

General Plan

**Agricultural  
Element**

Adopted December 15, 1993  
Amended November 9, 2011  
Amended September 26, 2017  
Amended December 17, 2019

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



# Table of Contents

SECTION I.....	1
INTRODUCTION.....	1
SECTION II.....	5
FARMLAND AND AGRICULTURAL RESOURCE PROTECTION.....	5
Urban Encroachment.....	7
Agricultural Zoning.....	12
Encroachment by Natural Resource Preserves.....	13
Encroachment By Recreational Facilities.....	16
Williamson Act.....	17
Groundwater Depletion, Water Quality And Water Conservation.....	21
Wind Erosion.....	22
Farmland Flooding.....	22
SECTION III.....	25
ECONOMIC VIABILITY OF AGRICULTURE.....	25
Pest And Fire Hazard Control.....	26
Farm Housing.....	27
Nonresidential Accessory Farm Structures On Floodplains.....	27
Agri-Tourism On Agricultural Lands.....	28
Agricultural Land Assessments.....	31



# SACRAMENTO COUNTY GENERAL PLAN

## AGRICULTURAL ELEMENT

### SECTION I

#### INTRODUCTION

##### Goals

The Sacramento County (County) General Plan provides for growth and development in the unincorporated area through the year 2030. Portions of the Plan contain policies for urban development including urban communities and the infrastructure necessary to serve them. Other sections of the Plan describe strategies to recognize and preserve areas of open space and natural resources. As a whole, the Plan reflects a balance between the amount and location of land uses in urban areas and those to remain in a rural or natural setting.

Agricultural production in Sacramento County remains a significant contributor to the local economy. In addition to the almost \$300 million in annual production value, there are hundreds of jobs directly tied to that production and thousands more that are impacted indirectly in the production, processing, transportation, and marketing of those commodities. It is estimated that there is approximately a four to one ratio for crops grown in this region, so \$300 million in production value is actually a \$1.2 billion impact on the local economy. Other benefits of agriculture include quality of life, open space contribution and management of habitat for wildlife.<sup>1</sup>

Most of the land outside the urban area is used for agricultural purposes and agriculture is the planned continuing land use. Just as the General Plan has policies designed to make the planned urban land uses develop and function, the General Plan should also reflect policies on how the County will support, as well as appropriately regulate, the use of agricultural land.

The goal of this element is to protect the County's agricultural lands and maintain the productivity of these lands. This Element includes a new "Agri-tourism" component, which promotes continued economic viability of agricultural activities throughout the County.

Agriculture provides nearly all of society's food and is an important provider of open space, especially in the vicinity of metropolitan areas. Sacramento County has recognized the key importance of agricultural issues by incorporating this agricultural element into its general plan update. This element is intended to promote achievement of two general goals:

- protection/maintenance of the County's agricultural lands, their agricultural productivity and natural resource benefits they provide, and

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<sup>1</sup> Correspondence from the County Agricultural Commissioner, July 8, 2004.

- promote/support farming and related industries as a strong and viable sector of the economy of a rapidly urbanizing County.

## **Background**

The Agricultural Element was initially prepared by the Sacramento County Agricultural Element Advisory Committee (Committee) in 1993, made up of County farmers, ranchers, and agricultural officials. The Committee consisted of the following members:

John Greber  
Hog Farmer  
Elk Grove

Jay Schneider  
Rancher  
Sloughhouse

John Lewallen  
Farmer  
Walnut Grove

Peter Struffenegger  
Farmer  
Herald

John Mulrooney  
Farmer  
Galt

Case Van Steyn  
Dairy farmer  
Elk Grove

Art Perham  
Rancher  
Elk Grove

Eric Vink  
American Farmland Trust  
San Francisco

Peter Rooney  
Rancher  
Sacramento

Mark White, Kerry Steele  
U.S. Natural Resource Conservation Service  
Sacramento

## **Relationship to Other Elements**

The Agricultural Element is coordinated with several other elements of the General Plan. It interacts primarily with the policies of the Land Use, Open Space, and Conservation Elements. The Land Use Element addresses agricultural land uses including Agricultural-Residential and Agricultural-Industrial development as well as potential urban expansion into existing agricultural areas. Land acquisition for preservation, trails and greenbelts are addressed in the Open Space Element. The Conservation Element has policies and implementation measures for soil preservation, groundwater depletion and quality, surface water quality, natural preserves and mitigation areas. Other related Elements include Safety (flooding issues) and Economic Development (agri-tourism). To avoid duplication, policies contained in those elements that affect agriculture are not repeated in this element. However, appropriate cross-referencing is included in this element. It is important to note that the Agricultural Element must be read and understood in the context of the rest of the General Plan. The Plan does provide for the planned conversion of some agricultural land to urban uses. It also provides for areas of permanent open space and contains comprehensive strategies and requirements for both urban and non-urban land uses.

Agriculture lands are likely to be impacted by the expansion of renewable energy sources because of the economic incentive programs and the need to provide cleaner energy. Much of rural Sacramento County is ideal for solar farms and other renewable facilities, however those facilities must be sited and designed to minimize impacts. Policies on solar and other renewable energy facilities are found in the Public Facilities Element in the section entitled “Solar Electric and other Renewable Energy Facilities”.

### **Organization**

The remainder of this element consists of two sections, one focusing on protection of farmlands and agricultural resources, and one focusing on strengthening the County's agricultural economy.





# SACRAMENTO COUNTY GENERAL PLAN AGRICULTURAL ELEMENT

## SECTION II

### FARMLAND AND AGRICULTURAL RESOURCE PROTECTION

**GOAL:       Protect important farmlands from conversion and encroachment and conserve agricultural resources.**

#### **Introduction**

Farmland is the fundamental agricultural resource. Urban development, wildlife preserves, and outdoor recreation facilities are encroaching upon farmlands. With rare exceptions, conversions of farmland to nonfarm uses are irreversible. Farmland conversions affect agricultural productivity directly by reducing the farmland base, and indirectly by increasing production costs or reducing yields on neighboring farmlands. Farmland losses reduce the ability of the County to supply food to local and export markets. The cumulative effects of individual farmland conversions include urban growth inducement, unstable rural real estate markets, world competition for existing markets, low commodity prices, and reduced viability of the local agricultural economy.

The converse relationship is also true: lack of viable agricultural productivity tends to lead to conversions of land to other, often conflicting uses. The real or perceived lack of viability may be caused by many factors including: growth pressures, unstable or reduced real estate values, cost of water or energy, government regulation, low commodity prices, and world competition for existing markets.

Two agencies play major roles in soil conservation in Sacramento County. The Natural Resource Conservation Service (NRCS) is a federal agency with offices in almost every county in the U.S. Office staff provides information, guidance and training to local organizations and individuals interested in conservation. A part of their charge is to assist in soil conservation. In addition, they maintain a Nationwide Land Inventory and Monitoring system. The Important Farmland categories used in the inventory are Prime Farmland, Farmland of Statewide Importance, Unique Farmland, and Farmland of Local Importance.

The State of California Department of Conservation (DOC), Farmland Mapping and Monitoring Program (FMMP) provides valuable data regarding soil quality and land use. The DOC also categorizes Important Farmlands in California, using modified definitions of the NRCS's categories (see the modified definitions for California below). The most significant modification is that DOC Prime and of Statewide Importance farmlands must be irrigated. In addition, mapping of Grazing Land is unique to California. Every two years the FMMP maps the entire state using the DOC Land Categories.

