

Fresno Model Farmland Conservation Program Statement of Intent

Purpose

The purpose of the Model Farmland Conservation Program (MFCP) is to design and implement a coordinated set of local policies and techniques that will effectively conserve – minimize the loss and decline of – the land and water resources necessary for Fresno County agriculture to remain economically viable for the foreseeable future.

Origins

In October 2006, the California Partnership for the San Joaquin Valley adopted a Strategic Action Plan that included recommendations for conserving important farmland as a strategy for maintaining agricultural economic viability. In March 2007, the Partnership awarded a \$200,000 grant to the Fresno Council of Governments to design and implement a Model Farmland Conservation Program (MFCP) that would help achieve this goal and serve as an example to other counties in the Valley. Fresno COG turned to American Farmland Trust (AFT) for assistance with this project. AFT has long been a leader in farmland conservation in California and nationwide, and was a partner in the Fresno Growth Alternatives Alliance that produced the 1998 *Landscape of Choice* strategies.

Planning Context

Fresno County is experiencing unprecedented growth. Within the next generation, the population of Fresno County is expected to more than double to 1.93 million people. Because most of the county's cities are located in the midst of agricultural land, this will place tremendous pressure on agricultural resources. If current trends continue, urban development and rural residences will expand from 234 to 448 square miles by 2050. At that point, there would remain only about 4 acres of prime, unique and statewide important farmland for every developed acre, compared with 8 acres today.

Wisely, Fresno is preparing for this growth by engaging in a number of planning exercises intended to assure that the county's economy is diversified and vibrant, its cities and environment are healthy, and agricultural and natural resources are protected. The Blueprint process is a county-wide process – as well as a regional exercise -- intended to produce a “preferred growth scenario” identifying where future development should occur and where land should remain available for other purposes, among which agriculture is foremost. One of the growth options being evaluated by this process is a Metro Rural Loop, which would be a multi-county, multi-modal transportation network to connect communities and attract efficient development to corridors while protecting vital farmland in between. A related exercise is a Land Buffer Task Force commissioned by the Board of Supervisors to look at ways of assuring that existing cities and unincorporated communities in Fresno County do not lose their identity and harm agriculture by growing together. Finally, the City of Fresno is now planning for a major expansion to the southeast based on “new urbanism” principles. The Fresno MFCP will be coordinated with each of these exercises to assure that the effective conservation of land for agricultural use is incorporated into their recommendations, policy and implementation.

Sure to influence these local planning exercises are at least two state initiatives. One is a strategic plan for the future of agriculture that will soon be inaugurated by the state Board of Food &

Agriculture, as recommended by the California Partnership for the San Joaquin Valley. The other is the statewide Climate Action Plan being implemented by the State Air Quality Control Board and the state Office of Planning & Research pursuant to AB 32, intended to reduce greenhouse gas emissions by, among other things, increasing the efficiency of land use and transportation to reduce motor vehicle trips. The Fresno MFCEP will also take these into consideration and, ideally, provide input to state decision makers on how state policies can enhance local farmland conservation strategies in Fresno County.

Project Tasks & Process

The Fresno MFCEP project includes three basic tasks.

- Identify and map characteristics that make farm and ranch lands strategic resources for agriculture. This will result in a gradation of values, not hard and fast lines.
- Document and analyze current trends affecting agricultural lands, as well as public policies, market forces and other factors that contribute to them.
- Select a coordinated set of policies and techniques that will effectively conserve the most strategic farmland for agricultural use while accommodating urban growth. To the extent possible, we intend to build on the strategies outlined in *Landscape of Choice*, which appear to represent a fairly recent, broad consensus on growth and conservation policy.

Day to day conduct of the project will be overseen by a steering committee composed largely of COG staff and representatives of the agriculture community. An Advisory Committee, broadly representative of agriculture and other local stakeholder groups, will provide input and advice on substantive issues, including the ultimate selection of policies and techniques. Two large public meetings and a half dozen smaller roundtable sessions in agriculture communities around the county will gather public input and build interest in the project. AFT will provide technical assistance on farmland conservation in all phases of the project, facilitate public meetings and produce the project report and recommendations. It will be assisted by the Information Center for the Environment at U.C. Davis on strategic farmland mapping. The target completion date for the project is August 2008.

Proposed Measures of Success

To successfully conserve agricultural land, the Fresno MFCEP must respond to current trends and their causes. As a working hypothesis, the following measures of success are proposed and will be evaluated and refined as the project goes forward:

- Urban growth will be directed away from the most strategic farmland
- Efficiency of urban development will be significantly increased to minimize farmland conversion
- Ranchette development will be greatly reduced, particularly on strategic farmland
- The land market will be stabilized to assure that land remains affordable for commercial agriculture
- An adequate supply of affordable water for agriculture will be assured
- Progress toward these outcomes will be continuously tracked to assure accountability for results
- The overall MFCEP will be fair as well as effective