

SAN LUIS OBISPO COUNTY AGRICULTURE ELEMENT

1998 AGRICULTURE AND OPEN SPACE ELEMENT

SAN LUIS OBISPO COUNTY GENERAL PLAN

AGRICULTURAL POLICIES (AGP)

AGP24: Conversion of Agricultural Land.

- a. Discourage the conversion of agricultural lands to non-agricultural uses through the following actions:
 1. Work in cooperation with the incorporated cities, service districts, school districts, the County Department of Agriculture, the Agricultural Liaison Board, Farm Bureau, and affected community advisory groups to establish urban service and urban reserve lines and village reserve lines that will protect agricultural land and will stabilize agriculture at the urban fringe.
 2. Establish clear criteria in this plan and the Land Use Element for changing the designation of land from Agriculture to non-agricultural designations.
 3. Avoid land redesignation (rezoning) that would create new rural residential development outside the urban and village reserve lines.
 4. Avoid locating new public facilities outside urban and village reserve lines unless they serve a rural function or there is no feasible alternative location within the urban and village reserve lines.

Discussion: The purpose of this policy is twofold: to protect agricultural land at the urban fringe by limiting the expansion of urban development; and to discourage urban/suburban sprawl by preventing "leapfrog" development into the agricultural areas of the county.

Agricultural land is often converted to other uses for a variety of reasons, including: urban growth pressures, rising land values and speculation, competition between urban and agricultural uses, the desirability of large-lot rural homesites, subdivision of agricultural properties into parcels too small to sustain agricultural uses, piecemeal LUE amendments to non-agricultural land use categories, and a lack of policies that clearly define under what circumstances agricultural lands should be converted to other uses and land use designations in the general plan. This conversion of agricultural land has the potential to seriously erode the long-term protection of agricultural resources.

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Even with the strong Williamson Act program in the county, there has been pressure to convert agricultural lands to other non-agricultural uses. Since adoption of the LUE in 1980, over 3,000 acres of land have been rezoned from the Agriculture category to non-agricultural land use categories in the unincorporated areas of the county.

Statistics from the state Department of Conservation's farmland mapping program show that in the period between 1984 and 1995 (the last year for which statistics are available), there was an overall decrease in agricultural land of about 14,800 acres. There was a net increase of Prime Farmland due to intensification (primarily irrigated vineyards); however, the net acreage of Farmland of Statewide Importance also declined by 783 acres.

The LUE contains a number of general goals that focus on the environment, distribution of land uses, phasing of urban development, and the provision of public services and facilities. Consistent with those goals, specific criteria should be developed for when it may be appropriate to convert agricultural lands to other uses. The criteria should include, but not necessarily be limited to, the following:

- ** Do not expand existing urban or village areas until such areas are largely built-out, or until such time as additional land is needed to accommodate necessary uses or services that cannot otherwise be accommodated within the existing urban or village area.
- ** Urban or village expansion should occur only where contiguous to an existing urban/village reserve line, as shown in the concept diagram in Figure 2-5, or where an entirely new urban or village area is needed in order to direct development away from surrounding agricultural or open space resources.
- ** Where urban expansion is to occur, it shall be annexed to an incorporated city or an existing community services district/county service area. The annexation shall occur only where the clustered development from rural property is to be located adjacent to the urban area, or when higher density development is to occur and where such development is consistent with resource and service capabilities and orderly extension of urban services.
- ** Where agricultural land is proposed for conversion to urban/suburban uses, give consideration to the protection of agricultural lands in the

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following priority order: row crop terrain and soils, specialty crops and forage lands, dry farm lands, and rangelands for grazing.

** Approve land for conversion from Agriculture to non-agriculture designations based upon a detailed site specific evaluation and consistency with the following findings:

- a. the land does not meet the criteria for inclusion in the Agriculture designation in this plan or the Land Use Element; and
- b. agricultural production is not feasible due to some physical constraint (such as soil infertility, lack of water resource, disease), or surrounding incompatible land uses; and
- c. adjacent lands are already substantially developed with uses that are incompatible with agricultural uses; and
- e. the conversion to non-agricultural uses shall not adversely affect existing or potential agricultural production on surrounding lands that will remain designated Agriculture; and
- f. there is an over-riding public need for the conversion of the land that outweighs the need to protect the land for long-term agricultural use, such as the orderly expansion of an incorporated city or community.

** Approval of land conversions from agriculture to non-agricultural land uses will include a finding that the conversion will not materially reduce groundwater recharge.

Implementation:

1. In cooperation with the incorporated cities and service districts, consider the criteria described in the above discussion to develop policies and implementation measures that will provide for the protection of agricultural lands as well as appropriate urban expansion.
2. Based on the results from item #1 above, consider proposed amendments to Framework for Planning of the LUE that incorporates those policies and implementation measures into the guidelines for general plan amendments and revise the purpose and character statements for the Agriculture category so they are consistent with those criteria.

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Timeframe: 24 months from plan adoption.

3. The Local Agency Formation Commission (LAFCO), in cooperation with the incorporated cities and service districts, should develop and adopt standards, criteria and procedures consistent with this plan and the LUE to be used in making decisions on proposed annexations and expansions of cities and service districts that may affect agricultural lands.

Timeframe: LAFCO adoption 18 months from adoption by the county of the criteria specified in item #1 above.

4. Refer proposed general plan amendment requests and proposed annexations and expansions of service districts to the County Department of Agriculture and affected community advisory groups whenever the proposal involves potential conversion of agricultural lands.

Timeframe: Ongoing.