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Dear Supervisor Chiesa:

American Farmland Trust has been engaged in farmland conservation in the San Joaquin Valley for over two decades. In January 2013, we published our latest report on the region and the status of our collective farmland conservation efforts.

Saving Farmland, Growing Cities shows that, since 1990, development has steadily consumed the region's best farmland, converting an acre of productive soil for every 6 new residents. This equates to more than 280 square miles – an area the size of Modesto, Fresno and Bakersfield combined. The report highlights the need to track the conversion of farmland and implement practices and policies to stem the losses, including the use of agricultural conservation easements and improving general plan policies on land use.

We hope the report assists you in re-doubling efforts to conserve farmland in the world's most productive agricultural region. If we ignore these findings, and the status quo persists, the report estimates that another half million acres of farmland will be converted.

The report also offers AFT an opportunity to engage local stakeholders and public officials. We look forward to hearing your feedback as well as briefing your board, council, commission or other official body.

Sincerely,

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2/8/13

The Modesto Bee | Ag group's report says growth policies don't aim to preserve San Joaquin Valley farmland

The Modesto Bee

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Ag group's report says growth policies don't aim to preserve San Joaquin Valley farmland

By John Holland jholland@modbee.com

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MODESTO --]

Home construction has paused in the San Joaquin Valley, a farmland preservation group said Thursday, but it will get back to devouring precious acres if policies do not change.

A new report from the American Farmland Trust says valley growth plans still direct too much development to the best soil and fall short of the housing density needed to keep farming strong.

The group cited some positive trends — including a farmland preservation plan adopted in Stanislaus County last year — but said the overall trend is still sprawl.

"By almost any measure, the San Joaquin Valley as a whole and its individual counties are not doing a good job of preserving farmland," said Ed Thompson, director of the group's California office, in a conference call with reporters.

The report, "Saving Farmland, Growing Cities," says the valley lost nearly 100,000 acres of high-quality farmland to urban use from 1990 to 2008. An additional 300,000 acres could be lost by 2050 if the trend continues, the group said.

The valley has about 10.6 million acres of agricultural land, the report says, but only about half of it is "highly productive irrigated cropland." An even smaller share, 27 percent, is "prime," the best land.

A building industry leader said the report does not account for the increasing crop yield from each acre and the spread of irrigated farmland into the foothill parts of the valley.

"We are producing more agriculture on less land and the amount of irrigated cropland is growing as the number of homes increases," said John Beckman, chief executive officer at the Building Industry Association of the Great Valley. "They can co-exist."

Beckman, who is based in Stockton, said the majority of home buyers do not want increased density in cities and neighborhoods.

The trust argues that higher density would create vibrant communities and reduce public spending on roads and other services.

The report notes that Stanislaus County went from 7.1 people per urbanized acre in 1990 to 7.3 in 2008. Merced County went in the other direction, from 6.3 to 5.6.

The report uses 2008 figures because they are the most recent available from the California Department of Conservation.

More recent numbers would not change the picture much because the past few years have brought a dramatic drop in home construction. In 2005, about 14,000 permits for single-family homes were issued in Stanislaus, Merced and San Joaquin counties. In 2011, they totalled 924.

The crash meant lost jobs for thousands of people in construction, real estate, home furnishings and related fields. It also contributed to a national recession and the ongoing financial crisis.

Thompson said the lull in home construction provides a chance for valley people to tinker with the growth plans.

"The opportunity exists to remake them as more mixed-use settlements where you have jobs and housing and not just homes forever," he said.



DEBBIE NODA/dnoda@modbee.com A walnut orchard close to multistory housing in Turlock, Jan. 17, 2013. Farmland preservation and development policies are being scrutinized in the San Joaquin Valley. - The Modesto Bee - Debbie Noda

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Stanislaus plan a model?

The trust praised a September vote by the Stanislaus Local Agency Formation Commission to require at least an acre of farmland preservation for each acre annexed to a city in the future. The policy could take years to be felt because of the housing downturn, but supporters hailed it as a major change in direction.

"We tried to come up with something that would help preserve the maximum amount of farmland while still bringing jobs into the county," said Waterford Mayor Charlie Goeken, chairman of LAFCo.

Turlock-area farmer Jeani Ferrari said 2012 "was a good year in Stanislaus County and the cities because there was a lot of dialogue about long-term preservation."

Ferrari, a board member with the Farmland Working Group, also praised Turlock for a growth plan with tighter boundaries than first proposed.

"If you have a compact urban footprint, that works for everybody," said Ferrari, who grows almonds, walnuts, peaches and sweet potatoes.

Beckman, with the builders group, said the valley's inventory of homes for sale is well short of the demand. And he said market research has shown that 75 percent to 80 percent of the buyers want detached, single-family homes at lower density than what the trust proposes.

The trust is especially critical of "ranchettes" — rural home sites that it considers too large for efficient development but too small for commercial agriculture.

Stanislaus, Merced and San Joaquin counties all have about an eighth of their developed acreage in ranchettes. Madera County skews the valleywide average with 51 percent.

The report also calls for sustaining agriculture — which has largely thrived amid the housing troubles — by providing for irrigation water, processing plants and other needs.

"At some point," Ferrari said, "not only do you have to house people, you have to feed people."

On the Net:

See the full report at www.farmland.org.

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