



Farmland Working Group

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

Modesto – It's Time for Urban Limit Lines

Lines on the Land... Worth repeating

by Eric Caine

February 15, 2014

When Vance Kennedy called the soil north and west of Modesto "a national treasure," he was speaking from the perspective of an award-winning scientist who has studied soil and water all his life. Kennedy is also a small-scale farmer—he farms eight acres of citrus on the famous "sandy loam" soil north of Modesto.

If only five percent of the land in the entire state is capable of sustainable long-term food production, we should be taking better care of it.

Realtors and developers like to cite figures that show farm acreage is increasing, and they're right if all you consider is irrigated dirt. On the east side of Stanislaus County alone, tens of thousands of acres have been planted in almonds just in the last few years. However, no one who really knows farmland expects those orchards to produce for even one full twenty-five year cycle — they're dependent on a rapidly vanishing aquifer and most are planted just above a subsurface of fractured rock.

Good soil—the kind farmers call "prime farmland" — is rare. Of California's 100 million total acres, only about 5,274,000 are considered prime farmland. According to David Carle, that's land, "with sustainable high yields and long-term agricultural productivity."

Unfortunately, sustainability isn't mentioned much when we talk about land, water, and the growth of cities, but it should be.

If only five percent of the land in the entire state is capable of sustainable long-term food production, we should be taking a lot better care of it. But according to a study by California State University, Stanislaus, we're not only not taking care of it, we're paving it over.

In the five short years between 1997 and 2002, California lost 8,282 farms and over a million acres of farmland. From 1998 through 2000, the San Joaquin Valley led the entire state in conversion of irrigated farmland to urban use. The total acreage lost included 5,610 acres of prime farmland.

Even worse, from 1992 to 1997, we lost 85,200 acres of prime farmland statewide, much of it right here in the San Joaquin Valley. In fact, conversion of prime farmland is occurring thirty percent faster than conversion of non-prime farmland.

Urban Limit Lines in the Bay Area Contra Costa County approved ULLs in 1990

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

A Letter from Wood Colony Association



Recently, Wood Colony was again included in an expansion scheme by the City of Modesto under a guise of developing an Urban Limit Line. This project was

a manipulation of an original Urban Limit Line proposal authored by Denny Jackman in 2015 and placed on the Modesto City election ballot as Measure I. The measure was narrowly defeated, so it was back to the drawing board. In 2018, Denny sent an email to the Modesto City Council asking the members to consider placing a measure, similar to Measure I, on the 2020 ballot. Over six months later, Mayor Brandvold asked Mr. Jackman if he would consider discussing the measure.

This new ULL discussion was launched in the fall of 2019 between Mr. Jackman, Mayor Ted Brandvold, and Mr. George Petrulakis, a local land use attorney. Eventually, a re-written ULL measure was placed as an agenda item, to be voted on by the Modesto City Council. Because of the ramifications and nuances in this proposal, the City quickly scheduled three community workshops to answer questions. All of this occurred "virtually" because of the COVID 19 restrictions regarding gatherings. This severely restricted public input.

Wood Colony Association strongly objected to the new parameters referenced in this ULL because it protruded significantly into Wood Colony and the incorporated area surrounding the Wood Colony Cemetery. There was also language in this proposal that would have pre-satisfied Measures A and M. These are citizen advisory votes for sewer extensions in Modesto prior to a vote for annexation. Documentation provided by the City for the ULL discussion also recognized that the City has enough developable land within its current Sphere of Influence to go forward for the next twenty years without any real need for more land. At the last minute, the ULL measure vote was removed from the agenda.

So where does that leave us? It leaves us in the same quandary, as always, why aren't we using the thousands of acres in the current General Plan? Why aren't we protecting the prime farmland and important water recharge areas that surround Modesto? Part of this ULL proposal did what it needed to do and left an open-ended boundary to the lesser soils east of Modesto.

