

FROM THE GROUND UP

SOILAND

Marv Soiland and his family are embracing a sustainable future.

By Bob Klose

Marv Soiland delivers the payroll every Thursday. It goes with the job he created for himself a half-century ago, when he established a development company that bears his name and, over the years, has been quietly going about developing urban housing and industrial projects from North Marin through Sonoma and into Mendocino counties.

"I have to get out to see what's going on, and I love interacting with employees," says Soiland, 83. "I'm not involved in the day-to-day, but I am involved in the big picture."

Soiland is chairman of the board of Soiland Co., Inc., a family business that employs three generations of Soilands and has salted Sonoma County with several building industry companies that are owned or operated by his sons and daughters.



Left to right: Marlene, Marv and Mark Soiland (Duncan Garner Photography)

Soiland's weekly payroll delivery takes him off his mountaintop home in Shiloh Estates north of Santa Rosa, a 2,710-acre development created by Soiland that includes million-dollar homes, a world-class golf course and a county regional park.

First, he crosses Highway 101 to his company's corporate headquarters at the 770-acre industrial park he and other construction leaders spearheaded more than 30 years ago, at the edge of the Charles M. Schulz-Sonoma County Airport. Then he's on to his company's production locations: Stony Point Rock Quarry in Cotati, Soils Plus on Stage Gulch Road near Sonoma, and Grab N' Grow Soils on Llano Road on the Santa Rosa Plain. The route causes Soiland to crisscross familiar territory, where he dug trenches to bury sewer, water and utility lines and prepared construction sites for housing subdivisions up and down the Highway 101 corridor.

But it's territory that exists now in the context of changing times.

A company evolution

When Soiland started his company in 1962, it was him and his backhoe for a couple months. It became a two-paycheck operation when he hired a backhoe operator at the union hall. For a while, his father did the books, collected the mail and ran the office in the startup's small trailer office in southern Novato.

Fast-forward 20 years and move the business to Sonoma County, where there were paychecks for 200 employees who drove dozens of backhoes, excavators and trenchers, several low, seven-axle trailers for hauling the heavy equipment, a fleet of about 30 Peterbilt trucks for hauling rock and water and a "pot full of pickups," Soiland recalls.

In the mid-1980s, he started cutting back, letting go of a lot of the contracting business, focusing on the Shiloh project as well as the rock and soils business, shrinking the Soiland ventures to just a few. He also began passing along a lot of the operational and management tasks to the next generation.

These days, he delivers pay envelopes on payday for about 34 full-time employees of the Soiland rock, soil, recycling and development companies now being run by Mark Soiland, his youngest son, and Marlene Soiland, his oldest daughter.

Mark Soiland, 41 and the sixth of Marv Soiland's seven children (four boys and three girls), is president/CEO of the family's rock, soil and compost company, which has less girth than the old days, downsized to meet new and different realities and

goals. There are lots of reasons:

- The recession, a 20 percent drop in the price of aggregate rock products for heavy construction and road beds, and more competition for a share of the market.
- Increasing transportation costs are reducing the size of the area in which companies like Soiland can operate profitably. The Soiland operation that stretched from north Marin to southern Mendocino counties is now confined to central and southern Sonoma County.
- Development potential trimmed by urban growth boundaries.
- A finite amount of hard, quarry rock resources.
- The movement to develop a sustainable economy that decreases the carbon footprint on the earth, embraces recycling and provides promise for future generations.

Recessionary spending

From his new office at Soiland's Stony Point Rock Quarry, the younger Soiland says the recent recession requires taking a hard look at the company businesses. "When we built this building in 2007, it was full of employees," says Mark. "Now, offices for two assistant managers are vacant. We've had to do more with less. The office manager and I are taking over tasks an assistant manager would have handled in the past."

Mark and Marlene Soiland don't flinch when discussing the impact of the recession. There's been some work—Soiland sold rock to the Highway 101 expansion project in Sonoma County and rock from the Soils Plus location went into improvements to Stage Gulch Road on the Highway 116 pass between Petaluma and Sonoma Valley. But it's been a very tough several years.

"We lost money in 2010, but not nearly as much as we did in 2009—that year was the absolute basement," Mark says. "It's been rock bottom."

Still, Soiland looks for the positive.

"Before, we took many things for granted," he says. "Now we take a hard look at everything and think very hard about capital and equipment." The company is scaling back, living by budgets, curtailing spending that would have been routine in prior years and choosing jobs very carefully. "We're letting some work go that we would have tried [to get] years ago, but now we pass on it if profit isn't certain," he says.

Green pursuits

The family businesses are making fundamental changes to meet current and future economic, environmental and resource challenges, a process Soiland describes as a

"recalibration" that includes a 10-year plan to create a new business model dominated by recycling.

