

Activists Occupy (and Re-Occupy) Urban Agricultural Land in San Francisco Bay Area

The following are press releases and other information on the occupation of the Gill Tract:

The initial occupation:

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE:

April 22, 2012



Occupy the Farm Activists Reclaim Prime Urban Agricultural Land in SF Bay Area

Contact: GillTractFarm@riseup.net

(Albany, Calif.), April 22, 2012: Occupy the Farm, a coalition of local residents, farmers, students, researchers, and activists are planting over 15,000 seedlings at the Gill Tract, the last remaining 10 acres of Class I agricultural soil in the urbanized East Bay area. The Gill Tract is public land

administered by the University of California, which plans to sell it to private developers.

For decades the UC has thwarted attempts by community members to transform the site for urban sustainable agriculture and hands-on education. With deliberate disregard for public interest, the University administrators plan to pave over this prime agricultural soil for commercial retail space, a Whole Foods, and a parking lot.

"For ten years people in Albany have tried to turn the Gill Tract into an Urban Farm and a more open space for the community. The people in the Bay Area deserve to use this treasure of land for an urban farm to help secure the future of our children," explains Jackie Hermes-Fletcher, an Albany resident and public school teacher for 38 years.

Occupy the Farm seeks to address structural problems with health and inequalities in the Bay Area that stem from communities' lack of access to food and land. Today's action reclaims the Gill Tract to demonstrate and exercise the peoples' right to use public space for the public good. This farm will serve as a hub for urban agriculture, a healthy and affordable food source for Bay Area residents and an educational center.

“Every piece of uncontaminated urban land needs to be farmed if we are to reclaim control over how food is grown, where it comes from, and who it goes to,” says Anya Kamenskaya, UC Berkeley alum and educator of urban agriculture. “We can farm underutilized spaces such as these to create alternatives to the corporate control of our food system.”

UC Berkeley has decided to privatize this unique public asset for commercial retail space, and, ironically, a high-end grocery store. This is only the latest in a string of privatization schemes. Over the last several decades, the university has increasingly shifted use of the Gill Tract away from sustainable agriculture and towards biotechnology with funding from corporations such as Novartis and BP.

Frustrated that traditional dialogue has fallen on deaf ears, many of these same local residents, students, and professors have united as Occupy the Farm to Take Back the Gill Tract. This group is working to empower communities to control their own resilient food systems for a stable and just future - a concept and practice known as food sovereignty.

Occupy the Farm is in solidarity with Via Campesina and the Movimiento Sin Tierra (Landless Workers Movement).

The Gill Tract is located at the Berkeley-Albany border, at the intersection of San Pablo Ave and Marin Ave.

Join us: Come dressed to work! We need people to help till the soil, plant seedlings, teach workshops, and more.



Donate/lend: We need shovels, rakes, pickaxes, rototillers, drip irrigation tape, gloves, hats, food, and anything else farming related!

Monetary donations can be sent through our website at www.takebackthetract.com



The barring of Professor Miguel Altieri:



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE:

UCPD Locks Gate on Professor's Research, Farmers Move to Remediate Neglected Portions of Gill Tract

Contact:

Anya Kamenskaya 415-812-4793

Effie Rawlings 415-215-5464

Marika Iyer 510-575-9979

Wednesday, May 9th: Albany, CA - Professor Miguel Altieri, researcher at the Gill Tract for 31 years, planned to begin planting his research plot with his students this morning. An hour before he was scheduled to begin, the UC administration barricaded the Gill Tract with concrete, metal barriers, and dozens of police who threatened farmers with "chemical agents and impact force." In a blatant affront to academic freedom, Dr. Altieri was told he lacked the "authorization" to conduct his research. A bulldozer loomed on the edge of the farm for the majority of the morning.

Despite the blockade, Professor Altieri, with the help of the farmers, managed to plant a token portion of his research area with organic, drought resistant crops that have benefited East Bay soup kitchens for years. The majority of his planned workday, however, has been disrupted by the UC Administration's intervention.

The Gill Tract Farmers Collective continues to believe that urban farming and academic research can coexist and benefit one another on public farmland. Yesterday evening, in order to free up as much space as possible for researchers, the farmers began relocating the temporary camp to a more southern portion of the Gill Tract which has long been vacant, not used for agricultural research. The move was completed this morning, after the scheduled planting with Professor Altieri, and offers a win-win scenario, where the farmers can maintain access to the crops and the researchers can begin their research unimpeded.

