

# General Plan

# Open Space Element

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**County of Sacramento**  
Office of Planning and Environmental Review

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**SACRAMENTO COUNTY GENERAL PLAN  
OPEN SPACE ELEMENT**

SECTION I

OPEN SPACE IN THE CONTEXT OF THE GENERAL PLAN

The Open Space Element is in many ways a plan for implementing other Elements of the General Plan. For example, maintaining intact habitat, productive soils, and mineral resource availability as open space is essential to resource conservation. Keeping floodplains undeveloped is likewise an important way to implement flood protection goals in the Safety Element. And, preserving open space areas within the fabric of urban development can address Land Use Element policies relating to neighborhood identity and land use conflicts. Indeed, the key role that open space plays in synthesizing land use objectives lends it the distinction as the only Element where an action plan is specifically required by state law.

**Types of Open Space**

**Rural Open Space**

Open space areas are largely un-fragmented areas of undeveloped land that are set aside primarily to preserve and/or enhance the County's wildlife habitat, agricultural productivity and recreational opportunities. Recreational use of these areas is generally limited so as to conserve sensitive habitat and protect agricultural activities. Similar to other metropolitan regions with open space resources, recreational access is typically limited to non-motorized trail use that is not disruptive to agricultural activities or harmful to sensitive species. Sacramento County has identified six categories that define valuable open space uses that are important to preserve and protect. All can be effective community separators and most overlap.

- *Habitat:* Natural or actively farmed lands that provide foraging, nesting, and wintering habitat for mammalian, avian, invertebrate, reptile, amphibian and aquatic wildlife species.
- *Natural Resources:* Land of important ecological functions, natural resources, or cultural resources. This includes, but is not limited to forests, farmland, ranchland, fallow fields, rivers and streams, floodplains, wetlands, vernal pools, riparian corridors and native plant communities.
- *Recreation:* Natural areas that provide for passive recreation such as wildlife viewing and pedestrian and bicycle travel, as well as wildlife habitat. It may encompass historic sites, scenic vistas, and trails.

- *Health/Safety (Flooding/Seismic):* Areas that require special management or regulation because of earthquake fault zones, unstable soil areas, high fire risks, floodplains, aircraft safety, high noise levels, and other hazards; and areas for the protection of watershed integrity, water quality and air quality.
- *Agriculture/Rangelands:* Active farms or ranchlands used for cultivating the land, producing crops, or raising livestock.
- *River and Stream Parkways:* Areas that are typically linear and follow the natural path of a river or stream. They are primarily used as corridors for pedestrians and bicyclists. Recreational uses focus on education and appreciation for natural resources. Parkways may also provide open space linkages, wildlife corridors and/or act as community separators.

As used in this plan, rural open space does not include developed agricultural parcels five acres or less in size and landscaped or natural areas providing required separation between incompatible land uses. These examples do not represent all non-open space uses.

### Urban Open Space

Urban open space areas are typically undeveloped land within urbanized areas that are set aside to provide public recreational opportunities as well as the chance to experience natural areas and wildlife habitat. They may also be developed areas that are available to the public to provide a feeling of openness. Sacramento County has identified five categories that define valuable urban open space uses that are important to promote, preserve, and protect.

- *Recreation:* Areas that provide for active and passive public recreational uses, including County/Regional parks, community parks, neighborhood parks, pocket parks and activity areas within the American River Parkway. These are areas that provide recreational and meditative opportunities and are not required under the Quimby Act or other legislation. Some of these areas are depicted on the County’s Land Use Diagram.
- *Trails and Parkways:* Areas with limited recreational uses that act primarily as corridors for pedestrians and bicyclists. They provide linkages from residential areas to schools, parks, commercial developments, as well as neighboring communities.
- *Stream and Canal Corridors:* Undeveloped areas along streams and canals that provide a buffer between the water and nearby development and can be used as pedestrian trails and/or wildlife corridors.
- *Natural Resources:* Areas that provide important ecological functions such as wetlands, floodplains, vernal pools, and urban forests. They may also offer educational opportunities for urban residents. This includes areas designated as Natural Preserves on the County’s Land Use Diagram.

- *Public Space*: Areas with public access that act primarily as places for urban relief. They may or may not be landscaped, but all areas offer a place to experience a sense of openness within an urbanized area. Examples include public plazas, fountains, and courtyards. While these urban features provide valuable public space, they may not be counted toward mitigation requirements for loss of rural open space due to development.

The following land uses are **not** considered urban open space by the County. This list is not a comprehensive inventory but provides some basis for a better understanding of what is not considered open space by the County.

- Required elements within a development such as private park and yard areas.
- Land dedications required for public infrastructure such as strips of land adjacent to roadways, drainage canals or utilities, that do not provide for recreational and/or habitat uses.

### **Relationship to Other Elements**

The Open Space Element is coordinated with several of the other Elements in this Plan. Many of the policies in other elements support and enhance the open space strategy described herein, and together they meet State General Plan mandates. The Land Use Element includes several land use designations related to open space including Natural Preserve and Resource Conservation Areas. The Agricultural Element addresses preservation of agricultural resources and supporting the economic vitality of farming operations. The Conservation Element focuses on preservation and management of natural resources and their ecological functions and includes several key open space related policies.