"We want part of our family legacy to include sustainability," says Mark. "A couple years ago, 20 percent of our business was in recycling. I want to flip that to 80 percent recycling."

Soiland already recycles asphalt, concrete ceramic fixtures (like toilets and sinks) and asphalt roof shingles for uses historically reserved for rock. Two years ago, it expanded its soils and recycling business with the purchase of Grab N' Grow.

Grab N' Grow recycles 80,000 cubic yards of agricultural and yard waste to produce soils products. This spring, the company, already known for its signature organic Mango Mulch product, launched a marketing program for a lineup of renewable soils products it's working to place in retail outlets throughout Northern California. To that effort, Marlene Soiland has given her name to a "Marlene's Magic Garden Mix" that Grab N' Grow is hoping consumers will use to fill backyard vegetable patches.

The Soilands are already making a mark on matters of sustainability and resource responsibility. In March, the company

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received a Best Practices Award from the Business Environmental Alliance (BEA) for recycling, reducing water use and decreasing the company's carbon footprint.

The Soiland's efforts go beyond the gates of their businesses. Marlene Soiland, 55, as owner of Soiland Management Co. Inc., is the CFO and administrative arm of Soiland Co., Inc. She's also involved in the Sonoma County Alliance and is emerging as an industry leader on environmental concerns.

Frustrated by the county's failure to find practical and environmentally sound solutions to solid waste issues, she's spearheaded efforts to put business and environmental leaders at the same table to attack complex and sometimes divisive problems. She says she's driven by her own personal convictions and the Alliance mission statement that declares "a healthy environment leads to a healthy economy."

"I've been recycling—against everybody's better advice—for 30 years," she says. "We can't be throwing things away, hauling our garbage out of the county and creating more greenhouse gases. Somehow, I'm going to be part of a solution."

Ann Hancock, executive director of the Sonoma County Climate Protection Campaign and a leader of the movement to green America, welcomes Marlene Soiland's involvement in the solid waste issue and hopes Marlene can help build a model for dealing with bigger issues, like water, energy and climate change.



Marv Soiland circa 1950

"She's smart, she's charismatic and, given the respect she has from the business community, having Marlene out front working on these issues is huge," says Hancock.

"Our father always believed in the future," says Mark Soiland. "The future is going to happen and there's no place for negativity and worry."

That's the course of action—the big picture—Marv Soiland's children and partners have chosen for getting the family businesses out from under the current downturn and operating successfully in the 21st century.

How it all started

In 1927, Marvin K. Soiland was born in San Francisco to parents Roy and Gertrude, both from large Norwegian-American families. His cabinet maker father worked for a San Francisco company that, in 1935, was building cabinets for

fine gloves sold at The Moss Store in downtown Santa Rosa, the current location of California Luggage Co. The job gave Roy time to look around for property in Sonoma County. Gertrude nixed a prospective parcel on Stony Point Road as too flat, but agreed to a house on six hillside acres Roy found off Chanate Road in Santa Rosa, an area that's now the Montecito Meadows subdivision.

Marv was 8 years old when he and his parents and younger brother, Al, moved to Santa Rosa in February 1936. Roy Soiland went ahead to install a new heater in the house. Marv recalls his

Uncle Howard drove Gertrude and the boys to Sonoma County in his Nash. They took the Van Ness Avenue ferry to Sausalito, passing by the Golden Gate Bridge, still under construction, safety nets hanging below suspension cables. "Al and I still talk about that," he says. "Big nets hanging underneath. They caught some of the workers but didn't catch them all."

In Santa Rosa, Marv and Al enrolled in Lewis Elementary School, and their father learned how to build and operate a chicken egg ranch. The family became active members of the Bethlehem Lutheran Church on Tupper Street in Santa Rosa, now the site of Bethlehem Towers senior living center.

The Lutheran experience would have a lasting impact on Soiland's life. Through a church friend, he obtained a \$75 Exchange Bank loan, co-signed by his father (the first of many business loans throughout his life) to buy a milk cow for a Future Farmers of America project. Nearly 50 years later, contacts associated with his 31 years on the Board of Directors of California Lutheran University in Southern California alerted him to the



A 1973 family photo.
Back row: Helena (Marv's first wife), Marlene, Dave and Dean.
Front row: Marv, Valerie, Mark, Monica and Troy.

development potential of the 2,710-acre Shiloh project.

Soiland was just 16 when he graduated from Santa Rosa High School. He attended Santa Rosa Junior College until he turned 17 and could join the Navy to perform his World War II duty. Discharged in 1946 as a Petty Officer, Motor Machinist Mate Third Class, he returned to SRJC, obtained an AA degree, completed liberal arts courses at Pacific Lutheran University near Tacoma and graduated with an engineering degree from Oregon State College in 1950.

