

California and the West

Sprawl Threatens Central Valley, Study Says

■ **Agriculture:** State could lose \$5.3 billion a year if farm belt cities don't stem urban expansion, researchers say. They call for controlled growth to preserve farmland.

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FRESNO—A look into the future of this richest farm belt in the world shows a transformation every bit as dramatic as that of post-World War II Los Angeles—a Central Valley lined with housing tracts and commercial strips but facing more foul air, congestion, urban sprawl and the loss of 1 million acres of farmland.

In the first detailed study examining the costs of paving over California's lush fields, a team of University of California and private researchers has confirmed the worst fears of farmers, environmentalists and planners.

If fast-growing cities such as Fresno, Sacramento,

Bakersfield and Modesto do not change their pattern of L.A.-style sprawl over the next 45 years, the study shows, California will lose more than 12% of its best farmland at a yearly cost of \$5.3 billion to the agricultural economy. One in 10 jobs statewide is tied to farming.

And because urban sprawl typically costs more in government services than it generates in tax revenues, cities and counties in the Central Valley are likely to be operating in the deep red by the year 2040. Facing a 20% shortfall in revenues, the study says, they could be forced to raise taxes or reduce public services.

Researchers say the findings are 45 years too late for Los Angeles County, once the nation's top agricultural producer and now a metropolis that cannot meet its debt.

They are hoping to prevent the same mistakes in the state's heartland, a 300-mile-long swath along California 99 that boasts a unique climate, rich alluvial soil and more than 250 crops—everything from almonds to zucchini. To accommodate the estimated tripling in

population here—from 4 million to 12 million residents over the next five decades—researchers are urging politicians and planners to break with the past and employ a more compact model of growth.

By only modestly increasing housing and commercial density, they argue, the Central Valley could cut in half the negative effects of sprawl.

"There is a choice," said Edward Thompson of the American Farmland Trust, a private nonprofit group that paid for the two-year study. "We can continue to waste the best farmland in the world or we can protect it."

"This is not anti-development. It's about how you grow. Are you going to grow smart or are you going to grow dumb?"

The study, which was released Wednesday and applauded by the governor's office, backs up a recent report authored by Bank of America and the Wilson Administration that pinned many of California's economic woes on urban sprawl.

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The bank's "Beyond Sprawl" report concluded that low-density growth has drained local government coffers and taken away jobs, investment capital and public services.

The state's building industry, which had criticized the earlier report, found fault with the American Farmland Trust study as well.

"We are losing some farmland to suburban development, no question about it," said Richard Lyon, a legislative lobbyist for the California Building Industry Assn. "But what's forgotten in all the hype are the jobs and tax base created by the construction industry.

"They claim that suburban sprawl is responsible for the economic decline in agricultural community, and that's absolute nonsense. First of all, sprawl is an indefinable term. It means whatever you want it to mean and it's being used as a rallying point in anti-growth movement."

To do the study, the American Farmland Trust, a national membership organization founded in 1980 to advocate the protection of farmland, retained a noted Oakland-based economist, David Strong, and experts from the Institute of Urban and Regional Development at UC Berkeley.

Using population estimates from the state Department of Finance and analyzing past development patterns in 11 counties, they were able to generate a computer snapshot of the Central Valley in 2040.

It is a picture taken from the pages of 1950s and 1960s Los Angeles. The middle third of the state would lose much of its rural, wide-open look. From Bakersfield to Sacramento, the 300-mile span of California 99 would be an almost unbroken chain of smog-choked cities and suburbs.

More than 1 million acres of farmland would be permanently lost, much of it prime acreage, according to the study. An addi-

tional 2.5 million acres would be at risk because urban encroachment would limit farm practices.

Because of reduced crop yields, the state's agricultural economy would lose \$2.1 billion a year in direct commodity sales and an additional \$3.2 billion a year in equipment, fertilizer and pesticide sales, the study estimates.

And cities straining to service the sprawl with police, firefighter, sewerage, roads and water would face an overall deficit of \$1 billion a year, forcing them to either pare back services or generate revenue through assessment districts and higher developer fees.

"Sprawl doesn't pay for itself," said Strong, the economist who authored the study's economic analysis. "And that deficit will echo through the entire array of city services. Lower response time from police, dirtier streets, more potholes."

One of the fastest-growing regions in the country, the Central Valley has nearly doubled its population in the past 20 years. Cities have accommodated that growth with about four housing units per acre. By increasing this housing density to seven units per acre, the study found, the effects of sprawl could be cut in half.

"Seven units per acre is not an unreasonable goal," said Eric Vink, who heads the Davis office of the Farmland Trust. "With that minor change, the loss of farmland is cut in half. And instead of budget deficits, the cities will actually have a small budget surplus."

Vink called for a task force of farmers, developers, public officials, environmentalists and the general public to promote ways to achieve more compact growth.

He said public officials and planners had to stop treating farmland as an interim land use. The most important farmland in the valley needs to be set aside as an agricultural reserve where growth is prohibited, he said.

"Cities should be saying, 'Here are the areas where we grow houses and here are the areas where we want to reserve for growing food,'" he said.