

# Farmland Working Group

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

## Guiding Modesto's future away from farmland



ANDY ALFARO aalfaro@modbee.com

### SPECIAL TO THE MODESTO BEE

By Matt Beekman, Jeani Ferrari, Lori Wolf  
- The Modesto Bee - Jan. 10, 2023

Modesto is one of three cities in Stanislaus County (also Turlock and Riverbank) updating their general plans. Modesto's last update was 1995. The city of Modesto defines a general plan on its website as "a set of policies, maps, and other exhibits that will guide the physical development of the overall Modesto community to 2050."

At their worst, general plan updates can be technocratic processes that lack transparency and are co-opted by developers, limiting input from residents and often resulting in general plans that don't address deficiencies or reinforce strengths of a community, which can have an adverse impact on local municipal finances.

At their best, updates are an inclusive, broadly scoped process that provides residents and the business community the opportunity to reimagine their community with a long-term timeline resulting in a positive impact on municipal finances.

Regardless of how well-organized and -executed general plans are, they have a direct impact on the fiscal

health, safety and overall quality of life of a city for decades and warrant a high degree of public involvement and scrutiny.

The first phase of Modesto's public outreach is winding down. In the spring, city staff anticipates completing a set of land use alternatives that will be presented to the public based on public input and ongoing staff research. Thus far, the city should be commended for its extensive public outreach and willingness to reexamine old land use patterns that have paved over thousands of acres of prime farmland and put Modesto in a financial position necessitating tax increases and cuts to vital services.

Farmland Working Group is encouraged to see the explicit mention of prioritizing infill development and redevelopment, preserving agricultural lands that surround Modesto, and taking a targeted approach

to any expansion that would largely center around industrial-zoned land needed by existing business. FWG concurs with the conclusion presented in the New Future(s): Opportunities for Economic Development whitepaper on the Modesto 2050 website in terms of what a fiscally responsible, implementable general plan update would resemble:

"It suggests a land use map that generally maximizes the infill potential of land within the city. Given the city's relatively low supply of industrial land, these approaches would support opening some targeted areas for industrial development, along with associated transportation improvements, but they would be at a relatively small scale, tailored to the types of industries best suited to Modesto, and much smaller than needed for the large, land-intense warehouse development happening elsewhere in the region."

"The land use map would also need to support the features that make Modesto such a great place to live — plenty of open space, a vibrant and dense downtown that supports a healthy mix of uses, affordable and available housing, and the ability to easily get around and reach those destinations using a variety of modes."

There are many benefits to promoting infill that can

# Modesto 2050 General Plan Update

City of Modesto  
Planning Division  
Attn: Diana Lowrance

The Farmland Working Group (FWG) appreciates the opportunity to provide written comment on the Modesto 2050 visioning process which will culminate in the adoption of a comprehensive update to the Urban Area General Plan and its Master Environmental Impact Report. The FWG recognizes that the City of Modesto is in the first year of a multi-year process. The FWG will continue to engage throughout this process and welcomes all notifications related to this matter per the contact information on this letter as well as future opportunities for involvement and input.

The FWG would like to commend City staff's public outreach efforts related to the visioning process. The extensive background information contained on the Modesto 2050 website and the willingness to meet with FWG board members and many other community groups, and individuals demonstrates a strong commitment to informing the public.

The FWG is encouraged to see the explicit mention of prioritizing infill development and redevelopment, preserving agricultural lands that surround the City, and taking a targeted approach to any expansion that would largely center around industrial zoned land needed by existing business in Modesto. The FWG concurs with the conclusion presented in the Whitepaper New Future(s): Opportunities for Economic Development on the Modesto 2050 website in terms of what a fiscally responsible, implementable general plan update would resemble:

"...it suggests a land use map that generally maximizes the infill potential of land within the city. Given the city's relatively low supply of industrial land, these approaches would support opening up some targeted areas for industrial development, along with associated transportation improvements, but they would be at a relatively small scale, tailored to the types of industries best suited to Modesto, and much smaller than needed for the large, land-intense warehouse development happening elsewhere in the region. The land use map would also need to support the features that make Modesto such a great place to live – plenty of open space, a vibrant and dense Downtown that supports a healthy mix of uses, affordable and available housing, and the ability to easily get around and reach those destinations using a variety of modes."

