



LASSEN COUNTY GENERAL PLAN

- 2000 -

AGRICULTURE ELEMENT



LASSEN COUNTY GENERAL PLAN AGRICULTURE ELEMENT

SECTION ONE: INTRODUCTION:

1.1 PURPOSE

Agriculture is important to Lassen County in many ways and on many levels, including economic, general land use, conservation, and the social and cultural character and values which the agricultural community imparts to and shares with the County's overall social environment. Agricultural lands also provide general open space values to the landscape and can provide substantial benefits to wildlife resources depending on a number of factors including resource management practices.

Agricultural lands also have important fiscal factors which benefit local government. According to *Planning for Prosperity*, a publication by the Sierra Business Council (1997) regarding the building of successful communities in the Sierra Nevadas, a number of studies have concluded that, even though undeveloped land does not generate as much gross revenue to local government as other types of land uses, agricultural and rural lands make a positive net contribution to local government revenues in comparison to residential development which often creates net revenue shortfalls for local government.

Rural land requires fewer public services per acre than developed land, particularly educational services which are the most expensive. In Ventura County, for example, for every dollar of taxes paid, the average residential unit required \$1.25 for public services, while the average farm required only 65 cents (Strong, 1996, as summarized in *Planning for Prosperity*, 1997).

The Lassen County General Plan Natural Resources Element is a revision of and replaces the 1968 Natural Resources Conservation Element. It complies with the requirements of and shall serve as Lassen County's "conservation element." The title "natural resources element" has been used instead of the title "conservation element" because conservation is recognized by the County as only one issue in the broader subject of the management of natural resources. Lassen County needs to address a full range of natural resource issues which, along with conservation, relate to economics,

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employment opportunities, and other resource management concerns.

Lassen County's Natural Resources Element addresses a number of resource issues including geologic and soil resources, water resources, and rangeland resources. Due to special concerns and interest of the agricultural community and the County regarding agricultural issues, and the need to support and maintain the important contributions of agriculture to Lassen County, agriculture as a general plan subject is addressed as a separate element of the General Plan. This element is an extension of the Natural Resources Element.

The Agriculture Element, used in conjunction with the related elements of the General Plan, will enable the County to take a comprehensive approach to addressing related resource management and land use issues. Furthermore, the County will be able to apply a deeper understanding of this important land use and conservation subject, and the customs and culture of the community related to it, to reexamine and define related resource goals and land use policies.

It is important to note that there are a number of related sections of the Natural Resources Element, as well as in the Open Space and Land Use Elements of the Lassen County General Plan, which relate to agricultural issues. These sections address such topics as soil, water, rangeland and grazing issues, and related land use designations. For example, consideration of the issue of the conversion of agricultural areas for other non-agricultural land uses touches upon several general plan themes. Conversion of agricultural land not only removes or substantially reduces the long-term productive agricultural value of the land, it often reduces and adversely affects other resource values such as wildlife habitat and water quality, and creates new demands for public services.

Although agriculture is addressed as a separate element of the General Plan, the subject is very much interwoven with other subjects and sections of the Plan. Some of the most directly applicable policies and background discussions from related sections of the Plan have been reiterated in the Agricultural Element in order to consolidate points relevant to the subject of agriculture resources.

1.2 STATE REQUIREMENTS

California State Law (Government Code Section 65300 et seq) requires each city and county to adopt a comprehensive, long-range general plan to guide the jurisdiction's future physical, economic and social development. The role of the general plan is to serve as the "constitution" for development and the foundation upon which land use decisions are based. Statutory requirements and authority for a General Plan are contained in Title 7, Division 1 of the California Government Code.

State law requires that a General Plan be an integrated, internally consistent document. There are seven elements mandated for general plans: land use; circulation; housing; safety; open space;

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conservation; and noise. In addition to the mandatory elements, jurisdictions may adopt optional elements to address unique issues, or to further address and focus on issues which are included in the mandatory elements. This Agriculture Element is an optional element of the General Plan. It is, however, basically an extension of the Natural Resources Element in respect to agricultural issues.

The policies of all elements must be integrated with and be internally consistent with the other elements of the General Plan. If, in the process of developing or amending this element in the future, it is determined that a proposed policy would be inconsistent with a related policy contained elsewhere in the General Plan, the County will need to choose between not adopting the proposed policy or proposing a corresponding amendment of the related policy to maintain internal consistency.

1.3 ORGANIZATION OF THE ELEMENT

Section One of the Agriculture Element consists of this Introduction. Section Two consists of the Goals, Policies and Implementation Measures of the Element. Section Three consists of a background discussion on the role of agriculture in Lassen County and recognition of some of the issues addressed in this Element.

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SECTION TWO: GOALS, POLICIES AND IMPLEMENTATION MEASURES

(Note: The Agriculture Element is an extension of the Natural Resources Element. Please refer to the Natural Resources Element for additional policies relating to agriculture, such as water resources, rangeland, etc. In addition, please refer to applicable policies in the Open Space, Land Use, and Wildlife Elements.)

GOAL A-1: Conservation of productive agricultural lands and lands having substantial physical potential for productive agricultural use, and the protection of such lands from unwarranted intrusion of incompatible land uses and conversion to uses which may obstruct or constrain agricultural use and value.

AG-1 POLICY: The County recognizes that land having the physical characteristics (e.g., soil) for production of agricultural crops and livestock is a resource of significant value which needs to be protected for its economic value, its contribution to the character of the community, and its environmental and scenic values.

AG-2 POLICY: Agriculture and livestock management, and related activities consistent with the zoning regulations established by the County, are considered by the County to be compatible activities in areas identified as "open space". Exceptions to this policy may be made in cases where the Board of Supervisors or the Planning Commission determines, in consideration of specific resource issues and management objectives in specified areas, that certain agricultural activities are not compatible and should be excluded. The recognition and consideration of the open space character and values of agricultural and rangeland areas shall not be construed to be contrary to resource production and management practices (including agriculture and livestock grazing) which may be allowed by the County subject to the adopted zoning of those areas and the lawful exercise of the County's land use authority.

AG-3 POLICY: Residential development in agricultural areas shall be discouraged because it disrupts the surrounding productive activity of ranches and agricultural operations. Future residential development, with the exception of building permits on an individual basis, should be relegated to the expansion of existing communities

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and residential areas, including areas designated as "residential" by the County in the General Plan or an area plan even though those areas may not yet be developed.

AG-4 POLICY: In order to support the existing and future economic value and viability of agricultural lands, including grazing lands, such lands should remain in relatively large units. Except in limited circumstances pursuant to the County's zoning ordinance (e.g., segregation of homesites, use permits, etc.), County zoning and subdivision regulations shall protect agricultural lands by not allowing isolated subdivisions intended primarily for residential use to be developed in areas which are not specifically designated in the General Plan or an area plan for a community development land use (e.g., rural residential) and zoned accordingly.

AG-5 POLICY: In order to minimize the disruption and displacement of agricultural operations and lands by non-agricultural development, non-agricultural development in agricultural areas should be directed to: sites where soils do not have significant potential for productive agricultural use; sites least likely to impact productive agricultural uses in the vicinity; sites where, or which are adjacent to where, similar non-agricultural uses already exist; and sites where adequate community services are or will be available.

