

A SACRAMENTO BEE SPECIAL REPORT

VANISHING FARMLAND



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A population boom that could boost California's population by 27 million over the next 40 years poses considerable peril for one of the state's key industries: a \$27 billion agriculture business that helps feed the entire world.

While there is still plenty of land for agriculture, much of the best land is disappearing at an alarming rate as cities expand. And millions of additional acres could be swallowed up unless our leaders make some hard decisions regarding land use.

In the meantime, many farmers and city dwellers already are locked in conflict at the "edge," where subdivisions end and farming begins.

Over the next three days, we will be giving you a look at this critical issue for California and explore some of the solutions. We hope you'll enjoy this thought-provoking series.

Rick Rodriguez, Executive Editor

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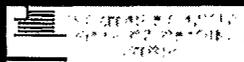
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Housing is Valley's new cash crop

By Dale Kasler
Bee Staff Writer

Published October 18, 1998

From his dairy farm south of Elk Grove, where his immigrant father started out more than 50 years ago, Tony Machado can see them coming: the suburbs creeping closer, their evening lights burning brighter.

He figures he's farming on borrowed time.

"It's too late for me now," said Machado, whose land is likely to get developed in a few years. "There's nothing I can do to stop it."

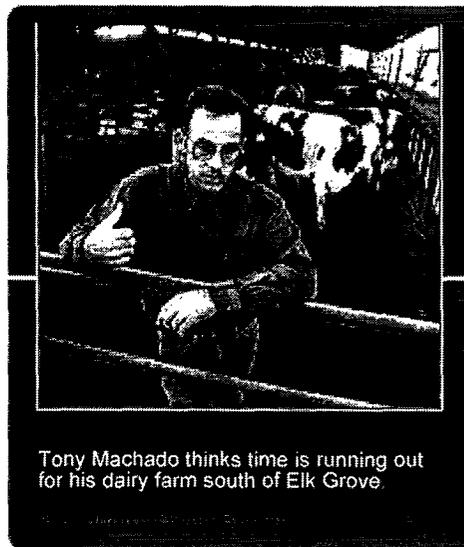
As California braces for its next great population explosion, a boom that will add 27 million people in 40 years, legions of farmers, land preservationists and others are sounding an alarm. They say this 21st-century human tidal wave could overwhelm one of the nation's most precious natural resources: California farmland.

From Elk Grove to Tracy, from Fresno to Chino, the relentless sprawl of suburbia could jeopardize an industry that produces half the nation's fruits, nuts and vegetables, some experts say. Eventually such a development could raise serious food-security questions for the nation, and turn America from the world's breadbasket into a major importer of food and fiber, they say.

"You continue to have this incremental taking of farmland, and pretty soon you're going to end up with something pretty significant," said Ann Veneman, secretary of the California Department of Food and Agriculture. "It's a serious concern."

Much of the concern is over the Central Valley, the agricultural jewel prized for its rich soils, Mediterranean-like climate and stunning diversity of crops. With the population between Redding and Bakersfield expected to more than double over the next 40 years, the preservationist group American Farmland Trust has labeled the Valley the nation's most "threatened" farming region.

"Most of the land that's available for development is in the Valley," said Thomas Hutchings, Sacramento County's planning director. "The economy of this state is moving from the coast to the inland valleys."



Tony Machado thinks time is running out for his dairy farm south of Elk Grove.

Rudy Platzek, a retired urban planner who's studied Valley development, warns of a day late in the 21st century when nearly half the Valley's farmland will have been devoured by "one linear mega-city from Marysville to the Tehachapi along the Highway 99 corridor." The farmland trust says the Valley could lose 1 million acres, or 15 percent of its farmland, by 2040.

Subdivisions are sprouting not just in the obvious places, like Elk Grove and Tracy, but also in burbs like Woodland, Salida and Los Banos -- quiet Valley farm towns morphing into bustling bedroom communities.

In Turlock, a mostly agricultural community south of Modesto, Earl Reed watched a housing development go up across the street from his corn farm and shook his head.

"I knew it was coming," said Reed, 69. "But it's a shock to see it happen so fast."

Scores of interviews with farmers, land preservationists, urban planners and developers reveal a problem that defies easy solutions:

- While California still has an abundance of farmland, nearly 29 million acres, much has been lost already and more will disappear in the future. The Center for the Continuing Study of the California Economy says the state will need 4.3 million additional housing units by 2020, a development that experts say could consume up to 1 million acres of land.
- Urban service boundaries -- lines around cities beyond which growth isn't supposed to occur for the foreseeable future -- and other efforts to control sprawl don't always work. And many towns, particularly in the Central Valley, welcome urbanization as an antidote to decades of laggard economic growth. They also are reluctant to embrace anti-sprawl solutions such as higher housing densities.
- As land gets developed, more farmers get drawn into a sort of "zone of conflict" with their new urban neighbors. Farming on the edge of a subdivision raises farmers' costs, cramps their style and increases their temptation to sell to developers.

To be sure, it's far too early to write off California agriculture. Farmers' revenue jumped 6 percent last year to a record \$26.8 billion. California farmers have shown a remarkable capacity to increase their productivity and switch to high-value crops like apricots and wine grapes, fueling higher revenues even while land disappears.

"So what if we lose half our agricultural land? So long as farmers have the ability to produce (high-value) commodities that people want to buy, that works for agriculture," said director Don Villarejo of the Davis-based California Institute for Rural Studies.

Moreover, there's some dispute about how quickly farmland is disappearing.

The U.S. census of agriculture 1 pegs the annual loss at about 300,000 acres. But another federal program, the Department of Agriculture's National Resources Inventory, says about 66,000 acres a year are vanishing. And in a report covering 1994 to 1996, the state Department of Conservation says farmland loss was nonexistent, although the state did lose about 38,000 acres of its best land.

Anecdotal evidence also can be confusing. A city dweller driving through fast-growing communities like Davis or North Natomas might well conclude that urbanization is everywhere. But that overlooks the millions of acres lying undisturbed, far, far away from the nearest subdivision.

"There's lots and lots of land in the Valley between Bakersfield and Sacramento," said Mike Souza, a Tracy farmer and real estate executive whose family recently sold a 70-acre parcel for development. "Tons and tons, and acres and acres."

Added Tim Coyle of the California Building Industry Association: "The problem is exaggerated."

Developers say most projects proceed slowly, pausing for government reviews, recessions and other roadblocks. Ten years ago Elliott Homes began buying a 1,600-acre cow pasture by Folsom for a community called Broadstone. By the time it's finished, the project will have taken 18 years.

"These things just don't happen willy-nilly," said Russ Davis, an Elliott vice president.



"I knew it was coming," says Turlock farmer Earl Reed as a housing development goes up across the street. "But it's a shock to see it happen so fast."

Yet preservationists say that's precisely the point: Slow, incremental development ends up devouring big chunks of land.

"Demands have already been made now for land that is going to be developed over the next 10 years," said Shawn Stevenson, a rancher and pistachio grower near the Fresno suburb of Clovis. "Land has been bought, plans have been made, momentum is being generated.

"You can't wait 20 or 40 years from now to decide we've been exhausting everything."

Every acre of farmland that gets converted to urban use puts several more acres in the path of future development, "like ripples on a pond," said Larry Goldzband, director of the Department of Conservation. The market value of the farmland rises as speculation heats up, raising rents for farmers who lease. The temptation grows, too: Land that's worth \$3,000 an acre for agriculture can be worth \$25,000 or more for development.

"This is my dad's retirement," said Chuck Tusso, whose elderly father owns farmland near Tracy that could be developed some day.