The Delta Primary Zone, defined by the Delta Protection Commission (DPC), is a unique resource with a rich cultural heritage, a strong agricultural base, and many opportunities for recreation and habitat conservation. In order to help preserve these and other important values of the Delta Primary Zone the DPC has adopted the-“Land Use and Resource Management Plan for the Primary Zone of the Delta” (DPC Management Plan). Per state law the General Plan maintains consistency with the DPC though the Delta Protection Element, a policy document based on, and similar to, the DPC Management Plan. The Board-adopted Delta Protection Element has policies that relate to many aspects of open space and resource conservation, and shall be considered when making decisions on projects within the Primary Zone of the Delta. **(Modified 2014)**

## **The Open Space Vision and Land Use Diagrams**

In this Element, the Open Space Vision Diagram and associated component maps illustrate the many important natural resources and habitats located throughout the County. The maps are described below and are included on the following pages:

### Open Space Vision Diagram

The Open Space Vision Diagram serves as an illustrative representation of lands that Sacramento County views as supporting its overall conservation vision. This diagram identifies areas where acquisition of easements or land in fee title, from willing sellers, could be directed when funding is available. The identification of public and private lands on the map does not imply a designation of permanent open space or a loss of property rights.

The diagram is a composite of four component maps. The four component maps identify agriculture and grazing areas, floodplains, high value habitat or areas where creation of greenbelts/community separators could be desirable. The priority area classification allows the County to direct financial resources to areas that would provide multiple benefits. A Priority one area for example will protect land that is within a floodplain, has the potential to be farmed or grazed, can act as a community separator and has wildlife habitat value. Highest priority areas under the Vision are considered to be those containing the attributes of multiple components. These components are as follows:

- **Agriculture Component:** Identifies important agricultural land as determined by the California Department of Conservation's 2008 Sacramento County Important Farmlands Map. Categories include prime and unique farmland, farmland of statewide and local importance and sustainable ranching lands.
- **Habitat Component:** Identifies areas to direct mitigation for several state and federally listed endangered and threatened plant and animal species, as well as valuable habitat. These areas are identified by the working draft South Sacramento Habitat Conservation Plan as areas of high habitat value.
- **Flood Protection Component:** Depicts the 100-year floodplain as well as streams to be avoided in order to maintain their wildlife habitat, recreational, hydrologic, and flood attenuation values.
- **Recreation Component:** Identifies existing parkways.

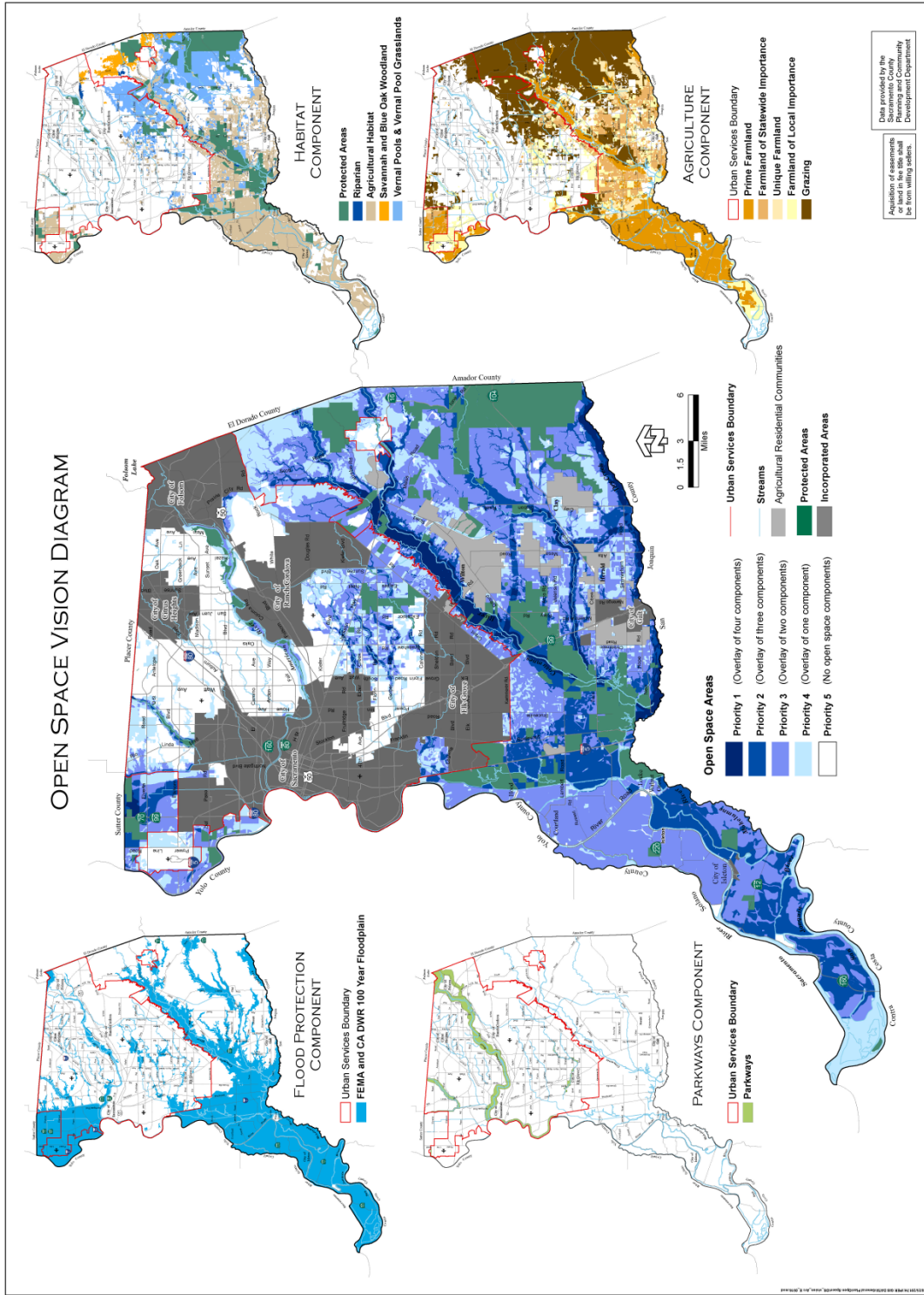


## Sacramento County Open Space/Rural Principles

Sacramento County has significant high quality natural/rural areas devoted to agriculture, natural resource protection, and recreational uses. As development continues to occur, it is important to protect these areas as they provide valuable habitat for both humans and wildlife as well as help retain the rural character of the County that makes it a desirable place to live. To meet this objective, Sacramento County has identified five open space/rural principles that serve as the basis for the Open Space Vision Diagram.