Implementation Measures:

AG-A The County shall phase out the use of the A-1, General Agriculture District, and shall, following appropriate public hearings, rezone all areas currently zoned A-1 to more specific zoning districts which are consistent with General Plan land use designations.

AG-B In areas zoned A-1, General Agriculture District, and having a General Plan natural resource management land use designation (e.g., Intensive Agriculture, Extensive Agriculture), the County will not approve subdivisions for general residential development, or approve the creation of parcels less than 40 acres in size, except in limited circumstances following review procedures and appropriate findings pursuant to the County's zoning ordinance (e.g., in connection with applications for segregation of homesites, use permits, etc.). Subdivisions for general residential purposes shall not be approved unless and until, after consideration of the area's natural resource values and factors which would support development, an amendment of the General Plan is approved by the County to designate the site for rural residential or other community development uses and the site is zoned accordingly.

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GOAL A-2: Maintain area plan policies and related land use and resource management decisions which support the agricultural policies of the Agriculture Element.

AG-6 POLICY: The policies of area plans relating to agricultural resources are recognized as complimentary to and supportive of the Agriculture Element as they may apply to the land and resources of each particular planning area.

Implementation Measures:

AG-C In any subsequent area plan, the County shall continue to identify areas which should be recognized as important agricultural lands and designate such lands as "Intensive Agriculture", and the County shall identify areas which have substantial but less intensive agricultural values and designate such lands as "Extensive Agriculture".

AG-D The policies of the Agriculture Element shall be considered during the development of related area plan policies.

GOAL A-3: Maintain an orderly process and review criteria for the consideration of project proposals which may result in the conversion of agricultural lands to uses which are not primarily agricultural or directly related to agriculture, consistent with related policies of the General Plan which are intended to protect agricultural resources and land uses.

AG-7 POLICY: In order to minimize the disruption and displacement of agricultural operations and lands by non-agricultural development, non-agricultural development in agricultural areas should be directed to: sites where soils do not have significant potential for productive agricultural use; sites least likely to impact productive agricultural uses in the vicinity; sites where, or which are adjacent to where, similar non-agricultural uses already exist; and sites where adequate community services are or will be available.

AG-8 POLICY: The County recognizes that some agricultural areas may, in the future, be more specifically identified and evaluated for alternative land uses. If it can be demonstrated with findings by the Board of Supervisors that there is adequate justification to consider the conversion of agricultural land, those lands may be considered for a General Plan amendment to redesignate them for a specific non-agricultural land use. The conversion of agricultural lands, including rangeland, to non-agricultural uses may be allowed if and when such proposed conversions are supported by findings based on substantial evidence, and consideration of related policies established by local agricultural industry organizations, which demonstrate consistency with all of the provisions listed below. (Note: Some types of land uses may be specifically exempted by the General Plan or an area plan from full

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consistency with these agricultural conversion findings, e.g., certain industrial uses.)

a) The conversion is justified by a factor of significant benefit to the community (e.g., facilitating orderly expansion of a community, facilitating construction of a public facility, providing significant employment-generating opportunities, etc.);

b) There is a substantial limitation to alternative non-agricultural sites for the proposed land use;

c) Conversion will not have a significant adverse impact on agricultural land use, agricultural water supplies, significant wildlife habitat, or other natural resource-based uses on adjacent lands;

d) Adequate community services to support the proposed use are or will be available at the proposed site; and

e) The proposed use is or will be supported by an appropriate land use designation and the establishment of a corresponding zoning district.

AG-9 POLICY: When considering proposals for agricultural land conversions and/or associated mitigation measures, the County will recognize that the cumulative impacts from land conversions places an increased burden on the remaining agricultural land to provide environmental quality, wildlife habitat and open space values and may threaten the viability of the remaining agricultural land; therefore, the County will support measures to help minimize the impacts of that burden.

AG10 POLICY: The County shall not expect or require that agricultural lands bear the burden of fulfilling open space requirements for residential and other forms of community development proposed in or adjacent to agricultural areas.

AG11 POLICY: Agricultural production and product processing facilities are encouraged by the County and, unlike most general industrial uses, are considered to be related to agricultural uses and, therefore, may be considered for location in areas designated for intensive or extensive agricultural use without being considered as a "conversion" of agricultural land and without all of the required findings set forth in this section for conversions. However, the siting of agricultural production facilities in these areas, when allowed, shall be supported by information and findings which demonstrate that the facility will not substantially interfere with agricultural or other natural resource-based uses on adjacent lands.

AG12 POLICY: Subject to case-by-case review (including review for compatibility with surrounding agricultural uses), and in compliance with relevant area plan, zoning,

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permitting and environmental review requirements, the development and operation of the following land uses will typically be deemed to be consistent with the Extensive and Intensive Agriculture land use designations and will not require zoning to an "Industrial" zoning district, nor will they be interpreted by the County to constitute an "agricultural conversion" pursuant to this General Plan:

- a) processing plants for the production of agricultural products;
- b) processing plants for the production of natural resource products where the location of the resource is fundamental to the location of processing and packaging facilities (e.g., water bottled at the source, etc.);
- c) mines, the extraction of minerals, and the ancillary processing of mineral materials generated on-site, including the production of asphalt, ready-mix concrete and similar products;
- d) saw mills and related timber processing operations;
- e) geothermal and natural gas wells, hydroelectric projects, and ancillary facilities for the production of energy; and
- f) uses of similar character as may be determined by the Board of Supervisors.

AG13 POLICY: The operation of a minor non-agricultural activity by the owner of agricultural land on lands designated for agriculture, when such use is clearly subordinate to and does not reduce, constrain, or interfere with agricultural operations on the property or in the vicinity, shall not be interpreted by the County as a "conversion" of agricultural land pursuant to the General Plan. Examples include, but are not limited to, bed-and-breakfast establishments, hunting and other small lodges, guest ranches, and home occupations.

Implementation Measures:

AG-E The County will consider the findings under Policy AG-12 above in any land use decision which involves the conversion of land from an intensive or extensive agricultural designation to a land use designation, zoning district, or use which is not predominantly agricultural or directly related to an agriculture land use, except as noted in the exceptions of this element.

AG-F The County will periodically consider revisions of the zoning ordinance to consider and clarify land uses which may be allowed, or which should not be allowed, in agricultural districts.

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GOAL A-4: Support for the economic viability and continuation of agricultural operations and the protection of agricultural resource lands.

AG14 POLICY: The County shall encourage the on-going review of agriculture-related land use and resource management issues by local organizations representing the agriculture industry (e.g. the Farm Bureau, the Cattlemen's Association), and shall consider their recommendations regarding related land use and resource management policies and actions.

AG15 POLICY: The County supports the consideration of innovative ways to maintain the economic viability of productive agricultural lands, subject to the unique circumstances of each area. Measures may include use of land conservation contracts (e.g., Williamson Act contracts), land banks, transfer of development rights, voluntary conservation easements, and use of buffer areas between agricultural lands and developing areas.

Implementation Measures:

AG-G The County will continue to implement the Williamson Act and utilize land conservation contracts for qualifying lands

AG-H The County may place lands in the "A-P", Agricultural Preserve Combining District, to establish the precise boundaries of agricultural preserves and to provide such additional restrictions upon the use of land as are necessary to comply with provisions of law which are applicable to agricultural preserves.

