

Farmland Working Group

Striving to protect food, families & farmland. Since 1999.

Where did all the farmland go? Better planning is badly needed in the Valley

By Jenny Toste
The Fresno Bee - February 26, 2021

What happens in California agriculture affects every American. The Central Valley is the bread basket of the nation, and food security is becoming increasingly important. The world population is projected to grow to 10 billion by 2050, but we don't know how we are going to feed that many people. The U.S. requires 1 billion meals a day, and depending on foreign countries for our food — like China or Chile — is a scary proposition. That is why Rep. Jim Costa, the Democrat from Fresno, continues to emphasize that agriculture is a national security issue. When I was at Valley PBS, we started the show "American Grown: My Job Depends on Ag" to tell the Valley's story to the whole country. We recognized the need to help someone in Maryland understand why an issue like California water matters to them.

At the same time, we need to make sure there is still farmland left on which to grow that food. I live in the country, and watch as more and more farmland is eaten up by development. The California Department of Food and Agriculture says 40,000 acres of ag land is permanently lost each year to housing and urban sprawl. I also see the desperate need for more housing and the temptation for farmers to sell for high development prices as crop values drop. All this makes me think, "Who's master planning the state? Is it really left up to each county individually? Could we actually look up in 30 years and wonder where all our farmland — and food — went?" Yes. As the state's population explodes, the CDFA

cautions, "The rate of farmland conversion is expected to increase tremendously." We could lose 2.5 million acres of ag land over the next 20 years, including a full 5% of valuable cropland.

American Farmland Trust says the majority of Valley land developed in the last 30 years was "prime" farmland. Its 2009 report on California agricultural land loss and conservation points to rapid population growth and inefficient use of land as the causes. The CFDA concludes that we need regional planning to define urban boundaries and preserve prime farmland. That's something the former planning director for the city of Fresno has been preaching for nearly 50 years — but it hasn't happened. Nick Yovino designed the general plan under Mayor Alan Autry in 2000 to limit sprawl and encourage infill development on already-vacant lots. Instead, developers went to nearby towns like Clovis, Madera, and Sanger to more easily convert large plots of farmland into houses. Now, these cities are all haphazardly merging together.

"Fresno can't have a good infill program if neighboring cities are

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Our Mission: To preserve the agricultural foundation of our region and promote smart growth in our urban communities through education, outreach and action.

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URBAN LIMIT LINES

Protecting Farmland, Growing Cities

Lines on the Land: The Urban Limit Line in Contra Costa County

One of the most important and powerful tools communities have for managing growth stopping sprawl development is the Urban Limit Line, or ULL (also known as an Urban Growth Boundary in some parts of the region). A ULL is the legally-protected line in the sand beyond which sprawl development is stopped in its tracks. Inside the ULL, urban services can be connected and all sorts of residential and commercial zoning is allowed, but just beyond it, development is severely restricted. This land beyond the ULL helps form the Bay Area's greenbelt.

In Contra Costa County, priceless ecological gifts like the County's acres of prime agricultural land and the critical wildlife habitat on the slopes of Mt. Diablo have inspired County residents to fight for its protection.

In 1990, voters approved Measure C-1990, which created a guarantee that at least 65% of land in the County would be preserved for agriculture, open space, wetlands, parks and other non-urban uses, and that no more than 35% of land would be used for urban development. In order to implement this "65/35" standard, the County established a ULL, which clearly defined where urban development was welcome, and where it was not.

Voters gave some extra teeth to the ULL in 2004 by voting for Measure J. In order to receive money from a transportation tax in the County, each city either had to adopt the County's ULL or obtain voter-approval for their own ULL. The incentive worked, and all cities approved a ULL—only Pittsburg, Antioch, and San Ramon approved a ULL different from the County's. Voter-approval is clutch and not all ULLs in the Bay Area require it—but a voter-approved ULL is a much safer protection than a city council-controlled one.

Contra Costa once again doubled down on the ULL in 2006 by voting for Measure L, extending the 65/35 designation and the Urban Limit Line until 2026. In 2016, the County did an extensive study to determine whether it could meet its housing and jobs needs within that boundary through 2036. The conclusion was a resounding yes...

By HAYLEYCURRIER99

<https://allianceforabetterbrentwood.org/2019/02/08/urban-limit-lines-in-contra-costa-county>

Urban Growth Boundaries in the Bay Area

Alameda County: Alameda County, Dublin, Fremont, Hayward, Livermore, Pleasanton

Contra Costa County: Antioch, Contra Costa County, Danville, El Cerrito, Hercules, Martinez, Oakley, Orinda, Pinole, Pittsburg, Pleasant Hill, Richmond, San Pablo, San Ramon, Walnut Creek

Marin County: Marin County, Novato

Napa County: American Canyon, Napa, St. Helena, Yountville

San Mateo County: San Mateo County

Santa Clara County: Cupertino, Gilroy, Los Gatos, Milpitas, Morgan Hill, Palo Alto, San Jose

Solano County: Benicia, Fairfield, Rio Vista, Vallejo, Vacaville

Sonoma County: Cloverdale, Cotati, Healdsburg, Petaluma, Rohnert Park, Santa Rosa, Sebastopol, Sonoma, Windsor

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growing outward," Yovino says. "You cannot plan by yourself in a vacuum because what you do affects others, and what they do affects you." Effectively, though, cities and counties are planning in a vacuum. They are not required to communicate while developing their general plans. Yovino points out that while the state mandates seven elements in general plans — including noise — there's no requirement for regional planning. He says we need that common framework. For example, there are 15 cities in Fresno County, yet each city individually negotiates its sphere of influence lines with the county, rather than all coming to the table and developing a comprehensive growth plan together.