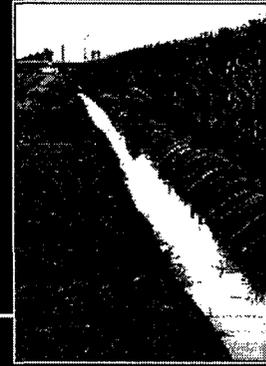
Tellingly, the farmland issue is being raised not only by "hippie farmers" and left-leaning 3 organizations like the farmland trust, said the trust's California director, Erik Vink.

Now the leading voice on this matter is the conservative California Farm Bureau Federation, which used to stay out of the debate because it didn't want to infringe on a farmer's right to sell. The bureau recently teamed with the farmland trust to warn of "an accelerating loss of productive agricultural land" and call for income tax credits, more affordable water and other incentives to keep land in agriculture.

Indeed, the preservationist movement is gaining allies. Counties and cities more often are saying "no" to urbanization, as when Stanislaus County's Local Area 4 Formation Commission rejected Modesto's request two years ago to earmark for development a huge chunk of prime farmland.

Public and privately funded land trusts have locked away thousands of important acres in Sonoma, Yolo, Monterey and other counties by paying premiums to farmers who agree never to sell to developers.

Another 16 million acres of California farmland are covered by the Williamson Act, the historic 1965 state law that provides property tax breaks for farmland owners who agree not to sell to developers for 10 years at a time. The law imposes a penalty on land sales that break the Williamson agreements (The bill's author, former Assemblyman John C. Williamson, died last Sunday). Gov. Pete Wilson recently signed into law the so-called "Super Williamson Act," providing heftier incentives for those willing to lock away their land for 20 years at a



Early in the morning, Tony Machado resets siphon tubes along an irrigation ditch to water corn being raised to feed dairy cows. Machado's dairy farm south of Elk Grove has been in his family since the 1940s.

time.

Many communities also have adopted urban service boundaries. But those boundaries aren't unbreakable; Sacramento County is considering a development near Rancho Murieta that would leapfrog its urban boundary. In San Bernardino County, population pressures are crashing in on a 15,000-acre land preserve established 30 years ago to protect the dairy farms around Chino.



Ruth Machado helps son Troy fax a parts order for farm machinery.

"You do as well as you can for as long as you can," sighed Larry Walker, a San Bernardino supervisor who fought against developing the dairy land.

What's especially worrisome to some preservationists is the caliber of the land at risk. According to the USDA's National Resources Inventory, nearly 2 percent of the California farmland classified as "prime" was urbanized from 1982 to 1992.

"The cities are unfortunately located on the best soils," said Stanislaus County planner Ron Freitas.

Some land may well be priceless. Land preservationists in Monterey County worry that suburban sprawl from San Jose could elbow aside farmland that grows most of the nation's supply of artichokes, broccoli, cauliflower and a few other crops.

"This is the most significant area in the world for summer vegetables," said Brian Rianda, director of the Monterey County Agricultural and Historical Land Conservancy. "We're fooling with our breadbasket."

Urbanization isn't the only factor in eroding farmland. Environmental programs also play a role.

The CalFed project, a joint venture between the state and federal governments, wants to buy and take out of production 188,000 acres of farmland to improve water flows and aid the environment of the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta. Many of the land purchases would occur in the Delta, but the proposal has sparked criticism from farmers all over.

Farmers in the Sacramento Valley fear CalFed's plan more than urbanization, said Rich Golb of the Northern California Water Association, which represents 66 water districts north of Sacramento.

Yet throughout much of California, in the long run the bigger concern is urban development, preservationists agree.

Suburbanites are even moving into farm towns once thought immune from the development craze.

In Woodland, for example, the influx of warehouses and distribution centers has brought economic growth -- and an emotional debate over the community's future.

When the city was updating its general plan in 1994, it proposed taking for development 5 several hundred acres of farmland owned by relatives of Steve Borchard, a city councilman and a farmer.

The idea broke Borchard's heart. While he couldn't participate in the council proceedings because of a conflict of interest, it was well known that he opposed the plan. Eventually the city agreed to develop elsewhere.

Borchard's stance angered some relatives. "It was their land, but I didn't want to see it plowed under," he said. "They felt I kept them from reaping their rewards."

The same kind of debate is going on in Tracy, another longtime agricultural community that is becoming a bedroom community. As population spills over from the East Bay, city officials have embraced plans for 20,000 new homes in the next 15 years or so.

Many have embraced Tracy's new status as a role model for San Joaquin County: growing, prosperous, no longer dependent on a farm economy that typically yields high unemployment.

Others there worry about the future of farming. Dairy farmer Leroy Ornellas has received informal inquiries from developers on land his parents bought 50 years ago.

"We look around and say, "Are we going to be able to be here? Where would we go?" Ornellas said.

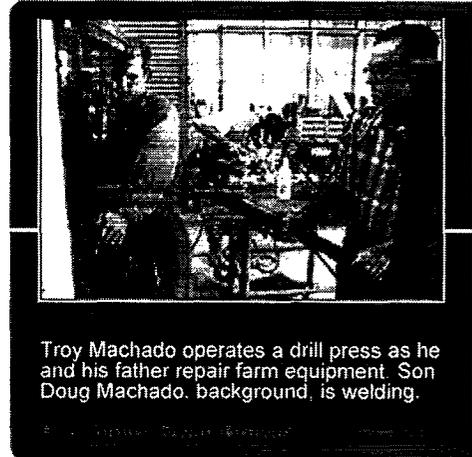
Until now, the question of "where" hasn't been a big worry for California farmers. They've been able to pick up and move. When Santa Clara County became Silicon Valley, they headed east. When the Los Angeles area filled up, they headed north, with little fuss.

Fred Douma sold his dairy farm in Riverside County three years ago and used the proceeds to build a 515-acre spread southeast of Tracy. "I got to build a better and bigger facility," he said matter-of-factly.

But some worry that eventually, farmers won't be able to relocate.

"There's not another move after this," said Bob Feenstra, a dairy-industry executive in Chino who's watched that industry migrate out of Southern California. "Where are you going to go?"

Which is how Tony Machado feels.



Troy Machado operates a drill press as he and his father repair farm equipment. Son Doug Machado, background, is welding.

The dairy farm that's been in his family since the '40s is part of a 4,300-acre stretch of agricultural land south of Elk Grove that Sacramento County officials say will be converted over the next few years into houses, schools and a shopping mall.

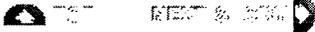
For years, while the economy was fallow, Machado didn't hear much about development. But county officials visited recently to discuss a new high school that's supposed to be built 1,000 feet north of his land. Reality is setting in.

"At my age, I hate the thought of having to go somewhere else," said Machado, 51. "It scares me, makes me nervous."

True, Machado will be handsomely rewarded for his land -- perhaps to the tune of \$25,000 an acre, for a total of \$5 million.

But that seems like small consolation to him and his wife, Ruth.

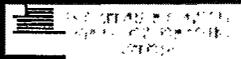
"Fifteen years ago, if somebody had said we were going to be in this position, we would have said they were crazy," Ruth Machado said. "We thought we were going to live here the rest of our lives."



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It isn't just the land that's fought over -- it's the water, too

By Dale Kasler
Bee Staff Writer

Published October 18, 1998

FIREBAUGH, Fresno County -- It isn't much to look at, a narrow 835-acre parcel of so-so quality farmland in the middle of nowhere.