AG-I The County will consult with representatives of the agricultural industry in the consideration and implementation, when warranted, of innovative mechanisms for the protection of agricultural lands and for the support of the agriculture industry. Measures may include, but are not limited to, land banks, transfer of development rights, voluntary conservation easements, and the use of buffer areas between agricultural lands and developing areas.

AG16 POLICY: Where proposed residential, commercial or industrial development abuts lands devoted to agriculture production, the non-agricultural uses shall be required to incorporate buffer areas to mitigate potential land use conflicts as conditions of approval for subdivisions or use permits. The type and width of buffer areas shall be determined based on the character, intensity and sensitivity of the abutting land uses.

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Implementation Measure:

AG-J The County will prepare and adopt guidelines and regulations to assist in the determination of the appropriate type and scope of agricultural buffer areas needed in circumstances that warrant the creation of such buffer areas.

GOAL A-5: Productive cooperation with and from Federal and state agencies which manage natural resources in Lassen County and improved consistency in resource management objectives, policies and programs.

AG17 POLICY: The County supports grazing practices on private lands and lands managed by state and Federal agencies which support the long-term health and sustainability of rangeland resources.

AG18 POLICY: The County supports cooperative efforts between private sector interests and public agencies that incorporate economic viability while addressing environmental resource concerns such as the Eagle Lake / Pine Creek CRMP.

AG19 POLICY: The County advocates grazing policies on Federal and state lands which support the economic viability of related private livestock operations while maintaining the long-term productivity of rangeland ecosystems. Proposed changes in resource management policies regarding rangeland use need to consider and mitigate potential economic, social and cultural impacts to Lassen County citizens and communities, and impacts to related private lands in Lassen County.

GOAL A-6: To protect and maximize the present and future productive, economic and environmental values of the County's soil resources.

AG20 POLICY: The County recognizes the need to protect and conserve areas where soils have high resource values especially in terms of potential agricultural productivity.

AG21 POLICY: The County discourages the development of land having soils of significant agricultural value for purposes other than agriculture or land uses directly related to agriculture.

Implementation Measures:

AG-K Pursuant to the California Environmental Quality Act, the County shall consider the impacts of proposed projects on areas having soils of locally significant agricultural value, whether currently used or not, and shall consider imposing necessary mitigation measures to avoid, reduce, or compensate for the extent of significant disturbance to those soils.

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AG-L The County will consider the productive value of soil resources as a factor in adopting land use designations and zoning.

AG-M The County will form a task force made up of representatives of qualified agencies and organizations to clarify the local definition of "prime" and other important agricultural lands and shall use such information to implement its General Plan policies and make related land use decisions.

GOAL A-7: Protection of agricultural lands and lands having substantial potential for productive agricultural use from the intrusion of incompatible neighboring uses and factors which threaten to constrain or reduce agricultural productivity.

AG22 POLICY: The County shall continue to support "right to farm" provisions and shall discourage and minimize the introduction and encroachment of uses which may conflict with agricultural operations or future agricultural development.

Implementation Measures:

AG-N The County shall apply careful discretion in approving uses and zoning in areas adjacent to agricultural areas which may conflict with agricultural operations or future agricultural development in the area.

AG-O The County shall continue and may strengthen its development ordinances to support and protect the "right to farm" in ways similar to those specified in Title 6 of the Lassen County Code.

AG-P The County supports the continuation of reasonable fencing and cattle guard requirements for subdivisions adjacent to agricultural zones.

AG-Q The County shall, in compliance with the related policies of this plan which are intended to protect agriculture, incorporate the review criteria set forth in those policies into the County's application review processes for proposed land uses and rezoning in areas within or adjacent to agricultural areas.

AG23 POLICY: The County encourages strategy plans and strong measures to manage feral horses and burros on public and private rangelands and to minimize related damage to livestock and wildlife forage and water resources.

AG24 POLICY: The County supports strong measures to eliminate or prevent the spread of invasive weeds and plant species including, but not limited to, medusahead, yellow starthistle, and perennial pepperweed (whitetop), and to control the adverse effects from the excessive spreading of such species as juniper and cheatgrass.

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GOAL A-8: Administrative relief in limited circumstances when the creation of a parcel is needed for a homesite or other special need related to an agricultural operation when the resulting parcel would be smaller than otherwise required in the agricultural area.

AG25 POLICY: The County may establish and administer processes to allow, under limited circumstances and with appropriate findings, the division of land in agricultural zones in order to create special parcels which would be smaller than the size of parcels generally required in the agricultural areas. Approval of such processes (e.g., "Segregation of Homesites", ancillary to an approved use permit, or other processes) shall not be construed to be a "variance" of the County Code and may be exempted from the required findings of an "agricultural conversion". When supported by appropriate findings, such land divisions shall not be regarded as inconsistent with the intent of the agricultural land use designation.

Implementation Measure:

AG-R The County shall maintain zoning and land division provisions which specify application and review processes for the segregation of homesites and creation of other parcels pursuant to this policy. The processes shall specify findings to clarify and determine when such proposals are justified.

GOAL A-9: Maintain a good regional reputation for locally-produced agricultural products.

AG26 POLICY: The County supports measures to promote and protect the quality and image of agricultural products produced in Lassen County.

GOAL A-10: Maintain a sensible appropriation and utilization of water for agricultural use in the county.

AG27 POLICY: In order to insure adequate supplies of irrigation water to areas having the highest potential for agricultural productivity, the County supports analysis and, when warranted, development of water impoundments and aqueducts to transport water resources to areas within the County which have the foremost agricultural soils.

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SECTION THREE: BACKGROUND REPORT:

Most of Lassen County has scant rainfall, a short growing season, and severe winters. A 1982 County Resource Inventory prepared by the Soil Conservation Service reported that most of the productive farms in Lassen County are in areas which receive only 8 to 16 inches of precipitation per year and have an annual growing season of approximately 120 days. Furthermore, most of the precipitation which these areas do receive occurs during the dormant seasons of the year. Other resource limitations which challenge agricultural production in various parts of Lassen County include soil quality and the availability and quality of water resources.

The agriculture and livestock industries have been predominant features of the County's economy for almost 140 years. A number of families have been involved in agricultural operations for over 100 years. While the ranching and farming industries in general have undergone many changes over the years, local operators have attempted to survive economically and maintain the stability of the farm and ranch lifestyle.

Hay and alfalfa have been key crops in Lassen County for many years. Alfalfa was first introduced in the Honey Lake Valley in 1860 and has since been a staple commodity produced in the County. While hay production was and continues to be a key component to the livestock industry for feed, it also complimented the dairy businesses that once operated in the County. Large quantities of butter and cheese were exported during the late-1800's to mining towns in Nevada. At the turn of the century, Watson's Cheese Factory in Big Valley provided dairy products throughout northern California.

Historically, grains have been raised primarily for local consumption as flour and feed. At the turn of the century there were several flour mills in the county, including some in Big Valley and Honey Lake Valley. It is noteworthy that, in 1909, there were 12,000 acres in wheat; 4,000 acres in oats; 3,000 acres in barley; and 1,500 acres in rye. This can be compared to the combined total production of these grains in 1991 of only 5,626 acres.