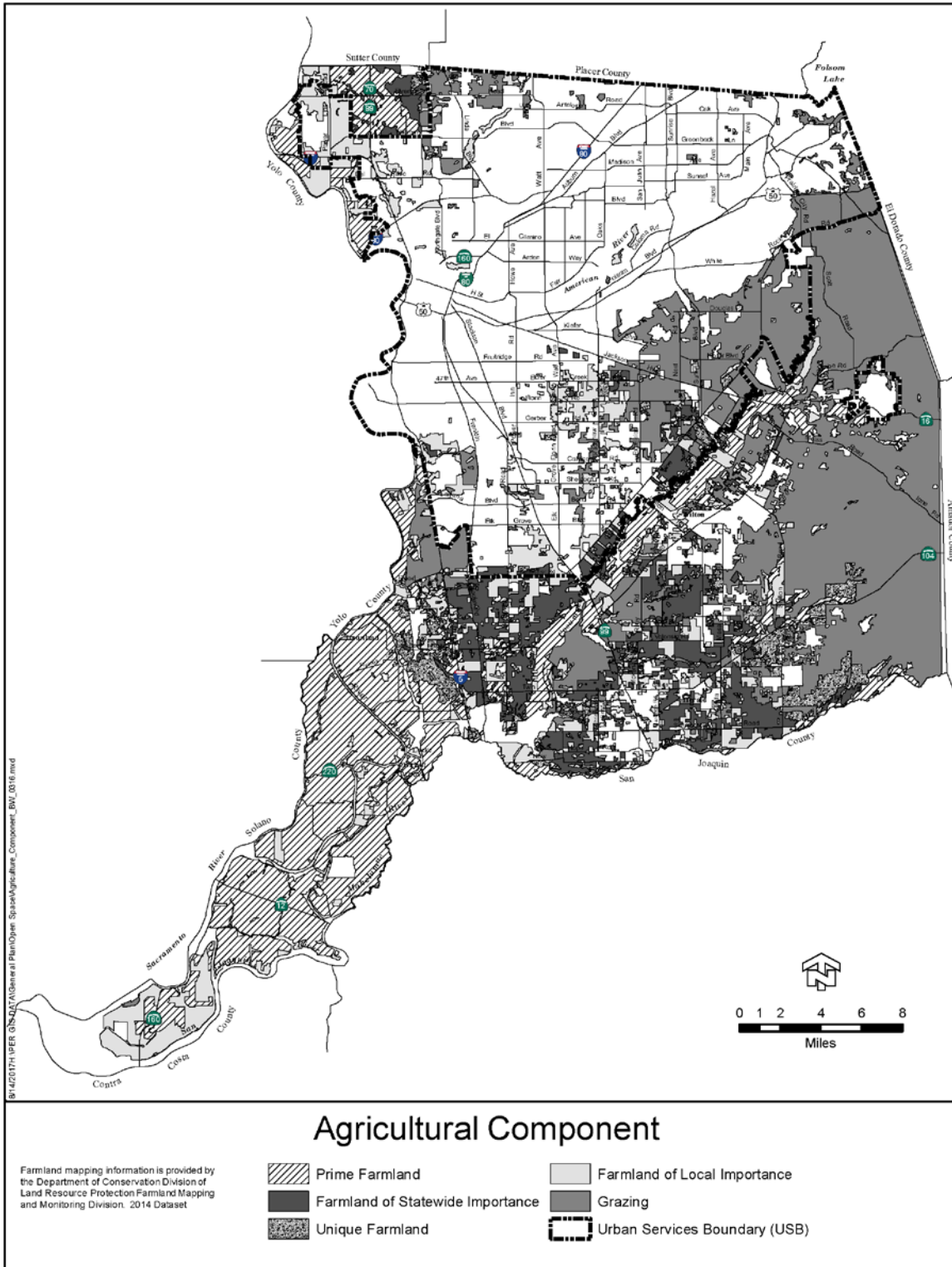
- **Floodplain Protection:** As the County becomes more developed, rainfall runoff will become more of a challenge resulting in increased flooding and expanding 100 year floodplains for area creeks. Limiting the number of development projects within floodplains will provide protection from flooding and help to maintain the integrity of the County's water quality and the regional water supply.
- **Habitat Preservation:** Sacramento County is home to numerous threatened and endangered species and their habitats. Protection of vernal pools, wetlands, creeks, oak woodlands, and other native plant communities throughout Sacramento County will aid in the preservation/recovery of these species. Protecting these areas from encroaching development projects and incompatible uses will aid in the prevention of floods, preservation of endangered species, and provision of open space areas. These areas can also act as greenbelts and enhance residents' overall quality of life by providing a distinct community identity.
- **Agriculture Protection:** Protecting prime, important, unique and local farmland and ranchland contributes to the economic stability of Sacramento County through the provision of locally grown food and the promotion of agri-tourism. Providing continued support to farmers and ranchers will also maintain the rural feel desired by community residents.
- **Greenbelts/Parkways:** Maintaining areas for passive and active recreation contributes to the overall health and well being of County residents. Trails and parkways encourage pedestrian and bicycle travel while providing connectivity between open space areas. Through the incorporation of public use open space within development projects, above state requirements, a valuable sense of place is also created.

