

The Ag/Urban Interface – Land Use Principles to Preserve Agriculture

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Introduction

A coalition named the Ag Futures Alliance (AFA) was formed by agriculturalists in late 1999 to address some of the more critical challenges facing agriculture in Ventura County. The initial purpose of AFA was to create a framework for implementing actions to ensure the existence and enhancement of agriculture in Ventura County in perpetuity. Recognizing a need for broad-based public commitment to and participation in the AFA, participants agreed that Ventura County agriculture must make the environmental and health concerns of non-farming residents a top priority. The alliance invited representatives from a variety of social and environmental concerns to participate, and with few exceptions the offer was accepted. It became clear to AFA participants that the first step must be to create meaningful two-way communication. The second step would be to build trust and the third step would be to discover win-win solutions based on mutual respect and appreciation. It was during the third step in 2002 that that AFA formed the subcommittee on Land Use Principles. The subcommittee identified the problems and challenges for agriculture in this county related to land use, then came to consensus on a set of principles and recommended actions for addressing the challenges. The Land Use subcommittee and Ag Futures Alliance, Ventura County respectfully present these principles and recommendations to decision makers and others as a platform for sustaining agriculture as a vital component of Ventura County's quality of life.

PREAMBLE

Ag Futures Alliance (AFA) of Ventura County is a collaborative forum for members of the agricultural, environmental, and civic communities, to develop strategies for preserving agriculture as an essential part of life in Ventura County.

Ventura County's productive farmland is a valuable yet finite natural resource. Agriculture is an essential foundation for a strong and self-sufficient society, producing fundamental food and fiber and contributing an estimated \$3.5 billion into Ventura County's economy annually. Agriculture is not a temporary or interim land use. Agricultural sustainability is a long-term commitment measured over generations, not in the current planning model of 20 years.

Land use practices of building residential neighborhoods directly next to farmland cause continual conflicts, resulting in the steady erosion of the agricultural industry. The principles set forth in this document suggest buffers and reasonable boundaries between agricultural and urban uses to reduce conflicts and allow the best use for each segment of society, allowing both to survive and prosper.

PURPOSE

The AFA proposes this set of land use principles for the residents and leaders of the cities and the County to promote meaningful consensus on an applicable, long-term strategy for protection of agriculture in Ventura County. These principles are consistent with previously published reports of the County of Ventura, and with the efforts of other land-use coalitions and "smart growth" urban planning concepts. It is important that there be a consistent, comprehensive commitment to supporting agriculture throughout Ventura County as disparate planning policies make for contradictory objectives and encourage conflicts.

This document reflects the collective experience of diverse stakeholders who want to move beyond the policy position and into active implementation of the principles.

It is hoped that each city will adopt these principles into their standard procedures as outlined in their general plans, comprehensive plans, specific plans or any other such planning document. Ventura County has often led the way in agricultural practices and slow growth principles. However, as the County strives to meet growing population demands, it is imperative that both cities and the County come to agreement about a set of policies and effective procedures to guide land use decisions into this new century.

Four Principles are presented below:

- Principle 1: Buffers are necessary between agriculture and neighboring uses.
- Principle 2: Permanent boundaries are needed between agricultural production areas and urban uses.
- Principle 3: Development strategies should encourage protection of agricultural lands.
- Principle 4: Regulatory structure should allow flexibility for agricultural operations.

PRINCIPLES

Principle 1: Buffers are necessary between agriculture and neighboring uses.
Agricultural operations adjacent to urban uses too often result in conflicts leading to restraints on the grower. Buffers protect neighbors while allowing agricultural operations to continue.

1. Create and maintain buffers between agricultural lands and urban uses. Buffers can include both (a) physical separators such as set backs, vegetative barriers and/or fencing, and (b) use-related through transitional zoning, restrictions and conditions.
2. Buffer zones between urban and agricultural areas in all cities should be based on consistent standards. The Ventura County Agricultural Policy Advisory Committee (APAC) and the Agricultural Commissioner should develop these consistent standards and monitor compliance by cities and the County.
3. Responsibility for the buffer rests with the encroaching urban use, not the pre-existing agricultural use. Without buffers, urban uses can build right up to agricultural

operations or the CURB/SOAR1 line, jeopardizing adjoining agriculture.

4. Where no buffer exists or is feasible, the grower should be compensated for any loss of production or value due to the interfering urban use.

Principle 2: Permanent boundaries are needed between agricultural production areas and urban uses. *Boundaries are distinguished from buffers in that boundaries are permanent, major, visible separators between areas of different land uses, while buffers occur between parcels.*

5. Boundaries between agriculture and urban should, whenever possible, be longlasting physical features, natural or manmade, that are true dividers such as rivers, major roads and freeways, drainage channels, airports, etc.

6. CURB and SOAR lines are sometimes arbitrary and not based on consistent, longterm physical features as outlined in #5. These lines should be reviewed and modified where appropriate to ensure logical, enforceable, long-term boundaries.