There are many benefits to promoting infill that can strengthen Modesto's fiscal health, provide more affordable housing, and increase the vibrancy of its downtown while not having a deleterious impact on our

region's agricultural economy. As Modesto continues with its' comprehensive update, the FWG would encourage Modesto's staff and elected officials in future public outreach to provide more information regarding the fiscal consequences and land use decisions, communicate the enormous agricultural resources in Stanislaus County and greater Central Valley and reference our County LAFCO adopted Farmland Preservation Policy. Doing so will reinforce the conclusions made thus far regarding the direction of Modesto's general plan update but also educate residents about the unique conditions of our region and the innovative public policies that have been adopted.

Sincerely,  
Farmland Working Group  
Advocacy Committee  
Jeani Ferrari, Lori Wolf, Matt Beekman

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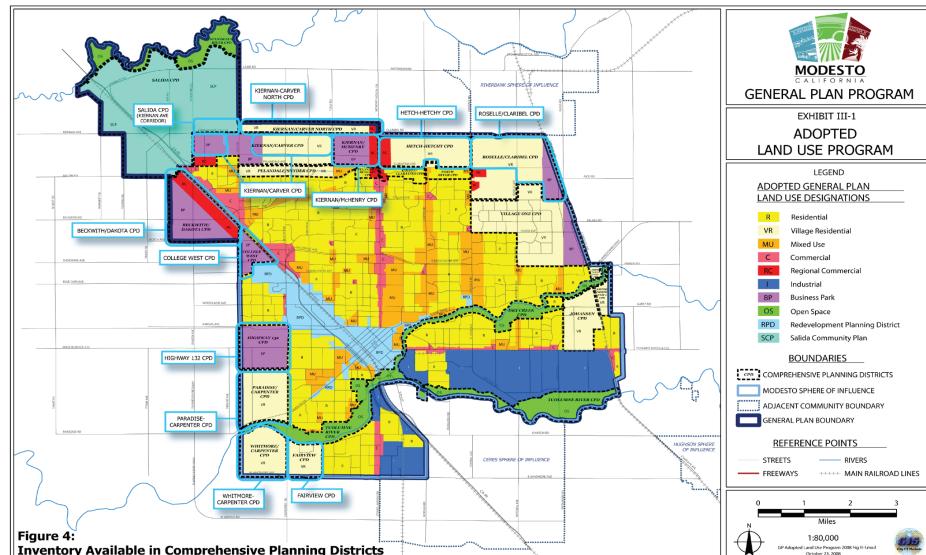


Figure 4:  
Inventory Available in Comprehensive Planning Districts

# *Can the Central Valley learn from the experience of Los Angeles and Southern California?*

## **1925 - 1955 CROP ACREAGE TRENDS FOR LOS ANGLES COUNTY AND SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA**

The Los Angeles area is undergoing a major transition. The change is from rural to urban, from country to city, from agriculture to industry, from "barn to skyscraper"

The southern portion of the State is likewise outstanding in the magnitude, diversity, and value of its farm enterprises. Southland agriculture also provides an important source of new wealth, of employment, of food supply, and of industrial raw materials.

The unprecedented growth of population in the Los Angeles area has been much discussed and need not be elaborated upon here. This growth, however, has been a major factor, if not the major factor, in acceleration of the shift from agriculture to industry.

This great influx of people has inevitably brought about major changes in land use, in food requirements, in marketing procedures, and in numerous other matters.

Los Angeles has been unique among the larger cities of the nation in having a major portion of its food supply originate near the city. This has been particularly true of fruits and vegetables. These local sources have not only assured residents of a generous food supply, but also one of relatively low cost, of freshness, and of good quality. Although not widely recognized, this factor as it relates to living costs has been important to many eastern firms considering a branch or a move to Los Angeles.

In connection with adequacy of food supply, an interesting paradox occurs in a farm-city transition area such as this. Demand for food is obviously increased by the growing population, yet ability of the area to produce food is decreased as the demand is increased.

Conversion of agricultural land to urban uses will not stop in Southern California unless the increase in population stops or is appreciably reduced. Renewed interest in the use of zoning for protection of agricultural lands may result in some protection against premature subdivision. A number of problems must be solved to make such zoning an effective and equitable tool, but efforts along this line may result in a way of preserving temporarily or even more permanently some of the richest lands available to farmers anywhere in the world. Areas where urbanization is only beginning may wish to give agricultural zoning careful consideration for more orderly and logical development.

Unless population growth slows, unless new lands are brought under irrigation, and unless yields can be further increased to offset farm acreage losses to urban uses, then metropolitan Los Angeles must expect to look farther afield for its food supplies and raw materials, and must expect to pay somewhat higher prices for these supplies and materials.