# OPENS SPACE VISION DIAGRAM

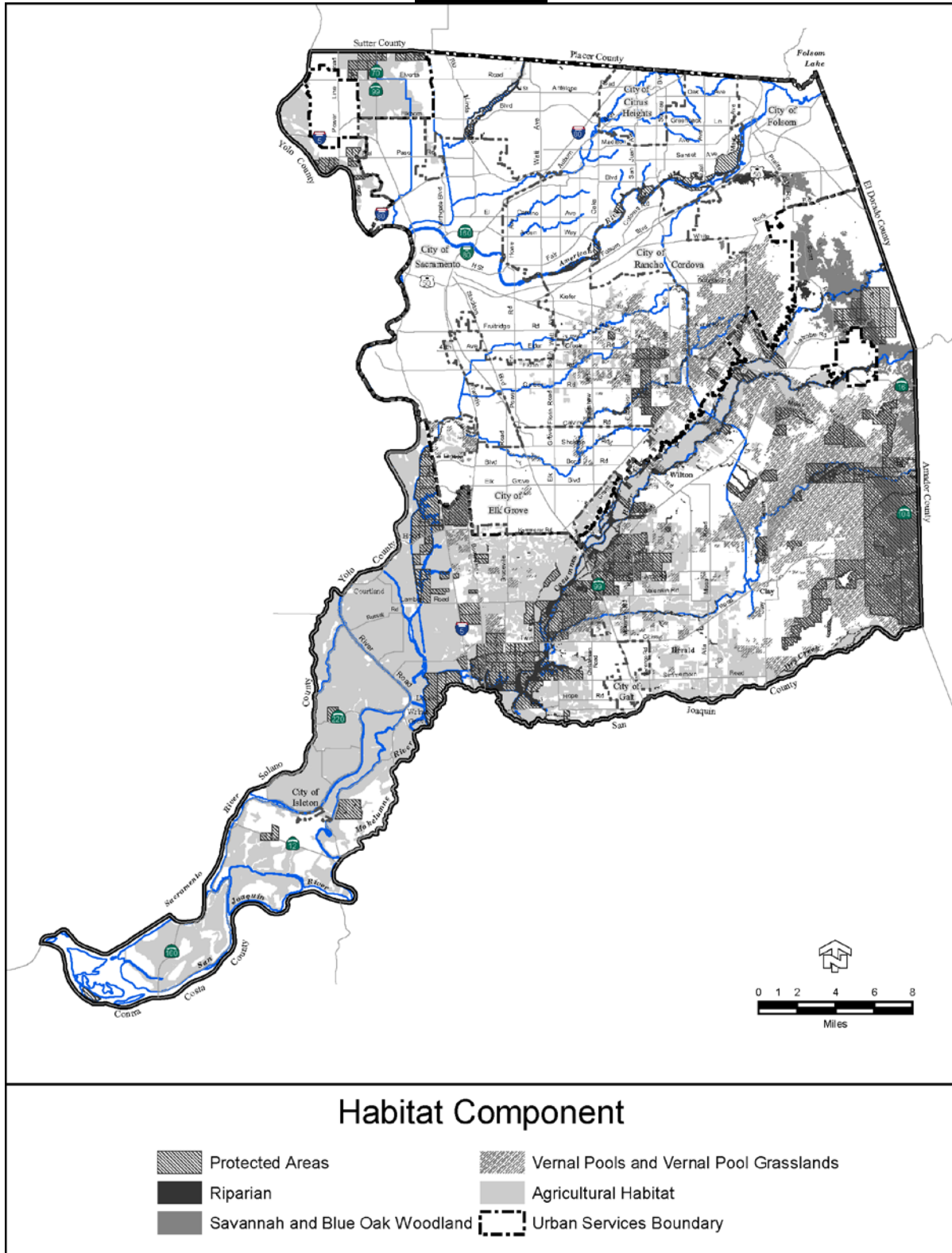


Sacramento County  
Open Space Vision Diagram

**FIGURE 1A**

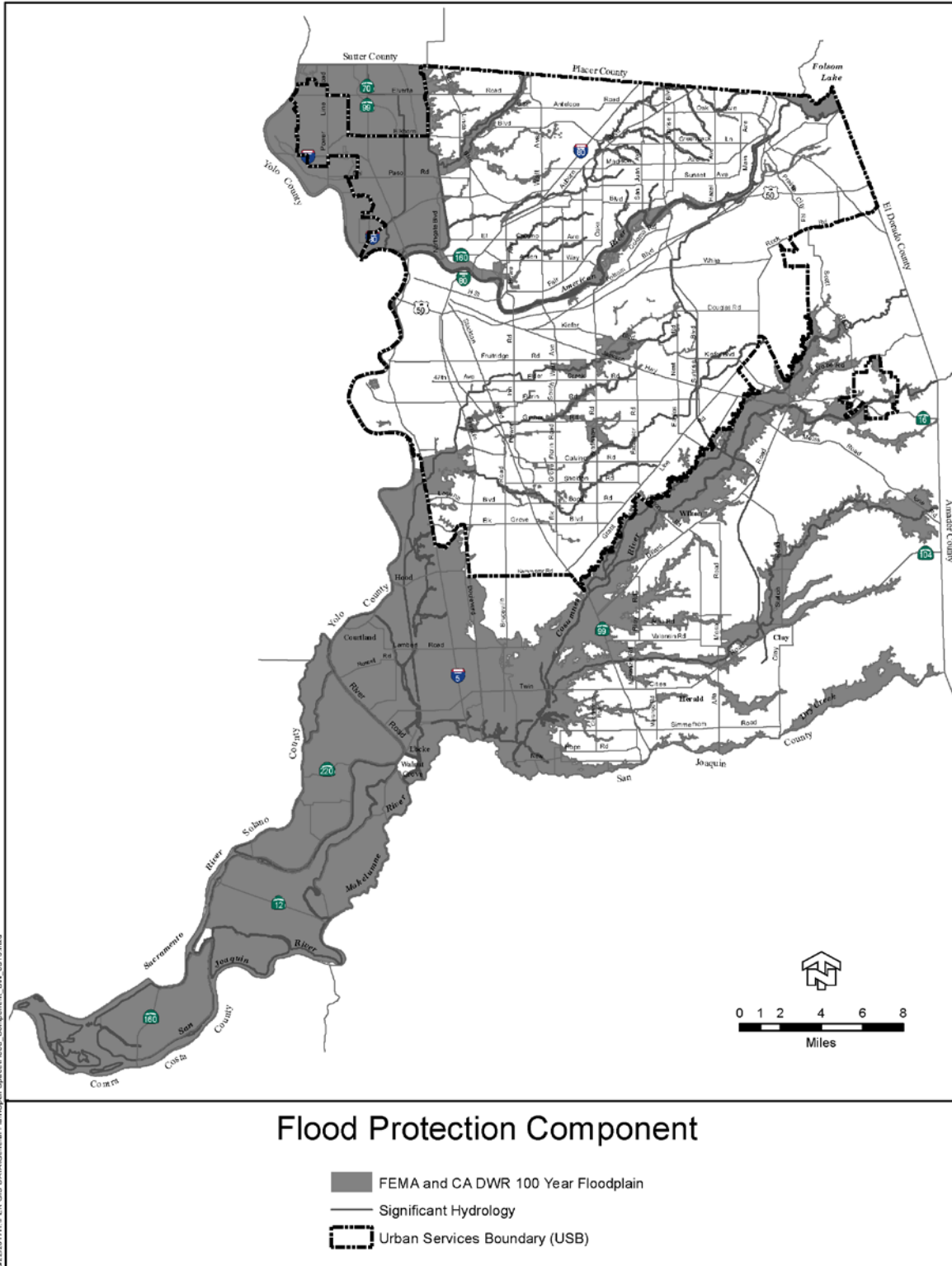


**FIGURE 1B**

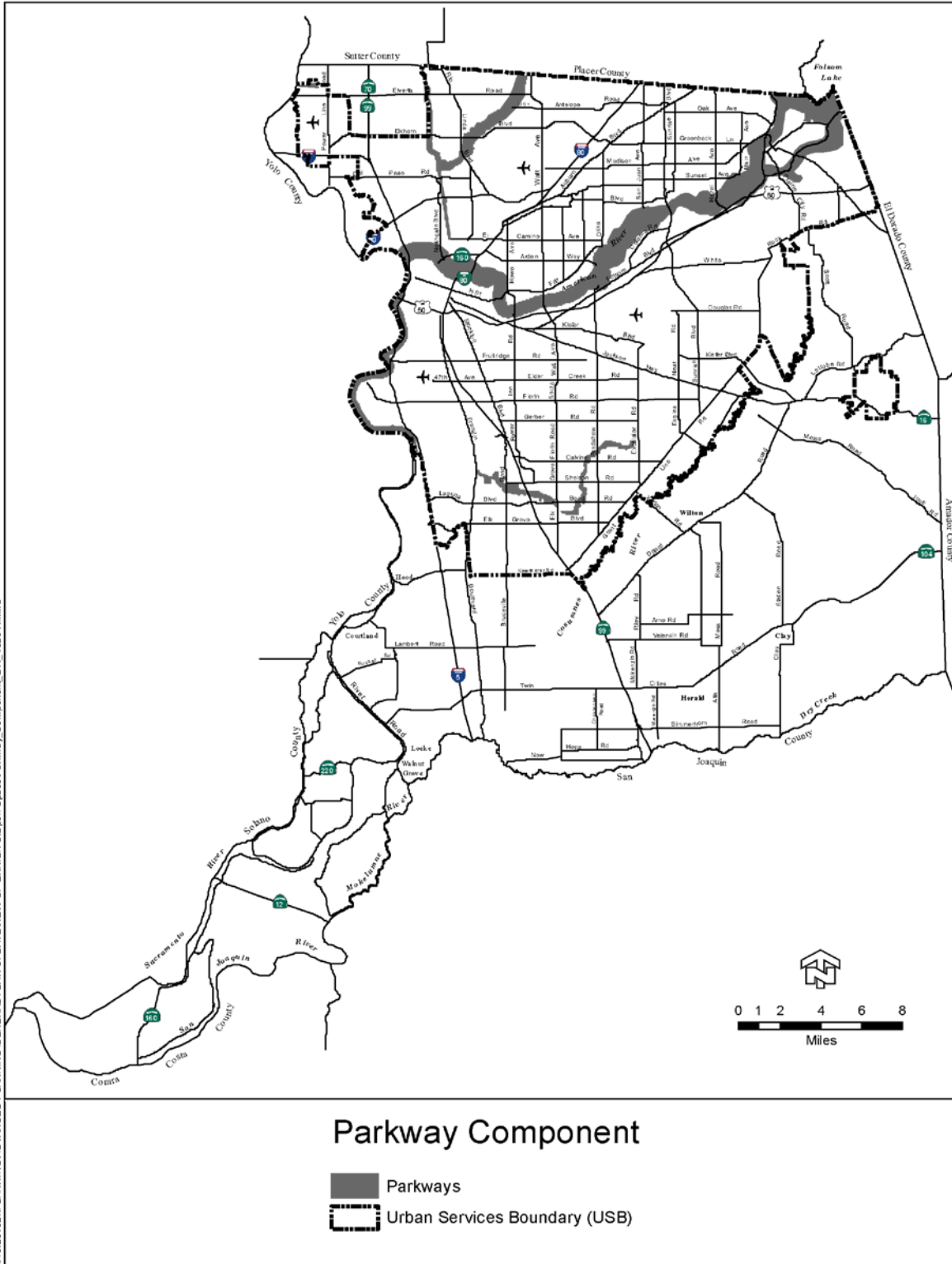




**FIGURE 1C**



**FIGURE 1D**



## Land Use Diagram

The General Plan Land Use Diagram identifies much of the County as open space. Major open space areas include the Delta's islands, waterways, and wetlands (including the Stone Lakes complex); the extensive Cosumnes River floodplain and oak woodlands and grasslands extending from Highway 50 south to San Joaquin in the East County. Within the urban area, the American River Parkway stands apart as the dominant open space feature. Other notable planned open spaces in the urban area include Dry Creek Parkway in Rio Linda and the buffer lands around the Regional Sewage Treatment Plant.

These open space areas are identified on the Land Use Diagram by the Recreation and Natural Preserve land use designations, which are described in the Land Use Element. In addition, the Resource Conservation Area Combining Land Use designation on the Land Use Diagram identifies areas with special resource management needs that are currently preserved or permanently protected under conservation easements or another form of protection. The designation illustrates certain natural resources as being important on the Land Use Diagram while recognizing the validity of the underlying land use designation. The Resource Conservation Area combining designation may be combined with Recreation, Natural Preserve, Agricultural-Cropland, and General Agricultural (20 and 80 acres) designations. The Surface Mining combining land use category protects many known aggregate resources as open space until the area is mined. However, it may ultimately be reclaimed for residential, industrial or other non-open space uses as well as recreation and natural habitat.

Substantial open space may also be incorporated into urban land use designations. Small scale parks and open space within residential areas are not delineated on the Land Use Diagram due to scale limitations.

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**SECTION II**

