the aisle suggested that there are many items from the Golden State, from juicy oranges to super-fresh salad greens. Horsman said that this year’s California shipments, before the fires, were about the same as they were one year ago.

The State of California is around 250 miles wide and more than 700 miles long. While the effects of last month’s fires are localized to Los Angeles county, destruction has already been seen 100 miles southeast in the Pauma Valley, where strong Santa Ana winds caused extensive damage to avocado groves and vineyards. “Our farmers are our backbone of our local food system, and these fires remind us how fragile that system can be,” Alba Velasquez, the executive director of the Los Angeles Food Policy Council, told ABC News.

Horsman said that the Coop started purchasing produce from California “because California has been able to dominate nationally due to their many growing areas and micro-climates and economies of scale.” California is a major producer of grapes, lettuce, almonds, pistachios, strawberries, tomatoes, and carrots; all of which helped bring the state \$23.96 billion dollars in revenue in 2023.

According to Horsman, a number of the huge farms that supply greens and root vegetables to the Coop are in the Central Valley, which is located more than 100 miles north of Los Angeles. The Central Valley has been relatively unaffected by the current fires. On the other hand, the avocado and citrus crops closer to Los Angeles continue to be threatened by the smoke from the fires and the Santa Ana winds.

Farms don’t have to be local to Los Angeles to feel the economic impact of the fires. Underwood Family Farms is located in Moorpark, 340 miles north of the city, but their staff could not sell at the Brentwood or Pasadena markets in January because of dangerous conditions and poor air quality. This resulted in few visitors and diminished sales.

Other farms local to Los Angeles are also feeling the economic impact of the fires, as well as poor air quality, flames and smoke. “Currently there are about 24 farms that are affected by the Eaton Fire, with numbers increasing every day,” Velasquez told ABC News.

The California environment has adjusted to moderate fires over the years. Many native trees, shrubs and perennials to the region are said to be fire-resistant, but were not cut out to withstand the ravages of last month. “While most native species have adapted to withstand smaller, naturally occurring fires, they aren’t built for the high-intensity blazes the state has seen in recent years,” said Kevin Tidmarsh of local news outlet LAist.

CALIFORNIA IS A MAJOR PRODUCER OF GRAPES, LETTUCE, ALMONDS, PISTACHIOS,

STRAWBERRIES, TOMATOES, AND CARROTS.

A January 15 post on Farms.com stated: “The Santa Ana winds, infamous for their speed and intensity, exacerbate the spread of wildfires, and add to the challenges faced by farmers. These winds carry dust and smoke from the fires across coastal Southern California, further endangering crops and air quality.”

The Coop began buying California produce in 1973, the year of its founding, according to Holtz. The California items that sell the fastest are broccoli and oranges.

“Initially, in 1973, we knew relatively little about the dominance by the West Coast in providing fresh veggies and fruits to the New York City area,” Holtz said. “Produce from California was dominant during that time, even for items that could have been produced locally. But starting in late June 1975 we started an 11-year period where we went to the market ourselves and gained valuable knowledge about what items were possible to get from local farms, and where in Hunts Point Market we could buy them. That made a big difference in our effectively buying as much from the local growing area whenever the quality met our standards.”

As the current fires remain contained to the Los Angeles area, Horsman and Holtz see relatively little impact on the Coop’s California produce buying. Long term concerns, however, include future fires that could affect Central Valley crops.

“We will always try hard to look for food so that our members’ food needs are covered,” Holtz stated. “Beyond searching for sources of food that our members need, there is no exact plan. Example of a theoretical situation: Any day now the North American asparagus harvest should be starting. It starts in Mexico and after a little while it moves up into southern California. What if that pattern doesn’t pan out this year and there is instead a great reduction in asparagus from southern California? What would we do?”