Changes in market conditions have brought changes in crop production. In 1909, there were 23 harvested acres reported for strawberry fruit, while in 1994 there were 618 acres planted primarily as strawberry nursery stock with an estimated value of \$12,329,100. Wild rice and garlic seed crops

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have also varied in importance over the years as part of Lassen County's crop market.

In the 1994 Crop Report for Lassen County, the County's Agricultural Commissioner reported that the 1994 gross dollar value of all agricultural commodities (including timber production) was \$94,900,550. In terms of total value to the economy, a multiplier of three suggests that this range of economic activity generates as much as \$284,700,000 to the Lassen County economy.

TABLE AG-1: SUMMARY OF 1994 PRODUCTION VALUES	
Field Crops	\$25,363,800
Livestock-Poultry	11,453,100
Livestock-Poultry Products	76,350
Seed, Fruit, Vegetable, Nursery	14,937,300
Timber Harvest and Cogeneration	43,070,000
TOTAL	\$94,900,550

Source: *Lassen County Crop Report, 1994*, Lassen County Department of Agriculture, 1995.

TABLE AG-2: SUMMARY OF 1994 CROP PRODUCTION VALUES (Excluding Timber Products)	
All Hay	\$22,700,000
Strawberry Plants	12,329,100
Pasture Land	1,714,400
Garlic Seed	1,126,600
Misc. Nursery/Field Crops: (Fresh strawberries, potatoes, onions, carrot seed, endive, mint oil, raspberry plants, greenhouse flowers, Christmas trees)	825,000
Sugar beets	415,800
Wheat	304,000

Source: *Lassen County Crop Report, 1994*, Lassen County Department of Agriculture, 1995.

Excluding timber products, alfalfa and other hay crops was the largest crop commodity group in production value with an estimated 1994 value of \$22,700,000.

The 1994 Crop Report estimated that there were 250 "farms" in Lassen County having an average

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size of 1,928 acres. It further reported that there were 482,000 acres of farmland with a total cropland inventory of 342,410 acres. An estimated 100,833 acres of cropland was further classified as "irrigated".

The 1994 Crop Report reported a livestock inventory for January 1, 1995 as follows:

TABLE AG-3: LASSEN COUNTY 1995 LIVESTOCK INVENTORY	
<u>Type of Livestock</u>	<u>Head of Stock</u>
All Cattle/Calves	54,000
Beef Cows	28,000
Milk Cows	150
Stock Sheep	3,100
Hogs/Pigs	927

Source: *Lassen County Crop Report, 1994*, Lassen County Department of Agriculture, 1995, (Information drawn from the California Crop and Livestock Reporting Service.)

1968 GENERAL PLAN REGARDING AGRICULTURE

Many of the statements in the County's 1968 General Plan regarding agriculture are still applicable today. Following are some related excerpts from the 1968 General Plan:

Agriculture

Agriculture represents Lassen County's leading industry in terms of value of production. The greatest gains in dollar value of product were registered by seed, fruit, vegetable and nursery crops while the production of livestock and poultry continued to decline. The gains in non-livestock production represent diversification and the reduction of dependence on the beef cattle industry. This points up two classes of land where improvements should be made and protection afforded: grazing land and crop land.

Grazing Lands

Much of the eastern half of the County falls in this category. These are the open, sparsely covered lands of the Modoc Plateau. Small parcels have water available from ground water sources or reservoirs, but most of this area is dry grazing land. Because of scant rainfall, short growing season and severe winters, Lassen County range land has relatively low productivity.

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In order for grazing to continue as an economic use, land must remain in relatively large units. County zoning and subdivision regulations should protect the grazing lands by not allowing small lot splits and isolated and unproductive subdivisions to occur.

Crop Lands

Limited portions of the County are devoted to the growing of row and forage crops. These lands generally occupy the level valley floors with the largest concentrations being in the Honey Lake Valley near Susanville and Big Valley.

Experience in other parts of California warns that the best agricultural lands in the vicinity of urban communities are often removed from agricultural use to be developed as subdivisions. Since suitable crop land provided with irrigation is relatively scarce in Lassen County while land suitable for urban development is ample, County policy should be directed toward the protection of the most economically desirable crop lands.

While County zoning should provide for all normal agricultural activities, including properly controlled roadside stands for produce sales, the recommendations given above for environmental quality control of grazing lands also apply to crop lands. A County soil conservation policy and plan are important to both the grazing and crop lands, with the objective of increasing both the acreage and productivity of these lands. The County Planning Department should work closely with State and Federal soil conservation authorities in order to coordinate and mutually reinforce land use policy.

The County's 1968 General Plan land use designations, and ultimately the corresponding zoning regulations, are the mechanisms that have been used to recognize and manage the appropriate use of land in the County. The General Plan Land Use Map established three designations directly related to agricultural land use. They are outlined below:

Crop Land and Prime Grazing Land: These areas are intended to include the foremost agricultural lands in the County due primarily to the quality of the soil.

Grazing and Sagebrush Environment: Lands under this designation on the Land Use Map are generally the open valleys and plateaus in the east half of the County. The dominant use has been cattle grazing [and sheep grazing] with some irrigated agriculture.

General Forest Environment: This area mainly consists of the timbered mountainous areas of western Lassen County. There is grazing use for some cattle in the flats and natural meadows interspersed throughout the forests. Timber production is the primary enterprise.

Planning law requires that zoning be consistent with general plan land use designations. In several

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places, the Lassen County General Plan called for protective zoning for its natural resources. For example:

The natural resources of the County, both physical and scenic, should be protected by comprehensive zoning and subdivision regulations. (Page 35)

Good zoning in Lassen County will help to insure high standards of land development without unduly restricting private initiative or causing excessive development costs. It will help to protect the scenic and recreation resources upon which the County's future depends. It will help to prevent wasteful, scattered land development throughout the County. (Page 55)

Agricultural, Forest and Recreation and Tourist District regulations should be strong enough and comprehensive enough to protect the resource areas of the County from premature or unsuitable types of development. Agricultural Preserve Zoning adopted in 1971 and Open Space Deed easements [are needed]. (Page 56)

RELATED AREA PLAN POLICIES

Through Lassen County's area plan program, by which the General Plan has been amended to more specifically address planning issues in identified planning areas, the County has further defined and clarified its land use policies, including agricultural policies. The area plans continue to emphasize that agricultural land is a resource of limited availability in Lassen County and, like timberland, it is economically important and provides other benefits such as wildlife habitat, groundwater recharge, and open space which contributes to the rural character of the area.

Following is a sample of agricultural policies and implementation measures which have been used in Lassen County area plans. Specific area plans should be consulted for the complete set of policies and implementation measures for each area.

Eagle Lake Area Plan:

Policy - Agricultural lands must be protected from conversions, non-agricultural developments and other land use conflicts that would be detrimental to this important asset.

Implementation - To ensure consistency with the General Plan and the continued viability of the agricultural use of the Planning Area, the private lands used for the protection of food and fiber shall be zoned, pursuant to Lassen County Ordinance No. 411, to U.C., Upland Conservation, Agricultural Preserve or other appropriate open space classification.

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Susanville Vicinity Area Plan:

7.1A Agricultural land in Lassen County shall be protected for its economic importance; its contribution to the character of the community; and its environmental values. The designation of "intensive agriculture" is applied to agricultural land (as shown on the area plan land use map) in the planning area.

