

Sustaining Our Agricultural Bounty

An Assessment of the Current State of Farming and Ranching in the San Francisco Bay Area



Courtesy of Harley Goat Farm

**A White Paper by
American Farmland Trust
Greenbelt Alliance
Sustainable Agriculture Education (SAGE)**

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Bay Area Agricultural Sustainability Project - Introduction

What would the Bay Area be like without farms and ranches? Imagine our region without the range and farm lands that bring us a bounty of local produce, fresh meats and dairy products, and the inspiring landscapes and ecosystems that define the Bay Area. Sooner than we realize we may lose this – unless the region’s agriculture can be sustained as a successful economic sector and valued for the productive land and ecosystems that supply us with a multitude of beneficial resources.

Since 1984, more than 200,000 acres of agricultural land in the nine-county Bay Area have been lost to development. Much of the region’s urban footprint was carved from irrigated cropland, the most productive and versatile land for food production. It is this high quality land that still remains the most vulnerable to development. Today, only 367,000 acres of this critical resource are still in production and much of it is up for grabs. With almost two million more people expected to live in the region by 2035, it is imperative that strong local land-use policies and conservation investments assure that the best remaining farm and ranch lands are preserved and that development consumes as little of it as possible.

But preserving the land is not enough. The one thing that distinguishes agricultural land from all other kinds of open space is that, by definition, it provides for a basic human need. Neither the food produced on agricultural land, nor its other public benefits – its scenic beauty, its environmental value as undeveloped watersheds and wildlife habitat, its historic character and cultural significance, its very presence as a bulwark against urban sprawl – can be guaranteed unless agriculture itself succeeds financially.

This recognition was behind a key recommendation of the Bay Area Open Space Council, Greenbelt Alliance, and Association of Bay Area Governments (ABAG) in a 2009 report entitled *Golden Lands, Golden Opportunity: Preserving Vital Bay Area Lands for All Californians: [Help keep the region’s farmers and ranchers in business.](#)*

Close to urban areas, Bay Area farmers and ranchers are under more pressure than their counterparts in more rural areas of the state. The cost of land and other inputs is higher and the potential for conflict with urban uses is greater. To stay in business, agriculture in this region must overcome these competitive disadvantages. And to do that, it needs the understanding and active support of the public, not only as consumers who can exert influence through their buying power, but also as constituents who can influence public policies that impact agriculture.

The Bay Area Agricultural Sustainability Project was inaugurated to keep the region’s agriculture competitive and economically viable. It is intended to help farmers and ranchers overcome the challenges they face, and to maximize their opportunity to capitalize on the advantage they enjoy due to their proximity to seven million customers. In so doing, this project seeks to maximize all of the contributions that agriculture makes to the livability and sustainability of the region as a whole.