To Grupe Development Co., though, it's a thing of beauty -- not the corn, sugar beets and alfalfa so much as the concrete canal bordering the north side of the tract.

The canal is filled with shimmering water from the federal government's Central Valley Project, and that's what Grupe wants. The developer purchased this property from farmer Jean Sagousse about 18 months ago in order to divert the water 80 miles northwest, to a subdivision Grupe has planned west of the fast-growing city of Tracy.

But Fresno County is suing to block the arrangement. Grupe Development's plan would lead to "unmitigated depletion of groundwater and loss of agricultural land in the county of Fresno," the lawsuit says. Grupe denies the allegation, saying the land won't go out of production.¹

This legal squabble from the heart of the San Joaquin Valley illustrates a critical subplot in the story of California's disappearing farmland: Water is as precious as soil.

Farmers fear that diversion of water to cities could weaken their increasingly tenuous grip on the land. They are suspicious if not downright hostile about any development project that could reduce agriculture's water supply.

So, while no one is proposing to build houses in Firebaugh, the Grupe plan brings the inseparable, twin specters of dwindling water and disappearing farmland to the front porches of farmers miles from any suburb.

"We have a policy in Fresno County that water does not leave the county," said Phil Larson, president of the county Farm Bureau.

Farmers are especially concerned about drought years, when they would have to compete with their new suburban neighbors for diminished supplies of water.

"When that reservoir starts going dry, who's going to get the water? The urban development," said general manager Dan Nelson of the San Luis

& Delta-Mendota Water Authority, which delivers water from the Central Valley Project to cities and farms on the west side of the San Joaquin Valley. "Once they're built, as a practical matter the houses are going to get water in the seventh year of a drought."

The Grupe case is by no means the only example of the importance of water in the farmland issue.

On the west side of the valley, farmers have volunteered to sell thousands of acres of environmentally troubled land to the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation, which would "retire" the parcels. But the program was stalled until the government agreed recently to let those parcels' water remain in the Westlands Water District, the farm-water association that encompasses much of the troubled area. In effect, Westlands said it would surrender land but not water.

"We have long believed that whatever happens to the land, we should keep the water," said Nelson, whose organization delivers water to Westlands farmers.

In Madera County, farmers are watching with concern as suburban Fresno begins sprawling into their heavily agricultural county. What worries them isn't really the paving over of the land; it's the taking of the region's water, said Roger Galleano, chairman of the water and planning committee of the Madera Farm Bureau.

Although Madera farm groups and developers are discussing a solution -- underground basins to catch floodwater for replenishing dwindling groundwater supplies -- the agricultural forces remain wary.

"Any development that stands to impact agricultural water supplies is what we're concerned about," said Stephen Ottemoeller, general manager of the Madera Irrigation District.

Nelson said uncertainty about water supplies sometimes persuades farmers to sell their land to developers. "People say, "Ag is selling out.' But we've put them in a position where they have to," Nelson said.

To remedy that problem, Marc Reisner, the environmental writer who wrote the acclaimed book on the West's water, "Cadillac Desert," has advocated guaranteeing farmers a reliable water supply "as a powerful incentive for farmland protection."

At the heart of the matter is the 1992 Central Valley Project Improvement Act, a sweeping federal law that rewrote the rules for delivering CVP water.

Among other things, in recognition of California's growing population, the act set up guidelines to encourage farmers to sell their water rights for urban development.

But proposals to ship agricultural water for urban use have generated plenty of controversy. Farmers around here are still upset by ex-Assemblyman Rusty Areias' aborted attempt a few years ago to sell water from his Los Banos dairy farm to the giant Metropolitan Water District of Los Angeles.

Though it's a much smaller proposal, the Grupe plan is significant because it would represent the first permanent sale of ag water to cities under the 1992 law, Nelson said.

In the early '90s, Grupe was drawing up blueprints for Tracy Hills, a 5,500-unit housing project just west of Tracy, a booming city receiving spillover population from the East Bay.

Tracy Hills had everything but water. It set out to find some from a farmer.

Under the rules governing the valley's water districts, farmers can't sell their water rights without the blessing of the other farmers in that district. But there are a handful of farmers who constitute an entire district -- and therefore don't need their neighbors' permission to transfer water.

"We went looking for a single-family water district," said Doug Unruh, Grupe's project manager for Tracy Hills.

It found the Widren Water District near Firebaugh, owned by Sagouspe. Its 835 acres had rights to enough water from the Central Valley Project to nourish the Tracy Hills project, Unruh said.

Grupe took an option on the land about eight years ago and made the purchase in early 1997. It paid him about \$2,500 an acre -- a little more than what Sagouspe paid for it -- and in exchange agreed to lease the land to him at a significant discount, Sagouspe said.

But after applying to the Bureau of Reclamation for permission to transfer the water, Grupe found itself locking horns with Fresno County.

The county sued Grupe and the city of Tracy over the proposed arrangement, saying the water transfer would take the land out of production -- or force the farmer to pump groundwater to make up for the loss.

Though he didn't get sued, Sagouspe drew the wrath of some of his fellow farmers.

"He's a very good grower," said the farm bureau's Larson. "He knows better than that."

Sagouspe, though, said his critics have it all wrong.

He's not "selling out agriculture," he said. "I don't believe in taking all the water out of ag and selling it or taking or stealing it or whatever."

Yes, the Widren water would leave Fresno County, he said. But no, the land wouldn't go out of production. He would pump some groundwater and use surface water to which he has rights from some adjacent districts, he said.

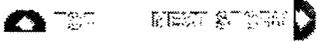
Well versed in water issues -- he's president of a water district serving nearby Los Banos -- the 51-year-old farmer said he should be applauded by other farmers.



"These cities are going to grow anyway," he said. "They're going to have to get the water from somewhere. (Farmers) have always been criticized for having too much water. This takes some of the pressure off."

Indeed, he believes his proposal could serve as a role model of sorts.

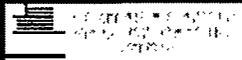
"This is an ideal type of transfer that other people down the road can follow," Sagouspe said.



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Farms and suburbs can make troublesome neighbors

By Dale Kasler
Bee Staff Writer

Published October 19, 1998

When rice farmer Nick Greco drives a tractor down a country lane outside of Lincoln, he sometimes gets company he's never had before: rush-hour commuters.

When Earl Reed applies chemicals to his cornfield on the edge of Turlock, he stops and thinks about his new neighbor: a subdivision across the street.

When Case van Steyn thinks about expanding his dairy farm near Elk Grove, he's reminded that land prices have been driven beyond his reach by an ever-increasing force: the likelihood of urban development.

Suburban sprawl is putting more farmers on the edge of development, a sometimes perilous state that can hinder their ability to raise their cows and grow their crops. That, in turn, puts more pressure on them to sell their land to developers, contributing to what many experts say is an alarming disappearance of California farmland.

The federal government says California has been losing anywhere from 66,000 to 300,000 acres of farmland a year, depending on the study. With the Central Valley's population expected to more than double over the next 40 years, the American Farmland Trust says roughly 15 percent of the Valley's farmland could vanish.

Moreover, as residential areas expand, more land is drawn into what the farmland trust calls the "zone of conflict," an area within a third of a mile of urban development. By 2040, up to 2.5 million acres of Central Valley farmland, or roughly a third of the Valley, could lie within that zone, the trust predicts.

Farmers say being in the "zone" brings complaints about noise, dust, odors and chemicals from new city-slicker neighbors who don't understand how farming works. Farmers say their equipment gets vandalized. They say their crops get stolen. They say their costs go up.