The Wood Colony Association is sincerely hoping that in the ensuing two years it will have the opportunity to educate the citizens in our County about the importance of protecting what is left of our prime farmland. This is the Twenty-First Century and if we are to provide food, grown locally, under the most stringent quality controls in the nation, we HAVE TO step up to the plate and demand that our local officials make protecting prime farmland their priority.

Submitted by Lori Wolf and David Jones
Wood Colony Association

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In the San Joaquin Valley, the conversion is producing cities like Stockton, which is bankrupt, and Modesto, which can't afford enough police officers to provide public safety. It's producing a region known as the "National Capitol of Meth," and the "Appalachia of the West."

Even though sprawl has long been determined to be cost inefficient, most San Joaquin Valley cities still seem intent on spreading outward instead of upward. A classic case is the "Gateway Village" project in Madera County. The 2,000 acre development will replace vineyards and citrus orchards and will get water from a convoluted arrangement that involves billionaire "farmer" Stewart Resnick.

Here in Stanislaus County, farmers and city dwellers alike are fighting a proposal to include Wood Colony, which features some of our best farmland, in Modesto's general plan. The rational solution to rampant consumption of

prime farmland is urban boundaries, but even supporters of farmland preservation go mum when the subject comes up.

Yolo, Sonoma, and Ventura Counties have had urban boundaries long enough to assess the effects, and all three have found that boundaries do indeed promote farmland preservation. In Sonoma County, a bitter debate of twenty years ago has turned into widespread acceptance of urban limits.

Here in Stanislaus County, despite vocal and even vehement support for farmland preservation, political leaders shy away from limits and boundaries, maybe because they're too beholden to the local Chamber of Commerce to dare propose a rational solution to our ongoing loss of prime farmland.

Berryhill — Committed to Farmland Conservation



by Tom Berryhill
The Modesto Bee – March 18, 2007

California was blessed with fertile and scenic land. Over the course of many generations, hardworking farmers and ranchers cultivated California's vast acreage, eventually making the state the world's fifth-largest supplier of food and agricultural products. This is a legacy to be proud of and one we should strive to maintain.

Unfortunately, as California ag land becomes more scarce and thus more expensive, there is an incredibly powerful incentive for individual farmers to sell their land rather than continue using it for agriculture or open space. Over the past 20 years or so, more than 1 million acres of agricultural land have been lost -- an area larger than Sonoma County.

Make no mistake, technological progress and innovative practices have made the agriculture industry increasingly efficient, allowing agribusinesses to produce more with less. However, the direction we are heading in terms of land use warrants concern.

Sixty years ago, Los Angeles County was the top agricultural producer in the nation. You read that right. A county that is now one of the largest urban areas in the world was an agricultural promised land not long ago.

With that in mind, it is important to note the rate of loss of agricultural land in California over the last few years. From 1996 through 2000, the state lost 218,000 acres of agricultural land. In the subsequent four years, that number grew to 345,000 acres.

The scarcity of ag land will only get worse. California's population is expected to grow by at least 7 million to 11 million people by 2025, with much of that growth in the Central Valley. If we are not careful, the San Joaquin Valley could end up going down the same path as Los Angeles County.

There are many opportunities more lucrative than farming and ranching, especially now. In our increasingly globalized economy, American agri-business faces stiff competition from other countries where there is much less regulation and cheaper labor. With the average age of California's farmers at 62 years, it is clear that many of their

children are looking toward more profitable endeavors.

One of my goals during my time in the California Assembly is to enhance the incentives for farmers and ranchers to continue with their profession and for their children to enter the profession as well. Last year, as a director for the California Association of Wine grape Growers, I worked with a large coalition of supporters to get Congress to approve a federal tax credit for those who dedicate their land to conservation purposes.

This legislation allowed farmers who restricted future development of their land to deduct 100 percent of their income from their taxes (up from 30 percent), and non-farmers to deduct 50 percent of their income (also up from 30 percent). It also extended the carryover period for these deductions from five to 15 years.