“ The unprecedented growth of population in the Los Angeles area has been much discussed and need not be elaborated upon here. This growth, however, has been a major factor, if not the major factor, in acceleration of the shift from agriculture to industry. ”

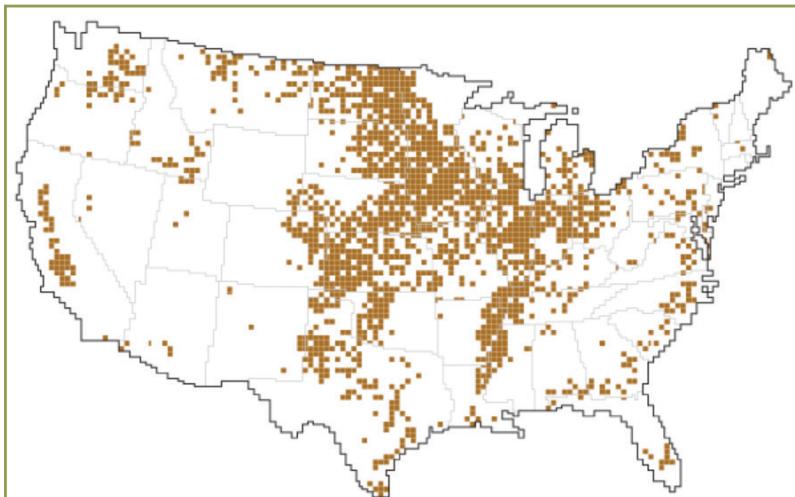
# STANISLAUS COUNTY AGRICULTURAL PRESERVATION POLICY

**Agriculture is a vital and essential part of the Stanislaus County economy and environment. Accordingly, boundary changes for urban development should only be proposed, evaluated, and approved in a manner which, to the fullest extent feasible, is consistent with the continuing growth and vitality of agriculture within the County.**

LAFCO's mission is to discourage urban sprawl, preserve open space and prime agricultural lands, promote the efficient provision of government services and encourage the orderly formation of local agencies. Additionally, Government Code Section 56668(e) requires LAFCO to consider "the effect of the proposal on maintaining the physical and economic integrity of agricultural lands."

Consistent with the legislative intent of LAFCO, the goals of this policy are as follows:

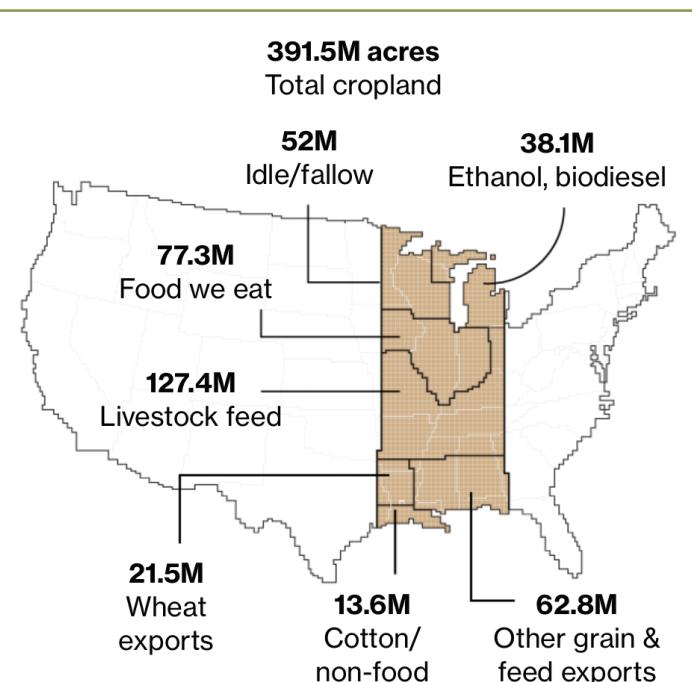
- Guide development away from agricultural lands where possible and encourage efficient development of existing vacant lands and infill properties within an agency's boundaries prior to conversion of additional agricultural lands.
- Fully consider the impacts a proposal will have on existing agricultural lands.



**Agricultural land takes up about a fifth of the country.**

- Minimize the conversion of agricultural land to other uses.
- Promote preservation of agricultural lands for continued agricultural uses while balancing the need for planned, orderly development and the efficient provision of services.

