



Final Seed Grant Report to the California Partnership for the San Joaquin Valley Model Farmland Conservation Program

Fresno County, the nation's leading agricultural county, relies on farmland. As its population continues to grow, the prosperity of agriculture, and the entire community it supports, will depend on striking a balance between urban development and conserving farmland. The California Partnership for the San Joaquin Valley recognized this by awarding the Council of Fresno County Governments a grant to design a model farmland conservation program, and American Farmland Trust (AFT) was selected to help it do so. Over an 18-month period, AFT facilitated an effort by public and private sector leaders to classify Fresno County's farmland according to its significance to agriculture, to document current conditions and trends affecting farmland, and to propose a set of policies that responds to these trends by establishing a framework for effectively conserving the county's most "strategic" farmland. The elements of this model farmland conservation program build on the principles of *A Landscape of Choice* and are intended to help implement the Blueprint planning process that has been conducted simultaneously. ([Map of Fresno's Strategic Farmland](#))

"Strategic" farmland is the land most likely to remain economically viable for high-value commercial agriculture in the long term, given its inherent characteristics and surrounding conditions. The characteristics used to classify farmland were: soils, availability of water, micro-climates, environmental sensitivity and urban development pressure. Based on computerized mapping of these characteristics, 559,000 acres of Fresno's 2.2 million acres of agricultural land were identified as the most strategic, i.e., the land that should receive the highest priority for conservation, and the lowest priority for non-farm development, as part of a broad strategy to sustain Fresno County agriculture.

One-sixth of Fresno's most strategic farmland is located inside or within one-half mile of city spheres of influence, highlighting the central challenge of minimizing the loss of this land by increasing the efficiency of urban development. Between 1990 and 2004, about 21,500 acres of Fresno County land were developed, one fifth of all of the land developed since the City of Fresno was founded more than 130 years ago. Because most development took place on the edges of existing cities, 69 percent of all the land developed was prime or unique farmland, or farmland of statewide importance. An acre of land was developed for every 9.4 new residents, which was somewhat more efficient than the 8.1 people per acre in the San Joaquin Valley as a whole. But it was far less efficient than development in other regions of the state, even those that are more suburban than urban, demonstrating that developing less land per capita is entirely possible and that much of the farmland being lost in Fresno County is unnecessary.

If no change in current development patterns occurs, another 97,600 acres of land will be urbanized in Fresno County by 2050, roughly double the current urbanized area. Of this, 67,350 acres (105 square miles) is likely to be in prime, unique or statewide important farmland and most, if not all of that will be "strategic" farmland. Moreover, if rural residential development, which now occupies roughly one quarter of all developed land in the county, continues apace, another 55,000 acres could be removed from agriculture.

Behind the loss of farmland is a gap between the well-intended plans of local governments and their actual performance in living up to them. Nearly all general plans call for avoiding the best land and developing land efficiently. But these plans are being frustrated by, among other things, a combination of fiscal pressure to promote development imposed by state law – the fiscalization of land use: the establishment of city spheres of influence that are expansive enough to accommodate decades of new development (the average of the small cities is 41 years) even at today’s inefficient rates; the failure of cities to measure how much of the best farmland is being developed in comparison to what is necessary to meet their needs; and ultimately, by the lack of compelling, alternative vision of, and fiscal model for, how cities in the San Joaquin Valley should grow.

Given that most of the growing cities in Fresno County are located in the midst of its most strategic farmland, increasing efficiency of development is the single most important thing that can be done to conserve the county’s irreplaceable farmland. The Model Farmland Conservation Program responds to this challenge by proposing three basic elements:

- Establishment of a “Strategic Agricultural Reserve” comprised of the highest categories of strategic farmland, which should be conserved by a County policy of prohibiting most non-farm development within it and by holding cities accountable for not encroaching up it unless it is necessary.
- Objective criteria for the expansion of city spheres of influence based on the demonstration of genuine need in light of the imperative of developing land more efficiently. The density benchmarks that emerge from the Blueprint planning process—the average now being considered is 8 dwellings per acre—should be used to determine whether cities have less than 20 years of developable residential land within their spheres before any expansion may take place. And any expansion would be limited to a 20-year supply of developable land. The same kind of test would apply to unincorporated areas of the County designated for development. General or specific plans would be amended to reflect the efficiency goals, and procedures would be established to ensure accountability for their implementation.
- Creation of a Stewardship Council as a non-regulatory, public-private partnership to oversee the progress of the Model Farmland Conservation Program and to conduct study of additional possible elements of the program, including but not limited to: new design and fiscal models for urban growth, buffer areas between cities, alternative for financing agricultural conservation easements and options for discouraging rural residential development.

Fresno County today resembles another California county that led the nation in agricultural production. There, one large city and many smaller ones were scattered over a vast fruited plain, sustained by the farms and ranches surrounding them. It took only a single lifetime for Los Angeles to be transformed into the poster child for urban sprawl. Local communities ignored or discounted warnings that agriculture was being piecemealed to death as farm after farm was consumed by low-density subdivisions, freeways, and parking lots. A decade ago, *A Landscape of Choice* issued the latest wake-up call to Fresno County, calling for more efficient, less auto-dependent communities that are more livable and conserve farmland. Yet, since then, little seems to have changed as another 17 square miles of the best farmland on Earth have been lost. The time for taking responsibility for effective action to conserve Fresno County’s farmland is running out. The ultimate challenge is to summon the political will to make it happen.