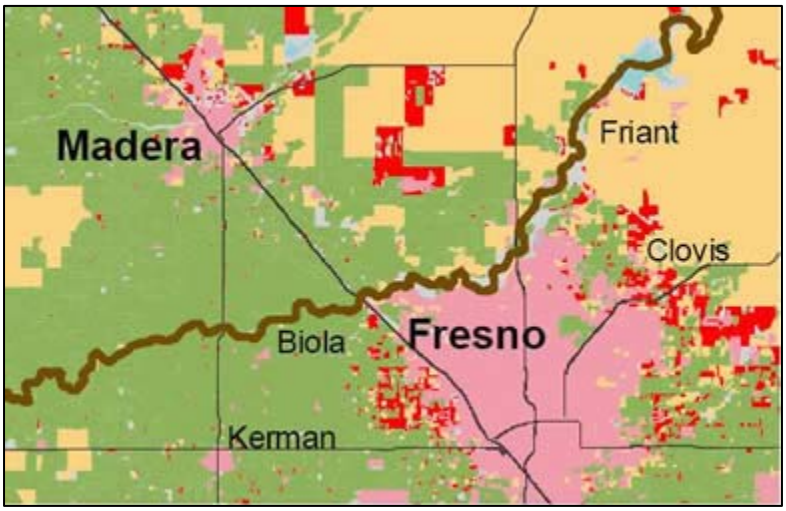
Ranchettes in the San Joaquin Valley: A Policy Proposal

Problem Statement

Ranchettes are rural residences on 1½ to 20+ acre lots that appear agricultural in character, but are not used for commercial crop or livestock production and often foreclose such use in the future. In the eight San Joaquin Valley counties, there are more than 30,000 developed ranchettes averaging 5.4 acres in size.* They occupy about 163,000 acres, which appear to be about evenly divided between the Valley floor and foothill regions. This is 35% as much land as is devoted to all the urban uses in the Valley combined. Yet, it is estimated that ranchettes house less than 3% of the Valley's population. If population grows as projected and current land use trends continue, an additional 560,000 acres of farm, ranch and forestland in the San Joaquin Valley could be developed as ranchettes by 2040. A recent flurry of ranchette subdivision proposals in the Valley – e.g., dividing 2,800 acres into 70 forty-acre ranchettes – suggests that we may be on the verge of the institutionalization of ranchettes on an unprecedented scale.



Ranchettes from 1½ to 10 acres in size (red) have been mapped by the FMMP in Stanislaus, Merced, Madera and Fresno Counties.

Ranchettes are caused by a number of factors. The demand for ranchettes is driven by the desire for a rural lifestyle – often without a full appreciation of its risks and liabilities. As the price of urban and suburban houses has increased, ranchettes on large rural lots have become more competitive as a housing alternative. Land ownership and zoning patterns contribute to the spread of ranchettes, often encouraging it on the most productive farmland. Historically, farmland has been subdivided into relatively small parcels (20-40 acres) throughout much of the eastern part of the Valley where the best soils and most reliable water allowed people to make a living on small farms. But local zoning originally intended to regulate the size of parcels for agricultural purposes now permits more ranchette development on high quality cropland than on lower quality rangeland, where much larger acreages are required for a house. Though most local general plans call for limiting ranchettes, little has been done to implement them. CEQA review appears to have similarly failed to cause an adequate assessment of the cumulative impact of ranchettes in the Valley.

Ranchettes are a poor use of land for many reasons. They are the most wasteful type of development in terms of *per capita* land consumption, defeating the purpose of trying to increase urban development efficiency – the single most important thing that can be done to save San Joaquin Valley agriculture in the face of explosive population growth. Because their edge-to-area ratio is so large, they also create more

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* Data from American Farmland Trust, *The Future Is Now: Central Valley Farmland at The Tipping Point?* (April 2006), http://www.farmland.org/reports/futureisnow/executivesummary.html

potential for physical, economic and legal conflicts between non-farm residents and production agriculture than contiguous suburban subdivisions. Ranchettes also appear to be one of the most significant factors contributing to inflation of farmland prices in the Valley, which threatens to make the land unaffordable for commercial agriculture. In the foothills, ranchettes on rangeland and forestland fragment wildlife habitat and increase the risk of wild fires. Last but not least, ranchettes located far from cities stretch public service budgets because of the high cost of providing emergency response, law enforcement and fire protection.