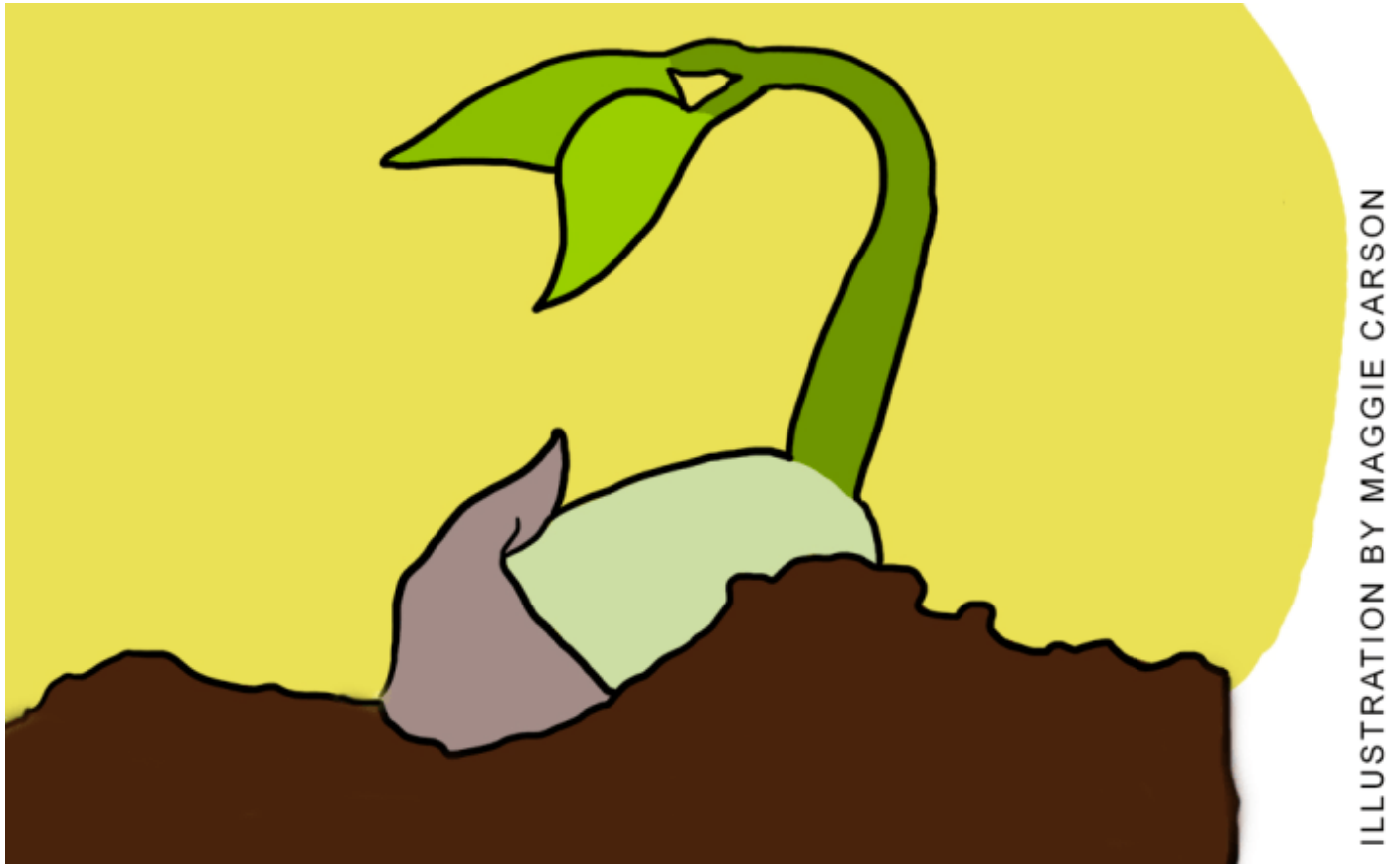
Holtz contuned, “Might there still be Peruvian asparagus available which is what we are getting now? Would the price go sky high? Would we buy it even at a high price? Would some members buy less? Would some members buy more zucchini etc. instead? I have no answers, only questions. The important thing is that we will pivot and try to make decisions that make sense in making it as certain as possible that our members will have something good to cook and eat.”