(Note: "Intensive Agriculture" basically corresponds to the "Cropland and Prime Grazing Land" designation of the 1968 General Plan. "Extensive Agriculture" basically corresponds to both the "General Forest Environment" and the "Grazing and Sagebrush Environment" designations.)

7.1B Parcel sizes shall be retained at sufficient sizes for productive economic agricultural use.

7.1C Non-agricultural uses shall be directed to areas with soils with limited value for intensive agricultural use or in areas where similar uses already exist. Non-agricultural uses shall not interfere with agricultural operations.

7.12 Where dense residential or commercial development abuts lands devoted to agriculture production, the non-agricultural uses shall incorporate buffer setbacks and/or construct natural screens to mitigate potential land use conflicts.

Pittville Area Plan:

1. In Subarea 2, zone those lands designated "Crop Land and Prime Grazing Land" in the County General Plan "A-3", Agricultural District, minimum 160 acres per parcel, or "E-A", Exclusive Agriculture. For qualifying prime agricultural lands, encourage inclusion in an "A-P", Agricultural Preserve Combining District.

8. Where relatively dense residential or intense commercial uses abut parcels devoted to crop production, livestock grazing or other agricultural uses, require residential or commercial development plans to incorporate buffer setbacks and/or construct natural screens to protect their residents or users from any incompatible agricultural activities (spraying or other uses producing airborne dust, noxious odors, high noise levels or unattractive sights). Proposed protective measures shall not interfere in any way with the adjacent agricultural operation.

Johnstonville Area Plan:

7-A ... Agricultural lands in the Planning Area shall be designated as either intensive or extensive agriculture.

7-3 Land designated Intensive Agriculture shall be zoned "A-3", Agricultural District or "E-

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A", Exclusive Agriculture.

7-4 Lands designated Extensive Agriculture shall be zoned "A-3", Agricultural District or "U-C", Upland Conservation.

Standish/Litchfield Area Plan:

7-A Agricultural land in Lassen County shall be protected for its economic importance, its contribution to the character of the community and its environmental values. Agricultural lands in the Planning Area shall be designated as either intensive or extensive agriculture.

7-B Parcel sizes shall be retained at sufficient sizes for productive agricultural use.

AGRICULTURE ISSUES

Prime Agricultural Land

The need to identify land which is in agricultural production and/or suitable for agricultural production is an important general plan issue. Counties are encouraged to inventory soils and lands which may be considered as "prime agricultural land" and to devise policies and means to help protect those lands.

On the subject of defining "Prime" and otherwise important agricultural lands, the California Department of Conservation confirms that there are various definitions of "prime agricultural land" and "agricultural land" in state statutes and in common use, and they caution that if the terms "prime agricultural land", "prime farmland", or "agricultural land" are to be used in relation with a particular program or statute (e.g., Williamson Act, California Environmental Quality Act, the Surface Mining and Reclamation Act, etc.), the definition for the particular statute or program needs to be used.

The Department of Conservation has referred to its "Important Farmland Series" maps to indicate farmland categories based on soil quality, but noted that unfortunately such a map only exists for a small area at the very southern end of the County. Therefore, the Department recommends that agricultural land may be identified as defined by Government Code Section 51201 (c) of the Williamson Act. This would include land which has at least one of the following qualities:

- All land which qualifies as Class I or Class II in the Soil Conservation Service's Land Capability Classification (LCC);
- Land which rates 80 through 100 in the Storie Index Rating.
- Land which supports livestock used for the production of food and fiber which has an annual carrying capacity of at least one animal unit per acre, as defined by the U.S. Department of

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- Land planted with fruit or nut-bearing trees, vines, bushes, or crops which have a nonbearing period of less than five years and which will normally return during the commercial bearing period at least \$200 per acre each year; and
- Land which has produced a crop with an annual gross value of not less than \$200 per acre for three of the previous five years.

It should be noted, however, that there are problems with these definitions. For example, the \$200 per acre figure (which was adopted in 1965) is obsolete due to inflation and fluctuating market prices. Revisions and updating of the criteria have been proposed on several occasions but have never been put into effect.

California's General Plan Guidelines also refer to terms similar to "Prime Agriculture" which are sometimes used to denote land having high agricultural value. These include:

Prime Farmland: Land with the best combination of physical and chemical characteristics for the production of agricultural crops.

Farmland of Statewide Importance: Land, other than "Prime Farmland" with a good combination of physical and chemical characteristics for the production of agricultural crops.

Unique Farmland: Land which does not meet the criteria for "Prime Farmland" or "Farmland of Statewide Importance" that is currently used for the production of high economic value crops. The California Department of Conservation maintains a list of Unique Farmland crops.

Farmland of Local Importance: Land, other than the above defined farmland types, of importance to the local agricultural economy, as determined by each county's board of supervisors.

Grazing Land: Land on which the existing vegetation is suited to the grazing or browsing of livestock.

Livestock Grazing

From a livestock management perspective, rangeland is typified as land on which natural vegetation is suitable for grazing or browsing use. They are not usually cultivated due to limited precipitation, soil features, topography, drainage and/or extreme temperature. However, it may include lands revegetated naturally or artificially to provide forage cover that is managed like native vegetation.

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(See Natural Resources Element Section 6. Rangeland for a discussion of related rangeland issues including livestock grazing on public lands.)

Livestock grazing is permitted by BLM and the Forest Service under terms and conditions set forth in grazing permits. A number of ranching operations in Lassen County rely upon these grazing allotments on public lands. (There are more than 200 grazing permittees in BLM's Susanville District alone.) The economic viability of these livestock operations is substantially dependent upon the continued and economical use of these rangeland resources. There is a direct relationship between Federal grazing privileges on dependent ranches and the economic viability and market value of the private real estate of those operations. If grazing allotments are no longer available, or are rendered economically impractical due to increased grazing fees, extensive management requirements, etc., the home ranches which depend upon them may, in turn, be rendered economically nonviable. This may cause or contribute to the financial failure of small ranching operations. The failure of these operations is tragic at the personal level to the families involved. Financial failure also contributes to pressures for the conversion of land which was once in agricultural production to other, more immediately profitable land uses.

In August 1993, the Federal government announced its intent to make major reforms in the Federal Government's policies for grazing on public lands. According to the Department of Interior's news releases, the purpose of the proposed reforms were to "bring Federal grazing fees closer to market value" and to take measures aimed at "improving the long-term health of America's rangelands" (Dept. of Interior, 1993). The announcement came in the form of draft proposals published concurrently by the Bureau of Land Management and the U.S. Forest Service.

Lassen County, as well as many rural counties in the western states, joined the livestock industry in expressing concerns over the impacts of the proposed changes in Federal rangeland management practices. In response to a notice that an Environmental Impact Statement would be prepared to address the impacts of the proposed reforms, concerns expressed by Lassen County included:

Effects on the economic viability of the local cattle industry and consequent impacts to private lands, including base ranches, which may no longer be able to survive as productive livestock operations.

The lack of consideration to the impacts on the economy of local communities, as well as impacts to their general social framework and customs.

The lack of Federal coordination with counties pursuant to the Federal Land Policy and Management Act.

The lack of environmental impact assessments at the County level to more accurately

determine and mitigate local impacts.

