

Will Development Spoil Yolo County Agriculture?

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As the pace of residential and commercial development in Yolo County accelerates, concern about the future of local agriculture and of valuable farmland is again a central topic of community discourse. From the standpoint of sensible land use policy, it would seem to be self-evident that paving over ever larger portions of some of the most productive cropland in the United States will eventually harm our state's ability to provide the bounty of food that we enjoy. Therefore, it is of great importance that we carefully review how our state and county is faring in the face of the supposed threat of more development.

In what follows, the discussion will primarily rely on the *Census of Agriculture*, conducted every five years, because it provides the most comprehensive data on farming, ranching and land use in agriculture, at both the state and county levels. The most recently completed agricultural census was completed in 2002, and published last year. Moreover, a fine review of California's agricultural land use issues, relying on the 1997 agricultural census, by Prof. John Fraser Hart, informs this approach to the problem (cf. "Specialty Cropland in California," *The Geographical Review* 93(2):153-170, April 2003).

First, despite the enormous growth in population and spreading of cities onto agricultural land, California farmers reported that the state's harvested cropland increased from just under 8 million acres in 1950 to 8.5 million acres 2002, a gain of more than 500,000 acres. Yolo County farmers reported a rise of over 50,000 acres in harvested cropland, from roughly 265,000 acres in 1950 to more than 315,000 acres in 2002.

Second, in that same half-century period, the state's farmers reported that land in orchards (trees and vines) increased from about 1.5 million acres to nearly 2.9 million acres. In other words, an immensely greater acreage was newly planted to tree crops and vineyards in this period than was lost to any other factor, including urban growth. Some of these new plantings were on cropland formerly devoted to pasture, as can be witnessed by anyone driving between Sacramento and Stockton. The recent film "Sideways" has as its background scenery, vineyard land along the southern Central Coast that was in pasture or field crops just a generation ago. Yolo County farmers reported that land in orchards in our county increased from about 17,100 acres in 1950 to 42,400 acres in 2002.

Third, harvested vegetable acreage in the California increased from about 538,000 acres in 1950 to nearly 1,200,000 acres in 2002. In the same period, Yolo County farmers reported that harvested vegetable acreage increased by nearly 38,000 acres, from 17,000 in 1950 to 54,700 in 2002.

Fourth, irrigated land in the state rose from 6.4 million acres to 8.7 million acres in that fifty-year time frame. In Yolo County, irrigated land shot up from just under 140,000 acres to nearly 300,000 acres, a whopping 114% increase.

And it doesn't stop at these measures. Whether it's acreage planted to strawberries, square feet of greenhouses devoted to ornamental plants and flowers, or output of milk, California leads the nation. Not only has our state long ago surpassed

Wisconsin's milk output, but we will also soon take the privilege of wearing cheese hats away from our Midwestern cousins.

By nearly every measure, the state's agriculture is doing very well. In fact, a recent U.S. Department of Agriculture report finds that California farmers' cash receipts from the sale of crops and livestock in 2004 exceeded \$30 billion for the first time ever, reaching a total of \$31.8 billion. The latter figure is just about as great as what is reported for the next two leading states combined, Iowa and Texas. This number is so big that it's hard to wrap one's mind around it; it is more than three times larger than the combined annual box office receipts from all motion picture theaters in America.

Not all the news about the state's farmland is as good as reported above for harvested cropland, land in orchards, or harvested vegetable acreage. The state's total of what the agricultural census describes as 'land in farms' has decreased sharply between 1950 and 2002, down from 36.6 million acres to 27.6 million acres, a decrease of just over 9 million acres. The term 'land in farms' refers to all farm and ranch land, including dryland range. By this measure, the outlook doesn't look nearly as bright and is a cause for concern among some.

Similarly, the state's total of cropland fell from about 13.8 million acres to just under 11 million acres, a decrease of nearly 2.8 million acres in about fifty years. Yolo County's cropland also fell, but by only a much smaller fraction, from 387,000 acres to 371,000 acres.