"I have farmers telling me they're faced with very serious conflicts with their new neighbors in the residential housing that's sprouted up all over "no-growth' Davis," said Don Villarejo, director of the Davis-based California Institute for Rural Studies. "You have people who feel they have the right to jog wherever they choose in spite of people trying to make a living farming."

In one celebrated case two years ago, Davis environmentalists picketed a local strawberry grower who was using the same chemicals that plenty of farmers have used for years, Villarejo said.

Four years ago the pressures of urbanization prompted Tracy rancher Lynn Bedford to vacate 275 acres of leased land to make way for a subdivision.

"Houses and farms just aren't compatible," he said.

"You try to be the diehard and stay there 'til the last minute. But the urban sprawl just got too much. You couldn't spray. You just can't farm that close to people with houses and lawns. ... It would be like someone going into a General Motors plant and building a house."

Even those who say the "vanishing farmland" issue is vastly overblown sympathize with farmers who collide with suburban sprawl.

"Development on the fringe is a legitimate issue," said Tim Coyle of the California Building Industry Association.

Farmers on the edge are by no means defenseless. State and local "right to farm" laws generally allow farmers to continue to follow the same agricultural practices that they've pursued for years, said John Gamper, director of taxation and land use at the California Farm Bureau Federation.

But "right to farm" laws don't prevent neighbors from filing complaints, which must be investigated by county grievance committees.

"The complaints keep coming in and the (farmer) is always defending himself instead of farming," said Frank Carl, agriculture commissioner of Sacramento County.

Often it's a matter of perception, Carl said. Passers-by catch a whiff of a farm chemical and assume something gone's wrong, even if the farmer is following all the rules, he said.

Two winters ago someone drove by Tony Machado's dairy farm near Elk Grove and saw some of his cows covered in mud. The motorist



Mike Souza strolls over prospective home sites that occupy what used to be the yard of the family ranch near Tracy. "People who move from the Bay Area to Tracy don't understand what the noise is at 4 in the morning," Souza says.

filed a cruelty-to-animals complaint with the county. Although the county concluded that the cows were healthy and well cared for, the incident stuck with Machado.

"When people start complaining, it makes it hard," he said. "They can find some reason to make it miserable for you."

Machado well understands that farms are a nuisance to houses -- the noise, the smell. But he was farming years before the Laguna subdivisions began.

"I hear people making snide remarks in Laguna: "Boy, I can sure smell those dairies,"" he said.

The "edge" issue isn't just about bruised feelings, though. Having a farm near a residential area can make farmers change the way they do business.

Reed, 69, has been farming all his life in various California locations, the last 24 years on a 32-acre cornfield north of Turlock in Stanislaus County. He could remember a time when he could look out from his front porch and see nothing but open space.

Now his view includes a new subdivision across the street and a second project cater-cornered from his place. The city just installed a traffic light on the corner.

With so much traffic, Reed can't crop-dust his cornfield anymore, he said. And even though the city says development will stop before it reaches his doorstep, Reed said he feels hemmed in.

"It becomes almost impossible to farm, when you're this close," he said. "You can't spray, you can't do this, you can't do that."

Chemicals are a particular sore point when farmers meet the city.

"You've got to wait for the wind direction to go away from town (before spraying)," said Woodland farmer Steve Borchard, chairman of the committee that sorts out "right to farm" complaints in Yolo County. "In the meantime, the bugs are eating your crops."

Traffic is another problem. Greco, who's been growing rice in South Placer County since 1972, used to think nothing of driving a tractor down Nicolaus Road outside of Lincoln. But what used to be a quiet country lane is turning into a significant transportation artery for suburbanites.

It can be an unnerving if not dangerous experience, merging 15 mph farm equipment with 50 mph automobiles.



Linda Tenbrink says passing motorists often steal cherries, peaches and nectarines from the fruit trees that sit by the side of the road on her family's orchard near Fairfield. "We call it roadside blight," she says.

"You can't put a tractor or harvester on the road at rush hour," Greco said.

Then there's the noise issue. Farmers are accustomed to plowing and harvesting early in the morning and late at night, something that might not sit well with a newcomer.

"People who move from the Bay Area to Tracy don't understand what the noise is at 4 in the morning, the crop dusting," said Mike Souza, a Tracy farmer and real estate broker.

Norm Nilsen, who raises a half-million turkeys in Wilton, was sued by his neighbor Dan Henry over allegations of excessive noise and other problems. Although they settled for an undisclosed sum about four years ago, conflict persists.

"We had a lot of trouble, and we still do, with flies, odor, turkey-manure dust, noise in the middle of the night," said Henry, who lives on a five-acre rural "ranchette" about a quarter mile from Nilsen's farm. "You can't barbecue -- you draw 10 million flies."

Nilsen said the 2 1/2 years of litigation cost him \$1.5 million in attorneys' fees and nearly sank his operation. For a while, banks were unwilling to finance him because of the uncertainty caused by the lawsuit.

As for Henry's complaints, Nilsen said he farms in a manner that's sensitive to neighbors' concerns.

Even farmers miles away from the nearest subdivision run into the "edge" problem. Rice farmers up and down the Sacramento Valley have seen their right to burn rice straw curtailed by environmental laws designed to protect the air breathed by Sacramentans. As the metropolitan area continues to grow, farmers figure the situation will get worse for them.

"The pressure is going to get tougher. It's going to get harder and harder to burn," said Bert Manuel, a rice farmer in Live Oak, Sutter County. Manuel said it costs him \$50 in extra farming expenses for every acre of rice straw he doesn't burn.

Theft contributes to the cost of doing business near town. Linda Tenbrink, who farms with her husband just outside of Fairfield, said motorists often steal cherries, peaches and nectarines from the fruit trees that sit by the side of the road.

"We call it roadside blight," she said. "Newly planted trees have gotten pulled out of the ground, too."

Van Steyn, who's been raising corn, alfalfa and dairy cows south of Elk Grove since 1956, used to leave tractors in the fields overnight. But that's changed with the growth of Elk Grove, he said.

"I have had batteries stolen out of equipment, loose tools stolen," he said. "We can't leave (equipment) parked in the field like we used to."

Another problem: Van Steyn said he would like to buy more land so he can expand his dairy herd. But he said speculation has doubled land prices to about \$6,000 an acre -- even though he's four miles beyond the urban service boundary, the line beyond which no development is planned by Sacramento County.

"When I have to compete with development for land, I can't compete," van Steyn said. "I don't have the big bucks."

Prices go up on the expectation that land will get converted to urban use, tempting some farmers to sell. That's why land development tends to snowball, said Larry Goldzband, director of the state Department of Conservation.

"You've brought infrastructure, city services to an area," he said. "You've raised the development pressure."

Even in the wine country of Napa and Sonoma counties, home to some of the nation's most valuable farmland, agriculture has trouble competing with development. That's why those two counties have taken extraordinary measures to protect open space and farmland, said Alvin Sokolow, a public-policy specialist at the University of California, Davis.

Al Jones, 40, remembers when his family raised cattle around 47th Avenue in Sacramento. Then his family was driven by development to Elk Grove, by Highway 99.

In the mid-'70s the Joneses moved to Wilton in south Sacramento County. Everything was fine until a few years ago, when a developer proposed a 1,200-acre residential project a few miles from the Jones farm.

Land prices starting going up around Wilton, and soon Jones was facing a rent hike of up to 40 percent.

"It's a tough thing when you keep having encroachment, the city keeps spreading out," Jones said. "There's a great clash in the way of life. You can't do high-intensity farming and co-exist."