**NOTE:** To avoid confusion between the use of Federal and State Important Farmland categories, the text, policies, and implementation measures contained in the General Plan Elements refer to

the State DOC Important Farmland categories rather than the Federal NRCS categories, except where specifically noted.

The California Department of Conservation utilizes a classification system that combines technical soil ratings and current land uses to determine important farmland categories throughout the State. The *Prime Farmland* category describes farmland with the best combination of physical and chemical features able to sustain long term agricultural production. This land has the soil quality, growing season, and moisture supply needed to produce sustained high yields. Land must have been used for irrigated agricultural production at some time during the four years prior to the mapping date. *Farmland of Statewide Importance* is farmland similar to Prime Farmland but with minor shortcomings, such as greater slopes or less ability to store soil moisture. Land must have been used for irrigated agricultural production at some time during the four years prior to the mapping date. *Unique Farmland* is farmland of lesser quality soils used for the production of the state's leading agricultural crops. This land is usually irrigated, but may include nonirrigated orchards or vineyards as found in some climatic zones in California. Land must have been cropped at some time during the four years prior to the mapping date.

*Farmland of Local Importance* is either currently producing crops or has the capability of production. This farmland category is determined by each County's board of supervisors and a local advisory committee. For Sacramento County, this classification refers to lands which do not qualify as Prime, Statewide, or Unique designation but are currently irrigated crops or pasture or nonirrigated crops; lands that would be Prime or Statewide designation and have been improved for irrigation but are now idle; and lands which currently support confined livestock, poultry operations, and aquaculture.

*Grazing Land* is land on which the existing vegetation, whether grown naturally or through management, is suitable for grazing or browsing of livestock. Grazing Land does not include land previously designated as Prime Farmland, Farmland of Statewide Importance, Unique Farmland, or Farmland of Local Importance, and heavily brushed, timbered, excessively steep, or rocky lands which restrict the access and movement of livestock.

Lands with intensive agricultural investments are those lands that include a large economic investment in the land and have an active operational practice. Examples under this category include orchards, vineyards, dairies, and other intensive livestock and poultry operations. These particular lands do not necessarily have to be located on Prime, Statewide Importance, Unique or Local Importance farmlands as described above.

Closely aligned with farmland protection measures are conservation of soil and water resources and protection of the capital investments essential to farming. Soil and water resource conservation policies are included in the Conservation Element of this General Plan. The economic viability of farming and other agricultural activities are included in Section III of this element.

Farmland resource protection is addressed in the General Plan by the policies and programs described below and intended to meet the following objectives.

- Protect prime, statewide importance, unique and local importance farmlands, and lands with intensive agricultural investments from urban encroachment.
- Retain agricultural land holdings in units large enough to guarantee future and continued agricultural use.
- Prime farmland, farmland of statewide importance, unique farmland and farmland of local importance, and farmlands with intensive agricultural investments protected from encroachment by natural resource preserves without compromising biologic diversity and habitat values.
- Protect farmlands from encroachments by recreational facilities and unlawful activities associated with use of recreational facilities.
- Increase in land under Williamson Act contracts and percentage of contract lands with nonrenewal notices stabilized or reduced.
- Reduce or eliminate groundwater cones of depression in farming areas by encouraging water conservation.
- Control wind erosion resulting from soil disturbance.
- No increase in the level or intensity of flooding of intensively farmed land.

Note: The policies contained in this Element are not tied to any maps contained in the Agricultural Element. The maps are only a snapshot in time and may not reflect the most current information.

### **Urban Encroachment**

**Objective: Protect prime, statewide importance, unique and local importance farmlands and lands with intensive agricultural investments (such as orchards, vineyards, dairies, and other concentrated livestock or poultry operations) from urban encroachment.**

Intent: Agriculture usually becomes less feasible when population growth and urban development encroaches onto farming areas. Urban encroachment results in increased road congestion making movement of farm equipment and crops more difficult, unauthorized and unlawful activities on farms, and increased risk of personal injury liability for farmers. Urbanization is particularly disruptive for agriculture when developments are located amid farming operations rather than contiguous with existing urban areas.

Farming next to urban areas often results in complaints regarding pesticides, dust, smoke, odors, or noise generated by accepted farming practices. Sacramento County has adopted a right-to-farm ordinance to provide legal assurance that established agricultural operations are allowed to continue, and to inform residents of areas zoned or designated for agriculture that they may be subject to inconvenience or discomfort resulting from accepted agricultural operations. This ordinance does not, however, prevent residents of farming areas from complaining about such inconvenience or discomfort.

The specific policies about separating and protecting agricultural lands and activities from urban development do not prohibit development from occurring outside of the urban area. The County

General Plan recognizes the maintenance and limited expansion of existing agricultural communities and the continued development of planned agricultural-residential (ag-res) development.

With the increasing popularity of urban farming concepts, one way to preserve farmland in urbanizing areas for these uses is to provide incentives through farmland mitigation credits. Policies contained herein allow farmland mitigation credits for those projects approved under a master plan or community plan that includes urban farming when farmland would otherwise have been lost.

For the purpose of this General Plan, the following definition shall be used.

**Urban Farm:** Urban farming generally involves income-earning or food producing activities such as planting, growing, harvesting, processing, and distributing field and vegetable crops in or around a village, town, or city to meet the daily demands of the consumers. Small scale breeding and raising of livestock could be allowed on a limited basis. In addition, incidental activities may include culinary and dietary education facilities, produce stands, and farmer's markets. Agricultural practices should include organic farming which focuses on maximum yields from a minimum area, while simultaneously improving the soil. The goal is long-term sustainability of both the soil and agricultural operations. For the purpose of this definition, urban farms are separate and distinct from community gardens. In addition, urban farm sites must be located within the Urban Policy Area.

Policies:

- AG-1. The County shall protect prime, statewide importance, unique and local importance farmlands located outside of the USB from urban encroachment.
- AG-2. The County shall not accept applications for General Plan amendments outside the Urban Services Boundary (USB) redesignating prime, statewide importance, unique and local importance farmlands or lands with intensive agricultural investments to agricultural/residential or urban use (i.e., residential, commercial, industrial) unless the applicant demonstrates that the request is consistent with the General Plan Agriculture-Residential expansion policies (please refer to Land Use Element Policies regarding Agriculture-Residential uses).
- AG-3. The County shall permit agricultural uses on buffers, provided such uses are conducted in a manner compatible with urban uses. Buffers shall be used to separate farming practices incompatible with adjacent urban uses. Any homeowners' association or similar entity within the development shall assist in determining compatible use. Buffers shall not adversely conflict with agricultural uses on adjoining property.
- AG-4. Prospective buyers of property adjacent to agricultural land shall be notified through the title report that they could be subject to inconvenience or discomfort resulting from accepted farming activities as per provisions of the County's right-to-farm ordinance.

AG-5. Projects resulting in the conversion of more than fifty (50) acres of farmland shall be mitigated within Sacramento County, except as specified in the paragraph below, based on a 1:1 ratio, for the loss of the following farmland categories through the specific planning process or individual project entitlement requests to provide in-kind or similar resource value protection (such as easements for agricultural purposes):

- prime, statewide importance, unique, local importance, and grazing farmlands located outside the USB;
- prime, statewide importance, unique, and local importance farmlands located inside the USB.