On the south side of the Gill Tract, the farmers are beginning a community research project to find solutions that can heal damaged urban land. Whereas the land already under cultivation by the farmers is Class 1 soil, the soil they are beginning to remediate has been impacted by concrete and contaminated by heavy metals and chemicals due to years of UC negligence. Corey Scher, an Albany native, is joining the farmers for the remediation process. "Look around here. There's trash everywhere, big pieces of rusty metal, abandoned structures, open plastic barrels of liquid chemicals. The University has not taken care of this place, so it's up to us to clean up their mess." The farmers intend to set an example of how to remediate damaged land to make it safe for growing food, and have scheduled a community visioning meeting for 5pm on Saturday, May 12th, to flesh out long-term plans for the farm.

The police presence has unnerved parents at Ocean View elementary school across the street from the Gill Tract. Kristin Vorhies expressed concerns about sending her asthmatic daughter to school this morning due to the UCPD's reputation for deploying chemical agents on peaceful protesters. She, "loves the idea of having a farm across the street from an elementary school." Vorhies "called the superintendent and requested that [the superintendent] work with the UC and the City of Albany to make sure that the situation is resolved peacefully, and without chemical agents or the threat of chemical agents. I hate to imagine the potentiality," Vorhies concluded.

Community outrage has bolstered the farmers with a steady stream of new visitors and community support. They believe this response has dissuaded the UCPD from forced evictions or arrests, and have called for a show of additional community support this evening. Asked how they plan to respond to this new development, the farmers reiterate that their plans remain unchanged. "Basically, it's just another day," said Ashoka Finley, an urban agriculture teacher at Richmond High School, "we're still planting, still seeding, still watering, still weeding."

The farmers said their encampment remains temporary, existing to maintain space for farming, education, and collaboration with the East Bay community, and to ensure open access and input into the future of these public lands. The farmer's vision for this land, however, is anything but temporary: Farmland is for farming.

UCPD seals of Gill Tract:

For Immediate Release:



Thursday, May 10th: UCPD seals off Gill Tract.

Effie Rawlings 415-215-5464

Marika Iyer 510-575-9979

Albany, CA. Today, May 10, 2012 at approximately Noon, the UCPD closed off the last remaining pedestrian access to the Gill Tract by chaining and locking the gate at San Pablo and Marin Avenues. For the past

24 hours, that gate had remained open, and despite a heavy police presence people had been able to enter and exit freely through it.

This represents the latest in a series of measures taken by the UC Administration to force the Farmers off of this piece of public farmland. To date, the UCPD has cut off all water to the Gill Tract, incapacitated the fire hydrant on the land, placed concrete barriers around the land preventing vehicular access, and locked all entrances shut. Farmers note that these actions threaten more than just their plants: that in this dry, windy weather, which poses a high fire-risk, there are no working fire hydrants on the land, and significantly restricted access points for firefighters and exits for people on the land.

Farmers are upset that the UC Administration is preventing scientists from carrying out their research on the Gill Tract. For the second day, UC Berkeley Professor Miguel Altieri has come to the Gill Tract to attempt to plant his crops. Whereas the Gill Tract Farmers Collective has directly assisted Altieri with his planting effort, the UCPD has physically prevented him from planting his dry-farmed tomato crop, saying he has no "authorization" to do his research. Professor Altieri says that he is "disappointed that the University has missed this opportunity to acknowledge that a coexistence of researchers and occupiers is possible, and that they have blocked access to my experimental plot."

A support rally has been called for 5pm at the San Pablo and Marin Avenue gate to resupply the farmers inside the Gill Tract with water for the crops, as well as food and drink. Supporters are encouraged to bring food, drinking water, large water containers such as gallon jugs, duct tape, and farming supplies to pass to people inside the fence. Supporters are also being encouraged to bring camping supplies, to stay overnight, and help maintain a permanent presence outside the fence to defend and supply the farmers inside.

UCPD locks gates on professor:

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UCPD block professor's research:

Only UC's Barricades and Police Stand In Way of Gill Tract Scientists' Research

May 14, 2012

Albany, CA - The Gill Tract Farmers Collective has broken down camp and moved it off the plot of Class I agricultural soil and outside the gates of the Gill Tract. The only thing standing in the way of the Gill Tract scientists from conducting their research is UC's own barricades and police.* Last week current Gill Tract scientists Miguel Altieri and Sarah Hake and former Gill Tract scientist and professor emeritus Andrew Gutierrez attempted to access the land. They were denied access by a UCPD officer who stated the only person authorized entrance was the dean of UC's College of Natural Resources, Keith Gilles. We will continue to maintain access to the plot so that the farmers and community can continue caring for the crops. We intend to coexist with the scientists on the plot this season as interim and future governance is resolved.

