

The Talk at Thunderhill

*Story by Peter Darnall, as seen in Victory Lane Magazine, August 2009
Republished here with their permission*

Thunderhill Raceway Park is well into its sixteenth year of operation. Sixteen years: In human years you'd be old enough to get a driver's license in California; in race track longevity years, it's like eternity.

The on-track activities of the CSRG Rolling Thunder were winding down on Sunday afternoon when I came across Dick Mudd. Dick was the Glenn County supervisor who was instrumental in making the race track proposal a reality. His presence soon attracted a group of "old timers" and tales of early days flowed.

"Thunderhill wouldn't be here today if Dick Mudd hadn't been on the Board of Supervisors," one fellow volunteered. Everyone nodded in agreement ... Sixteen years ago the environmentalists were just as outspoken as they are today. Even Greenpeace threatened to actively oppose any attempt to build a race track in this area. Experts predicted irreversible damage to the pristine foothill environment; abundant wildlife would disappear one species at a time. The nearby Delevan National Wildlife Refuge would never be the same. A barren landscape would replace the rich farmlands and the world, as we know it, would come to a sudden end just outside Willows, CA. Now many years have passed since the track hosted its first event. Has the habitat of local wild life been destroyed? How badly has the environment deteriorated at Thunderhill over the years? You might be very surprised.

The second Saturday of November each year marks the opening of Pheasant Season in Glenn County. I guess I shouldn't have been startled, therefore, when I flushed out a pheasant just in back of Turn 5 at Thunderhill during the CSRG Fall Finale last year. "That happens quite a bit," the flagman in the booth said, laughing at my amazement. "We've actually had a problem with poachers coming over the fence and hunting birds on the race track property."

Hard to believe, if true. Was he kidding? How could these birds survive, let alone thrive on the grounds of a race track with cars and motorcycles flashing by just a few yards away? Imagine the noise and all those toxic exhaust fumes? You would have thought that this area would have turned into an ecological disaster zone long ago. That's certainly the result the environmentalists predicted if a race track were to be built here.

And there's more... Thunderhill Raceway Park lies on land purchased from its adjacent namesake, Thunder Hill Ranch. The weathered sign at the entrance to Thunder Hill Ranch advertises Angus Bulls and Calves for sale. The ranch has been involved with cattle for as long as anyone can remember. Let's not ignore the well-publicized danger of "bovine flatulence" either. Cow exhaust, the experts tell us, is loaded with Methane gas. Methane gas, experts claim, is damaging to the Ozone Layer and reputedly threatens rainforests worldwide. Race cars running on a track surrounded by grazing cattle on the hillsides might be an environmentalist's concept of an ecological disaster, but it's quite a sight. No Armco guardrails or advertising materials clutter the sweeping vistas. The car commercials seen on television could have been shot at Thunderhill. Revenues from such activities represent a substantial contribution to the

track's profitability: "I hadn't heard about the poachers trespassing on the track," Dick admitted. "But I'm not surprised," he added. "Any birds living on the track property are going to be better than the birds on the other side of the fence. The gun club plants commercially raised birds in the fields for the hunters. Those artificially raised birds are puny by comparison to the wild pheasants." I didn't bring up the issue of bovine flatulence. I knew what his answer would have been. Dick summed it up succinctly: "The track doesn't present any threat to wildlife."

Epilogue: According to recently released figures, the facility contributed more than 16 million dollars to the local economy last year. The SFRJSCCA has recognized Dick Mudd's achievement to make the Thunderhill Raceway facility the success it is today. At a trackside ceremony late last year, he was inducted into the group's Hall of Fame, the only non-driver ever to be so honored.