Cattleman Al Jones rides in his roping practice arena. His family once farmed around 47th Avenue in Sacramento, but encroaching development chased Jones first to Elk Grove, then Wilton, and finally to his current operation in the Amador County foothills.



Jones didn't stand his ground. He surrendered his lease and moved his cows to scrubrier, more difficult land in the Amador County foothills.

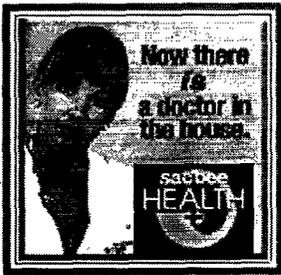
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LOCAL NEWS



Vanishing farmland: Housing is Valley's new cash crop

By Dale Kasler
Bee Staff Writer
(Published Oct. 18, 1998)

First of three parts

From his dairy farm south of Elk Grove, where his immigrant father started out more than 50 years ago, Tony Machado can see them coming: the suburbs creeping closer, their evening lights burning brighter.

He figures he's farming on borrowed time.

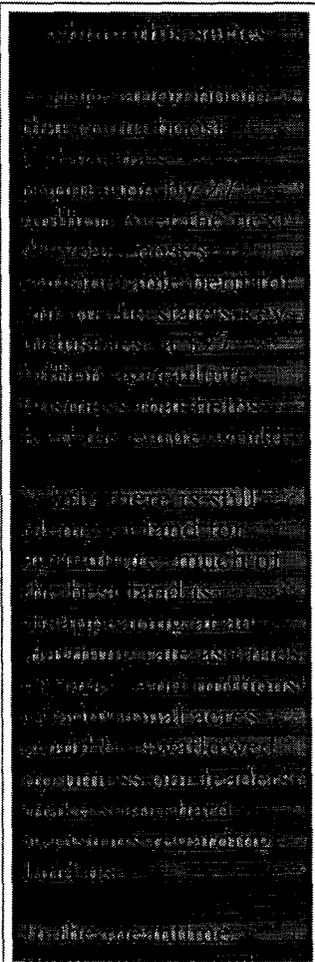
"It's too late for me now," said Machado, whose land is likely to get developed in a few years. "There's nothing I can do to stop it."

As California braces for its next great population explosion, a boom that will add 27 million people in 40 years, legions of farmers, land preservationists and others are sounding an alarm. They say this 21st-century human tidal wave could overwhelm one of the nation's most precious natural resources: California farmland.

From Elk Grove to Tracy, from Fresno to Chino, the relentless sprawl of suburbia could jeopardize an industry that produces half the nation's fruits, nuts and vegetables, some experts say. Eventually such a development could raise serious food-security questions for the nation, and turn America from the world's breadbasket into a major importer of food and fiber, they say.

"You continue to have this incremental taking of farmland, and pretty soon you're going to end up with something pretty significant," said Ann Veneman, secretary of the California Department of Food and Agriculture. "It's a serious concern."

Much of the concern is over the Central Valley, the agricultural jewel prized for its rich soils,



many farmers and

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agricultural jewel prized for its rich soils, Mediterranean-like climate and stunning diversity of crops. With the population between Redding and Bakersfield expected to more than double over the next 40 years, the preservationist group American Farmland Trust has labeled the Valley the nation's most "threatened" farming region.

"Most of the land that's available for development is in the Valley," said Thomas Hutchings, Sacramento County's planning director. "The economy of this state is moving from the coast to the inland valleys."

Rudy Platzek, a retired urban planner who's studied Valley development, warns of a day late in the 21st century when nearly half the Valley's farmland will have been devoured by "one linear mega-city from Marysville to the Tehachapi along the Highway 99 corridor." The farmland trust says the Valley could lose 1 million acres, or 15 percent of its farmland, by 2040.

Subdivisions are sprouting not just in the obvious places, like Elk Grove and Tracy, but also in burgs like Woodland, Salida and Los Banos -- quiet Valley farm towns morphing into bustling bedroom communities.

In Turlock, a mostly agricultural community south of Modesto, Earl Reed watched a housing development go up across the street from his corn farm and shook his head.

"I knew it was coming," said Reed, 69. "But it's a shock to see it happen so fast."

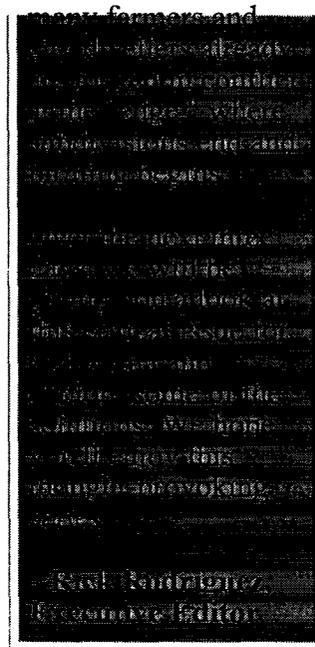
Scores of interviews with farmers, land preservationists, urban planners and developers reveal a problem that defies easy solutions:

While California still has an abundance of farmland, nearly 29 million acres, much has been lost already and more will disappear in the future. The Center for the Continuing Study of the California Economy says the state will need 4.3 million additional housing units by 2020, a development that experts say could consume up to 1 million acres of land.

Urban service boundaries -- lines around cities beyond which growth isn't supposed to occur for the foreseeable future -- and other efforts to control sprawl don't always work. And many towns, particularly in the Central Valley, welcome urbanization as an antidote to decades of laggard economic growth. They also are reluctant to embrace anti-sprawl solutions such as higher housing densities.

As land gets developed, more farmers get drawn into a sort of "zone of conflict" with their new urban neighbors. Farming on the edge of a subdivision raises farmers' costs, cramps their style and increases their temptation to sell to developers.

To be sure, it's far too early to write off California agriculture. Farmers' revenue jumped 6 percent last year to a record \$26.8 billion. California farmers have shown a remarkable capacity to increase their productivity and



switch to high-value crops like apricots and wine grapes, fueling higher revenues even while land disappears.

"So what if we lose half our agricultural land? So long as farmers have the ability to produce (high-value) commodities that people want to buy, that works for agriculture," said director Don Villarejo of the Davis-based California Institute for Rural Studies.

Moreover, there's some dispute about how quickly farmland is disappearing.

The U.S. census of agriculture 1 pegs the annual loss at about 300,000 acres. But another federal program, the Department of Agriculture's National Resources Inventory, says about 66,000 acres a year are vanishing. And in a report covering 1994 to 1996, the state Department of Conservation says farmland loss was nonexistent, although the state did lose about 38,000 acres of its best land.

Anecdotal evidence also can be confusing. A city dweller driving through fast-growing communities like Davis or North Natomas might well conclude that urbanization is everywhere. But that overlooks the millions of acres lying undisturbed, far, far away from the nearest subdivision.

"There's lots and lots of land in the Valley between Bakersfield and Sacramento," said Mike Souza, a Tracy farmer and real estate executive whose family recently sold a 70-acre parcel for development. "Tons and tons, and acres and acres."

Added Tim Coyle of the California Building Industry Association: "The problem is exaggerated."

Developers say most projects proceed slowly, pausing for government reviews, recessions and other roadblocks. Ten years ago Elliott Homes began buying a 1,600-acre cow pasture by Folsom for a community called Broadstone. By the time it's finished, the project will have taken 18 years.

"These things just don't happen willy-nilly," said Russ Davis, an Elliott vice president.

Yet preservationists say that's precisely the point: Slow, incremental development ends up devouring big chunks of land.