The Board of Supervisors retains the authority to override impacts to Unique, Local, and Grazing farmlands, but not with respect to Prime and Statewide farmlands.

However, if that land is also required to provide mitigation pursuant to a Sacramento County endorsed or approved Habitat Conservation Plan (HCP), then the Board of Supervisors may consider the mitigation land provided in accordance with the HCP as meeting the requirements of this section including land outside of Sacramento County.

Note: This policy is not tied to any maps contained in the Agricultural Element. Instead, the most current Important Farmland map from the Department of Conservation should be used to calculate mitigation.

AG-6. If a property owner is required to mitigate for the loss of farmland under Policy AG-5, and the approved master plan or community plan includes land permanently set aside for an urban farm, a 1:1 farmland credit will be given to projects that incorporate urban farming within the project that permanently preserves farmland. Urban farms may qualify for credit for the proposed master plan or community plan and will be considered as part of the master plan or community plan process subject to the following criteria:

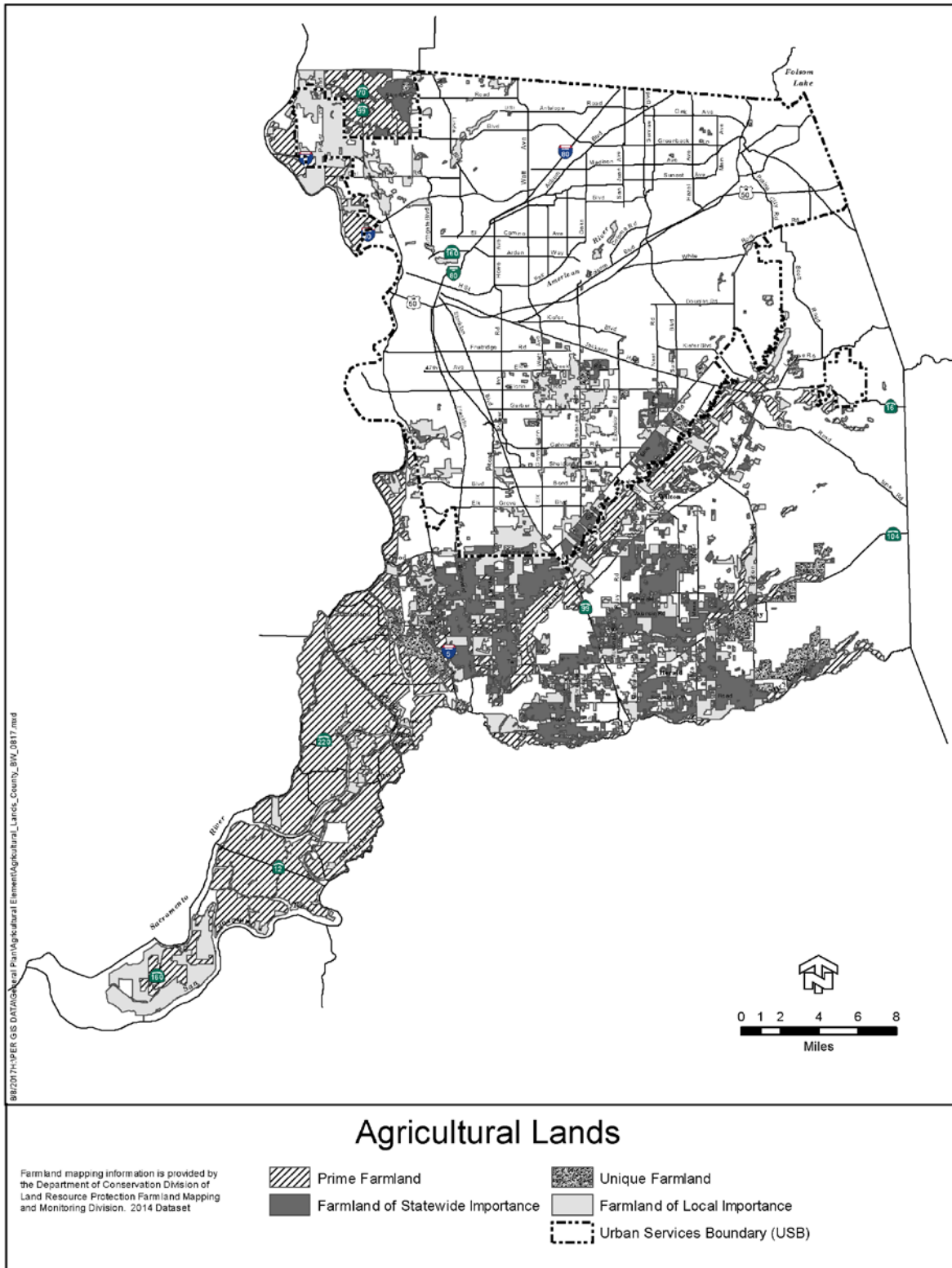
- The required minimum urban farm size to qualify for the credit shall be at least 5 acres.
- Only land that is fully available for farming shall count towards the credit. Ancillary facilities such as education buildings, farmer's markets, and parking areas shall not be included in the acreage calculation.
- Community gardens shall not count toward the credit.
- The zoning shall be a permanent agricultural zone, or similar zone, that ensures the permanency of the agricultural use.
- An appropriate source of water shall be identified and provided.
- A permanent agricultural easement shall be recorded over the site. The agricultural easement shall be dedicated to the County of Sacramento or an organization approved by the County to preserve the farmland.
- If there is a separate farm management entity, a recorded farming management agreement shall be required between the landowner and the farm manager.

Any reversion to a non-farming use on an urban farm site that received farmland credit shall trigger farmland mitigation regardless of the size. The mitigation shall be equivalent to the mitigation required at the time of the original project approval. In addition, the mitigation shall be based on the farmland category at the time of original project approval; however, in the event the farmland category has been upgraded to a higher category as shown on the latest Important Farmland Map from the Department of Conservation, that farmland category shall be used as the basis in determining equivalent mitigation.

Implementation Measures:

- A. Prepare a map of the County's prime, statewide importance, unique and local importance farmlands and lands with intensive agricultural investments, using the California Department of Conservation's definition of prime, statewide importance, unique and local importance farmlands and defining lands with intensive agricultural investments to include orchards, vineyards, dairies, and other intensive livestock and poultry operations. (AGRICULTURAL COMMISSIONER)
- B. Develop procedures for assessing the availability of feasible alternative sites for urban developments utilizing policies found elsewhere in this plan. In determining feasibility, exclude circumstance directly related to the applicant. (PLANNING & ENVIRONMENTAL REVIEW)
- C. This Implementation Measure was moved to the Air Quality Element via adoption of the Environmental Justice Element on December 17, 2019.