When I walk down the produce aisle this winter, I’ll keep an eye out for changes in produce availability. And I’ll load up on my beloved Sumo Mandarins, from California’s San Joaquin Valley, for as long as I can.

Anita Bushell is a freelance writer who has been published in Friends Journal, Ford Foundation Report, and Uncensored: American Experiences with Poverty and Homelessness. She just published One Way to Whitefish.

ENVIRONMENTAL COMMITTEE REPORT: WHY THE RECENT DROUGHT AND WILDFIRES?

February 18, 2025



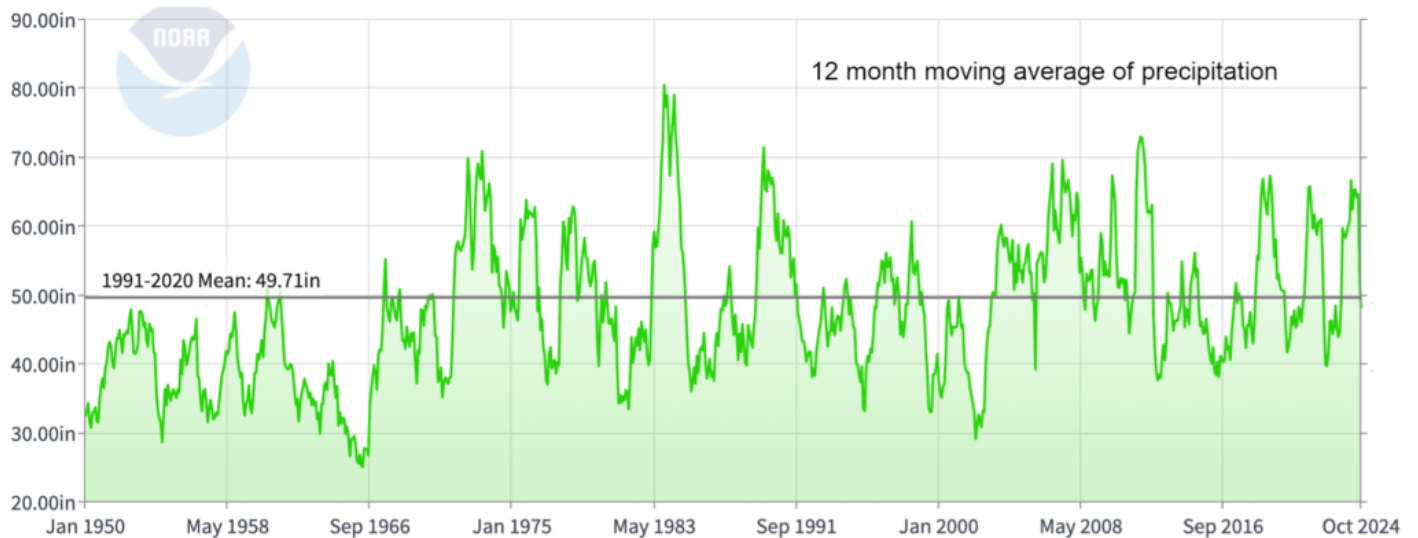
By Damon Turney, for the Environmental Committee