"Nobody wants sprawl, but nobody wants higher density housing in their neighborhood," Yovino explains. "Everybody says they want to cooperate, yet no one will give up local control to make it happen." Yovino's solution is for the state to require regional planning in general plans. The Office of Planning and Research can designate the regions and incentivize local cooperation. The benefits are better-designed cities that require less driving, resulting in better air quality, more affordable housing, more cost-effective public services — and the preservation of farmland. "We need to get ahead of this issue. We should have gotten ahead of it a long time ago."

SOAR is a series of voter initiatives that require a vote of the people before agricultural land or open space areas can be rezoned for development.

Sitting on Los Angeles County's northwestern boundary, Ventura County is subject to tremendous development pressure. Ventura County's rolling hillsides, rugged mountains, beautiful beaches and fertile plains and valleys present a spectacular setting that creates conflicting incentives to preserve and develop this landscape.

With a population of approximately 850,000 and over 100,000 acres of agricultural land in production, the county offers a highly attractive semi-rural respite from the urban sprawl of Los Angeles County, where strip malls and subdivisions of one community merge indistinguishably with the next.

The first SOAR initiative was approved by the voters in the City of Ventura in 1995. Since then, seven others have been enacted around cities in Ventura County, as well as in the County's unincorporated areas.

All of the SOAR initiatives were renewed by voters in November 2016, extending their expiration date to 2050. No other county in the United States has more effective regulations against urban sprawl.

The County's SOAR initiative requires a majority vote of the people in order to rezone unincorporated open space, agricultural or rural land for development. The eight voter-approved SOAR initiatives passed by the cities of Camarillo, Fillmore, Moorpark, Oxnard, Santa Paula, Simi Valley, Thousand Oaks and Ventura require voter approval for urban development beyond a City Urban Restriction Boundary (CURB), or, in the case of the City of Ventura, before rezoning agricultural land within the city's sphere of influence.

In 2016, voters overwhelmingly elected to extend the SOAR initiatives until 2050. We need to monitor and respond to new threats such as weakening of land use policy protections, developer-led ballot initiatives, and attempts to constrain or co-opt grassroots democratic processes to benefit over-development.

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SOAR COMMUNITIES

Ventura County	Oxnard
Camarillo	Port Hueneme
Fillmore	Santa Paula
Lake Sherwood	Santa Rosa Valley
Malibu/Yerba Buena	Santa Susana Knolls
Moorpark	Simi Valley
Oak Park	Thousand Oaks
Ojai	Ventura

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WE ARE WATCHING...

The Case for Urban Limit Lines (ULLs)

Urban Limit Lines (ULLs), also referred to as Urban Growth Boundaries (UGBs), is not new. In fact, one can find historical examples of ULLs dating back to 19th century England. They typically have been voted in by residents who lack confidence in their local government's ability to make sound decisions to supply adequate services or protect local resources such as open space or prime agricultural land. They have been widely used and have a successful track record in California. By establishing ULLs, residents can be assured urban development will occur within predefined areas in a predictable manner.

Quality of life concerns are often cited as the justification for ULLs, such as traffic congestion, noise, or crime. Another critical benefit of ULLs is the assurance of good governance. Once a ULL is established, residents can be confident that

schools will not be over impacted, city finances will not be over extended due to poor planning and that there will be greater transparency over plans for future growth. ULLs are not a means to stop urban development but a tool to manage it in an effective manner.

One bad decision by your city council or county board of supervisors can have an adverse impact on the quality of your local schools, the reliability of your drinking water, the quality of your roads, your safety, and the value of your home. There is growing dissatisfaction with all levels of government. Many Americans don't feel represented by their elected officials. ULLs can be a very effective tool for residents to place limits on elected officials to ensure that supplying services like police, fire, water and sewer in a cost-effective, accountable manner is the priority and not just growth for its own sake.



Farmland Working Group

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The California Department of Food and Agriculture (CDFA) concludes that we need regional planning to define urban boundaries and preserve prime farmland.

Worth Repeating **Our Promise for 2020**

To work with community groups,
regional organizations, local citizens
and elected officials
to establish Urban Boundaries
that protect, for the long term,
Stanislaus County's most valuable resource
F a r m l a n d
while growing healthy, compact communities