**FIGURE 1**



- D. Review and update as necessary the County Right-to-Farm Ordinance every five (5) years to ensure it reflects changing issues and continues to protect agricultural uses. (AGRICULTURAL COMMISSIONER)
- E. Amend the County Right-to-Farm Ordinance to implement Policy AG-4. This requirement shall also be a condition of approval to record the Right-to-Farm Ordinance for parcel and subdivision maps located in agricultural zoning. (PLANNING & ENVIRONMENTAL REVIEW, AGRICULTURAL COMMISSIONER)
- F. Erect signs on County roads adjacent to agricultural roads warning motorists that they may encounter slow-moving vehicles and to use caution. (SACDOT)
- G. Actively encourage participation by rural residents of county in crime prevention programs. (SHERIFF-RURAL CRIMES TASKFORCE)
- H. Coordinate with the Tax Collector to distribute a notice to properties near agricultural operations about the Right-to-Farm Ordinance in the annual tax bills. (AGRICULTURAL COMMISSIONER, DEPARTMENT OF FINANCE)
- I. Develop procedures for the mitigation and preservation of farmland that may include:
- The establishment of a farmland mitigation fund so that applicants can satisfy their agricultural mitigation through the option to pay a fee to the County that is then used to acquire, preserve, and maintain the required amount of agricultural land; and/or
  - An ordinance or other similar mechanism to establish mitigation credits for projects that will convert non-prime farmland to prime land as defined by the Department of Conservation; and/or
  - A process for receiving input from the County Agricultural Advisory Committee once the duties are established per Implementation Measure K.
  - Address other preservation mechanisms as directed by the Board of Supervisors. (PLANNING & ENVIRONMENTAL REVIEW)
- J. The County shall work with and assist the Agricultural Advisory Committee, if appointed, in accomplishing its duties as specified in the Sacramento County Code. (AGRICULTURAL COMMISSIONER, PLANNING & ENVIRONMENTAL REVIEW)

### **Agricultural Zoning**

**Objective: Retain agricultural land holdings in units large enough to guarantee future and continued agricultural use.**



Intent: Sacramento County's zoning consistency program requires zoning in the General Plan agricultural land use categories to be large-lot exclusive agricultural zones. The following policies provide guidance on appropriate minimum parcel sizes and the division of agricultural parcels.

Although they relate minimum parcel size to soil capability classes, it is important to emphasize that the policies do not necessarily presume that it is possible to support economically viable farming operations on 20, 40, 80 or 160 acre farming units. This may be true in certain instances involving specified crops or animal husbandry operations, but for the most part substantially larger acreage is necessary to sustain a farming enterprise. The minimum sizes established by these policies reflect a balance between the need to maintain economic farming units, provide some flexibility and options for landowners, and recognize that larger minimums would render numerous preexisting parcels nonconforming.

There is increasing interest in splitting large agricultural holdings into tracts of minimum size lots intended for buyers whose primary interests are large estates, speculation, or other non-farming priorities. To the extent that this occurs with regularity, it may undercut efforts to maintain agriculturally productive land.

Policies:

AG-7. Require agricultural land divisions to meet the following minimum parcel sizes:

<u>General Plan Land Use Category</u>	<u>Minimum Parcel Size</u>
Agricultural Cropland	
NRCS Soil Classes I and II	40 acres
NRCS Soil Classes III and IV	80 acres
General Agriculture 20	20 acres
General Agriculture 80	80 acres
Agriculture Urban Reserve	10 acres

AG-8. Agricultural zoning district boundaries shall be rational and shall respect parcel boundaries.

AG-9. Agricultural land divisions shall not adversely affect the integrity of agricultural pursuits. Agricultural land divisions may be denied if the reviewing authority finds that the division of land is likely to create circumstances inconsistent with this policy.

Implementation Measure:

A. Evaluate minimum parcel sizes necessary for sustained agricultural productivity on NRCS soil classes I through IV, and amend Policy AG-7 according to the results of that analysis. (PLANNING & ENVIRONMENTAL REVIEW, AGRICULTURAL COMMISSIONER)

**Encroachment by Natural Resource Preserves**

**Objective: Prime farmland, farmland of statewide importance, unique farmland and farmland of local importance, and farmlands with intensive agricultural investments are to be protected from encroachment by natural resource preserves without compromising biologic diversity and habitat values.**

Intent: In addition to encroachments by urban developments, County farmlands are potentially threatened by conversion to wildlife refuges, regulations curtailing agricultural practices to protect adjacent natural resource preserves, and adverse public use impacts associated with outdoor recreational facilities and trails. Disruption of one resource value for another is a historic pattern of land development in the County. For example, the existing Stone Lakes National Wildlife Refuge could convert areas of prime, statewide importance, unique and local importance farmlands and farms with intensive agricultural investments to wildlife habitat and lead to additional spraying controls on remaining nearby farmland.

However, progress has been made in balancing farmland protection in concert with habitat preservation so as to maintain the County's multiple natural resource values; which is the keystone for many of the policies proposed in this General Plan Element. Wildlife friendly farming is being fostered along the Cosumnes River Preserve through partnerships between local landowners, nonprofit organizations and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS). These farming practices include using organic pesticides, allowing crops to sit longer than typical growing seasons, planting crops that serve as valuable habitat and creating food plots solely for wildlife. This partnership is an attempt to restore a fraction of the County's multiple resource bases. Another example of this type of partnership is the federal Safe Harbor Program. This program allows farmers to enter into an agreement with the USFWS to carry out and maintain certain habitat enhancements on portions of their property for a specified amount of time. If a listed species moves onto the property during this time, the farmer is not subject to any additional restrictions under the Endangered Species Act.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Description of Safe Harbor Program from the Yolo County Agricultural Element, November 2002.  
[http://www.yolocounty.org/org/PPW/planning/general\\_plan\\_documents.htm](http://www.yolocounty.org/org/PPW/planning/general_plan_documents.htm)

Policies:

- AG-10. The County shall balance the protection of prime, statewide importance, unique and local importance farmlands and farmlands with intensive agricultural investments with the preservation of natural habitat so that the protection of farmland can also serve to protect habitat.
- AG-11. Cooperation shall be encouraged between landowners of prime, statewide importance, unique and local importance farmlands or land with intensive agricultural investments and landowners of natural resource preserves, including mitigation banks, mitigation sites, and wildlife refuges, so that both habitat preservation and standard farming practices mutually benefit.
- AG-12. The County will cooperate with landowners of agriculturally zoned properties to promote the placing of natural preserve/mitigation amenities on land, such as trees and other biota enhancing improvement, by making sure amenities are assets to both the natural preserve/mitigation areas and agriculture practices.
- AG-13. Indemnification against property losses from recreational users should be provided to agricultural property owners adjacent to mitigation banks, environmental mitigation sites, wildlife refuges, or other natural resource preserves provided loss is proven to be a direct and exclusive result of new recreational access provided by the establishment of, and occurring through, such sites, and provide law enforcement access to such sites.
- AG-14. Initiate intergovernmental agreements with State and Federal Wildlife management authorities in order to mitigate loss of prime, statewide importance, unique and local importance farmlands or land with intensive agricultural investment due to natural habitat conversion.
- AG-15. The County shall pursue opportunities to create mitigation banks, environmental mitigation sites, wildlife refuges, or other natural resource preserves wherein substantial agricultural activities that are compatible with protection of high habitat values continue, but incompatible activities and conversion for development are precluded by conservation easements.
- AG-16. Maintain private ownership by coordinating with non-profit organizations to acquire conservation easements for preserving farmlands.
- AG-17. The establishment of conservation easements combining preservation of agricultural uses, habitat values, and open space on the same property should be encouraged where feasible.