A year later, after a short stint teaching U.S. Army personnel how to operate Caterpillar earth-moving machines, he was recalled to the

Navy for Korea. After receiving 90-days of training and commissioned an officer, Soiland joined the USS Estes for a tour of duty that would take him to Korea for refugee evacuations, port calls in Saigon and into the South Pacific, where the Estes was the command ship for H-bomb tests in the Marshall Islands.

He witnessed the first H-bomb explosion on Nov. 1, 1952. "I saw it go off," he says. "Something you never forget—and don't want to see again."

In 1953, during a stop at the Estes' home port in San Diego, Soiland met and married his first wife, Helena MacKnight. Nine

months later, he was a Lieutenant j.g. (junior grade) when he received a wire that his first son, David, had been born. Marv was off the coast of Indochina when he got his discharge orders. A helicopter on a mail run dropped him off at the tip of South Vietnam. He hitchhiked to Saigon, hopped a plane to Clark Field in the Philippines and found military flights to California.

His parents picked him up at Travis Air Force Base in Fairfield, and he headed home to Santa Rosa where he built a house on Wallace Road for his family and started a business in laying pipe and developing land for construction. "I didn't put up sticks," he says of his chosen field. "I liked to move dirt."

The company grows

Soiland learned the business first with Hal Peletz's Construction Co. where he estimated jobs and supervised pipeline construction, and then moved to Marin to work for Linscott Engineering Contractors. In 1962, he went out on his own.

Soiland's daughter, Marlene, remembers the day in 1962 that her father went to Sacramento to take the test for a contractor's license. The family was living in a house Marv built on Slowdown Court in Novato. There were three kids by then, her older brother David and a younger brother, Dean. "My mother had us all at the edge of the bed, praying together that he'd pass the test," she says. "He passed."

"I had \$3,000 and a lot of ambition," Marv Soiland says now. "You just stuck your neck out and took the plunge."

He had one backhoe and an operator, Jack Witsch, who'd become his partner and colleague for years. They got started doing small, underground pipeline jobs. Business grew and, within a few years, Soiland carved up ground to build industrial parks in Ignacio and Bel Marin Keyes, a 260-acre development that served as his company's primary headquarters until 1978.

He and Witsch partnered with Novato attorney Ed Grundstrom to construct a portion of the Marin Country Club housing project and built homes in Novato. In the process, he established professional standing and a relationship with industry leaders including Art Condiotti of Condiotti Enterprises, who participated in the Ignacio project and would later use the Soiland company on projects in Sonoma County.

Former Condiotti associate Phil Trowbridge, who retired two years ago, recalls "the way [Soiland] handled people, because of his demeanor and the people he contracted. He was probably the finest business commercial person I ever came across."

Soiland performed site development work for Condiotti projects in the 1980s and 1990s in Petaluma, Rohnert Park and Santa Rosa. "We delivered an awful lot of homes," Trowbridge says. "Marv was always dependable and got the job done."

As both business and the family grew—and as land development in Marin County slowed—Soiland headed north. In 1969, he bought a house on 40 acres on the corner of Stony Point and Jewett Roads for his growing family of six children (at the time) and 20 quarter horses.

Soiland bought a small parcel on Maxwell Court in Santa Rosa in 1972 for a satellite yard and Healdsburg Sand and Gravel, to provide aggregate for pipeline and site development projects. Over the years—and with partners he'd eventually buy out—he acquired Stony Point Rock Quarry and then later added Soils Plus.

In 1978, he moved his company headquarters to 40 acres on Airport Boulevard in Santa Rosa. It was there that the Soiland operation grew to employ 200 workers and became a leader in

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—Marv Soiland

Sonoma County development.

In 1980, Soiland and nine other builders and property owners near the county airport, including Condiotti Enterprises and Wikiup developer Stan Andersen, put up \$6,000 each and formed a joint venture called Lone Redwood, Inc. to finance a county feasibility study for a sewer trunk line from the Larkfield-Wikiup subdivisions west to the airport and eventually a sewer treatment plant near the Windsor

town limit.

The utility cleared the way for developing the 770-acre airport area industrial park, including Soiland's own 110-acre industrial neighborhood, now home to some 30 businesses.

All in the family

Four generations, and counting, of Soilands have worked for the family business, including Marv's father as office and bookkeeper in the early years, and brother Al, now retired, who ran the transportation portion of the business and was a partner in development of the airport industrial park property. Each of Marv's seven kids were on the payroll at some time. A grandson is now a heavy equipment mechanic at Grab N' Grow.

Marlene Soiland says she and her siblings started working during summer vacations once they were 13. "At home, our father was 'Dad.' At the job, he was 'Marv,'" says Marlene.