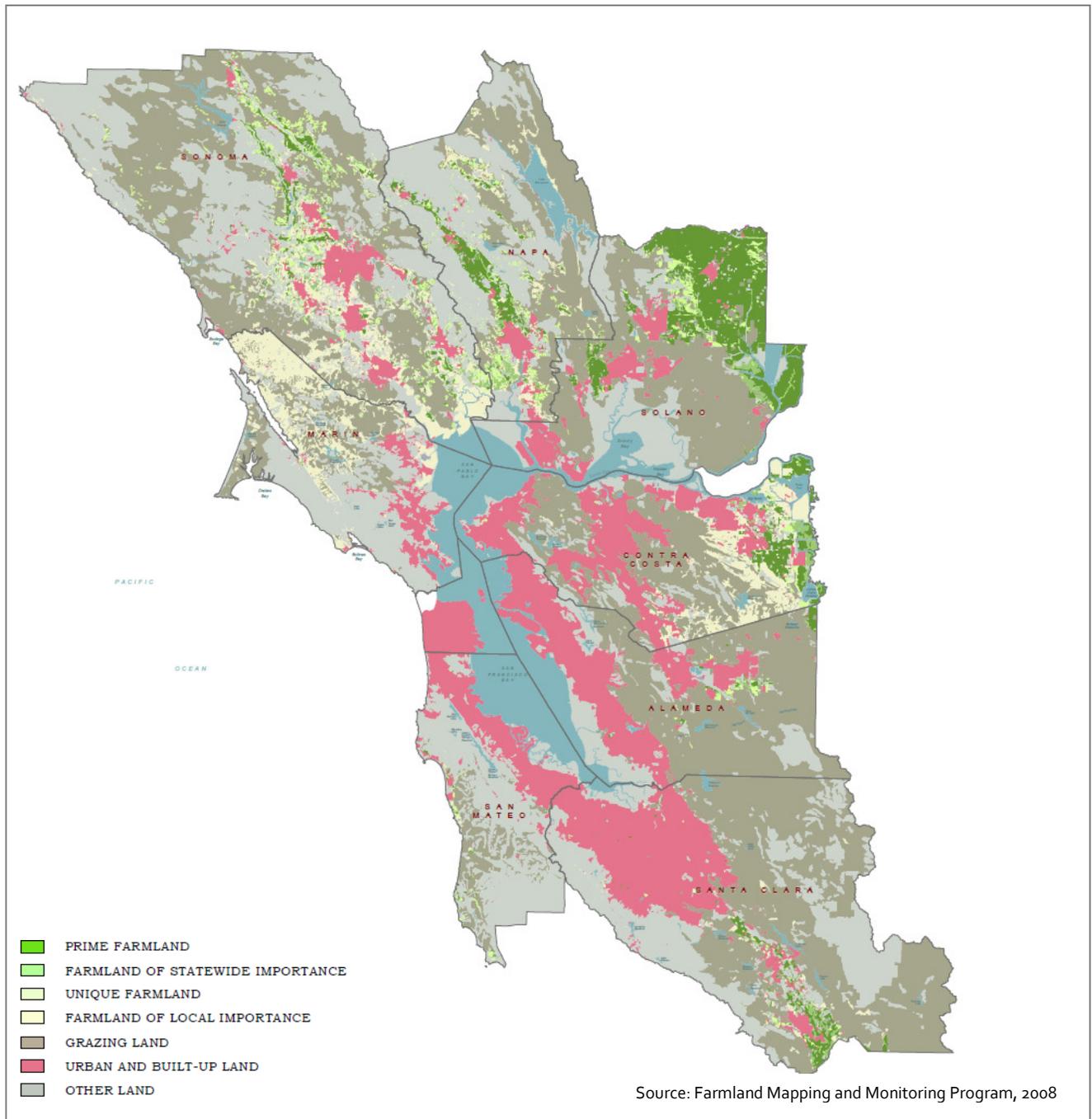
The Bay Area’s agricultural land is not a placeholder for future development, nor simply preserved open space that will help prevent urban sprawl and all of its undesirable consequences – though that is surely one of its important functions. The Bay Area Agricultural Sustainability Project envisions a working landscape that continues to enrich the region for many generations to come as an irreplaceable environmental, cultural, and historic resource that supplies healthy food to the region’s residents and visitors, while supporting farm and ranch families who are pillars of the metropolitan community.

The Bay Area Agricultural Sustainability Project consists of two components: 1) this white paper, the product of reconnaissance to document the defining characteristics of the region’s agriculture and to identify the challenges and opportunities encountered by the region’s farmers and ranchers; and 2) a

convening in early 2011 of a group of regional leaders from agriculture and other constituencies to consider the information in the white paper, along with their own experiences, and to begin designing a comprehensive strategy to assure a robust and sustainable future for Bay Area agriculture.

The Project is a collaboration among three nonprofit organizations: Greenbelt Alliance, Sustainable Agriculture Education (SAGE), and American Farmland Trust. It was inspired by an Urban-Rural Roundtable convened in 2008 by former San Francisco Mayor Gavin Newsom, which, among other things, recommended that a concerted effort be made to realize the full potential of the region's agricultural lands and producers to supply the region's growing demand for local food.