### Implementation Measures:

- A. Property loss claims resulting from recreational uses located adjacent to agricultural lands shall be processed pursuant to the California Tort Claims Act (Government Code section 900 et seq.) (RISK MANAGEMENT and COUNTY COUNSEL)
- B. Develop procedures for assessing the availability of feasible alternative sites for natural resource preserves and mitigation sites. (PLANNING & ENVIRONMENTAL REVIEW)
- C. In cooperation with private land conservancies, determine funding source for publicly acquired conservation easements geared to protecting farmland. (PLANNING & ENVIRONMENTAL REVIEW, AGRICULTURAL COMMISSIONER)
- D. Educate and encourage participation in the federal “Safe Harbor” program by local farmers. (PLANNING & ENVIRONMENTAL REVIEW, AGRICULTURAL COMMISSIONER)

### Encroachment By Recreational Facilities

**Objective: Farmlands are to be protected from encroachments by recreational facilities and unlawful activities associated with use of recreational facilities.**

Intent: Demand for recreational use of open space has increased with the County's growth in population. Unauthorized use of farmlands by recreationists or by others gaining access to farmlands through public recreation facilities, has also increased. Such trespassers sometimes disturb livestock, steal or damage property, or litter the area they use. The County is establishing new public trailways in the East and South County rural areas. Such trailways could displace agricultural activities, increase the difficulty of farming adjacent lands by dividing fields or pastures, and increase the frequency of farm trespass.

### Policies:

- AG-18. The County shall actively discourage unlawful activities on farmlands associated with use of public recreation facilities.
- AG-19. Recreational trails shall be designed in cooperation with adjacent property owners to minimize adverse impacts on farming practices.
- AG-20. Public recreation trails adjacent to permanent agriculture shall be designed to provide appropriate vehicle access for law enforcement needs.
- AG-21. The County encourages the preservation of prime, statewide importance, unique and local importance farmlands, including opposing any residential or commercial development for the Cosumnes River or Deer Creek riparian areas which are not compatible with agricultural uses.

- AG-22. If land within the Cosumnes River watershed is developed for non-agricultural purposes, the County should actively pursue easement dedication for equestrian trails and bikeways within such development as a condition of approval.
- AG-23. The County seeks to minimize agricultural/trail-user conflicts by recommending and seeking buffer zones between trails and nearby agricultural land and by locating trails away from the Cosumnes and Deer Creek riparian areas.

Implementation Measures:

- A. When selecting locations for County trailways, avoid whenever possible, alignments which bisect prime, statewide importance, unique and local importance farmlands and lands with intensive agricultural investment. (REGIONAL PARKS)
- B. Develop a signage program along trailways to promote education and stewardship of prime, statewide importance, unique and local importance farmlands. (REGIONAL PARKS)
- C. Erect fences or other physical barriers adequate to limit access along County trailways adjacent to agricultural lands, except where such barriers would disrupt agriculture. (REGIONAL PARKS)
- D. Review the adequacy and enforcement of the County's trespass ordinance with the intent of increasing the effectiveness of trespass control, especially where trespass originates on County-owned land. (SHERIFF, DISTRICT ATTORNEY)
- E. Provide flexible funding mechanisms for adequate law enforcement patrols of County trailways. (REGIONAL PARKS)
- F. Enforce regulation prohibiting access to County trailways between the hours of sunset and sunrise. (REGIONAL PARKS)

Williamson Act

**Objective: Increase land under Williamson Act contracts and percentage of contract lands with nonrenewal notices stabilized or reduced.**

Intent: The California Land Conservation Act of 1965, commonly called the Williamson Act, has long been the mainstay of Sacramento County's agricultural land preservation program. The purpose of the Williamson Act is to secure a long-term landowner commitment to maintain farmland in agricultural uses in exchange for assessment of the land based upon use rather than market value.

Thirty-eight years after the program's initiation, 171,492 acres, representing 27 percent of the County has been placed under contract.

Because of the County's growing demands for urban development, maintenance of a strong agricultural sector requires stable land use patterns in the County's important farming areas. The General Plan policy structure is largely supported by a boundary demarking the difference between urban and rural land uses, known as the Urban Services Boundary (USB). Maintenance and expansion of contracted land outside the USB strengthens the County's planning objectives of concentrating growth so as to be efficiently serviced and to preserve agricultural lands. However, Sacramento County's recent urban growth surge and landowner desires to sell their agricultural land are contributing to a decline in Williamson Act contracts since 1989.<sup>3</sup> These contracts are essential toward maintaining an assemblage of working agriculture in Sacramento County. Sacramento County's urban growth surge has also been accompanied by a dramatic speculative increase in farmland prices and a large increase in the filing of nonrenewal notices.

Since the 1993 General Plan Update, the State Legislature has provided jurisdictions with a powerful tool to help remedy overall reduction in Williamson Act contracts, and the increase in nonrenewal notices, called Farmland Security Zones (also known as the Super Williamson Act). The Super Williamson Act gives landowners the option of replacing the original Williamson Act contract with a contract that provides greater tax benefits to landowners in return for increased commitment (minimum 20-year contract) to maintain their land for agricultural uses. Lands eligible for this program include prime, statewide importance, unique and local importance farmlands. This mechanism can help to continue the preservation of agricultural lands in Sacramento County and stabilize or reduce the number of nonrenewal notices.

The County should actively encourage new Williamson Act contracts through public information programs. The County can also encourage landowners who have filed notices of nonrenewal to rescind their contracts in favor of a new contract with full tax benefits, as per California State Government Code Sections 551254-55. Additionally, establishing incentive systems to maintain Williamson Act contracts would help discourage the increasing number of non-renewal of contracts.

#### Policies:

- AG-24. The County shall actively encourage enrollments of prime, statewide importance, unique and local importance agricultural lands in its Williamson Act program.
- AG-25. Outside the Urban Service Boundary, encourage landowners to enter into Williamson Act contracts or, as appropriate, to rescind Notices of Nonrenewal. Provide support to keep property in the Williamson Act by allowing agricultural-friendly land use practices that include additional economic incentives, and support replacing existing Williamson Act contracts with amended contracts that include agricultural-friendly land use practices.
- AG-26. Support the state-formed program for Farmland Security Zones (also known as the Super Williamson Act).