January 7, 2025

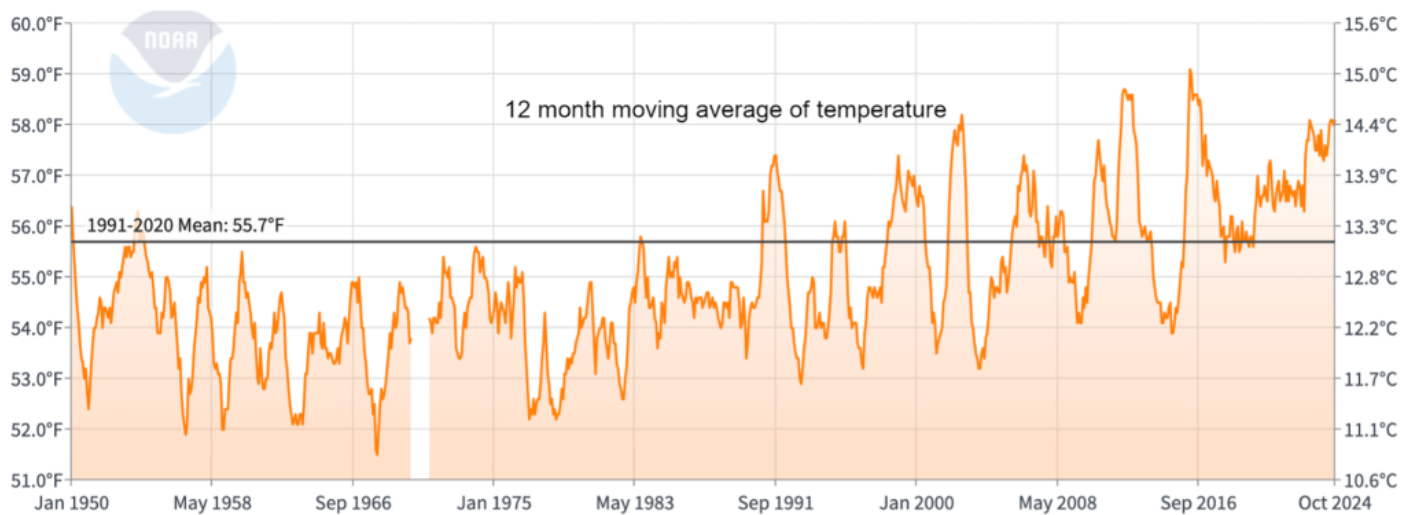
Our recent sunny autumn weather is not all warm news. Our heavily forested ecosystem is drying out¹, a fact clearly visible in the recent fall foliage having more brown than previous years. Of particular concern is the connection between our dry forests and the rise of forest fires in the tristate area, including many close to the city, which made air hazardous to breathe a few weeks ago. Our local Prospect Park was also damaged by a large forest fire that consumed two acres of trees and land on November 8.

So what's the reason for this, and what can be done to help? The data from environmental science points a clear finger at climate change but with a plot twist. Actual precipitation in our watershed has *increased* over the past 75 years, notwithstanding the exceptionally dry October we just had, as shown by the data below from the famous Central Park meteorological observatory.² Climate change is known to increase rain-

fall. This is due to increased evaporation of water from the oceans, which translates to more rainfall—what goes up must come down.



So how are we in drought then, you ask? This is the key issue. The higher temperatures on our forest and land nowadays mean they dry out much faster. Remember, evaporation occurs faster in warm temperatures, and the forest is a living system that loves to consume groundwater when it has a warm sunny day to do so. Below is the temperature history from the same observatory in Central Park—temperature rise is clearly the dominant factor here. These trends of precipitation and temperature are stronger in upstate cities like Albany or Binghamton, near our NYC watershed and reservoirs. The effect of higher evaporation means New York reservoir levels are a much better metric of drought severity than rainfall. Recent rains, just before November 27, have not been enough to improve reservoir levels.



Climate scientists call this faster drying process a “flash drought” effect³, meaning a month of low rain now can have the same bad consequences as 12 months of drought a century ago. And increased rainfall is now necessary to keep our watershed in the same state as it was 50 years ago. At present date the reservoirs that hold water for New York City are unusually low, likely due to just a couple months of low rain. A worsening of this trend could threaten major costs or damage to NYC water quality, or to the subterranean tunnels that feed water to the city, not to mention the forest fires and air quality.

