

Agricultural Land Protection Tools



Butte County Citizens Advisory Committee

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Butte County Agricultural Land

□ Existing Setting

- According to California's Farmland Mapping and Monitoring Program (FMMP), Butte County has over 512,000 acres of agricultural land, including approximately 249,734 acres of irrigated farmland.
- The agricultural economy in Butte County is strong—in 2001, the net worth of the agricultural industry totaled over \$287 million; in 2005, the gross value was \$439 million.
- According to FMMP, Butte County lost 7,700 acres of agricultural land to incompatible uses 2002-04
- Most of the converted land is within city Sphere's of Influence where land is at greater risk of conversion.

Tools available to protect Butte County Farmland



- **Agricultural Protection Policy**
- **Strong Agricultural Element**
- **Policies to Discourage Ranchette Development**

Agricultural Protection Policy

Maintain Integrity of the Williamson Act

- ▣ Administered by the County, agricultural landowners voluntarily restrict their land to agriculture or open space and receive property tax deductions.

Agricultural Protection Zoning (APZ)

- ▣ Designates mandatory areas where farming is the desired land use, generally on the basis of soil quality and historical agricultural use.
- ▣ Other land uses are discouraged.

Agricultural Protection Policy

Establish Effective Urban Growth Boundaries

- ▣ Separate urbanized areas from non-urbanized areas by identifying the locations in which urbanization can occur.
- ▣ Control sprawl, encourage increased densities inside boundary and establish protected greenbelts of agriculture or open space around the perimeter.
- ▣ Example: City of Chico Greenline which is the City's western city limit forcing growth away from prime farmland.

Create Agricultural Buffers or Setbacks

- ▣ Example: *Butte County Agricultural Buffer Setback Ordinance*.
 - Requires 300-ft. agricultural buffers for all new residential development in Butte County.
 - Other land uses are discouraged.

Agricultural Protection Policy

Adopt a policy or ordinance to require mitigation for the loss of farmland

- Protect farmland by providing equivalent farm acreage elsewhere when farmland is converted to other uses.
- Party responsible for the need to mitigate is required to permanently protect at least one acre of farmland for every acre of farmland they convert to incompatible uses.
- Farmland is permanently protected with an agricultural conservation easement.

Agricultural Protection Policy

- **Eligible mitigation land should meet the following criteria:**
 - Comparable or better soil quality.
 - Adequate water supply.
 - Unencumbered by another easement.
 - Located within County.
 - First priority is to mitigate within 2 miles of subject property.
 - If no land available in 2 mile radius, land outside area may be considered if land is equal or better agricultural value.

Agricultural Protection Policy

- **Agricultural Conservation Easements**
 - A voluntary, legally recorded agreement between a landowner and qualified conservation organization.
 - Restrict land use to agricultural and open space uses.
 - Landowner is financially compensated for the development rights which are extinguished.
 - Land trusts like the Northern California Regional Land Trust (NCRLT) can purchase easements or land with donated funds, or accept donations of agricultural conservation easements.

Funding for Agricultural Easements

□ Sources of Funding in California:

- CA Department of Conservation (estimated \$20 million a year).
- Federal Farm and Ranchland Protection Program (Latest Farm Bill - \$200 Million).
- Mitigation \$\$ as projects are approved.
- Sales Tax Revenues – Example: Sonoma County Measure F (passed in Nov 2006 : 75% YES).
 - Continues current Open Space sales tax of $\frac{1}{4}$ of one percent (0.25%) for protection of community separators and greenbelts, scenic landscapes, productive Agland, sensitive habitat, riparian corridors and other open space projects.

Who manages Agricultural Easements?

- **Qualified land trusts (Northern CA Land Trust) hold agricultural easements**
 - ▣ NCRLT is aware of farmers who are interested in putting agricultural easements on their farmland.
 - ▣ Provide baseline documentation, annual monitoring and legal defense in perpetuity for the agricultural easement.

Strong Agricultural Element

□ **Stanislaus County Ag Element**

- 1:1 Mitigation when proposed project zoning change from Agriculture to Residential.
- Encourage higher density and infill in already existing urban areas.
- Subdivision of Ag Land should not result in parcels for residential purposes.
- Minimum parcel sizes allowed for lands designated Ag shall not promote the expansion of existing, or creation of new ranchette areas.

Strong Agricultural Element

□ **Stanislaus County Ag Element (cont.)**

- Evaluate future projects on a case by case basis to determine whether conversion of Ag Land will have an adverse effect on the environment.
- Participate in efforts to identify strategic agricultural land.
- Encourage cities to adopt Agricultural Mitigation ordinance.

Policies to Discourage Ranchette Development

- **Local government should take the following steps regarding ranchettes:**
 - ▣ Place a moratorium on all new rural ranchettes.
 - ▣ Identify areas where they should be discouraged.
 - ▣ Identify areas where they should be encouraged.
 - Where land is already divided in smaller lots.
 - Where public services are already located.

Policies to Discourage Ranchette Development

- **Local government should take the following steps regarding ranchettes (cont.):**
 - ▣ **In Areas Where Permitted**
 - Establish a specific number of ranchettes.
 - Permit the subdivision of existing parcels.
 - Adopt lot size standards, lot configuration, and buffers on ranchette parcels to minimize conflicts with agriculture.

Policies to Discourage Ranchette Development

- **Local government should take the following steps regarding ranchettes (cont.):**
 - ▣ **In Areas Where Discouraged**
 - Increase lot size to reflect viability (example: 40 acres for cropland, 160 acres for rangeland).
 - Prohibit subdivision of land into smaller parcels except for farm residences.
 - Require right to farm ordinance in deeds that create ranchette parcels in agricultural areas.
 - Require agricultural easements on remainder of parcel when clustering.

Policies to Discourage Ranchette Development

- **Local government should take the following steps regarding ranchettes (cont.):**

- **In All Areas Where Ranchettes are Allowed**

- Adopt graduated impact fees based on distance of public service and their costs.
- Adopt similar fee structure based on quality of soil and location.
- Reduce the number of existing development entitlements by using mitigation fees to purchase agricultural easements in strategic farmland areas

Northern CA Regional Land Trust

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References

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