Figure 1. Bay Area Region, Important Farmland 2008



Bay Area Agriculture Today

While the Bay Area is home to over 7 million people and over 100 cities and towns, it continues to have productive working landscapes that provide a diversity of food for regional and worldwide markets. From the fertile southern Santa Clara Valley to the wine-grape growing regions of Sonoma and Napa, Bay Area farmers produce a cornucopia of fruits, vegetables, meat, dairy, and wines. Bay Area agriculture provides jobs, contributes to the local economy, and gives the Bay Area a sense of history, place, and unique character.

However, if agriculture is to continue to contribute to the quality of life in the Bay Area – indeed, if it is to capitalize on unique opportunities such as the public’s growing interest in locally grown food, ecosystem services, and agritourism – and to remain economically viable, it must meet some serious challenges.

Production, Producers, and Places

Bay Area farmers produce agricultural products valued at over \$1.8 billion dollars a year. Though this represents an 11 percent decline in production value over an 18-year period, in many ways agriculture continues to thrive and the potential of our region’s agricultural lands remains strong. With a wide diversity of nursery crops, livestock, fruits, and vegetables as well as a thriving wine industry, Bay Area farmers continue to supply the region and beyond with a bounty of food. Sonoma and Napa counties realize the highest agricultural values based on wine grape production. Solano, Santa Clara, and San Mateo counties follow in agricultural values, based on a wide diversity of agricultural products.

Grazing and farmland continue to cover a significant percentage of the Bay Area. Most Bay Area counties have more than 40 percent of their acreage in some form of agricultural production, and Napa and Solano counties continue to have more than half of their land base in agriculture. Grazing is by far the largest agricultural land use, accounting for almost 75 percent of agricultural lands in the region. Livestock is a leading agricultural product in seven Bay Area counties. However, most counties also produce a wide array of other food crops. In seven Bay Area counties fruits and vegetables are primary crops, with significant acreage devoted to orchards and row crops. Nursery crops, horticulture, and floriculture continue to play an important part in Bay Area agriculture. In several counties, most notably Napa and Sonoma, wine grapes are a driving factor in the agricultural economy.

While some Bay Area counties have adopted strong land-use protections, the region continues to lose valuable agricultural land every year. In Bay Area counties, cropland, orchards, and row crops are disappearing most rapidly. While the Bay Area had 674,364 acres of cropland in 1990, that acreage had

Table 1.1 Bay Area Regional Agriculture Trends

	Agricultural Value		Change in Cropland Acres		Direct Sales	Population Growth	
	2008	2000-2008 % Change	All Cropland 1990-2008	Prime Cropland 1990-2008	As % of Total 2007	% Increase by 2035	Share of Growth by 2035
Alameda	\$41,185,000	10%	-35%	-53%	1%	23%	23%
Contra Costa	\$71,962,340	-22%	-19%	-37%	4%	22%	15%
Marin	\$63,311,293	6%	-4%	-96%	3%	10%	2%
Napa	\$409,122,900	-4%	5%	12%	0.3%	12%	1%
San Francisco	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	18%	9%
San Mateo	\$160,925,000	-33%	-40%	-7%	6%	16%	7%
Santa Clara	\$247,950,400	-18%	-39%	-47%	2%	27%	32%
Solano	\$292,840,200	28%	-14%	-11%	1%	29%	8%
Sonoma	\$593,407,000	-18%	-6%	-9%	1%	12%	4%
Bay Area Region	\$1,880,704,133	-11%	-12%	-18%	1%	22%	100%

Sources: County Agricultural Commissioners’ Crop Reports, 2008; California Farmland Mapping and Monitoring Program, 2008; USDA Census of Agriculture, 2007; Association of Bay Area Governments, 2008.

dropped to 591,167 by 2008, a 12% decline over 18 years. Even more alarming, as suburban growth has spread out over fertile regions in counties like Alameda, Contra Costa, and Santa Clara, these regions are losing a disproportionate amount of “prime cropland” – the land designated as the most valuable for agricultural production by the California Farmland Mapping and Monitoring Program. Over the last decade, the Bay Area lost at least 18 percent of its prime cropland.