**OPEN SPACE PRESERVATION STRATEGY**

**Need for Comprehensive Strategy**

The long-term protection of important open space resources must involve more than designating them on the General Plan map and applying consistent zoning. The experiences of cities and counties across the country demonstrate that open space zoning alone cannot withstand the economic and political momentum created by rapid urban growth. A comprehensive open space preservation effort must consequently utilize a broad assortment of programs and technologies tailored to specific circumstances.

Following is a brief description of the major preservation goals and reference to elements where they are discussed:

- Open space lands in Sacramento permanently protected through coordinated use of regulation, education, acquisition, density transfer and incentive programs. (Open Space Element)
- Preserve and manage natural habitats and their ecological functions throughout Sacramento County. (Conservation Element)
- Preserve, enhance and restore special status species habitat in Sacramento County to aid in the recovery of these species. (Conservation Element)
- Preserve, protect and manage the health and integrity of aquatic resources in Sacramento County. (Conservation Element)
- Preserve, protect and enhance Sacramento County vegetative habitats. (Conservation Element)
- Protect important farmlands from conversion and encroachment and conserve agricultural resources. (Agricultural Element)
- Enhanced viability of Sacramento County's agricultural economy. (Agricultural Element)

## **Key Open Space Concepts**

Two key concepts form the basis of the Open Space Element goals, objectives, and policies: protecting permanent open space and establishing natural area linkages.

Any plan which attempts to accommodate large scale urban development yet maintain substantial rural, actively used, and natural open space must confront the inevitable challenge of defining and maintaining a stable demarkation between the two vastly different and economically disparate land uses. The Urban Service Boundary, as described in the Land Use Element, provides a definition for the urban edge. However, urban service policies