Consistent with our statements all along, and consistent with our direct dialogue with the scientists over the past three weeks, we have made the collective decision to move off the plot of Class I soil where the researchers need to plant their corn so that we may coexist with them.

We hope our collective decision and action will be seen as measure of good faith toward the scientists. We ask UC administrators to allow us until 10am on Monday, May 14, before moving in with their tractors to till the land for the scientists. We need some time to wake up, stretch

our legs, get our blood flowing (it's cold at night!), and do a final run-through to make sure the plot is clean and tidy.

As for the encampment, we never considered it permanent nor central to our long-term objective. An encampment on the Class I soil is not required to grow food in an ecologically-sound and socially-just way.

Having said that, in no way should our actions be interpreted as an abandonment of our resolve and effort toward building and maintaining an urban agriculture farm on this land. On the contrary. We had a great three week anniversary and Mother's Day celebration this weekend. We have been humbled and energized by the local, national, and international support for agroecology, food sovereignty, and Occupy the Farm. Until the gates are open to the public from sunup to sundown seven days a week, we plan to maintain a constant presence outside the gates of the Gill Tract to ensure our crops are safe and healthy and so that we may continue facilitating open dialogue about the future of the Gill Tract.

Notes

*Current UC Berkeley scientists conducting research on the plot of Class I agricultural soil include:

Miguel Altieri, professor of agroecology, dept. of Environmental Science, Policy, & Management
Sarah Hake, adjunct professor, dept. of Plant & Microbial Biology; center director, USDA Plant Gene Expression Center

Frank Harmon, adjunct associate professor, dept. of Plant & Microbial Biology

Steven Lindow, professor, dept. of Plant & Microbial Biology

Damon Lisch, associate research professional, dept. of Plant & Microbial Biology

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Website: www.OccupytheFarm.org

Twitter: @OccupyFarm and #OccupytheFarm

Facebook: Occupy the Farm

Email: GillTractFarm@riseup.net

The re-occupation:

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

10:50 AM; JULY 7, 2012

WHAT: Urban Farm Activists Re-Enter Gill Tract, Assert Access is the Issue

WHERE: Gill Tract, Albany, CA at the intersection of Marin Ave. and San Pablo Ave.

CONTACT: Anya Kamenskaya (415) 812-4793; Effie Rawlings (415) 215-5464

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At 9:40 AM on July 7, 2012, urban farm activists re-entered the Gill Tract in Albany, CA to harvest crops planted during the 3-week occupation earlier this spring. The action came in response to UC and Albany City officials organizing an invite-only harvest party of the same crops. This date marks the first re-entry of urban farm activists on the land since UC Berkeley reasserted private control of Gill Tract through a police raid on May 14, 2012.

"The 'community inclusion' rhetoric put forth by UC Berkeley and the City of Albany has shown to be full of hot air. Since the Farm was raided, they have not had a single public discussion, yet feel they can railroad the development process through by calling an emergency council meeting on July 9th." said Effie Rawlings, a recent UC Berkeley graduate and Occupy the Farm organizer.

The farmers say that the City and UC's attempts to exclude the public are unacceptable, and that today's action will not be the last, unless the access to land and decision making process becomes public.

"The involvement of the community in the occupation got the UC and City to discuss the preservation of this historic farmland." said Anya Kamenskaya, a long time advocate for agroecological farming at Gill Tract. "We're going to have to continue to push for transparency and inclusion every step of the way. The fact that the UC cancelled their invite-only work party and issued a statement yesterday admitting that the public deserves access to this farmland, shows that they are responding to us calling them out."

During the occupation, the farmer-activists sowed crops in over 70 two-hundred foot rows. Only 40 rows remain, after the rest were plowed under by UC Berkeley to make way for corn-based research.

"I'm bummed about the condition of the crops." said Corey Scher. "The weeds are choking everything out, and the plants have bolted from not being harvested. If we tended the whole way through, we would yield a much better harvest."

Nearly a hundred people were harvesting crops and weeding rows planted during the occupation. Organizers maintain that public access to the land is the issue and that they will steward the Gill Tract as farmland indefinitely through direct action; if necessary.

Ashoka Finley, an Urban Agriculture teacher at Richmond High School, "want[s] the gates open for public access all the time. If deer are the issue, then close the gates but don't lock them. We'll just keep on coming back."

Organizers are mobilizing again at 6 PM on Monday, July 9th, for the 'emergency' meeting of the Albany city council where the UC commercial development proposal of Gill Tract will be called into question.

By 10:50 AM, UC officials had yet to issue a response.