Markets and Value-Added Activities

Bay Area farming operations are diverse in their acreage, scale of operations, and markets. Most operations are small farms selling niche products locally through farmers’ markets, community-supported agriculture (CSAs), and local grocers. Relatively few represent large operations growing thousands of acres of agricultural products that are marketed through wholesalers and distributed worldwide. Bay Area farmers continue to adapt to market demands. A decade ago, many Bay Area counties realized significant agricultural revenues from nursery crops. In several counties including Contra Costa, Santa Clara, and Sonoma counties, dramatic declines in the nursery industry have accounted for significant drops in agricultural values. Napa, Sonoma, and Alameda counties have developed vibrant, profitable viticulture industries that are the foundation of their agricultural economies.

As is the case around the rest of California and the nation, organic production, direct marketing, and agricultural tourism currently play a small economic role in Bay Area agriculture. However, these activities are on the rise with marked increases in each county over the past ten years.

While the Bay Area region boasts some of the best wineries in the world, other value-added and processing facilities are limited. Farmers around the region note that lack of processing facilities limits their ability to develop local alternatives to traditional commodities markets.

Policy Influences on Farmland and Agriculture

Napa and Marin counties acknowledged the value of their agricultural resources decades ago by enacting strong land-use protections that prevent the development for agricultural land. The success of these early, innovative land-use policies in protecting farmland is dramatic. Marin has lost less than five percent of agricultural lands in the 18-year period between 1990 and 2008, and Napa has increased acreage of cultivated farmland. Other counties have been less effective with agricultural land protections and have experienced a significant loss of farmland over the past two decades. For instance Santa Clara County lost 41 percent of its cropland from 1990 to 2008, with San Mateo and Contra Costa counties also experiencing dramatic loss of croplands.

Gradually, all Bay Area counties have come to acknowledge the importance of local agriculture. Today all Bay Area counties have some form of land-use regulation targeted at protecting agricultural land. Public agencies and nonprofit land trusts also work around the Bay Area to permanently protect agricultural lands. Marin, Napa, and Sonoma counties provide evidence that land conservation efforts are most successful when used in concert with strong land-use policies.

Over the past decade, some counties have begun to recognize that it will take more than farmland conservation to ensure that the Bay Area continues to have a local source of food. Local governments have begun to explore programs that preserve agricultural land, and some are starting to support limited agriculture economic development efforts. Some county governments in the region have established agricultural advisory task forces and food councils to address agricultural issues. Several counties, including Marin, Solano, and Contra Costa counties, have amended county zoning to allow expanded direct marketing and value-added facilities. Marin County has a staff person dedicated to assisting farmers with the permitting and regulatory process. Some county governments, including San Mateo, Contra Costa, and

San Francisco, are considering local food purchasing policies that require that county departments purchase food from local farmers. Still, many agricultural producers feel that much more can be done by county government to establish bolder economic development programs.

Challenges and Opportunities

Development pressures and land values. The cost of agricultural land on the urban edge of the Bay Area has skyrocketed as development pressures have reached traditional agricultural communities. Even when land-use policies protect against subdivision development, the Bay Area's bucolic agricultural landscapes draws new residents seeking rural estate homes. While the current economic downturn has temporarily mitigated this trend, the general momentum of escalating land values and uncertainty about future land use have made agricultural property owners in some Bay Area counties hesitant to invest in their farming operations and develop new markets.

Water. In several Bay Area counties like Alameda and San Mateo, lack of irrigation water significantly limits agriculture. Innovative solutions like the San Mateo Pond Project seek to address water issues, but infrastructure costs, permitting, and regulatory restrictions continue to create barriers. The competition for water among agricultural, urban, and environmental restoration needs is intensifying. Several counties have begun to explore innovative approaches to balance these needs such as using reclaimed water from neighboring urban areas for agricultural irrigation water but costs and regulations have been barriers here as well.