Great care must be exercised in interpreting these figures. For example, as Prof. Hart was alert to point out, the largest decrease of 'land in farms' was a decline of over 6 million acres of 'farm woodland.' That is, over two-thirds of the loss of 'land in farms' was of wooded land, most of which was used exclusively for livestock grazing. Of the 2.8 million acre decrease of cropland, about 2.2 million was of a decline of cropland used only for pasture or grazing.

Neither of these two factors should be cause for the degree of alarm that some advocates express about the loss of farmland. Of course, since 1950, California has witnessed the virtual elimination of crop farming in the southern California basin, and the loss of more than 135,000 of orchards. The Santa Clara Valley, extending south of San Jose, similarly lost over 75,000 acres of tree fruit land.

The enormous expansion of fruit and vegetable production in other parts of the state, notably our own Central Valley, and in the Salinas and southern desert valleys, has far more than simply replaced those regions given over to urban encroachment. Just since 1974 alone, annual California farm production of fruits and vegetables has increased from about 21 million to 34 million tons per year, an increase only partly due to expanded acreage. To those who argue that the loss of prime farmland pushes agriculture onto less desirable soils, the increase in average crop yields in some fruit crops and vegetables over the past fifty years, suggests that this broad claim must be reexamined more carefully.

The state's dairy industry is currently undergoing a similar relocation of production with the vast dairies of the Chino basin, where the world's largest assemblage of dairy cows in 1997 extended over an area of just 30 square miles. New residential developments are now standing on much of that land and more will be built in the coming years. Dairy farmers are using the windfall from these land sales to move their herds to newly purchased land in the Central Valley and replace outmoded facilities with state-of-

the-art equipment. No wonder that a recent report commissioned by the California Milk Advisory Board projects that milk and cheese production in the Golden State will continue to increase at a record pace.

Not every farmer is sanguine. Some crops that were formerly major parts of our state and local agriculture have all but disappeared. Barley and sugar beet acreage have plummeted, not for lack of suitable land, but instead as a result of other factors. Tomato farmers and those growing peaches and pears for canning have experienced major shocks owing to the bankruptcy and closing of Tri-Valley Growers and the shutdown of our local Hunt Wesson tomato processing plant.

In the past several years, thousands of acres of wine grape vineyards have been pulled, not because of relentless urbanization, but because below-breakeven prices for some grape varieties forced some farmers to quit. As consumers, we gained the benefit of these low prices. Remember 'Two-buck Chuck'? Farmers need adequate prices just to survive, but sometimes their enormous capacity for higher production forces prices in the wrong direction.

Major challenges lie ahead for both state and Yolo County agriculture. Just five years ago, the U.S. exported more fruit, nut and vegetable crops than were imported. Today, the situation has reversed. Garlic for processing imported from China, and asparagus imports from Mexico and Peru have already led to readjustments among some farmers growing those crops.

Our nation's farm policy has still failed to help boost prices for staple commodities to a level that many small and medium scale producers believe they need to survive. The billions of annual USDA payments to farmers will become a major target in upcoming budget debates and in the discourse over the 2007 farm bill authorization. International trade agreements, vital to our nation's exports, including agricultural products, have led to formal complaints, upheld by the WTO, that some of our agricultural industries, such as cotton, are unfairly subsidized by government payments, to the detriment of poorer nations, like Brazil, who depend upon world trade in agricultural commodities for much of their farmers' income.

Competition for limited water supplies is becoming more severe with each passing year. Already thousands of acres of land in the Imperial Valley have been fallowed to allow for the sale and transfer of water that had been earmarked for irrigation to the rapidly growing population of San Diego County. In the Central Valley, the Westlands Water District has permanently retired tens of thousands of acres of farmland owing to inadequate irrigation supplies and severe drainage problems.

California agriculture has great advantages as compared with nearly every other state, most notably climate and vast lands that are capable of producing an ever-increasing abundance of nutritious foods. Nevertheless, meeting the challenges described above will not be an easy task.

However, conversion of farm land to residential or commercial use does not rank nearly as high a concern as do the factors described above. Yolo County residents who want to support our local farmers can do so by shopping at farmers markets, through community supported agriculture, and patronizing stores that feature locally-grown farm products. It is a testimony to Yolo County agriculture that our county ranks first among all 3,000 counties in the nation in the percent of our county's crop production that is certified organic.