"Demands have already been made now for land that is going to be developed over the next 10 years," said Shawn Stevenson, a rancher and pistachio grower near the Fresno suburb of Clovis. "Land has been bought, plans have been made, momentum is being generated.

"You can't wait 20 or 40 years from now to decide we've been exhausting everything."

Every acre of farmland that gets converted to urban use puts several more acres in the path of future development, "like ripples on a pond," said Larry Goldzband, director of the Department of Conservation. The market value of the farmland rises as speculation heats up, raising rents for farmers who lease. The temptation grows, too: Land that's worth \$3,000 an acre for agriculture can be worth \$25,000 or more for development.

"This is my dad's retirement," said Chuck Tusso, whose elderly father owns

farmland near Tracy that could be developed some day.

Tellingly, the farmland issue is being raised not only by "hippie farmers" and left-leaning 3 organizations like the farmland trust, said the trust's California director, Erik Vink.

Now the leading voice on this matter is the conservative California Farm Bureau Federation, which used to stay out of the debate because it didn't want to infringe on a farmer's right to sell. The bureau recently teamed with the farmland trust to warn of "an accelerating loss of productive agricultural land" and call for income tax credits, more affordable water and other incentives to keep land in agriculture.

Indeed, the preservationist movement is gaining allies. Counties and cities more often are saying "no" to urbanization, as when Stanislaus County's Local Area 4 Formation Commission rejected Modesto's request two years ago to earmark for development a huge chunk of prime farmland.

Public and privately funded land trusts have locked away thousands of important acres in Sonoma, Yolo, Monterey and other counties by paying premiums to farmers who agree never to sell to developers.

Another 16 million acres of California farmland are covered by the Williamson Act, the historic 1965 state law that provides property tax breaks for farmland owners who agree not to sell to developers for 10 years at a time. The law imposes a penalty on land sales that break the Williamson agreements (The bill's author, former Assemblyman John C. Williamson, died last Sunday). Gov. Pete Wilson recently signed into law the so-called "Super Williamson Act," providing heftier incentives for those willing to lock away their land for 20 years at a time.

Many communities also have adopted urban service boundaries. But those boundaries aren't unbreakable; Sacramento County is considering a development near Rancho Murieta that would leapfrog its urban boundary. In San Bernardino County, population pressures are crashing in on a 15,000-acre land preserve established 30 years ago to protect the dairy farms around Chino.

"You do as well as you can for as long as you can," sighed Larry Walker, a San Bernardino supervisor who fought against developing the dairy land.

What's especially worrisome to some preservationists is the caliber of the land at risk. According to the USDA's National Resources Inventory, nearly 2 percent of the California farmland classified as "prime" was urbanized from 1982 to 1992.

"The cities are unfortunately located on the best soils," said Stanislaus County planner Ron Freitas.

Some land may well be priceless. Land preservationists in Monterey County worry that suburban sprawl from San Jose could elbow aside farmland that grows most of the nation's supply of artichokes, broccoli, cauliflower and a few other crops.

"This is the most significant area in the world for summer vegetables," said Brian Rianda, director of the Monterey County Agricultural and Historical Land Conservancy. "We're fooling with our breadbasket."

Urbanization isn't the only factor in eroding farmland. Environmental programs also play a role.

The CalFed project, a joint venture between the state and federal governments, wants to buy and take out of production 188,000 acres of farmland to improve water flows and aid the environment of the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta. Many of the land purchases would occur in the Delta, but the proposal has sparked criticism from farmers all over.

Farmers in the Sacramento Valley fear CalFed's plan more than urbanization, said Rich Golb of the Northern California Water Association, which represents 66 water districts north of Sacramento.

Yet throughout much of California, in the long run the bigger concern is urban development, preservationists agree.

Suburbanites are even moving into farm towns once thought immune from the development craze.

In Woodland, for example, the influx of warehouses and distribution centers has brought economic growth -- and an emotional debate over the community's future.

When the city was updating its general plan in 1994, it proposed taking for development 5 several hundred acres of farmland owned by relatives of Steve Borchard, a city councilman and a farmer.

The idea broke Borchard's heart. While he couldn't participate in the council proceedings because of a conflict of interest, it was well known that he opposed the plan. Eventually the city agreed to develop elsewhere.

Borchard's stance angered some relatives. "It was their land, but I didn't want to see it plowed under," he said. "They felt I kept them from reaping their rewards."

The same kind of debate is going on in Tracy, another longtime agricultural community that is becoming a bedroom community. As population spills over from the East Bay, city officials have embraced plans for 20,000 new homes in the next 15 years or so.

Many have embraced Tracy's new status as a role model for San Joaquin County: growing, prosperous, no longer dependent on a farm economy that typically yields high unemployment.

Others there worry about the future of farming. Dairy farmer Leroy Ornellas has received informal inquiries from developers on land his parents bought 50 years ago.

"We look around and say, "Are we going to be able to be here? Where would we go?" Ornellas said.

Until now, the question of "where" hasn't been a big worry for California farmers. They've been able to pick up and move. When Santa Clara County became Silicon Valley, they headed east. When the Los Angeles area filled up, they headed north, with little fuss.

Fred Douma sold his dairy farm in Riverside County three years ago and used the proceeds to build a 515-acre spread southeast of Tracy. "I got to build a better and bigger facility," he said matter-of-factly.

But some worry that eventually, farmers won't be able to relocate.

"There's not another move after this," said Bob Feenstra, a dairy-industry executive in Chino who's watched that industry migrate out of Southern California. "Where are you going to go?"

Which is how Tony Machado feels.

The dairy farm that's been in his family since the '40s is part of a 4,300-acre stretch of agricultural land south of Elk Grove that Sacramento County officials say will be converted over the next few years into houses, schools and a shopping mall.

For years, while the economy was fallow, Machado didn't hear much about development. But county officials visited recently to discuss a new high school that's supposed to be built 1,000 feet north of his land. Reality is setting in.

"At my age, I hate the thought of having to go somewhere else," said Machado, 51. "It scares me, makes me nervous."

True, Machado will be handsomely rewarded for his land -- perhaps to the tune of \$25,000 an acre, for a total of \$5 million.

But that seems like small consolation to him and his wife, Ruth.

"Fifteen years ago, if somebody had said we were going to be in this position, we would have said they were crazy," Ruth Machado said. "We thought we were going to live here the rest of our lives."

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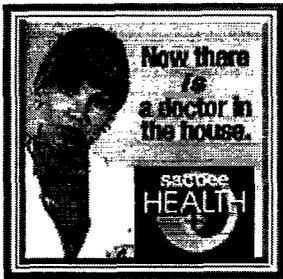
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LOCAL NEWS



It isn't just the land that's fought over -- it's the water, too

By Dale Kasler
Bee Staff Writer
(Published Oct. 18, 1998)

■ FIREBAUGH, Fresno County -- It isn't much to look at, a narrow 835-acre parcel of so-so quality farmland in the middle of nowhere.

To Grupe Development Co., though, it's a thing of beauty -- not the corn, sugar beets and alfalfa so much as the concrete canal bordering the north side of the tract.

The canal is filled with shimmering water from the federal government's Central Valley Project, and that's what Grupe wants. The developer purchased this property from farmer Jean Sagouspe about 18 months ago in order to divert the water 80 miles northwest, to a subdivision Grupe has planned west of the fast-growing city of Tracy.

But Fresno County is suing to block the arrangement. Grupe Development's plan would lead to "unmitigated depletion of groundwater and loss of agricultural land in the county of Fresno," the lawsuit says. Grupe denies the allegation, saying the land won't go out of production.