Concern over the proposal that local rangeland management in the form of advisory boards would be replaced by regional councils without adequate local expertise and representation.

The cumulative impacts of rangeland reform and all major changes in Federal resource management policies, including timber harvesting practices, in contributing to the economic recession of rural communities.

Conversion of Agricultural Lands

From a general land use perspective, agricultural lands have been and increasingly are subject to pressure for conversion to non-agricultural land uses and development. This is especially true in the vicinity of communities in cases where the land has agricultural value but is not owned by an active agricultural operation, or has been owned by an active operation but, for a number of reasons, the owners wish to realize a higher immediate value on the property through subdivision and development.

The pressures placed on farmers and ranchers between rising costs and diminishing prices is considerable and, in turn, has a widespread impact on local land use. For a number of reasons, including personal economic circumstances and the financial survival of a family, retirement decisions, estate planning, or simply having received a purchase offer from a land developer which they can't refuse, a farmer or rancher may propose to sell or subdivide their land.

These land use conversion pressures are exemplified by past development trends and recent development issues in areas like Johnstonville, Standish and Janesville. The relative lack of intensity in agricultural productivity and/or low cost per acre in some areas suggests to some people, from an economic standpoint alone, that lands which were once part of a larger ranch or farm may be viewed as vacant land which can be readily developed. Furthermore, it is a lifestyle choice for many people in Lassen County to seek a five, ten, or twenty-acre "ranchette" as a homesite. Over time, for example, a parcel which was once 160 acres of rangeland can become four 40-acre parcels which later is divided into 10-acre homesites. Eventually, sixteen homes or more may occupy what was once one 160-acre parcel of agricultural land.

This trend not only presents a threat for the direct conversion of agricultural land as a productive resource, it also contributes in a less obvious but nonetheless damaging way to the reduction of the economic viability of agricultural parcels. It is a commonly accepted precept in land use planning that agricultural land needs to remain in parcels large enough to support the economic viability of an operation. Although it is true that the size of an agricultural operation is important to the economic viability of an operation, economic viability is a complex issue which includes many

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factors. Interest rates, energy costs, management skills, the price of feed, fertilizers and pesticides, constraints of government regulations, land and machinery costs, labor, and other factors all contribute to the economic challenges of a successful agricultural operation. There is no standard acreage for any agricultural operation that will guarantee financial success.

In terms of land use, however, there is an "economy of scale" for an operation which is a key factor in economic viability. This scale varies with the type of crop or livestock operation. An alfalfa operation requires more land than, for example, a produce farm specializing in organic vegetables. A cattle operation which relies on rangeland grazing resources (often in association with grazing leases on Federal lands) requires more land than a feedlot operation.

Once, however, agricultural land is divided into parcels which can no longer support crop or livestock operations, it is highly unlikely that it can ever be returned to a size which will restore its economic viability. Furthermore, as the land begins to be developed, additional constraints and pressures on surrounding agricultural operations increase.

Depending on local demand, property values, and the type and extent of improvements (roads, water systems, etc.) which a developer may be required to install for a development project, one of the fastest and most economically profitable real estate projects is to acquire and subdivide agricultural land for conversion to residential or commercial land uses. Professional land developers often strategically look for rural land with development potential which can be purchased at a price much lower, relatively, than vacant land within established communities. In spite of their dedication to agriculture as a lifestyle, such opportunities are also apparent to many farmers and ranchers who may have the need or desire for additional income from their property.

Another aspect of this issue is that the encroachment of urban-type development and related land speculation produces pressures on agricultural lands that tend to discourage new agricultural investment and uses, raises the price of land making the purchase for farming or ranching purposes unrealistic, and increases the likelihood of purchase for nonagricultural use.

Still another important and often overlooked value of much agricultural land is its value as open space and wildlife habitat. Improvements such as stock ponds and irrigation channels provide water for wildlife. Deer and other animals often feed upon agricultural crops such as alfalfa. The loss of agricultural land may, in some cases, result in the loss of valuable wildlife habitat.

Conversion of agricultural land to non-agricultural uses not only removes or reduces the productive agricultural value of the land, it usually reduces other resource values such as wildlife habitat and water quality. Wildlife habitat and water quality are influenced by the land uses within the entire watershed. If an agricultural conversion increases non-point source pollution in a stream, for example, the producers on the remaining agricultural land in the watershed may come under

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increased pressure to maintain the overall quality of water resources. Similar situations could arise with an endangered species and its habitat. These impacts could reduce the long-term viability of agricultural enterprises near the converted area.

In some cases, areas which have been used for rangeland or agricultural use may present appropriate opportunities for conversion to other land uses including residential or, in special cases, industrial or commercial development. Caution needs to be exercised, however, that less apparent but nonetheless significant resource values are not overlooked and disregarded in a possibly premature conclusion that the land no longer has significant agricultural value to warrant protection and conservation. Counties are faced on a regular basis with the tough task of deciding if and when land that has been in agricultural use, or land having the resource potential (soil qualities, water, etc.) for future agricultural use, should and can be converted to non-agricultural land uses. To address these pressures in a successful, orderly manner, local agencies should establish priorities and firm public policies for consideration of project proposals involving the conversion of agricultural land.

Two of the most important steps in setting agricultural priorities is to determine which lands should be designated for agriculture and, secondly, devising means to ensure long-term conservation. This process requires an applied understanding of the physical attributes of property which contribute to production value, including soils, water availability, land use, and current and past agricultural practices. It also requires recognition of lands that may have agricultural potential but which may be needed for urban uses as part of the orderly growth of communities.

Some counties have developed scoring systems in an attempt to objectively evaluate land and determine if its agricultural resource value is such that it could be or should not be allowed to be converted. These scoring systems may consider such factors as: quantity and reliability of water; classification of soils; existing parcel size; compatibility of surrounding land uses; proximity of paved roads; and availability of fire protection. Scoring systems for "prime" cropland areas may vary from the rating systems for rangeland.

Whether or not a scoring system is utilized, a jurisdiction should make strong findings in consultation with local agricultural industry organizations to justify the conversion of agricultural lands when such conversions are approved, if for no other purpose than to cite the specific reasons it was permitted in a particular case and to avoid assumptions of a precedent generally favoring conversion of agricultural land. The principal basis of these findings could be 1.) the benefits of converting agricultural land substantially outweighs the long-term benefits of preserving agricultural production; and 2.) no other non-agricultural lands are reasonably available and suitable for the proposed development.

Incompatible Land Uses

Development projects located next to or in close proximity to agricultural lands often generate a number of incompatible land use factors. The development of residential uses may bring in people who have overly romantic and idealistic expectations of the "peace and quiet" they will find by living in the open spaces of an agricultural area. They may not appreciate the extent of work required for productive agricultural operations in the area and feel that the dust, noise, odors, and other annoyances created by nearby farming and ranching efforts impose a nuisance on their personal living environment. Homeowners may complain that the extensive pumping of water for agricultural irrigation drops the local water table, thereby adversely affecting the wells that supply their homes. In turn, dogs from residential areas may disturb and kill sheep and other livestock.