What can we do to help? The good news is that rain will return to New York, likely at increased levels. It remains to be seen if increased rainfall will be enough, given the higher temperatures, and higher evapo-transpiration. At some point in the future, environmental issues will need to be taken seriously by city/state/federal voters and officials, because bigger problems may arise that will not be pleasant. Recommended actions to help are:

- Stay engaged politically: Ensure our elected officials keep a smart focus on environ-

mental issues.

- Conservation: Fix leaks, reduce waste, consider rainwater barrels if feeding a large garden or landscape. Cover pools.
- Be fire conscious, particularly when outdoors at barbecues or similar events.
- Research and innovate: Study known solutions⁴ and be active in developing new ones.

Want more? So do we. The Park Slope Food Coop Environmental Committee collects tips and hacks on issues of concern to the shopping members, so please feel welcome to reach out with additional information or suggestions at psfc.environmental.committee@gmail.com.

Notes

1. Hillary Howard, "New York City Drought Warning Declared for First Time in Over 20 Years," *New York Times*, 11/08/24.
2. National Centers for Environmental Monitoring, website for meteorological site USW00094728, accessed 11/26/24.
3. Yuan et al., "A Global Transition to Flash Droughts under Climate Change," *Science*, 2023
4. U.S. E.P.A., Prepare for Drought, www.epa.gov/green-infrastructure/prepare-drought, accessed 11/29/24.

ENVIRONMENTAL COMMITTEE REPORT

February 18, 2025



Banking on Change: Make a Difference at the Cash Register

ly in fossil fuel companies. This fuels climate change, leading to extreme weather events, sea-level rise and disruptions to agriculture—all impacting our food system and communities.

“Since the 2015 Paris Climate Agreement, the world’s 60 largest banks have poured US\$ 5.5 trillion into the fossil fuel industry,” according to Banking on Climate Chaos, a report published by a coalition of civil society groups.

Banking with a Green Conscience: Divest from Fossil Fuel

The good news? There’s a growing movement of sustainable banks that align with our Park Slope Food Coop spirit. These banks choose to divest, meaning they sell their investments in fossil fuel companies. Instead, they invest in projects that are more aligned with our values at the Coop. These banks might:

- Support Renewable Energy by investing in solar, wind and other renewable energy sources, promoting clean energy transition.
- Fund Sustainable Businesses through loans and investments directed towards sustainable agriculture, green building projects and eco-friendly businesses.

Making a Difference, One Dollar at a Time

By choosing a sustainable bank, you become part of a growing movement towards a greener economy. Here’s how your decision can create a ripple effect:

- Put pressure on banks and big polluters with increased demand for sustainable banking. The realities of climate change put pressure on traditional banks to shift their practices, making fossil fuel expansion eventually too high a risk. Last month, Barclays announced they would stop directly financing new oil and gas projects.

- Invest in a healthy planet. Your money supports projects that combat climate change and promote environmental health.
- Align with Coop values. Choosing a sustainable bank reflects the same environmental consciousness we practice at the Coop.

Small Steps, Big Impact

Switching banks may seem like a small action, but collectively these choices have significant power. By aligning your banking choices with your values you can make a real difference for the environment and support a more sustainable future. Remember, every dollar counts and with conscious banking we can invest in a healthier planet, one transaction at a time.

Finding the Right Fit

Not all sustainable banks are created equal. Research their practices, investment strategies and commitment to environmental responsibility. Don't be afraid to ask questions and compare options.

See these resources to find a fossil fuel free bank:

Mighty Deposits

Green America

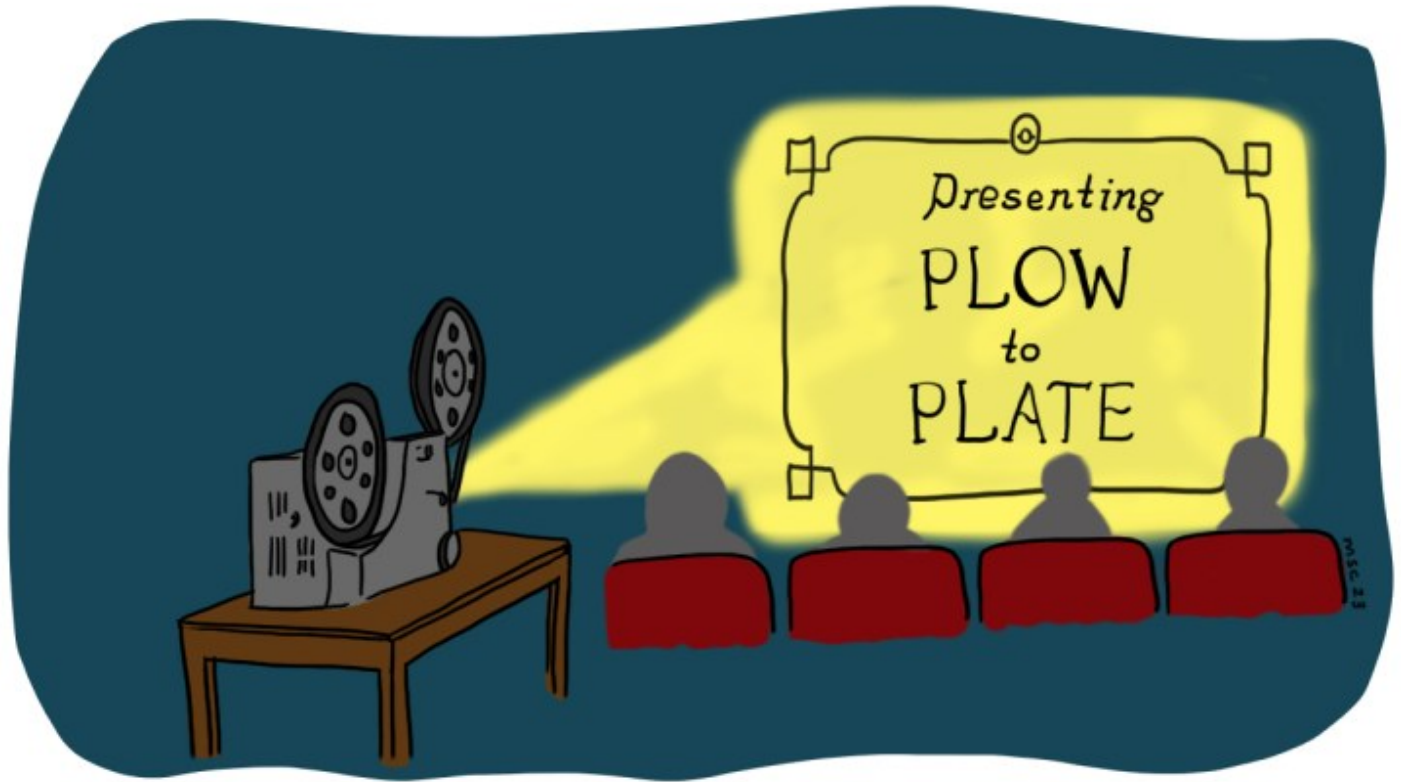
1 Million Women

Green Portfolio

Alice Roche-Naude is a member of the Environmental Committee.

PLOW TO PLATE FILM SERIES: KISS THE GROUND

February 18, 2025



By Adam Rabiner

Kiss the Ground begins with an unnamed narrator grimly intoning about fires, hurricanes and other natural disasters caused by climate change, as news reel footage graphically illustrates these catastrophes.

With six mass extinction events already underway, the bad news about our planet is overwhelming, and the fear that we're headed for a cliff puts most of us in a state of paralysis.

After this proclamation, the camera alights on the narrator, who is speaking into a microphone in a darkened studio. "The truth is, I've given up..." the man says while grimly biting his lower lip, "...and, the odds are, so have you." Then the camera then cuts to a picturesque forest, with a coastline in the background. "But what if there

was another path?” the voice asks. This is Woody Harrelson, and his message is anything but cheery.

