

WHAT CAN LAFCO DO TO PRESERVE AGRICULTURE AND OPEN SPACE?

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What is the difference between the two?

Open Space is a general term describing undeveloped land including parks, school yards, golf courses and agricultural land. It is largely used for recreation, environmental protection and for esthetic purposes.

Agricultural Land is land used for the production of food, fiber, medicinal plants, energy, etc. They are very similar in appearance but very different in purpose.

Why should we care?

Everybody talks about preserving agriculture but nobody does anything about it. The image of agriculture portrayed through popular culture and popular media tends to be either unsophisticated agrarian producers using ancient or harmful cultural techniques or massive corporate farms producing poisonous, un-nutritious and flavorless food at the expense of the planet and an unsuspecting consumer. Nothing could be farther from the truth.

Still, It is comforting to lump Agriculture together with Open Space because the image is more palatable and attractive. Open Space does serve a very valuable purpose in our society and around the world. Preservation of habitat is an extremely important goal for everyone. Recreation and esthetics are critical to our physical and mental wellbeing. However, lumping the two together and thinking about them as a sort of larger Open Space ignores some very important issues.

Principal among them is feeding the world. By mid century, the world population is projected to grow by 35%. This could require a 100% increase in worldwide crop yields. Actual numbers are debatable but the trends are irrefutable:

- Developing countries (China, India,...) are demanding more and better food
- Underdeveloped countries continue to increase populations as medical advances save more lives
- Farmland is lost to non-agricultural uses such as recreational open space, habitat protection and development
- Desertification (largely a result of under grazing!)
- Climate change
- Water supplies
- Over-regulation of agricultural practices and on and on.

What can LAFCO do?

First would be to acknowledge the importance of privately owned, privately managed, economically sustainable units of agricultural farmland. Managing recreational land and protected habitat require tools that maintain the status quo. Agriculture demands a set of tools that address ever changing climates, changing markets, changing regulations and changing economics. Clearly and historically, the most productive way to feed the world is having farmers and ranchers who own their land and who can be innovative and address changes as they arise. Those growers are not going to ruin the productivity of their land for the sake of a quick profit. What works less well but is the trend today is to burden farmers and ranchers with dictates on how they should produce food.

Second is to look at existing approaches. Zoning laws could be reviewed to ensure the protection of ag economies, not just the land. Enforcement would help (junkification?). Down zoning must include fair

compensation to the ag land owner. Mitigation is fine in some cases but it often reduces or eliminates food production opportunities. Conservation Easements should include the protection of woodlands, riparian corridors and non-productive areas, not arable or grazing lands. Setting areas aside for the protection of agricultural land is fine but don't trap the producers in an uneconomic environment. Advocate the establishment of support industries. Lower property taxes on land that legitimately produces food.

The most successful model using tax dollars is the University Extension Service using research done in universities to answer questions posed by producers and researchers, then applied in a practical way. It is a symbiotic relationship. The opposite effect can be seen with the assertion by EPA (2% lifetime success rate with their ESA) of Clean Water Act provisions that adversely effect most farm and ranchland.

Third, help dispel the myths about agriculture. Cattle are widely blamed for methane production, wasting water resources, producing unhealthy food, and on and on. Do the research. Too much hype and too many agendas. Most of the world's land is not arable and the greatest portion of ag land is grazing land. This is where the highest quality protein is produced using rainfall and self propelled harvesters.

It's extremely important and valuable for pop culture to identify concerns with our human activities (establishing national parks, identifying the effects of DDT, identifying the loss of species, air quality,...). But base your decisions on verified science not on pop culture fantasies. You will be surprised.

--Jeff Wiedemann