This year in the Assembly, I will be a joint author of a bill, with Assemblywoman Noreen Evans from Santa Rosa, that would make these same changes to the state's tax laws. Stronger incentives like this are absolutely necessary to maintain a reasonable balance of land use in California.

There is much concern today about the country's dependence on foreign oil. Imagine the consequences of being dependent on foreign food if we do not preserve our agricultural resources.

I want my kids and their kids to benefit from and enjoy agricultural land and open space as I was able to. This is not possible unless we make it more financially feasible for landowners to keep their agricultural land and open space as it is. Tom Berryhill represents the 25th Assembly District.

“Sixty years ago, Los Angeles County was the top agricultural producer in the nation. You read that right. A county that is now one of the largest urban areas in the world was an agricultural promised land not long ago.”

Farewell from Founding Director Denny Jackman



It wasn't long after the massive expansion and adoption of the City of Modesto General Plan in 1995 that Congressman Gary Condit brought together a meeting of all the heads of the local areas environmental groups. I was President of GOAL (Growth, Orderly, Affordable, Livable). Condit asked, "What is the single most important environmental issue of the area?" Farmland preservation was the unanimous answer.

Various members of the Condit meeting continued to meet at County Center #3, which used to be at the corner of Scenic Drive and Oakdale Road, under the leadership of UC Cooperative Extension Advisor, Phil Osterli. The regularly scheduled meetings drew a broad scope of attendees – representatives from Stanislaus County Farm Bureau, Community Alliance with Family Farmers, MJC Ag Department, CSU, Stanislaus, E & J Gallo Winery, California Grown Marketing, Merced County Farmland and Open Space Trust, Merced Farm Bureau, Valley Air, Sierra Club, Protect Our Water, City of Turlock, City of Modesto – as well as representatives from Congressman Condit and Senator Monteith's offices and Stanislaus County Supervisor Roland Starn.

We chose a name for what we did, Farmland Working Group. About that time, Jeani Ferrari started attending the County Center meetings and joined the newly formed group. It was Jeani who most aggressively promoted that we generate a newsletter, actively participate in educational presentations and establish the FWG as a non-profit organization. We have continued to promote the protection of local farmland since.

For over 20 years, many local folks have contributed to FWG's efforts by speaking to elected representatives and community groups, as well as speaking to students through a partnership with high schools in the area. Rudy Platzek, a retired community planner, was one of most

qualified members to address the issue of urban sprawl. He generated maps of the entire Central Valley, one map showing the existing General Plans of every city in the Central Valley; this had never been done. The maps illustrated how the General Plans of all the cities from Sacramento to Bakersfield, over time, would sprawl together, eliminating some of the highest quality food growing soils on Earth.

Rudy, along with his friend Glen Anderson, traveled up and down the Valley showing representatives and community leaders his findings. He was dubbed the Paul Revere of farmland protection. Those maps were crucial in identifying what would happen over a period of years if cities didn't recognize the cumulative loss of farmland.

In 1999, FWG participated in the Stanislaus County Visioning Process that held meetings with community groups, local representatives, and important stakeholders within our area. Modesto Mayor Richard Lang's words, "...that we would do it right and establish urban limits," were boldly printed on the marketing materials.

Perhaps, yet, another wink and a nod, 20 years later, no significant urban limit protection requirements exist, with the exception of the small City of Newman.

In 2002, I became a Modesto City Council member. In 2003, I lost a 4-3 vote to establish the Modesto General Plan boundaries as our urban limit line. Despite the massive size, nearly 45,000 acres, again, the farmland protection issue was sidelined and "kicked down the road!"