Notwithstanding their shortcomings, appropriately regulated ranchette development might – emphasize might – serve the broader purpose of maintaining land for agriculture and environmental benefits, if appropriately sited and conditioned. For example, conservation easements over the remainder of ranchette parcels could be required as a condition of building on a small part of them. Because of the potential leverage, e.g., preserving one out of every 20 acres, this could preserve a lot of farmland and habitat – if land use conflict problems can be solved. Or small ranchettes could be concentrated in carefully selected areas near cities to serve as a transitional zone between urban and intensive agricultural land uses. These could also serve as the receiving areas for development credits transferred from more remote lands that otherwise could be developed into ranchettes with a far greater impact on agriculture or the environment.

Proposed Policy Action

In the interest of maintaining San Joaquin Valley agriculture and protecting its environment, and of reducing the public service demands and costs of development, further ranchette expansion should be minimized.

Local governments in each county should take the following steps:

1) Until more specific measures can be adopted, the *status quo* should be maintained with a moratorium on all new rural residential development (except perhaps for a very limited number of units per year) and on the subdivision of rural land for purposes other than agriculture.

2) Identify areas where ranchettes should be prohibited or strongly discouraged, and where they might be permitted if appropriately regulated. Ranchettes are less appropriate in areas where few of them now exist; where there are highly productive soils, relatively inexpensive irrigation water and significant investments in commercial agriculture; and in areas with critical wildlife habitat, flood and fire hazards, and terrain that makes the provision of municipal services difficult and expensive. Ranchettes are more appropriate in areas where land ownership is already divided into many small (<20 acre) parcels, many of which are already developed as ranchettes; intensive agricultural activities and/or sensitive environments will not be affected by non-farm residential activities; they may provide a transition or buffer zone between intensive agriculture and urban land uses; and public services can be provided without excessive difficultly or cost.

3) In areas where ranchettes are appropriate and permitted –

a) Establish a specific limit on the number of ranchettes in such areas based on average size(s), the amount of land designated for the purpose and factors relevant to their impact.

b) Permit the subdivision of existing parcels for ranchette development only with the purchase of development credits (see below).

c) Adopt regulations to minimize the impact of ranchettes on agriculture, the environment (e.g., runoff from overgrazed land) and the provision of public services.

4) In areas where ranchettes are to be discouraged as inappropriate –

a) Increase the minimum parcel size in agricultural zones to reflect contemporary requirements for commercial agricultural economic viability (at least 40 acres for crops, 160+ acres for rangeland).

b) Prohibit subdivision of land into parcels smaller than the new minimum, except for the purpose of creating very small lots for both farm and non-farm residences that are already entitled.

c) Adopt standards for maximum lot size (e.g., 2 acres), lot configuration and road frontage, physical and vegetative buffers on ranchette parcels to minimize their impact on agriculture and natural resources.

d) Require right-to-farm waivers in all land sales contracts and deeds that create ranchette parcels in agricultural areas.

e) Require conservation easements to be dedicated on the remainder of all parcels from which ranchette lots are created or from which the development credits are transferred. On agricultural land, consider requiring long-term leases and similar arrangements that will keep the land in commercial production.

5) In all areas where any ranchette development may occur –

a) Adopt graduated impact fees, based on distance to services and difficulty of providing them, so as to recover the full public costs of ranchettes. Fees would naturally be higher in areas farther from cities.

b) Adopt graduated mitigation fees on ranchettes, based on the amount and quality of land removed from commercial agriculture or important environmental uses. Fees would be higher on larger ranchettes on prime soils or critical habitat. Fees should be reinvested in purchasing conservation easements and other mitigation strategies.

c) To encourage the clustering rather than scattering of ranchettes, allow the transfer of development credits associated with existing entitled residences between parcels, with standards (perhaps a point system) to determine appropriate receiver parcels, and subject to all fees and easement requirements.

d) Reduce the number of existing development entitlements on potential ranchettes in areas of high agricultural and natural importance by using mitigation fees to purchase conservation easements.

State government should take these steps:

1) The Resources Agency should immediately expand and update the mapping of ranchettes by the Farmland Mapping & Monitoring Program of the Department of Conservation to all San Joaquin Valley counties.

2) The Office of Planning & Research should work with local governments to compile and maintain a current database of all existing residential entitlements in rural areas, and pending requests for the creation of new ranchette parcels and residences, so that their cumulative impacts on agriculture and natural resources can be measured.

3) The Business, Transportation and Housing Agency should identify appropriate ways to reward local governments that effectively limit ranchettes by giving them priority for financing of rural development, public services, infrastructure, etc.

Comments on this proposal welcome. Contact Edward Thompson, Jr. ethompson@farmland.org 530-753-1073