and supporting zoning have, of and by themselves, proved inadequate to the task of long-term open space protection at the urban fringe, not only in Sacramento, but in rapidly urbanizing environments throughout the country. This element identifies both key acquisition areas and some implementation programs to secure permanent open space and thus fixing the urban service boundary along its entire length.

The second key concept, establishing open space linkages, has both an urban and rural context. Urban open spaces most typically consist of small separate blocks of open space, usually developed parks, which provide essential settings for active recreation as well as casual respite from urban life's vexations. Wetlands, vernal pools, oak groves and other important natural habitats are protected in isolated patches on a case by case basis as development occurs. In the rural setting, where open space lands predominate, natural habitats are all too often fragmented by farms and rural residential areas.

Modern ecological research repeatedly points to the value of natural land corridors in perpetuating complete ecosystems and wildlife habitats. These contiguous linkages between natural community types protect biologically important transition zones where habitats of various lower order wildlife intermix to form more complex support zones for species higher in the food chain. Precisely because they are higher in the food chain, many mammals and birds of prey require considerable supporting territory. When their natural habitat is reduced to isolated patches, capable of supporting only a few breeding pairs, the long term viability of the species is severely threatened. Linked natural habitat corridors facilitate migration of species between breeding populations, thus enlarging the gene pool and helping to ensure genetically diverse and healthy populations of individual species.

Open space linkages in the urban environment are also important because they provide definition and scale to neighborhoods and visual, psychological relief to the pervasiveness of urban sprawl. They also create the opportunity for attractive, safe transportation corridors for non-vehicular travel.

