



LARGER AG LAND PARCELS COULD REDUCE SPRAWL - Modesto Bee, The (CA) - May 28, 2006 - page B6

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Only a few decades ago, families could and did survive on farms of only 10 acres. They could grow fruits and vegetables, have a couple of cows, feed the family and sell any extras to pay for other essentials. That's why Stanislaus County, through its zoning law, defined agricultural areas as parcels of 10 acres or more.

In 1983, in a controversial decision at the time, the Board of Supervisors raised the minimum ag parcel size to 40 acres. The argument was that it would take at least that much to create an economically viable farm. This expanded size **limit** deliberately made it hard for property owners to divide parcels into two-, three- or five-acre ranchettes, which were growing in popularity among people who wanted the country lifestyle, but for whom **farming** was, at most, a hobby.

Today, some people still yearn for a rural lifestyle, away from the noise and bustle of city life. And they're willing to buy 40 acres or more if that's what it takes to get the solitude and the view they desire. **Farming?** That's not part of their plans.

As Bee staff writer Garth Stapley explained in a May 20 article, this demand for rural living has led several farmers to split large parcels into what are 40-acre home sites. Other proposals are pending, adding as many as 24,000 acres that someday could be removed from ag uses. Such splits create a host of problems.

Stanislaus County is considering whether it should raise the minimum parcel size in agricultural zones, to keep rangeland in acreages large enough to be sustainable as farms.

There are good reasons for a revision in the ag zoning limits. It's too soon for specifics, but this is an objective worth pursuing.

The current 40-acre parcel size makes sense on the richest soil, where almonds, grapes and other high-yield crops do well. But on rangeland, 40 acres can support maybe a dozen cows and calves, nowhere near enough for a farmer to make a living. Some counties already have a 120- or 160-acre minimum for this type of land, much of which lies at the edge of the valley and in the lower foothills.

With long-term farmland **protection**, there are other reasons to discourage **residential** sprawl into remote areas:

- * Services. City dwellers who buy rural home sites frequently still have **urban** expectations. They object to long waits for police, fire and ambulance responses.
- * Roads. These new rural residents also are likely to complain about narrow country roads, especially after getting stuck behind slow-moving tractors. They'll press for roads to be widened, strengthened and smoothed -expensive improvements that counties cannot afford.
- * Environment. Wildlife and native plants are displaced as people and pets move in.

County officials have started talking about farm parcel sizes as part of a larger discussion in updating the agricultural element of the general plan. So far, relatively few people have been involved.

This subject needs and deserves the participation of a wider audience. Hundreds of people attended meetings in the late 1980s and early '90s, when the ag element was being written and rewritten. We hope there is that kind of interest again.

Some conflict is inevitable, even within the **farming** community. Farmers naturally are concerned about their land, but many are as interested (or more) in protecting **farming** practices as they are in protecting property rights. For many, their land is their retirement account. They want to be able to sell it for the highest price possible -- when they want to sell it.

The ag element is clearly out of date. It only marginally notes concerns about air quality, for example, because it was written before studies showed that our valley has some of the nation's worst pollution. But it spells out general goals that are still appropriate today: Strengthening the ag economy, preserving ag land and protecting the natural resources that sustain ag. Those are strong principles to guide the discussion.

Typically, the people speaking out against sprawl cite developments of side-by-side houses. But California and some other states are losing as much or more ag land to the sprawl of low-density rural **residential** developments, those 40-acre ranchettes.

That's why the county should look hard at its ag zoning and how many acres are required for sustainable **farming** in the 21st century.

The county's ag element can be read online at It is part of the general plan link.

OUR POINT

Stanislaus County seriously should consider larger parcel sizes for less-fertile ag land.

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