Increasingly, counties in which agriculture is an important segment of their economy and environment are emphasizing "right to farm" provisions in their ordinances and land use policies. These provisions reinforce the position of these counties that if people are purchasing or own land located near agricultural lands or operations, or are included in areas which are zoned or designated in the general plan for agricultural land use, those lands may be subject to inconveniences arising from agricultural operations. Such inconveniences or discomforts may include noise, odors, light, fumes, dust, smoke, insects, chemicals, etc. The right to farm provisions state that people living within or near agricultural areas should be prepared to accept such inconveniences as normal and necessary aspects of living in a county with a strong rural character and an active agricultural sector. Imperial County has even established a special grievance committee to assist in the resolution of disputes which might arise from residents regarding agricultural operations. Lassen County's right to farm provisions are contained in Title 6 of the Lassen County Code.

The County does consider the potential impacts on agricultural lands and operations which may be caused by proposed residential and other urban-type development near agricultural lands. The County has been cautious about allowing development which may be incompatible and intrusive on agricultural operations. In some cases, the County has considered areas which may serve as "buffers" between agriculture and potentially sensitive development. The width of such buffer areas may vary with the nature of the agricultural operations. For example, development next to a pasture with grazing livestock would not be expected to need as much of a buffer area, if any, as would development next to a feed lot or an intensively managed crop field.

Another form of conflict between development in rangeland areas and livestock operations is the fact that residents in new residential areas often complain of "open range" cattle drifting onto their property and causing damage. Lassen County is recognized by law as an open range county (California Food and Agriculture Code Section 17123(c)). Provisions in the State Code, among other things, state that, 1) Lassen County, for the purposes of these statutes, is a "county chiefly devoted to livestock grazing", and 2) because Lassen is a "county chiefly devoted to livestock

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grazing”, county residents do not have a right to take up and place a lien on an estray animal found on their premises unless the premises are entirely enclosed with a good and substantial fence.

Lassen County has supported the position that the burden is on the homeowners to fence the cattle out. Ordinance No. 492, adopted in 1989, established fencing and cattle guard requirements for subdivisions and rezoning adjacent to specified agricultural zones. The ordinance requires that the applicant of a residential project shall be required to construct perimeter fencing and cattle guards of specified standards in the event a proposed subdivision of any lands adjacent to an agricultural zone would result in parcels less than twenty acres in size.

Williamson Act and Other Conservation Programs

There are a number of programs and related measures which may mitigate or serve as alternatives to agricultural land conversions and help minimize the intrusion of incompatible land uses, many of which have already been addressed in this General Plan. These include:

- Directing incompatible or growth-inducing uses to lower quality soils in order to avoid valuable agricultural lands;
- Increasing home density, or clustering residential units, to allow a greater portion of the development area to remain in agricultural production;
- Protecting other farmland through conservation easements (e.g., the Department of Conservation’s Agricultural Land Stewardship Program, Farmland Security Zone contracts, or Williamson Act contracts);
- Establishing buffers such as setbacks, berms, greenbelts, and open space areas to separate farmland from incompatible or growth-inducing uses;
- Implementing right-to-farm ordinances; and
- Adopting long-term farmland protection policies, programs and strategies including those measures mentioned above.

In the early 1960s, agricultural property tax burdens resulting from rapid land value appreciation became so problematic that, in 1965, the Legislature passed the California Land Conservation Act, also known as the Williamson Act. The Williamson Act responded to the problems facing growers who were being forced out of farming by rising taxes on their land. The Act allows local governments to assess agricultural landowners based upon the income-producing value of their property, rather than the "highest and best use" assessed property value which had previously been the rule. The Legislature intended the Act to help farmers by providing property tax relief, and by discouraging the unnecessary and premature conversion of agricultural land to non-agricultural uses.

In 1969, the Legislature passed the companion Open Space Subvention Act. This act provides for subvention payments by the state to participating cities and counties based upon the types and

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amount of land under land conservation contracts. The subvention payments partially compensate these governments for the reduced property tax revenues from land under Williamson Act contracts.

In 1998, Lassen County reported to the California Department of Conservation that the County had a total of 300,034 acres under Williamson Act contracts.

The California Department of Conservation's Division of Land Resource Protection (DLRP) administers the new Farmland Security Zone (FSZ) provision of the Williamson Act. FSZ's provide a twenty-year contract alternative to continued enrollment of land in a Williamson Act contract. In return for the longer-term commitment, landowners receive a greater property tax benefit and, according to the Department of Conservation, protection from specific land use decisions which could jeopardize agricultural uses.

Along with the Williamson Act are additional tools which, if used thoughtfully, can help support the conservation of agricultural lands. For example, the technique of "transferable development rights", or TDR, allows development rights which are unused on one parcel of land to be severed from that parcel and transferred to another parcel. TDR can be used to achieve numerous land use and resource management goals, including the conservation of open space and agricultural lands. Communities can benefit because they can protect important resources with minimal expenses. Under TDR, a community can treat development rights (e.g., the allowable building density of a site) as a commodity which can be transferred from one site to be used at another in exchange for not developing the site from which the development "credits" are transferred. Landowners and developers can benefit from TDR because they can profit from the transfer, even though some property involved remains undeveloped.

As an example of a TDR, if a community wants to conserve a piece of prime agricultural land, it can create a program in which the land to be protected is designated as a TDR "sending area". The development rights from the sending area can be transferred to a designated "receiving area" and used to increase the density of that receiving area. After the transfer of development rights, land in the sending area is protected from future development by conservation easements, development agreements, or conveyance of ownership to a public agency or land trust.

Conservation easements are another method of protecting agricultural land. A conservation easement is a voluntary agreement between a landowner and a qualified conservation organization in which the property owner sells or otherwise conveys certain property rights (e.g., the "right" to subdivide the land) to a third party while retaining other rights, such as the right to live upon and farm the land. The landowner and the easement holder, which is typically a land trust or a public agency, mutually agree on which rights and restrictions on use are necessary for the protection of the property. Such an agreement can legally restrict development of the land which would destroy its potential for agricultural production, and yet grant the owner some additional compensation for

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protecting the land including, in some cases, tax deductions and incentives.

The Department of Conservation has advised the County that the Agricultural Land Stewardship Program (ALSP), managed by the Division of Land Resource Protection, also provides grant funds to local agencies and nonprofit organizations for acquiring conservation easements on qualified lands.

According to the Department of Conservation, the creation of Farmland Security Zones and the Agricultural Land Stewardship Program now offer a “suite” of agricultural land conservation tools ranging “from the relatively short-term protection of the Williamson Act to the virtual perpetuity of ALSP easements.” They propose that these tools could be strategically applied in Lassen County to implement general plan policies for various priorities of agricultural land conservation needs.

Water Resources

The use of wells for irrigation purposes came into being during the early 1890's. By 1910, wells as deep as 1,000 feet were being bored in the eastern Honey Lake Valley. Some wells were fortunate to hit artesian flows. Ground water occurs throughout most of Lassen County. However, wells that yield over 100 gallons per minute are found mostly in the major ground water basins.

Historically, water use in Lassen County has been dominated by irrigation for agricultural purposes. The Department of Water Resources has conducted periodic land use surveys within Lassen County since 1956. Irrigated lands within the County have increased from about 75,000 acres in 1956 to 100,000 acres in 1988 (Department of Water Resources, 1992). The increase in irrigated acres has mainly resulted from the use of ground water as opposed to surface water. An estimated 12,000 acre-feet of ground water was applied in 1956 compared to 96,000 acre-feet in 1988.