This legal squabble from the heart of the San Joaquin Valley illustrates a critical subplot in the story of California's disappearing farmland: Water is as precious as soil.

Farmers fear that diversion of water to cities could weaken their increasingly tenuous grip on the land. They are suspicious if not downright hostile about any development project that could reduce agriculture's water supply.

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So, while no one is proposing to build houses in Firebaugh, the Grupe plan brings the inseparable, twin specters of dwindling water and disappearing farmland to the front porches of farmers miles from any suburb.

"We have a policy in Fresno County that water does not leave the county," said Phil Larson, president of the county Farm Bureau.

Farmers are especially concerned about drought years, when they would have to compete with their new suburban neighbors for diminished supplies of water.

"When that reservoir starts going dry, who's going to get the water? The urban development," said general manager Dan Nelson of the San Luis & Delta-Mendota Water Authority, which delivers water from the Central Valley Project to cities and farms on the west side of the San Joaquin Valley. "Once they're built, as a practical matter the houses are going to get water in the seventh year of a drought."

The Grupe case is by no means the only example of the importance of water in the farmland issue.

On the west side of the valley, farmers have volunteered to sell thousands of acres of environmentally troubled land to the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation, which would "retire" the parcels. But the program was stalled until the government agreed recently to let those parcels' water remain in the Westlands Water District, the farm-water association that encompasses much of the troubled area. In effect, Westlands said it would surrender land but not water.

"We have long believed that whatever happens to the land, we should keep the water," said Nelson, whose organization delivers water to Westlands farmers.

In Madera County, farmers are watching with concern as suburban Fresno begins sprawling into their heavily agricultural county. What worries them isn't really the paving over of the land; it's the taking of the region's water, said Roger Galleano, chairman of the water and planning committee of the Madera Farm Bureau.

Although Madera farm groups and developers are discussing a solution -- underground basins to catch floodwater for replenishing dwindling groundwater supplies -- the agricultural forces remain wary.

"Any development that stands to impact agricultural water supplies is what we're concerned about," said Stephen Ottemoeller, general manager of the Madera Irrigation District.

Nelson said uncertainty about water supplies sometimes persuades farmers to sell their land to developers. "People say, 'Ag is selling out.' But we've put them in a position where they have to," Nelson said.

To remedy that problem, Marc Reisner, the environmental writer who wrote the acclaimed book on the West's water, "Cadillac Desert," has advocated guaranteeing farmers a reliable water supply "as a powerful incentive for farmland protection."

At the heart of the matter is the 1992 Central Valley Project Improvement

Act, a sweeping federal law that rewrote the rules for delivering CVP water.

Among other things, in recognition of California's growing population, the act set up guidelines to encourage farmers to sell their water rights for urban development.

But proposals to ship agricultural water for urban use have generated plenty of controversy. Farmers around here are still upset by ex-Assemblyman Rusty Areias' aborted attempt a few years ago to sell water from his Los Banos dairy farm to the giant Metropolitan Water District of Los Angeles.

Though it's a much smaller proposal, the Grupe plan is significant because it would represent the first permanent sale of ag water to cities under the 1992 law, Nelson said.

In the early '90s, Grupe was drawing up blueprints for Tracy Hills, a 5,500-unit housing project just west of Tracy, a booming city receiving spillover population from the East Bay.

Tracy Hills had everything but water. It set out to find some from a farmer.

Under the rules governing the valley's water districts, farmers can't sell their water rights without the blessing of the other farmers in that district. But there are a handful of farmers who constitute an entire district -- and therefore don't need their neighbors' permission to transfer water.

"We went looking for a single-family water district," said Doug Unruh, Grupe's project manager for Tracy Hills.

It found the Widren Water District near Firebaugh, owned by Sagouspe. Its 835 acres had rights to enough water from the Central Valley Project to nourish the Tracy Hills project, Unruh said.

Grupe took an option on the land about eight years ago and made the purchase in early 1997. It paid him about \$2,500 an acre -- a little more than what Sagouspe paid for it -- and in exchange agreed to lease the land to him at a significant discount, Sagouspe said.

But after applying to the Bureau of Reclamation for permission to transfer the water, Grupe found itself locking horns with Fresno County.

The county sued Grupe and the city of Tracy over the proposed arrangement, saying the water transfer would take the land out of production -- or force the farmer to pump groundwater to make up for the loss.

Though he didn't get sued, Sagouspe drew the wrath of some of his fellow farmers.

"He's a very good grower," said the farm bureau's Larson. "He knows better than that."

Sagouspe, though, said his critics have it all wrong.

He's not "selling out agriculture," he said. "I don't believe in taking all the water out of ag and selling it or taking it or stealing it or whatever."

Yes, the Widren water would leave Fresno County, he said. But no, the land

wouldn't go out of production. He would pump some groundwater and use surface water to which he has rights from some adjacent districts, he said.

Well versed in water issues -- he's president of a water district serving nearby Los Banos -- the 51-year-old farmer said he should be applauded by other farmers.

"These cities are going to grow anyway," he said. "They're going to have to get the water from somewhere. (Farmers) have always been criticized for having too much water. This takes some of the pressure off."

Indeed, he believes his proposal could serve as a role model of sorts.

"This is an ideal type of transfer that other people down the road can follow," Sagouspe said.

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Vanishing Farmland: Skimping on lots to save rich soil -- High-density housing touted

By Dale Kasler
Bee Staff Writer
(Published Oct. 20, 1998)

■ **FRESNO** -- The houses huddle together along narrow streets. Homes costing a half-million dollars are backed up against \$130,000 dwellings. Apartment buildings sit right across the street from \$250,000 houses.

This real estate development, known as The Dominion, sits on a former wheat field in northeast Fresno. It packs 3,600 homes and apartments on a 600-acre parcel -- an unusually high density of housing for this community -- and has become something of a rallying point for those interested in preserving California farmland.

The argument is simple: The more people you have living on an acre of land, the less farmland you consume.

"What we have out here," said Leo Wilson, who developed The Dominion, "is a good laboratory to show people it can work."

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It's an idea that some in Fresno -- a booming city that is spilling into the single most important agricultural county in America -- believe is long overdue. With the issue of vanishing farmland demanding greater attention throughout the Central Valley, a strange-bedfellows alliance of Fresno County farmers, land preservationists and developers has begun lobbying government officials in the region to approve developments with higher densities of housing.

The group, called the Growth Alternatives Alliance, is urging smaller lots, narrower streets, the use of "in-fill" -- idle land close to the urban core -- and other means to slow the pace of farmland consumption.

For developers, of course, higher densities enables them to make more money. "We can get more yield per acre," said Wilson, sounding very much like a farmer.

But it's also believed that higher yields can be the salvation of California's farmland. That's of particular importance in Fresno County, whose \$3.43 billion-a-year farm economy, tops in the nation, is threatened by a population that's expected to jump to nearly 2.5 million in 2040 from 945,000 today.

"We believe we can accommodate the growth and preserve the land," Bob Maddux, a farmland real estate agent and member of the alliance. Separately, a task force led by the California Farm Bureau Federation recently called for high-density development as one means of keeping land in agriculture.

At the density rate of three new units of housing per acre, which is fairly typical throughout many Central Valley cities, the population boom forecast for the Central Valley will consume 1 million acres of Valley farmland by 2040, according to the preservation group American Farmland Trust. But by doubling the density to six units to the acre -- the level of density found in many big California cities, including Sacramento -- the amount of Valley farmland consumed would be cut to a half-million acres, the trust says.

But making high-density housing a reality will be a difficult, painstaking process.