The Commission encourages local agencies to identify the loss of agricultural land as early in their processes as possible, and to work with applicants to initiate and execute plans to minimize that loss, as soon as feasible. Agencies may also adopt their own agricultural preservation policies, consistent with this Policy, in order to better meet their own local circumstances and processes.



Yet the actual land area used to grow the food Americans eat is much smaller—only about the size of Indiana, Illinois and half of Iowa combined. More than a third of the entire corn crop is devoted to ethanol production. Most cropland is used for livestock feed, exports or is left idle to let the land recover.



## ***Message from the Chair***

**Lori Wolf**

I am married to a farmer. When I met him, oh so many years ago, I had no idea what our life would be like because I was a city girl. Well, it's been interesting. His paycheck basically shows up once a year. He raises a crop but sells a commodity (which means we don't get to set the price). Our livelihood is dependent on abundant sunshine, adequate rainfall and snowmelt, hopefully no frost but definitely chilling temperatures, etc. Farmers complain, yet they wouldn't do things any differently. My farmer never had to work 'off farm' like some of our neighbors, however, for small family farmers that can be a reality of keeping it together financially. Farmers feed all of us and the land that nurtures us all is in grave danger, especially here in the Central Valley. Here are some interesting facts —

The Central Valley's fertile soil and extended growing season make it THE major food producing region in the United States.

- The Central Valley is the world's largest patch of Class 1 soil, the best there is. Using less than 1% of U.S. farmland, California's Central Valley is a food-producing powerhouse with over 13,500 farming enterprises producing 350 commodities annually, including 60% of the nation's fruits and nuts and 30% of its vegetables.
- California's Central Valley is the country's biggest exporter of many agricultural commodities, supplying more than 99 percent of almonds, artichokes, dates, dried plums, figs, garlic, kiwifruit, olives and olive oil, pistachios, raisins, table grapes and walnuts. The foods the Central Valley produces and exports are vital to not only maintain trade, but the economy.



Letter to the editor  
The Modesto Bee - Jan. 8, 2023

### **SO MUCH WASTED RAIN**

Over eight years ago, the Water Quality Supply and Infrastructure Improvement Act was passed by Californians by a 67% to 32% margin. This proposition authorized \$7.12 billion to go toward state water supply infrastructure projects. Since its passage, there has been little to no movement on any water storage projects.

In the San Joaquin Valley, we understand the importance of updated water infrastructure and specifically water storage — pleading with Sacramento to deliver on projects that increase our ability to capture and keep water in wet years to better provide for our thirsty communities in the dry years. Our calls have gone ignored.

Many of us witnessed the closure of Highway 99 due to flooding — this caused thousands to change or cancel travel plans, and some were left stranded in water. Vast amounts of this rain has flowed out into the Pacific. This is water that could be used to provide thirsty Valley communities and give our farmers the opportunity to grow more crops.

As we head into another large storm this week, we will see more evidence of our failing water infrastructure. I hope this will move Sacramento to finally make water infrastructure a priority.

Nick Dokoozlian, Modesto

*Continued from page 1*

strengthen Modesto's fiscal health, provide more affordable housing and increase the vibrancy of its downtown while not having a deleterious impact on our region's agricultural economy.

As Modesto continues with its comprehensive update, the Farmland Working Group would encourage city staff and elected officials to provide more information regarding the damaging fiscal consequences of low-density residential development outside current city limits, communicate the enormous agricultural resources in Stanislaus

County and the greater Central Valley, and reference our LAFCO-adopted farmland preservation policy.

Doing so will reinforce the conclusions made thus far regarding the direction of Modesto's general plan update and also educate residents about the unique conditions of our region and the innovative public policies that have been adopted.

Matt Beekman, Jeani Ferrari and Lori Wolf are members of Turlock-based Farmland Working Group's advocacy committee.

### **FWG Executive Board**

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*Thank You*

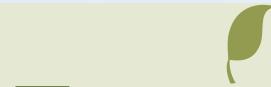
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# Farmland Working Group

P. O. Box 948 Turlock, CA 95381



[www.farmlandworkinggroup.org](http://www.farmlandworkinggroup.org)



Become a member or renew your membership  
Please Support Our Important Work!

Just **17% of American land is ideal for farming**. We don't have that much to lose... **62% of development** between 1992 and 2012 took place on agricultural land. The other 38% was primarily forest and simply unused space.

Some types of farmland are more at risk of being swallowed by development than others. **91% of the acreage devoted to fruit trees, tree nuts, and berries are directly in the path of development** as they're located in counties that qualify as either metropolitan areas or immediately adjacent to them.