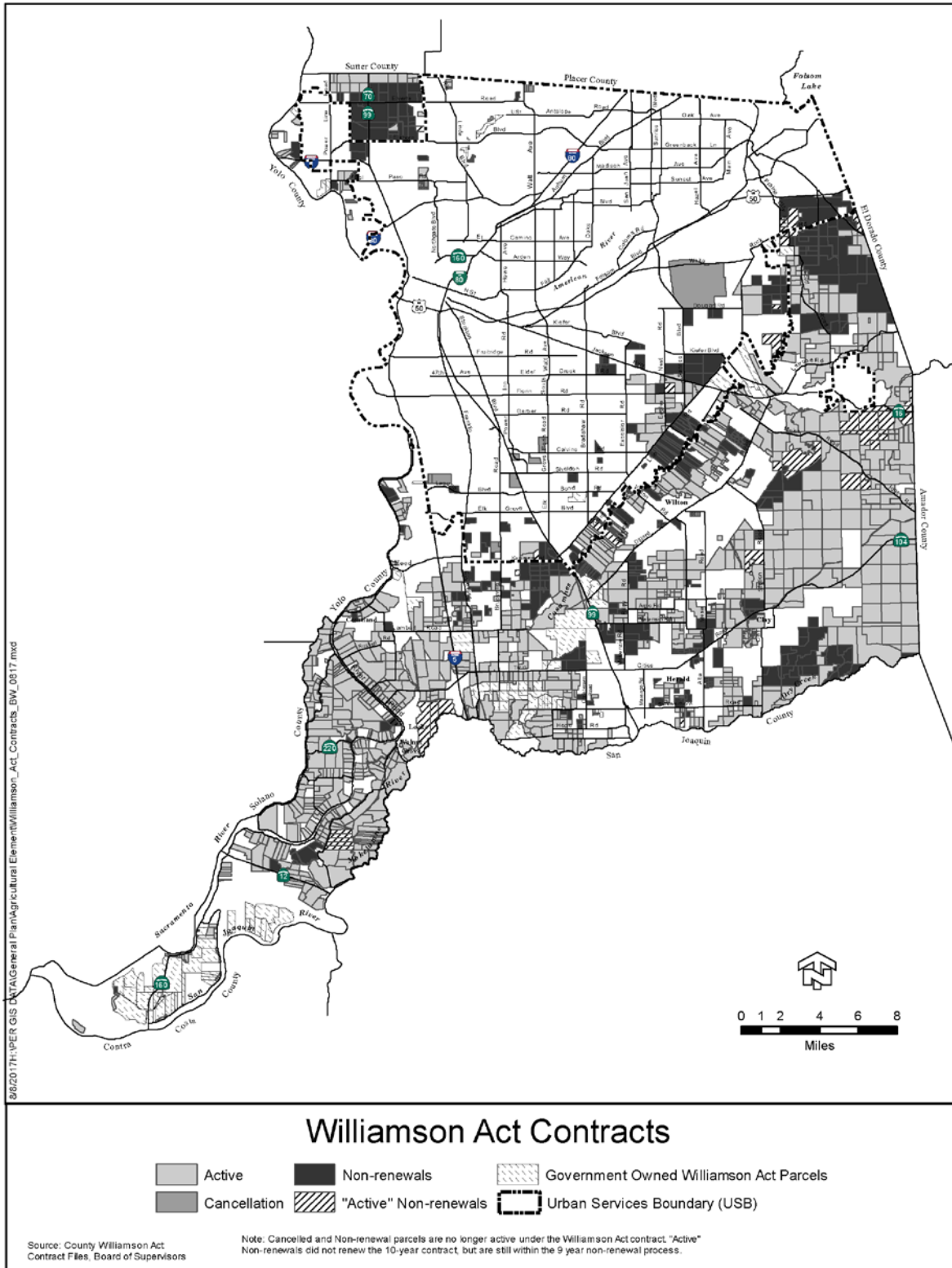
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<sup>3</sup> In 1989, approximately 253,240 acres in the County were under contract compared to approximately 171,492 acres in 2004.

Implementation Measures:

- A. Establish a Farmland Security Zones program (also known as the Super Williamson Act) for Sacramento County. Program components shall include increased tax benefits to property owners, minimum 20 year contracts, and restrictions on annexation of properties subject to contract. (PLANNING & ENVIRONMENTAL REVIEW, ASSESSOR, AGRICULTURAL COMMISSIONER)
- B. Prepare and distribute a brochure to property owners with Williamson Act contracts and property owners eligible to enter into contracts. The brochure should explain County Williamson Act policies and effects of nonrenewal. (PLANNING & ENVIRONMENTAL REVIEW, ASSESSOR, AGRICULTURAL COMMISSIONER)
- C. Make periodic presentations on Williamson Act benefits and County open space policy to farm groups, rural community councils and other appropriate forums. (PLANNING & ENVIRONMENTAL REVIEW, ASSESSOR)
- D. Continue to update and monitor agricultural preserves within the County using the County's Geographic Information System. (PLANNING & ENVIRONMENTAL REVIEW, AGRICULTURAL COMMISSIONER)
- E. Upon establishment of the County's Agri-tourism program, the current County Williamson Act Resolution shall be amended to allow agriculture-friendly uses consistent with the state program. (PLANNING & ENVIRONMENTAL REVIEW, AGRICULTURAL COMMISSIONER)
- F. Work with the Department of Conservation, Sacramento County Farm Bureau, Cattlemen's Association and other affected stakeholders to revise lists of permitted and compatible uses for the Sacramento Williamson Act Resolution and contract in order to clarify allowed open space and passive recreational uses on Williamson Act lands, consistent with the state program. (PLANNING & ENVIRONMENTAL REVIEW, AGRICULTURAL COMMISSIONER)

**FIGURE 2**





## **Groundwater Depletion, Water Quality And Water Conservation**

**Objective:     Reduce or eliminate groundwater cones of depression in farming areas by encouraging water conservation.**

Intent: Groundwater depletion has caused pumping costs to increase in some farming areas south of the American River in the South County. Increasing pumping costs have reduced the viability of farming in these areas where substantial urban development is planned. Such developments could increase demands on local aquifers unless alternative surface water supplies are made available to them.

The California Department of Public Health has established California water recycling criteria (known as Title 22) for various purposes, including agriculture. The Sacramento Regional County Sanitation District (SRCSD) is working with a variety of partners regarding the use of recycled water in the south Sacramento County agriculture area. This program would supply secondary recycled water from the Regional Treatment Plant in Elk Grove to approximately 700 to 2,000 acres of land south of Lambert Road and would be used on non-edible crops, such as alfalfa. This program serves the dual purpose of reducing groundwater usage in the area while also providing habitat for Swainsons Hawk.<sup>4</sup>

### Policy:

AG-27.     The County shall actively encourage groundwater recharge, water conservation and water recycling by both agricultural and urban water users.

### Implementation Measures:

- A.     Promote, through educational and technical assistance programs, adoption of water conservation and water recycling measures, including programs established in the Sacramento Regional County Sanitation District's Water Recycling Master Plan. (DWR, SACDOT)
- B.     In cooperation with SRCSD, the County shall explore innovative ways to encourage groundwater recharge in agricultural areas. (DWR, PLANNING & ENVIRONMENTAL REVIEW)
- C.     Develop a cooperative education and implementation program with the National Resource Conservation Service, the South Sacramento-Amador Water Quality Alliance, the Sacramento Valley Water Quality Coalition and UC Cooperative Extension to encourage filter strips and hedgerows in agricultural areas that would benefit both agricultural practices and habitat. (AGRICULTURAL COMMISSIONER)

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<sup>4</sup> Sources include: SRCSD Board staff report dated February 8, 2006, conversation with Helen Lu, DWQ, and the California Section of the WaterReuse Association ([www. watereuse.org](http://www.watereuse.org)).

## **Wind Erosion**

**Objective:    **Reduced soil erosion.****

Intent: The Delta area of the county has a high concentration of light-textured soils highly susceptible to wind erosion. Tillage and other farming operations increase the rate of wind erosion and the amount of airborne dust. The Conservation Element includes a policy recommending tillage practices to reduce soil losses. The following policy would assist farmers in reducing wind erosion and airborne dust.

Policy:

AG-28.    The County shall actively encourage conservation of soil resources.

