

MERCED COUNTY UNIVERSITY COMMUNITY PLAN
POLICY DISCUSSION PAPER

Agricultural Resources

Revised July 10, 2001

INTRODUCTION

Merced County is located near the center of California in the San Joaquin Valley. It is bounded by the Sierra Nevada Mountains to the east and the Coast Range to the west. Merced County ranks as one of the top ten agricultural counties in the state for the overall production of agricultural goods and in the top five for some crops. The soil consists of a large fertile alluvial fan in the east side of the county resulting from centuries of erosion in the Sierras.

Various row crops and orchards are grown in the eastern portion of the County due to the water supply and superior soil quality.

ISSUES

Development of the University Community Plan (UCP) area will result in the loss of productive agricultural lands including croppable farmland and irrigated pasture. The lands within the UCP area are all designated agricultural by the California Department of Conservation Farmland Mapping and Monitoring Program; the site is comprised of a combination of Prime Farmland, Farmland of Statewide Importance, Unique Farmland, Farmland of Local Importance, and Grazing land. With the exception of the portion of the Merced Hills Golf Course included in the UCP area, the northern portion of the site is actively used for grazing cattle and the southern portion is used for the production of tomatoes and corn rotated with oats and wheat. Furthermore, lands to the south and southeast are rich farmland soils planted in crops such as almonds, walnuts, cotton, tomatoes and corn. In addition to the loss of agricultural lands within the UCP area, implementation of the UCP could result in the premature conversion or development of surrounding agricultural lands. Given the importance and value that Merced County places on the preservation and conservation of farmland and agricultural productivity, all reasonable efforts should be taken to avoid adverse effects on nearby farmland or agricultural productivity. The following policies would prevent the premature loss of agricultural lands and use within the UCP area and would preserve and protect important agricultural lands surrounding the UCP area.

REVISED POLICY FRAMEWORK

Agricultural Preservation within the University Community Plan

Goal 1: Continued agricultural productivity within the UCP area prior to development.

Objective A: Orderly development within the UCP area to minimize impacts to agricultural resources.

Policy 1A-1: Development will be phased from north to south. Locate initial uses in the northern portion of the Community with subsequent phases extending to the southern boundary of the UCP.

Policy 1A-2: Establish urban development boundaries to define each phase of development.

Policy 1A-3: Require all new development and infrastructure to locate within the defined UCP urban development boundary until a majority of its capacity (50 percent or greater) has been exhausted through the entitlement process. When this threshold is reached, the County will consider expansion of the urban development boundary.

Objective B: Maximize use of productive agricultural soils within the UCP area.

Policy 1B-1: Allow agricultural production to occur within the UCP area, for as long as possible, during development of the site.

Policy 1B-2: The UCP Area shall adopt and enforce the County of Merced's Right-to-Farm Ordinance that requires nonagricultural residents be made aware of local agricultural operations, their practices, and the potential agriculturally related impacts (noise, odors, dust, etc.).

Policy 1B-3: The County shall provide materials such as brochures and pamphlets to all future residents of the UCP area informing them about the effects of agricultural activities that states residents within the UCP area may be subject to inconveniences or discomfort arising from the use of agricultural chemicals, such as fertilizers and pesticides; and from the pursuit of agricultural operations including but not limited to, plowing, spraying, and burning which occasionally may generate dust, smoke, noise and odor.

Goal 2: Compensate for the loss of productive agricultural land due to development of the UCP Area.

Objective A: Mitigate for the loss of productive farmland within the UCP area.

Policy 2A-1: Require preservation of off-site productive agricultural lands at a one to one (1:1) mitigation ratio, or another ratio that the Board of Supervisors deems necessary and feasible, for the loss of productive agricultural land within the UCP area.

Implementation

Requirements

Agricultural mitigation shall be required for zone changes from an Agricultural Zoning Classification to a Non-Agricultural Zoning Classification for all lands within the UCP area (including land designated by the Department of Conservation as Prime Farmland, Unique Farmland, Farmland of Statewide Importance, Farmland of Local Importance, and Grazing land, prior to or concurrent with approval of a change in zoning by the County. Preservation of one acre of agricultural land shall be required for each acre of agricultural land changed to a non-agricultural zoning classification (1:1 ratio) or preservation of a specified acreage of agricultural land shall be required for each acre of agricultural land changed to a non-agricultural zoning classification as deemed necessary and feasible by the Board of Supervisors. Agricultural mitigation shall be satisfied by one of the following:

1. Granting, in perpetuity, a voluntary farmland conservation easement, a farmland deed restriction, or other farmland conservation mechanism to, or for the benefit of, a qualifying entity acceptable and approved by the County; and, the payment of fees sufficient to compensate for all administrative costs incurred by the County, easement holder inclusive of trust funds for the purpose of legal defense, monitoring and all other services provided; or
2. Upon adoption of an Agricultural Conservation Easement Program by the County, payment of an in-lieu fee sufficient to purchase a voluntary farmland conservation easement, farmland deed restriction, or other farmland conservation easement mechanism consistent with the provisions of this section; and, the payment of fees sufficient to compensate for all administrative costs incurred, inclusive of trust funds for the purpose of legal defense, monitoring and all other services provided. The in-lieu fee, paid to a qualifying entity acceptable and approved by the County, shall be used for agricultural mitigation purposes only, i.e., purchases of voluntary conservation easements.