Applied water for municipal and industrial purposes is only about three percent of the volume applied for agricultural irrigation.

In 1992, the California Department of Water Resources expressed concerns that Lassen County's available water supply from surface and ground water sources was nearing total usage. Although only approximately 19 percent of Lassen County's potentially irrigable land is currently irrigated, any significant long-term increase in irrigated area has been judged to be unlikely. Continued expansion of municipal and industrial water use in the Honey Lake Valley, including Susanville, will compete for the apparently limited remaining ground water resources or will require some very expensive surface water development.

The safe yield of a ground water basin is largely a function of recharge. There is a limit to a basin's ability to sustain recharge. Predicting the point when drafting and water use exceeds recharge is

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often difficult before it has been crossed. Overdrafting a ground water basin could cause water quality degradation and subsidence. If ground water levels decline significantly due to drought or overdraft, pumping lifts may become too high to economically irrigate crops.

An issue which is of serious concern in many areas of the nation is the conversion of agricultural water supplies to serve municipal and industrial uses. Municipal and industrial uses can usually pay more for their water and can tolerate higher pumping lifts. In general, municipal and industrial users can usually afford to pump ground water long after agricultural users have had to abandon their wells. Such conversion can have a significant impact on ground water supplies and land uses which rely upon those supplies. The effect of irrigation allows for some water to infiltrate back into the upper geologic strata and recharge shallow aquifers. Municipal uses, however, tend to concentrate water runoff into sewage systems which, unless treated and reapplied through agricultural uses or other methods, is lost to the recharge of the ground water system.

Water transfers, or water marketing, is increasingly an issue in rural areas as the steady increase in municipal water needs, as well as agricultural needs in areas of limited water availability, have forced cities and water districts to pursue water supply alternatives. Water transfers involves the sale or transfer of water or water rights from one user or use to another.

The potential of water exportation from Lassen County ground water basins has, over the last several years, become more threatening with the promotion by Washoe County, Nevada, and private interests to construct the "Truckee Meadows Project". This project proposed to pump and pipe ground water from the Honey Lake Valley to serve development in the Lemmon and Spanish Springs Valleys north of Reno. The County of Lassen protested the proposal because a substantial part of the water source area was on Lassen County's side of the valley and the proposed amounts of water that would be extracted were expected to result in a significant drawdown of Lassen County's ground water resources. It was feared that this drawdown would have had a number of adverse resource and related environmental impacts.

The issue of water transfers may affect areas of the County other than the Honey Lake Valley. For example, it may be possible for water marketers to pump groundwater from the Big Valley area into the Pit River and sell it downstream (e.g., along the Sacramento River) to municipal users or water districts in need of additional water supplies. The greater the need, the higher the price and, consequently, the less regard to local land use water needs and environmental impacts.

Although most ground water in California is available to anyone who can pump it, existing or potential problems with unrestrained ground water withdrawals can result in the need for formal management programs. Ground water districts can play an important role in managing ground water resources and regulating its use.

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In 1980, the California State legislature adopted the Sierra Valley Groundwater Basin Act (SB 1391, Chapter 449 and amended by Chapter 986, Statutes of 1980). This Act authorized the formation of two groundwater districts, one of which became the Long Valley Ground Water District comprised of portions of Lassen and Sierra Counties within the Long Valley ground water basin. The need for this district resulted as a response to the drilling of large wells on the Nevada side of Long Valley near Bordertown and concern that the basin would be overdrafted. The act gives the district the power to curtail or suspend pumping and to ban exportation of ground water out of the basin in the event of overdrafting or water quality problems.

In 1989, the Honey Lake Valley Ground Water Basin Act, modeled after the Long Valley Act, was authorized by legislation (SB 1721, Chapter 1392, Statutes of 1989). Once again, the impetus for formation of the district and institution of water extraction regulations was largely a response to the intentions of Nevada interests to pump groundwater out of the basin.

Lassen County has also supported formation of a "Willow Creek Valley Groundwater Management District" to give land owners in that area the ability to manage groundwater resources. Legislation was proposed to form this district in 1993. In 1995, legislation for the "Surprise Valley Groundwater Basin Act" was enacted, authorizing the creation of the Surprise Valley Groundwater Management District. Although this area is primarily in Modoc County, it includes a portion of Lassen County.

The County of Lassen, in partnership with Modoc County, is part of the "Lassen-Modoc County Flood Control and Water Conservation District". The District, formed in 1959, consists of all the territory of Lassen County and the area of Modoc County situated within the Pit River drainage. Among the purposes of the district is the purpose to, "provide for the acquisition, retention, and reclaiming of drainage, storm, flood, and other waters and to save, conserve, and distribute such waters for the beneficial use in said district".

Another example of attempts by outside areas to claim water resources currently serving rural areas such as Lassen County is the "Bay-Delta" issue. Based on conclusions that higher volumes of water are needed in the summer to protect fish populations in California's river deltas, proposals have been made to force holders of water rights in source areas inland to relinquish some of their water rights to provide additional water for downstream use. Proposals have even included curtailing and, to some extent, confiscating long established "pre-1914" water rights. Although the Bay-Delta proposals are primarily aimed at surface water resources, related proposals are also seeking to extract ground water resources. When surface water flows are reduced, especially in drought periods, conjunctive uses (e.g., pumping and transferring ground water to augment surface water deficiencies) are being contemplated.

Reductions of water right allocations could significantly affect agriculture irrigation resources and

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other beneficial uses of water by irrigation districts, community service districts, and individual water users in these source areas. The proposed transfer of water resources out of the water basins may also result in depletion of water resources and significant impacts to dependent vegetation and wildlife habitats. Rural counties, the Regional Council of Rural Counties, and other advocates of the water rights of "counties of origin" have claimed, along with other points of opposition, that the relative volume of water gained by curtailment of water rights in these areas would have minimal benefit for California's bays and deltas compared to the injury which will be incurred in rural areas due to the lack of storage capacity and other water resource alternatives, as well as environmental impacts caused by the depletion of water resources.

Agricultural Community Recommendations

In June, 1995, the Lassen County Farm Bureau and the Lassen County Cattlemen's Association worked together to formulate a list of agriculture policies. These policies were intended to represent the concerns and needs of the local agricultural community and industry with regards to land use issues and related public policy. The County of Lassen was asked to consider the following points and position statements in implementation of its general plan, and in consideration of a revision of the County's general plan:

Recognize farmland as an important resource that is worth protecting by including an agricultural element in the County General Plan.

Protect water resources necessary for agricultural production.

Recognize a right-to-farm ordinance to minimize conflicts at the urban-rural interface.

Encourage implementation of sphere of influence and annexation policies to facilitate orderly, compact development and efficient use of infrastructure.

Support infill growth and higher suburban densities prior to expansion onto agricultural land for more efficient use of our land resources.

Oppose the creation of new towns or any urban "leap frog" centers in agricultural areas without strict mitigation of all on-site and off-site impacts on ongoing agricultural operation.

Seek implementation of mitigation measures to reduce the impacts of projects that convert agricultural land (e.g., purchase of conservation easements or transfer of development credits).

Protect the integrity of the California Land Conservation Act (Williamson Act).