"We're probably 15 to 20 years behind the curve," said Steve Krueger, a member of the Growth Alternatives Alliance and an executive with developer Castle & Cook. "It'll take years to implement these strategies."

Managing farmland

Projected prime farmland losses in selected Central Valley counties, 1992-2040, according to density of development.

Scenario A: "Urban sprawl" (three units of housing per acre)

Scenario B: "Compact growth" (six units of housing per acre)

Fresno

Scenario A: 163,615
Scenario B: 68,426

Kern

Scenario A: 72,422
Scenario B: 28,521

Sacramento

Scenario A: 60,767
Scenario B: 24,468

San Joaquin

Scenario A: 81,111
Scenario B: 37,255

Stanislaus

Scenario A: 62,315
Scenario B: 36,561

Yolo

Scenario A: 13,986
Scenario B: 7,657

Valley total

Scenario A: 613,669
Scenario B: 265,937

Source: American Farmland Trust

If ever.

High-density housing runs counter to the California home-buying public's preference for big suburban-style lots, developers and urban planners say.

"The fact is, the market chooses," said Mike Winn, director of community planning for Lennar Communities, one of the biggest homebuilders in Sacramento. "People in California like the suburban design of their neighborhoods. They like a decent-sized lot."

In addition, it's difficult to persuade government officials to make the zoning changes needed to increase housing densities, builders say.

Fire and sanitation officials fret that streets will be too narrow for their vehicles. And residents of adjacent neighborhoods often are uncomfortable living next door to a densely packed residential neighborhood -- and will put up a fight.

"People associate smaller lots in our area with low-income buyers," said Robert Wood, a Fresno homebuilding executive who's dealt with planning commissions up and down the San Joaquin Valley.

"Most builders won't take the lambasting ... over the outcries of the neighborhood," Wood said. "You get into these types of battles, and it lengthens the entitlement process. And if they really don't like you, they'll file a lawsuit."

Said Jeff Harris of the Building Industry Association of the San Joaquin Valley: "The citizens turn out literally by the hundreds, all opposed, unanimously opposed. It becomes a process that is very, very difficult."

Getting approval for high-density development requires seeking variances from zoning regulations and often complicates and delays the entitlement process, builders said. Usually the city officials turn down the request rather than go to the trouble, builders said.

Wood recalled trying to get high-density housing projects approved in recent years in Reedley, Kingsburg and other cities around Fresno County. "They said absolutely no. I couldn't even get past the planning commission."

To be sure, there are examples of low-sprawl projects in the Central Valley. The Metro Square development, under which 45 homes were built on a mere 2 1/2 acres in midtown Sacramento, was recently hailed by a visiting Vice President Al Gore as a boon to farmland preservation.

Metro Square's architect, David Mogavero, said he's talking to developers and government officials in the San Joaquin Valley about doing similar high-density "in-fill" projects in Fresno, Modesto, Stockton and the Tulare County town of Lindsay. "There's a growing recognition that ... open-space preservation is driven by urban preservation -- reinvesting in existing parts of the community," he said.

For the most part, though, city officials in the Valley say they're reluctant to cram tight housing down anyone's throat for fear that the project won't fly in the marketplace. This explains why county governments provide considerable space for five-acre rural "ranchettes," even though they make

farmland preservationists seethe.

Even with conventional suburban projects, municipalities find it difficult to increase densities because they don't want home buyers going elsewhere.

Sacramento County officials are wrestling with that issue as they plan two developments south of Elk Grove totaling 4,300 acres.

The projects currently call for average housing densities of about five to six units per acre, said Thomas Hutchings, the county's planning director. But he said he believes the Board of Supervisors probably will decrease the densities because of a belief by Elk Grove residents that there isn't enough housing with big lots.

"We have a very high-density situation right now," complained Marcia Bartlett, a member of the Franklin/Laguna Community Planning Advisory Council. "Your roof kind of overhangs your neighbors." Residents who want bigger yards have to move elsewhere, contributing to the instability of the area, she said.

The city of Fresno often finds itself competing with suburbs that offer larger spreads.

"It's real hard for us," said Nick Yovino, the city's deputy director of planning. "When the competition (in the suburbs) has 7,500-square-foot lots with a three-car garage and a nice school district for under \$150,000, that's hard to compete with."

It was against this backdrop that developer Leo Wilson began laying the plans 16 years ago for The Dominion.

Inspired by European cities where residents live close to one another, he set out to create a pedestrian-friendly community of narrow streets and tightly clustered dwellings -- while still preserving the trappings of suburban-style living.

Wilson said the proposal stirred up trouble from the get-go.

"People were very apprehensive," he said while touring the development recently. "It was something new, something different. People are scared that you're going to build a house that isn't up to standards."

It took two years to get the government entitlements before construction could begin, he said. That's about twice as long as usual, he said.

Today he considers The Dominion a success: a community with almost no "For Sale" signs, a place where \$250,000 homes sit cheek by jowl with two-story apartment buildings without seeming tacky-tacky. "It looks like a traditional neighborhood," he said.

Most important, to farmland advocates, The Dominion provides a lot of housing on a relatively small plot of land.

But Wilson said duplicating the feat may be next to impossible.

"You'd be crazy to do it today because you'd be fighting with the city," he said. "I'm not sure I want to go through the headache of doing it again."

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Vanishing Farmland: Writing a check saves land for farming

By Dale Kasler
Bee Staff Writer
(Published Oct. 20, 1998)

■ An agreement to keep some of his land in agriculture forever made Greg Schmid \$800,000 richer.

In August, the Davis farmer sold a "conservation easement" on an 800-acre tomato field to the state's Agricultural Land Stewardship Program. By selling the easement, he in effect forfeited his right to sell the property to developers.

"Obviously, the money was an incentive," said Schmid, who owns another 4,800 acres unaffected by the conservation easement. "I also had a belief that the program makes sense."

As preservationists grapple with the assault on California farmland, conservation easements have emerged as a key strategy. The state recently increased funding for the land stewardship program to \$13.7 million a year, up from about \$1.5 million a year.

Private and publicly funded land trusts have preserved more than 60,000 acres in four counties north of San Francisco, including vital wine-grape land in Napa and Sonoma counties, said Alvin Sokolow, a public policy specialist at the University of California, Davis.

Yet with population pressures threatening millions of acres over the next few decades, conservation easements almost certainly won't be enough to hold back the tide of development.

"We don't have the money," said Larry Goldzband, director of the state Department of Conservation, which administers the land-stewardship plan.

But in selected, targeted cases, it can work, he said. The department was able to purchase the conservation easement on Schmid's land relatively cheaply -- \$1,000 an acre -- because the land is as many as 50 years away from being threatened.

"It is a valuable program," Goldzband said. "It allows the people who want to be the stewards of the land ... to continue to be that."

Various communities are devising alternative preservation strategies. Among the most intriguing is an industrial zone proposed by Sutter County officials.

In the early '90s the county turned down a proposal to transform 25,000 acres

of rice fields just north of Sacramento into a 100,000-population "new town" in 30 years.

Although the rejection was based on a variety of reasons, it got county officials thinking about farmland preservation. In 1995 the county adopted a plan designating 10,000 acres near Sacramento for industrial and commercial development.

The plan would consume valuable farmland but hopefully would keep residential development out of the southern part of Sutter County, said county Supervisor Dick Akin. The idea is that developers wouldn't build houses near the industrial site, he said.

"This could buffer us somewhat from the residential development of Sacramento and Placer counties," said Akin, a rice farmer. "Hopefully, the industrial development would be our Maginot land."

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