Eligible Lands

Lands shall be of comparable productivity based on the California Department of Conservation and shall meet all of the following criteria to qualify as agricultural mitigation:

1. Lands identified by the California Department of Conservation Farmland Mapping and Monitoring Program as Prime Farmland, Farmland of Statewide Importance, Unique Farmland, Farmland of Local Importance, and Grazing land;
2. The land shall have an adequate water supply for the purposes of irrigation. The water supply shall be comparable to, or better than, the land that is the subject of a change in zoning classification, and shall be sufficient to support ongoing agricultural uses. The water supply shall be protected through legal instrument acceptable to County Counsel, which ensures that water rights permanently remain with the mitigation land;
3. The mitigation land shall be located within the County of Merced;
4. The mitigation land may overlap partially with existing habitat easement areas, as determined by the County and approved by the California Department of Fish and Game; however, land previously encumbered by any other agricultural conservation easement shall not qualify, or be used for agricultural mitigation.

Instruments

All voluntary farmland conservation easements, voluntary farmland deed restrictions, or other voluntary farmland conservation mechanisms shall be implemented through a legal instrument acceptable to County Counsel and signed by all owners with an interest in the mitigation land. The instrument shall prohibit any activity that substantially impairs or diminishes the agricultural productivity of the mitigation land.

Instruments that convey interest in the mitigation land to a qualifying entity, shall name a qualified entity the beneficiary. If any qualifying entity owning an interest in mitigation land ceases to exist, the duty to hold, administer, monitor, and enforce the interest shall pass to the County, or other qualifying entity as acceptable and approved by the County.

Policy 2A-2: During build-out of the UCP, designate areas of prime farmland as community gardens.

Policy 2A-3: Where possible, existing prime agricultural land within the UCP area shall be incorporated as open space into the final design of the community. Open space uses could include parks, community gardens, educational/research activities.

Goal 3: Reduce the potential for agricultural and urban land use conflicts.

Objective A: Minimize agricultural and urban land use conflicts.

Policy 3A-1: An adequate open space buffer will be established at the southern edge of the UCP area. This buffer will accommodate passive uses such as open space, parks, certified organic farming, or natural preserves.

Implementation

The buffer shall include a windrow of trees will be planted to clearly define the boundary edge and to shield residents from agricultural activities that occur south of the UCP area.

Agricultural Preservation for the University Community Area Plan

Goal 4: Strengthen economic and social linkages between UCP urban consumers and regional small scale farms.

Objective A: Promote Community Supported Agriculture by encouraging local farmers to deliver agricultural products directly to consumers.

Policy 4A-1: Encourage the development of agricultural retail businesses by promoting local agricultural events and other direct marketing programs by advertising for them through regional media.

Policy 4A-2: In coordination with the Merced County Agricultural Commissioner's Office, facilitate a farmers' market in the UCP area by providing a suitable low-cost site in a central location and other resources to develop and promote it.

Policy 4A-3: Increase access to affordable fruits, vegetables, and healthy food for all UCP residents through support of farmer's markets, community supported agriculture, produce stands and other farm to neighborhood marketing strategies.

Policy 4A-4: Provide accurate, on-going, and culturally appropriate nutrition education to residents promoting increased consumption of fruits, vegetables and complex carbohydrates.

Policy 4A-5: When possible, encourage the use of local agricultural goods for use in local restaurants, schools, and grocery stores.

Goal 5: Preservation of important farmlands south and east of the UCP area.

Objective A: Protect land located south of UCP boundary and immediately east of the City of Merced.

Policy 5A-1: The SUDP boundary shall be an urban limit line, defining the ultimate development area of the UCP.

Policy 5A-2: Future voluntary conservation easements should be targeted for land located south of the UCP boundary and immediately east of the City of Merced.

Implementation

(See Policy 2A-1)

A mitigation bonus will be provided for acquisition of voluntary conservation easements located in the above area.

Policy 5A-3: Establish an Agricultural Green Belt Agreement with the City of Merced.

Implementation

The County will enter into an agreement with the City of Merced that:

1. Reiterates the commitment of both jurisdictions to preservation of agricultural lands east of the City of Merced;
2. Establishes appropriate oversight, information exchange and approval processes by the Board of Supervisors and the City Council for changes of zoning to urban uses within the area south of the UCP boundary and immediately east of the City of Merced.

Objective B: Infrastructure for the UCP area will be designed to accommodate development of the UCP.

Policy 5B-1: Infrastructure should be designed to only accommodate development within the UCP SUDP boundary.