Implementation Measure:

- A. In conjunction with the Air Quality Management District and the Natural Resource Conservation Service, develop and implement voluntary best management practices guidelines for farming operations on highly erodible soils (Please also refer to the Soil Resources section of the Conservation Element in this General Plan). (AGRICULTURAL COMMISSIONER)

## **Farmland Flooding**

**Objective:    **No increase in the level or intensity of flooding of intensively farmed land.****

Intent: Many of the County's farmlands are prone to flooding, particularly in the southern portion of the County. An extensive system of levees and pumps has been developed to reduce flood damage in these areas. Rapid urbanization in Sacramento, Placer, and El Dorado Counties, however, has increased the proportion of land covered by impervious surfaces and channelization of natural streams. Increased runoff and channelization reduce the time required for storm waters to reach sea level. As a consequence, storms result in higher peak flows and more flooding than previously. The Conservation Element includes policies to require developers to develop runoff control strategies for, and to incorporate runoff control measures into new developments. The following policy is intended to ensure that urban developments in the County do not increase flood damage in the County's farming areas.

Policy:

- AG-29.    The County shall minimize flood risks to agricultural lands resulting from new urban developments by:
- Requiring that such developments incorporate adequate runoff control structures and/or

- Assisting implementing comprehensive drainage management plans to mitigate increased risks of farmland flooding resulting from such developments.

Implementation Measure:

- A. Require as a condition for project approval that developments in newly urbanizing areas of the County either:
- Incorporate runoff control measures adequate to contain the additional runoff from a 24-hour storm event with a 100-year recurrence interval that the project site would generate after it is developed, relative to the runoff from such a storm generated by the site before development, or
  - Conform to applicable standard conditions implementing comprehensive flood management plans. (DWR)



**SACRAMENTO COUNTY GENERAL PLAN  
AGRICULTURAL ELEMENT**

**SECTION III**

**ECONOMIC VIABILITY OF AGRICULTURE**

**GOAL:**       **Enhanced viability of Sacramento County's agricultural economy.**

**Introduction**

This section provides a policy framework to strengthen Sacramento County's agricultural industries. Although County agencies have limited capability to affect the economic viability of farming directly, the County indirectly affects the socioeconomic conditions under which farmers operate through its Zoning Code, ordinances, taxation powers, and the programs of various County departments.

Economic viability of farming is addressed in the General Plan by the policies and programs discussed in this section, which are directed toward the following objectives. In addition, the Economic Development Element which also addresses agri-tourism should be referenced.

- Reduce crop and livestock productivity losses resulting from noxious weed infestations and wildfires.
- Increase flexibility and accountability for farmers to provide on-farm housing for relatives and other employees who work on the farm.
- Reduce the costs and difficulty of obtaining permits for construction of accessory farm buildings in floodway fringe areas.
- Support Agri-tourism in the County that will: (a) Protect, conserve and enhance agribusiness operations in Sacramento County for economic sustainability and viability; and (b) Promote the visibility of the farms, ranches and properties participating and working towards protecting and sustaining agriculture in Sacramento County.
- Increase the equity of assessments on agricultural lands for services that primarily benefit urban residents.

## **Pest And Fire Hazard Control**

**Objective:**    **Reduced crop and livestock productivity losses resulting from noxious weed infestations and wildfires.**

Intent: Noxious weeds infest croplands and grazing lands and reduce their productivity. Noxious weeds often disperse from roadside populations. Noxious weed control is being addressed via the County's noxious weed program.

Idled crop lands that have deteriorated from lack of management can cause problems for adjacent farmlands by providing sites for buildup and dispersal of crop pest populations. Similarly, populations of rodents and other herbivores often increase on unmanaged lands and result in increased crop depredation on adjoining farms. Unmanaged grazing lands often produce heavy accumulations of highly flammable herbaceous matter. Improved pest and fire control measures on idled lands in farm areas would increase farm productivity.

### Policies:

- AG-30.    Provide a plan focused on noxious weed control in agricultural areas.
- AG-31.    Control agricultural losses caused by pests and fires resulting from lack of management of idled farmlands.

### Implementation Measures:

- A.    In cooperation with UC Cooperative Extension, implement a noxious weed control program focusing on roadsides in agricultural areas.    (SACDOT)
- B.    In cooperation with UC Cooperative Extension, publish and distribute annually a bulletin identifying important and emerging weed pests and delineating weed problem areas in the County.    (AGRICULTURAL COMMISSIONER)
- C.    In cooperation with UC Cooperative Extension, provide farmers with technical assistance in weed control.    (AGRICULTURAL COMMISSIONER,)
- D.    In cooperation with UC Cooperative Extension, adopt and enforce an ordinance establishing pest and fire management standards for idled lands in or adjacent to Permanent Agricultural and Agricultural-Residential zones.    (AGRICULTURAL COMMISSIONER, PLANNING & ENVIRONMENTAL REVIEW)
- E.    Initiate an effort to identify and eliminate barriers to desirable urban farming opportunities and related activities, including but not limited to urban farm stands, community gardens and other healthy food access points.    (AGRICULTURAL COMMISSIONER, PLANNING & ENVIRONMENTAL REVIEW)

## **Farm Housing**

**Objective: Increased flexibility and accountability for providing on-farm housing for relatives and other employees who work on the farm.**

Intent: Many farms require on-site housing of farm employees. The County Zoning Code allows one accessory dwelling per 5 acres in Permanent Agricultural zones (i.e., AG-160, AG-80, AG-40, and AG-20), provided that such dwellings are occupied by at least one employee who receives a major portion of his or her income from such on-site employment. The Zoning Code, however, contains no provisions to facilitate verification that accessory dwellings are bona fide agricultural employee residences. A maximum density of one accessory dwelling per 5 acres could encourage developers or other landowners to establish residential settings for nonfarmers in Permanent-Agricultural zones indistinguishable from housing in Agricultural-Residential zones. Such housing is incompatible with intensive commercial agriculture. Consequently, an amendment to the Zoning Code is required to enable the County to prevent abuse of the code's agricultural accessory dwelling provision.

### Policy:

AG-32. The County shall allow construction and occupancy of agricultural accessory dwellings provided that such dwellings provide living quarters for full-time, on-site agricultural employees.

### Implementation Measures:

- A. Review projects to ensure that the following requirements are met as conditions for construction of accessory dwelling units in Permanent Agricultural zones:
- Records verifying employment of farm workers must be provided by the applicant;
  - Lot reductions and parcel splits are not permitted for the purpose of siting accessory dwelling units; and
  - Accessory dwelling units should be sited to minimize disruption of farming operations, avoid conversions of productive farmland, and take maximum advantage of existing facilities including utilities and driveways. (PLANNING & ENVIRONMENTAL REVIEW)

## **Nonresidential Accessory Farm Structures On Floodplains**

**Objective: Reduced cost and difficulty of obtaining permits for construction of accessory farm buildings in floodway fringe areas.**

Intent: Farmers who want to construct nonresidential farm structures in the non-floodway portions of floodplains are required by the County under the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA)

to prepare or have prepared initial studies to determine whether such structures could cause significant environmental effects. Initial studies prepared for such structures in Sacramento County, however, have never identified potentials for significant environmental effects. Preparing initial studies is expensive and time-consuming. This issue primarily affects farmers in the Delta, Stone Lakes, and Cosumnes River areas of the County. The following policy seeks to ease the regulatory processes governing the building of farm accessory structures.

Policy:

AG-33. Allow, with the simplest regulatory and administrative procedures possible, the construction of non-residential farm accessory buildings in the floodway fringe provided such structures do not obstruct flood flows or impair public safety.