One way or another, they've all stayed involved in the industry, either on Soiland's payroll, as subcontractors or, sometimes, as competitors.

David Soiland, 56, who learned the trade with the International Union of Operating Engineers, operates Dave Soiland Construction, his own grading and utility firm that also crushes rock and other debris to make road base material for his dad's Soiland Co. and other companies.

Dean Soiland, 52, ran the Healdsburg Sand and Gravel division of Soiland before starting his own company with his wife, Belinda. Their firm, BoDean Co., Inc., has Mark West Quarry, Blue Rock Quarry in Forestville and an asphalt company in Santa Rosa. Dean is also a partner with his brother, Troy, in North Gate Concrete, a ready mix company.

Troy Soiland, 49, operated Soiland quarries in Bodega, on Stage Gulch and Stony Point, before going his own way. He now has trailer park properties in Sonoma County and elsewhere and owns North Gate Concrete.

Monica Soiland, 46, is an executive officer with Mid-State Construction in Petaluma, a member of the board of North Coast Builders Exchange and the Petaluma Chamber of Commerce. She was named construction woman of the year in 2008 by the *North Bay Business Journal*. (Her sister Marlene received the same award in 2009.)

Valerie Soiland Rodriguez, 39, was office manager at the Stony Point Rock Quarry until she met and married her husband, Jay Rodriguez, who was stationed at Two Rock Coast Guard base. They now live in Florida where Jay is a police officer. Valerie remains in the fold, however, and provides the silk screen and embroidery work for Soiland Co. Inc. clothing, hats and marketing material.

And Mark and Marlene make seven.

Keith Woods, CEO of North Coast Builders Exchange, lauds Marv Soiland for his role in "the advancement of the construction industry."

Though quiet and understated in demeanor, Soiland and his family name take a rightful place in the community of people

who built modern Sonoma County, such as Coddling, Friedman, Condiotti and Trione, and with them, he's been inducted into the county's Business Hall of Fame.

"He's a very big deal to us and the industry," says Woods. "But one could say the best thing he ever did for the industry is having his kids. The quality of his offspring now working in the construction industry may be his greatest legacy."

Soiland is proud of his four sons and three daughters, who've produced 15 grandchildren and four great grandchildren.

"They all turned out good," he says.

Coming home

He's proud, too, of his largest project, the development of Shiloh Estates, the 2,710 acres above Faught Road on the northeastern edge of Santa Rosa.

Soiland learned the property was available through contacts at California Lutheran University in Thousand Oaks. When he had horses, Soiland offered to donate four of them to the university's equestrian program. The college took the horses and, at the same time, recruited Soiland, who served on its board of directors for 31 years. Five of his children earned degrees there. In 1985, Soiland heard from a board member that Campus Crusades for Christ couldn't service the debt on the Shiloh property. Soiland drove up to have a look.

"I tied it up just as soon as I could," he says.

With partners that included his old business associate Jack Witsch and cartoonist Charles Schulz, the project got under way three years later. The deal dedicated 850 acres to what became the county's Shiloh Regional Park. About 600 acres went to separate developers who built Mayacama Golf Course, designed by Jack Nicklaus, and 31 homes and 50 small casitas (granny units) that

are for sale or rent.

That left almost 1,300 acres for Shiloh Estates, where Soiland developed seven miles of roads, relocated several vernal pools, built a dam for a 24-acre lake and established sites for 69 homes, all of which are sold, with 50 homes built or under construction.

Soiland chose 16 acres near the top of the property for a house for him and his wife, Fran, whom he married in 1989, a year after his first marriage ended in divorce. Fran Roby was an experienced commercial real estate agent when she met Soiland at Cross and Crown Lutheran Church in Rohnert Park. She ran Shiloh Realty, the real estate sales arm of the project.

The Soilands, who moved into their new home in 1990, were the first residents on the hill. Their sunroom looks over Shiloh Lake. Soiland won't say how much he paid for the property, but he does offer he built the roads and dam with borrowed money. "Fran says she'd never have married me had she known I was \$10 million in debt," he says.

Soiland says he wants to work 10 more years. As chairman and co-owner of Soiland Co., Inc., he has Stony Point Rock Quarry, Soils Plus and Grab N' Grow to look after. And he's a partner with Marlene in the company that manages several commercial buildings and five remaining acres at the Sonoma County airport area industrial park. Then there's the weekly payroll to deliver.

"I don't want to dominate, but every now and then, I get into a management meeting and, if something doesn't make sense, I get into that real fast," he says. "I enjoy watching things grow. The businesses are things we started, like one of the kids, kind of, and you've been with them from day one and hopefully you see them grow up and maybe profit after a while." ■