In Sacramento, the American River Parkway is the quintessential example of a significant open space corridor which admirably fulfills the benefits of open space linkages. Unfortunately, the development pattern in much of northeast and south Sacramento has precluded the opportunity to establish other open space corridors. Some opportunities do remain, however, along Dry Creek in Rio Linda and the Morrison/Laguna Stream group in south Sacramento to preserve riparian

open space corridors. They are reflected in the open space preservation strategy and policies of this plan. Additional opportunities exist to create supporting open space linkages and community separators in newly developing urban areas to promote neighborhood identity and create a network of paths for bicycle and pedestrian travel.

In rural Sacramento, beyond the Urban Service Boundary, contiguous open spaces already exist, allowing for the preservation of high quality natural areas, many of which provide opportunities for passive recreation within the limits of sustainable natural resource management. Of particular interest is the protection of natural corridors along the Cosumnes River and Deer Creek, Dry Creek adjacent to San Joaquin County, Laguna Creek draining into the Cosumnes, the east county blue oak woodlands, the Stone Lakes/Snodgrass Slough area, and the Alta Mesa corridor. This latter corridor, starting at Highway 99 in the vicinity of Badger Creek and extending east to the foothills, is notable in the diversity of habitat protection potential and linkages it affords. It encompasses the permanent and seasonal marshes of the Badger Creek complex; vernal pools encompassing four separate geologic strata (and hence separate soil associations) and representing much of the floristic diversity found in vernal pools in this part of the Sacramento Valley; blue oak woodlands to the east; and ultimately reaching the Ione chaparral, a rare endemic community, scattered occurrences of which are located just into Amador County.

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SECTION III

OPEN SPACE IMPLEMENTATION POLICIES

**GOAL:**        **Open space lands in Sacramento permanently protected through coordinated use of regulation, education, acquisition, density transfer and incentive programs.**

**Introduction And General Policies**

Intent: This section provides policy and program guidance to serve as overall guidance to the County's open space efforts. Additional policies pertaining to open space preservation are included in the Land Use and Conservation Elements.

The last policy in this section addresses educational programs for the many valuable natural resources in the County. Greater knowledge and appreciation of open space and other natural resources will strengthen public support for their preservation.

Policies:

- OS-1.        Actively plan to protect, as open space, areas of natural resource value, which may include but are not limited to wetlands preserves, riparian corridors, woodlands, and floodplains associated with riparian drainages.
- OS-2.        Maintain open space and natural areas that are interconnected and of sufficient size to protect biodiversity, accommodate wildlife movement and sustain ecosystems.
- OS-3.        Promote educational programs which focus on the importance of natural resources and agricultural lands in Sacramento County.

Implementation Measures:

- A.        Develop ordinances to implement the protection of specific natural resources and meet policies OS-1 and OS-2 above. (PLANNING & ENVIRONMENTAL REVIEW)
- B.        Support development of Habitat Conservation Plans for Sacramento County. (PLANNING & ENVIRONMENTAL REVIEW)

- C. Work with local conservation groups to develop educational and interpretive programs regarding important open space resources in Sacramento County. Outreach tools may include a webpage, brochure and flyers. (PLANNING & ENVIRONMENTAL REVIEW)
- D. Educate and engage the community in the SPLASH program aimed at having a community that is knowledgeable and protective of the integrity and health of Sacramento County streams and vernal pools. (DWR, PLANNING & ENVIRONMENTAL REVIEW)
- E. Continue to support watershed programs and advocacy groups which educate watershed residents and other stakeholders about ways to prevent pollution and protect water quality in local creeks and rivers. (DWR, PLANNING & ENVIRONMENTAL REVIEW)

### **Acquisition**

**Objective: Effective open space preservation strategy that supports the Open Space Vision Diagram.**

Intent: The Open Space Vision Diagram and its component maps identify the areas of many valuable open space and natural resources, including vernal pools, wetlands, oak woodlands and riparian habitat. Acquisition of properties should focus on helping maintain ecosystems. Encouraging or developing willing sellers, whenever possible, is important to establishing landowner acceptance of the overall open space preservation program.

#### Policies:

- OS-4. Open space acquisition shall be directed to lands identified on the Open Space Vision Diagram and associated component maps.
- OS-5. Fee title and easement acquisitions within stream corridors shall be consistent with any adopted Master Drainage Plans of the Department of Water Resources.
- OS-6. The County may seek to acquire land for open space purposes through either fee title or less than fee interest; however, such acquisitions shall be negotiated only with willing sellers.
- OS-7. Costs of acquiring public open space shall be equitably distributed between existing and new residents.
- OS-8. The County shall consider adopting a comprehensive Open Space Preservation Action Plan which implements the Open Space Vision Diagram. Any such action plan shall be compatible with County adopted Habitat Conservation Plans. This Action Plan should include:
  - An inventory of open space resources.

- Refinement of targeted areas for preservation identified in this Element, with cost estimates for acquisition.
- An administrative structure which provides for governance by the Board of Supervisors.
- Provisions for permanent preservation of open space lands acquired in fee title or less than fee interest will only be negotiated with willing sellers.
- Funding for acquisition.

OS-9. Open space easements obtained and offered as mitigation shall be dedicated to the County of Sacramento, an open space agency, or an organization designated by the County to protect and manage the open space. Fee title of land may be dedicated to the County, the open space agency, or organization provided it is acceptable to the appropriate department or agency (Please also refer to Section V of the Conservation Element for related policies).

OS-10. Sacramento County shall seek to attain the County Regional Park System standard of 20 acres of regional parkland per 1,000 population.