This other path, the subject of *Kiss the Ground*, is restoring healthy soil that has the ability to sequester vast amounts of greenhouse gases that could balance the climate, replenish fresh water supplies and feed the world.

THE MODEL GISELE BÜNDCHEN AND HER FORMER HUSBAND, THE FOOTBALL STAR TOM BRADY, DISCUSS THEIR HEALTHFUL EATING HABITS.

Kiss the Ground focuses on several key strategies of sequestration, the primary one being regenerative agriculture. Regenerative agriculture focuses on improving the health of soil, which has been degraded by the use of heavy machinery, fertilizers, and pesticides in intensive farming. Ray Archuleta, who works for the USDA’s Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), is a proponent of regenerative agriculture. He travels the country teaching ranchers, farmers and other producers the basic scientific principles of soil.

Most of his students have been practicing industrial-scale agriculture for years but do not know how soil works. As Ray makes efforts to reduce chemical spraying and tilling, which harm the soil and contribute to erosion, he discovers that educational and social issues precede ecological issues.

Just as Ray seeks to persuade farmers that they can still farm productively and profitably without pesticides and herbicides and using no-till drilling, *Kiss the Ground* challenges other common misconceptions about modern-day agriculture, such as the belief that methane-burping cows are always bad for the environment.

In another segment, the actor Ian Somerhalder visits Allan Savory, the Zimbabwean ecologist and livestock farmer who originated Holistic Management—a system of res-

toring parched African savannah to fertile and healthy grasslands through a controlled system of cattle grazing. Doniga Markegard, a rancher who uses the innovative, carbon-storing methods of regenerative ranching in the depleted San Francisco Bay Area, has also achieved soil preservation through similar methods.

But it is not just producers who can improve the soil—everyday consumers can contribute by carefully choosing what they eat. For example, a vegan or vegetarian has a smaller environmental footprint than a meat eater. However, even carnivores can lessen their impact by choosing local, grass-fed animals rather than those mass produced on feedlots. These points are highlighted by the model Gisele Bündchen and her former husband, the football star Tom Brady, who discuss their healthful eating habits.

Cities can get into the action as well. For example, San Francisco has an innovative composting program that could serve as a national and international model. The system penalizes restaurants and citizens for contributing to the waste stream and rewards them for diverting food waste into compost, which is then given to local farmers.

One of the biggest successes highlighted by *Kiss the Ground* was the restoration of China's 140,000 square mile Loess Plateau between 1994 and 2009. In this span, a team of scientists worked with communities to turn a dusty and dry landscape into a verdant one that supports agriculture and has lifted 100 million people out of poverty. The plateau had been completely devastated, but through a lot of cooperation and hard work, both its biodiversity and economy were restored.

PERHAPS THE MOST DIRE AND DEPRESSING STATISTIC CITED IN THE FILM IS THE UNITED NATIONS' DOOMSDAY ESTIMATE THAT THE WORLD'S REMAINING TOPSOIL WILL BE GONE WITHIN 60 YEARS.

Counterbalancing these positive narratives, the film cites some hard facts that harken back to those early, scary images of destruction. For example, we've lost one third of the world's topsoil since the 1970s, and two-thirds of the world is currently in the process of desertification, which is causing 40 million people to be pushed off their land every year.

One estimate suggests that there will be one billion soil desertification refugees by 2050. Perhaps the most dire and depressing statistic cited in the film is the United Nations' doomsday estimate that the world's remaining topsoil will be gone within 60 years. That is only 60 harvests left.

While *Kiss the Ground* bounces between fatalism and optimism, with an upbeat soundtrack by singer-songwriter and guitarist Jason Mraz, it seems to ultimately take the side of hope. After all, between the two potential paths facing our small green planet, what choice, really, do we have?

Kiss the Ground screened on October 10, 2023 at 7:00 p.m.

To be added to our mailing list for future screening announcements, please email a request to plowtoplate@mail.com.