

# Protecting Farmland

## GENERAL PLANS: AGRICULTURAL ELEMENTS COMPREHENSIVE FARMLAND PROTECTION PLANS

Every county's General Plan is the basic tool for planning and land use. Often agricultural issues are scattered throughout the Plan, some counties are adopting specific farmland protection plans. These can offer an array of preservation strategies presented in a comprehensive, simple manner. The methods can be reconciled with each other and provide farmers with support for the importance of their business and give the community and leaders the strong impression that agricultural land preservation is important to the county.

## URBAN GROWTH BOUNDARIES

An urban growth boundary is an official dividing line at the edge of a community separating land open to development from land to be preserved for agriculture or open space. The idea behind urban growth boundaries is to bring certainty into community planning by letting developers know what land can be developed and farmers and environmentalists know what land will be preserved. The boundaries are designed to remain in place for 20 or more years. Establishing urban growth boundaries requires identifying lands to be preserved; determining the amount of land needed for development over a 20-year period, assuming the filling in of already-developed areas and aiming for a minimum density of 8-10 units per acre; mapping the boundary; locking in the boundary through community vote; and securing joint agreements with neighboring jurisdictions. In Oregon, 20-year urban growth boundaries are in effect for all 241 cities. Greenbelt Alliance is presently conducting an urban growth boundary campaign in Sonoma County.

## CONSERVATION EASEMENTS

A conservation easement is a voluntary agreement between a landowner and a qualified conservation organization or public entity to preserve land for agriculture or open space uses. The owner retains title to the land, as well as the right to see or transfer the property, and can restrict public access. Easements may be either purchased or donated and may be specified for any length of time. Terms are tailored to suit the landowner and may apply to all or part of a piece of property. If the development rights are donated in perpetuity, the landowner may qualify for federal tax benefits. Most states also allow a tax deduction for easements. The organization receiving the easement accepts responsibility for monitoring and enforcing the restrictions. The state of California has some funds available for purchasing easements. For more information, contact the State Wildlife Conservation Board (916) 445-8448.

## THE FARMLAND MAPPING AND MONITORING PROGRAM

This program monitors the conversion of agricultural land in some counties in California and publishes biannual Farmland Conversion Reports giving urbanization statistics by county in five farmland categories - - prime farmland, farmland of statewide importance, unique farmland, farmland of local importance, and grazing land. The program also provides county maps showing existing farmland in the five categories. For more information, contact the Office of Land Conservation, 801 K Street, MS 13-71, Sacramento, CA 95814-3528, (916) 324-0859.

## THE WILLIAMSON ACT

Under the Williamson Act, farmers enter into 10-year contracts to keep land in agriculture or open space in return for a tax exemption. The Act is administered at the local level and it is left to local entities to determine what constitutes open space and agricultural land and what land uses are compatible with agriculture in that area. Counties can choose whether to participate in the Williamson Act, and at present 47 of the 58 counties do participate. Statewide, 15.9 million acres of land are presently under Williamson Act contract. Humboldt County has many acres of rangeland under the Act, and is just starting to look at reducing the size of parcels that can apply to be accepted in the Williamson Act.

## TRANSFER OR PURCHASE OF DEVELOPMENT RIGHTS

A community can treat development rights as a commodity which can be transferred from one site to be used on another site. Because of this transfer, the community prevents development on a site it wants to preserve and gains development on a site which the community has determined is appropriate for development. Likewise, the landowners and developers involved in the transaction are able to use their development rights (and make a profit) even though in the process some land has been preserved for nonuse. Since both the public and the private sector benefit from these transactions, TDR has often been described as a "win-win" solution for difficult land use problems.

## LAND TRUSTS

Using funds from both public and private sources, non-profit Trusts acquire conservation easements on land. These easements legally restrict certain uses of the land which could limit agricultural production. The Trust manages the land and oversees the uses. Landowners can benefit by donating or selling their land to the Trust, see Conservation easements.

## SUPPORTING AGRICULTURE

Policy makers in communities understand that agriculture must be supported to succeed. Some counties make marketing a regional goal and facilitate the permit process for agricultural structures such as greenhouses, barns etc. Allied industries such as trucking, ag equipment and supplies sales are important to the industry. Processing facilities can be creatively financed and cooperatives encouraged.

Community Supported Agriculture: A marketing technique where farmers sell shares to their produce. Shareholders support the farmers by paying up front, and the farmers deliver produce on a weekly basis to the Shareholders.

Agricultural Advisory Committee: The Humboldt County Board of Supervisors has a committee of agriculturists to advise them of policies that affect agriculture. This is a positive step towards planning for the sustainability of the industry. They often review planning department recommendations on ag land subdivision etc.

### Sources:

Saving Farmland, Agrarian Advocate, May 1995

Preserving Agricultural Land on the Edge, Tools and Techniques Workbook.