Implementation Measures:

- A. Coordinate with Water Resources to identify sites and mechanisms to protect open space in stream corridors consistent with Master Drainage Plans. (PLANNING & ENVIRONMENTAL REVIEW, DWR)
- B. Determine funding source, which may include publicly voted bonds, for publicly acquired conservation easements geared to protecting open space. (PLANNING & ENVIRONMENTAL REVIEW, REGIONAL PARKS)
- C. Develop mitigation requirements and standards for open space, including appropriate mitigation ratios, for areas identified on the Open Space Vision Diagram. (Please also refer to the Conservation Element for other mitigation policies). (PLANNING & ENVIRONMENTAL REVIEW)
- D. Conduct a study to develop an Open Space Preservation Action program which includes the requirements outlined in OS-8. (PLANNING & ENVIRONMENTAL REVIEW)

## **Trails And Greenbelts**

**Objective: Establishment of trails and greenbelts to provide for recreational opportunities and community separators.**

Intent: Preservation of open space not only provides habitat and protection for wildlife, but it can also greatly increase the quality of life for people. Maintaining areas for trails can serve as an important source of outdoor recreation for cyclists, hikers, joggers and equestrian riders. Providing for open space buffers or separators between communities can create a sense of identity and individuality, provide separation between land uses and serve as habitat corridors.

### Policies:

- OS-11. Establish trail connections and linkages within the County and across jurisdictional boundaries that are compatible with existing land uses. These trail connections shall have the capability of being Class I trails (off-street, separated facilities) with grade separations wherever feasible.
- OS-12. The County shall seek to establish greenbelts to serve as habitat corridors and community separators. These shall be located:
- Between agricultural-residential communities within the unincorporated County; and
  - Where feasible, between the unincorporated County and adjacent cities.

### Implementation Measures:

- A. Cooperate with neighboring jurisdictions and landowners to:
- Identify potential trail connections and funding mechanisms;
  - Create a comprehensive trail and linkages plan;
  - Develop a connected network of Class I trails (off-street, separated facilities) with grade separations wherever feasible, depending on factors such as speed limits, number of roadway lanes and trail user safety {for example, a grade separated crossing may be appropriate at locations with more than two (2) lanes and a speed limit greater than 25 miles per hour}; and
  - Incorporate trail information into the County's Bikeway Master Plan.

(PLANNING & ENVIRONMENTAL REVIEW, REGIONAL PARKS, SACDOT)



- B. Coordinate with Rails to Trails Conservancy to determine feasibility of converting Sacramento County abandoned railways to trails. (PLANNING & ENVIRONMENTAL REVIEW, REGIONAL PARKS)
- C. Coordinate with neighboring jurisdictions to identify and establish greenbelts/community separators between cities (located within Sacramento County) and the unincorporated County areas. (PLANNING & ENVIRONMENTAL REVIEW)
- D. Development of Agricultural-Residential communities outside of the Urban Services Boundary shall establish greenbelts/community separators on their outer boundaries. (PLANNING & ENVIRONMENTAL REVIEW)

**Cluster Development**

**Objective:   Appropriate urban and rural development clustered to provide open space resource protection.**

Intent: The design concept of cluster development is authorized in the County Zoning Code through the issuance of a special development permit to, among other things, "encourage more efficient allocation and maintenance of privately controlled open space through the redistribution of overall density. . . ." The Code further permits a density increase up to 50 percent of permitted density where environmentally sensitive or significant features exist on the proposed site that are worthy of preservation.

Cluster development can also provide enhanced open space value in the context of rural development, where Agricultural-Residential parcels may be concentrated in one portion of the property in order to protect natural resources or provide an open space buffer between rural residences and intensively farmed areas.

In order that cluster development techniques be better tailored to provide open space resource protection, it is desirable to more specifically identify the circumstances where it is appropriate. Just as importantly, it is necessary to recognize that limitations on the use of density bonuses are necessary.

**Policies:**

- OS-13. Permit development clustering in urban areas where grouping of units at a higher density would facilitate on-site protection of woodlands, wetlands, steep slopes, urban stream corridors, scenic areas, or other appropriate natural features as open space, provided that:
  - Urban infrastructure capacity is available for urban use.

- On-site resource protection is appropriate and consistent with other General Plan Policies.
- General Plan policies pertaining to floodplain fill or natural preserves would not preclude development of the proposed use in the area to be protected as open space.
- The architecture and scale of development is appropriate for the area.
- Development rights for open space areas are permanently dedicated via conservation easements and appropriate long-term management is provided for by either a public agency or other appropriate entity. (Please also refer to the Conservation Element for related policies).

OS-14. Permit development clustering in rural areas where grouping units at a higher density would create an open space buffer protecting intensive farming activities, provided that:

- Clustered residential lots are adjacent to and comparable in lot size to existing agricultural areas.
- Septic disposal systems are not concentrated in a manner which increases the potential for groundwater contamination.
- General Plan policies pertaining to floodplain or natural preserves would not preclude development of the proposed use in the area to be protected as open space.
- The project complies with any applicable development credits transfer ordinance relating to density bonuses.
- Development rights for open space areas are permanently dedicated via conservation easements and appropriate long-term management is provided for by either a public agency or other appropriate entity. (Please also refer to the Conservation Element for related policies).
- The overall average density of the project is comparable to the average lot sizes in the area.

OS-15. Consider density bonuses as a method of encouraging development clustering and open space preservation.

Implementation Measures:

- A. Amend the zoning code pertaining to special development permits to incorporate clustering policies outlined in this section. (PLANNING & ENVIRONMENTAL REVIEW)