7. Boundaries should encompass large swaths of land for efficient agricultural operation. Smaller parcels of farmland that are surrounded neighbored by urban uses that cannot be adequately buffered should be allowed to develop, upon request of the landowner.

8. Where appropriate, allow public open space (passive parkland, wildlife habitat) to serve as a permanent boundary for agriculture.

9. Proven land conservation tools that create protection boundaries should be encouraged, such as Land Conservation Act (Williamson Act) Contracts, Farmland Security Zone contracts, conservation easements and TDRs (transfers of development rights). These compensate owners who agree to keep their land in agriculture and provide a growth boundary.

Principle 3: Development strategies should encourage protection of agricultural lands. *Currently adopted land use plans call for further encroachment into areas of prime agricultural soils, which are widely regarded as being among the most fertile in the world.*

10. Cities and County general and specific plans should contain an Agricultural Element that reflects the principles stated herein.

11. Urban development should be directed to those areas least desirable for agriculture based on factors of soil, slope, water, wind, climate and location.

12. Investments in infrastructure improvements should be directed into existing urban areas in order to increase urban population capacities and to avoid positioning agricultural lands for eventual development.

13. Encourage creative models of mixed-use development and higher density in designated urban areas to reduce encroachment into productive agricultural areas. This will require zoning/regulatory changes in various jurisdictions.
14. Every city and the County must promote development and maintenance of housing for farm workers and their families.
15. If farmland conversion must occur, ensure that nearby agricultural operations are protected from a “domino” effect through use of buffers and other policies as presented in this document.
16. Protection and preservation efforts should be directed toward large blocks of farmland positioned to allow for viable agricultural operation and maintenance.
17. Recognizing that existing SOAR ordinances have a limited tenure, policies and agreements need to be created that will continue the preservation of agricultural resources before conversion pressures intensify.
18. Particularly sensitive urban functions such as schools (public and private), child day care centers, elderly care units, and health care facilities should be located on sites that do not place them in conflict with existing agriculture uses and/or that are required to provide generous buffers.
19. Encourage LAFCO to adopt regulations based on these principles and recommendations when reviewing annexation applications affecting agricultural lands.
20. The Board of Supervisors and the Ventura County Agricultural Commissioner should continue to fund staff to monitor land use projects affecting agriculture and to continue the level of support provided by that office and the APAC.

Principle 4: Regulatory structure should allow flexibility for agricultural operations.
There are currently laws, zoning and regulations by cities and the County that unnecessarily restrict agricultural operations.

21. Zoning, codes, use permits, planning requirements and other regulations should be flexible and not unduly restrict the use of agricultural land, such as the crops that may be grown, buildings and structures, equipment in view, or how production may occur.
22. The widest definition of agricultural uses should be allowed in agricultural areas to permit growers to adapt to changing markets. This recognizes greenhouses, shade structures, hoop houses, and others as legitimate agricultural methods in a highly competitive industry.
23. Encourage public education and greater awareness of agricultural operations and provisions of the Ventura County “Right to Farm” ordinance.

24. The County and cities must continue to support, through zoning and appropriate infrastructure, agriculture-support business such as packinghouses, chemical distribution facilities, tractor and irrigation supply companies, etc. that are critical for the agricultural industry.

REFERENCES:

1. VC Farm Bureau Land Use Policy: <http://members.aol.com/vcfb1/landuse.htm>.
2. California laws: www.leginfo.ca.gov "current laws."
3. "The Impacts of Farmland Conversion in California" (1991 study for state Office of Land Conservation) UC Davis, Sustainable Agriculture Research & Education Program www.sarep.ucdavis.edu/NEWSLTR/v2n4/sa-2.htm.
4. Excerpt (7 pages) from North Ventura Avenue Elementary School Mitigated Negative Declaration, Rincon Consultants for the Ventura Unified School District (example of how a project addressed its own impacts on agriculture) www.ventura.k12.ca.us/vusd/ag/htm
5. Ventura County LAFCO School Siting Criteria (2002) www.ventura.org/LAFCO
6. \$3.5 billion estimate is approximate value of crops times three for economic multiplier.

AFA Land Use Committee, 2003

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AG INNOVATIONS NETWORK (AGIN)

The Ventura County Ag Futures Alliance partners with Ag Innovations Network in the organization and facilitation of its efforts. Ag Innovations Network is a small group of professionals dedicated to helping preserve and protect our unique agricultural heritage by helping farmers and ranchers develop new practices and new revenue streams that keep land in agriculture.

The mission of AG Innovations Network (AGIN) is to enhance the long-term sustainability of communities by assisting agriculture to fulfil its essential role as the keystone in a healthy eco-system, economy, and society.

AGIN creates and facilitates public processes that bring together divergent groups with a stake in agriculture to find common ground and implement solutions that address local needs. AGIN also designs and implements marketing programs, resource stewardship programs, and public education campaigns.

All these activities focus on solutions that increase the use of sustainable farming practices, increase the awareness of the importance of a healthy agricultural base to a sustainable society, and reduce the friction between farmers, governments, and the general public.

To contact or learn more about AGIN, visit their website at www.aginnovations.net.