In 2007, FWG members collaborated with Modesto Council Member Garrad Marsh to gather signatures and suc-

“ Jackman spent four years on the council, from 2001 to 2005, and has been arguing for farmland protection for almost four decades. I think the latter is his greater service to our community. ”

by Judy Sly, August 16, 2013
excerpt from *The Modesto Bee*

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New FWG Directors



Matt Beekman was born and raised in Stanislaus County. He is a commercial beekeeper engaged in pollination, honey production and breeding queen bees. He is a graduate from UC Berkeley with a double major in Political Science and Political Economy of Industrial Societies (PEIS).

As part of his PEIS coursework, he took two City Planning courses that triggered his interest in local municipal governance. He served in various capacities for the City of Hughson as a Planning Commissioner, City Council member, and Mayor from 2004-2015.

During his tenure as Mayor, the City of Hughson adopted a 2:1 farmland mitigation policy. Matt Beekman also served on the Stanislaus County Council of Governments, Stanislaus County Local Agency Formation Commission (LAFCO), was elected City Representative for CALAFCO

Central Region encompassing all Central Valley, Sierra Nevada Counties. In 2015 he was selected as the LAFCO City Commissioner of The Year for the State of California. Matt Beekman resides with his wife and three children in Turlock, CA.



Steve Stewart is a Central Valley native. He was born and raised in Ripon, CA and has a lifelong involvement in Agriculture.

After graduating from Fresno State with a degree in Plant Science, he started a career as a winegrape grower that has afforded him the opportunity to see the changes in the landscape of the San Joaquin Valley over the past 30 years.

Steve, his wife Kathleen and two daughters, currently live in Stanislaus County. He is focused and committed, working to preserve the agricultural resources that the Central Valley provides.

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cessfully place on the Stanislaus County ballot the Stamp Out Sprawl Initiative, Measure E. Measure E passed in February 2008 with over a 2/3-majority vote! The measure requires a countywide vote before any subdivision map can be approved for residential housing outside our incorporated cities.

In February 2014, the Modesto City Council made an attempt to sprawl west, beyond Hwy 99 and into the enclave of Wood Colony. In collaboration with FWG, I started a signature gathering campaign for another Stamp Out Sprawl Initiative. This time it was directed to prevent the City of Modesto from sprawling over our best farmlands north and west of the City. It became Measure I, which lost by 215 votes in November 2015. Of particular note is that Modesto has since changed from odd to even number voting years. In 2015, less than 1/4 of the eligible voters voted.

And today, despite an ever-increasing recognition of the value of prime farmland, our legislatures continue to "kick the can down the road!" The Local Agency Formation Commission approved the City of Riverbank to sprawl west, despite seeing proof that west of Riverbank is some

of the highest quality soils and water recharge area in the County. Riverbank's General Plan is to sprawl all the way to McHenry Avenue, becoming a continuous urban area that blends with Modesto along the southern banks for the Stanislaus River.

Without constant monitoring and calls to action by local folks and Farmland Working Group, the so-called government funded agencies are not protecting our long-term interests. Not everyone can live in the garden. Not every inch of prime farmland needs to be covered in concrete and asphalt to have thriving economies. In fact, our farming community became stronger during the housing collapse and international recession of 2008. Economic development comes from "within" a community. Economic development comes from making our communities better, not just bigger. If/when we do get bigger, let's use the soils that aren't so good for growing food or recharging our aquifers.

Calls and action to protect our best farmland is what FWG and my cohorts have done for over 20 years. We must protect our best soils and water recharge areas. We cannot afford to "kick that can down the road" much longer.



Farmland Working Group

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“...Clearly, California will soon need to choose if it wants an agricultural or an urban Central Valley. The stakes are enormous and the challenge to the state is daunting.

To save the Valley from the fate of urbanization, it is now time to start thinking that the Valley’s urban boundaries can eventually be stabilized in order to secure a significant portion of our nation’s future food supply...”

Rudy Platzek (1930 - 2017)

Some of us stand at the edge of the city, look inward, and say,
“How can we be better?”

Others stand at the edge of the city and say,
“How can we be bigger?”

– **Denny Jackman**