Implementation Measure:

A. Evaluate County ordinance to implement Federal Emergency Management Agency requirements to simplify the application process for constructing non-residential farm accessory buildings in the floodway fringe. Consider and pursue the adoption of state and federal legislation, as appropriate. (PLANNING & ENVIRONMENTAL REVIEW, DWR)

**Agri-Tourism On Agricultural Lands**

**Objective: Protect, conserve, and enhance agribusiness operations in Sacramento County for economic sustainability and viability.**

**AND**

**Promote the visibility of the farms, ranches, and properties participating and working towards protecting and sustaining agriculture in Sacramento County.**

Intent: Defined as the overlap between agriculture and tourism, Agri-tourism is an activity, enterprise, or business that combines primary elements and characteristics of Sacramento County agriculture and tourism and provides an experience for visitors that stimulate economic activity and contributes to farm, ranch, and community income. Agri-tourism is a tool to assist the long-term economic sustainability, diversity and viability for some of the County's agricultural industry.

Currently, the County Zoning Code prohibits or severely restricts many Agri-tourism activities. For instance, the Zoning Code prohibits farmstand operators in agricultural zones from selling crops grown off the premises unless a conditional use permit is granted. Farmstand operators usually need to provide a large variety of fruits and vegetables throughout the year to attract and maintain customers.

In order to facilitate the wide array of tastes and resource opportunities of the agricultural community and County population, a diverse Agri-tourism enterprise must be created. An Agri-



tourism program should be established by working with a variety of quasi-government organizations, nonprofits and other organizations to develop the framework of the program.

While Agri-tourism can serve as an important economic tool for the agricultural community, these types of uses must supplement, not replace, primary agricultural production. In addition, the potential impacts from these activities (such as increased traffic, number of visitors) on neighboring property owners and their agricultural operations must be minimized.

If Agri-tourism is to be successful, farmers, ranchers, participating landowners, and the County will need to develop an outreach campaign. The purpose of public awareness will be to introduce and maintain the presence of and need for preserving the quality of the agricultural land base, protecting the diversity of soils, and promoting the products in an agriculturally friendly manner. It can also serve to educate visitors and tourists about respecting the primary agricultural use of the land, as well as landowners' right to farm and use of the road.

The policies and implementation measures that follow outline the key components and provisions for the creation of an Agri-tourism Program for Sacramento County. The program shall be developed in phases for different geographical sections of the County. This will allow for a planning process that focuses on the specific opportunities and needs of the different agricultural areas of the County. The first phase of the program will address the Delta region. The Delta has many strong opportunities for a variety of Agri-tourism uses including, but not limited to, agriculture, historical and cultural education, habitat protection and recreation. The Agri-tourism program can build on the branding effort currently underway in the Delta, which includes a proposed "Discover the Delta" information center and installation of several "Entering the California Delta" road signs at major entry points.<sup>5</sup> Any regulations and provisions established for this first phase of the program must be consistent with the Delta Protection Commission's *Land Use and Resource Management Plan for the Primary Zone of the Delta*, adopted February 23, 1995.

#### Policies:

- AG-34. The County shall support a variety of Agri-tourism uses that encourages economic sustainability while still respecting and promoting the primary agriculture use of the land.
- AG-35. The County shall support Agri-tourism for different geographical areas of the County that includes categorical definitions for intensity and type of uses that allow for flexibility in agricultural practices and market opportunities while paying particular attention to compatibility with surrounding uses.
- AG-36. The County shall coordinate with quasi-government organizations, nonprofits, and other organizations to assess and evaluate market attractions as well as inventory, provide new and expanded tourism based economic opportunities for farmers and

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<sup>5</sup> Information from the Discover the Delta organization. [www.discoverthedelta.com](http://www.discoverthedelta.com)

ranchers, discuss any public safety or liability concerns and provide staff resources for education and technical support if requested.

Implementation Measures:

- A. Develop a County Agri-tourism Program that includes, but is not limited, to the following components. This program shall be developed in phases for specific geographical areas, with the first phase being created for the Delta:
- Work with quasi-government organizations, nonprofits, and other organizations, including but not limited to, the Delta Protection Commission, Sacramento County Farm Bureau, UC Cooperative Extension and Discover the Delta to develop the framework for the Agri-tourism program. (PLANNING & ENVIRONMENTAL REVIEW, ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT, AGRICULTURAL COMMISSIONER)
  - Amend zoning code to add provisions for agri-tourism uses. These amendments shall include regulations for uses allowed by right and uses that must go through discretionary review (such as a use permit). These uses must be related to and supplement, not replace, the primary agricultural use of the property. (PLANNING & ENVIRONMENTAL REVIEW, ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT, AGRICULTURAL COMMISSIONER)
  - Explore economic incentives and options regarding land use entitlement and building permit fees as part of the program. (PLANNING & ENVIRONMENTAL REVIEW, ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT, AGRICULTURAL COMMISSIONER, COUNTY ENGINEERING)
  - Include provisions that address potential conflicts and compatibility issues with neighboring property owners and their agricultural production. (PLANNING & ENVIRONMENTAL REVIEW, ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT, AGRICULTURAL COMMISSIONER)
  - Work with the organizations identified in Implementation Measure A above to establish educational programs that promote the importance of locally-grown agricultural products. (PLANNING & ENVIRONMENTAL REVIEW, ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT, AGRICULTURAL COMMISSIONER)
- B. Review the County Right-to-Farm Ordinance to ensure the Agri-tourism program does not conflict with the provisions of the ordinance and that it continues to protect agricultural uses and landowners' right-to-farm. (PLANNING & ENVIRONMENTAL REVIEW, AGRICULTURAL COMMISSIONER)
- C. Establish a network of harvest trails utilizing existing roadways within Agri-tourism areas. Work with the organizations identified in Implementation Measure A above to determine roadway areas of unincorporated Sacramento County that will be best suited for this network

and install signage that will promote the concept. (SACDOT, PLANNING & ENVIRONMENTAL REVIEW, AGRICULTURAL COMMISSIONER)

### **Agricultural Land Assessments**

**Objective: Increased equity of assessments on agricultural land for services that primarily benefit urban residents.**

Intent: Several of the assessment districts established to serve rural areas of the County have become increasingly urbanized in recent decades. Some of the services provided by such districts benefit urban residents more than farmers or ranchers. Additionally, some districts recently established in urbanizing areas of the County primarily to serve urban residents include agricultural lands. Examples of such urban services include fire protection, park and recreation services, and neighborhood street lighting. Tax increases and assessments levied to pay for such services are often applied on the basis of a fixed per-parcel fee. Such taxes and assessments are inequitable insofar as the proportion of costs paid by farmers exceeds the proportion of benefits received by farmers. This inequity is usually greatest when per-parcel fees are levied on vacant parcels, i.e., parcels that support a farm operation but have no residences. The following policy would increase the equity of property assessments.

#### Policy:

AG-37. The County shall ensure that proposed changes in dependent special district levies are equitable, especially where such changes could unduly increase the tax burden on owners of agricultural lands.

#### Implementation Measures:

- A. Develop and adopt procedures to review and evaluate proposed changes in dependent special district levies with respect to the equity of their sharing of costs and benefits between owners of lands in Permanent-Agricultural zones and owners of lands in other zones. (AUDITOR-CONTROLLER)
- B. Require as a condition for adoption that proposed changes in dependent special district levies are equitable for owners of agricultural lands. (AUDITOR-CONTROLLER)