Local distribution. Due to the consolidation of California agriculture, globalization of food production, and increased production costs, many Bay Area farmers are struggling to survive economically. With some exceptions, the region's farmers do not have the acreage and scale of operations to compete in global commodities markets, and yet the local distribution system that once brought their products directly to local markets is no longer in place. Rebuilding the region's agricultural infrastructure and recreating a local food distribution system could provide Bay Area farmers with profitable new markets, provide urban residents with fresh, healthy food, and keep food dollars in local communities. County governments and farmers are working together in several Bay Area counties like San Mateo and Napa to build local food distribution systems.

Value-added production and regulations. As agriculture has changed over the past several decades, small-scale farmers have had to adapt their marketing strategies. Innovative farmers have found ways to connect with their urban neighbors through farmers' markets, roadside stands, community-supported agriculture (CSAs), and farm visits. However, in some counties, the well-intended land-use protections enacted to protect agricultural soils have restricted farmers from developing value-added processing facilities or engaging in on-farm direct marketing activities. For example, until recently Contra Costa County zoning prohibited farmers from making or selling value-added products like wine, olive oil, jams, salsa, and baked goods. Often, even when zoning permits value-added processing, the cost of permitting and infrastructure development is prohibitively expensive for small producers. Livestock producers face even more complex challenges to local processing with a myriad of state and federal regulations on processing meat. As a result, the region is critically lacking a sufficient number of meat-processing facilities. With the Bay Area showing among the highest consumer demand in the nation for grass-fed, natural, and organic beef products, it is also seeing a growing demand from cattle producers who are interested in raising, slaughtering, and processing meats locally for regional markets.

Funding and Financial Barriers

Significant public and private investment will be needed to fund land conservation, agricultural infrastructure (including regional processing and distribution), and to rebuild a viable regional food system.

Due to the current economic climate, financing initiatives to support agriculture has become increasingly limited. Several of the region's counties have identified programs to support local agriculture but have been unable to find funding for implementation. For instance, the recently updated Solano County General Plan called for two new positions to provide regulatory assistance to farmers, but the County was unable to sustain funding for the new positions due to budget challenges. While the Tri-Valley Vision 2010 identified steps to enhance Alameda County agriculture, the recommendations have not been implemented, in part, due to lack of funding. Some land trusts and agricultural organizations have been unable to continue key programs, and conservation funding agencies have reduced budgets for conservation easements. On the other hand, several counties, including Sonoma and Santa Clara, have voter-approved, well-funded open space districts that have been able to continue to permanently protect significant open space and agricultural lands.

As the Bay Area residents increasingly recognize the importance of local agriculture to the Bay Area's economy, public health, and environment, they may be willing to support regional funding mechanisms to support agriculture and agricultural economic development.

Initiatives and Goals

Land conservation. Over the past several decades, all of the region's counties have adopted land-use policies that intend to protect the Bay Area's remaining agricultural lands. The strength and success of these policies in protecting farmland from development pressures has varied significantly from county to county.

Around the Bay Area, open space districts, land trusts, and state agencies that had traditionally focused on open space and habitat lands have begun to fund and implement permanent protections for agricultural lands. The Marin Agricultural Land Trust (MALT) was established over 30 years ago as the country's first agricultural land trust and has since permanently protected one-third of Marin County's agricultural lands. The importance of agricultural lands is beginning to receive more regional recognition as shown in the Association of Bay Area Governments' (ABAG) designation of several of the Bay Area's agricultural areas as Priority Conservation Areas.

Regional Marketing. Bay Area farmers are working collaboratively to brand their products through regional marketing campaigns. Sonoma Select, a forerunner in regional branding, created a logo and brand that allowed consumers to identify premium, local products from Sonoma producers. Other counties have followed with Buy Fresh Buy Local campaigns and unique regional brands such as San Mateo's "As Fresh as It Gets," Marin Organics, and Solano Grown. However, as demonstrated by Sonoma Select, it is often difficult for farmers to raise funds to sustain regional branding campaigns. Napa, Sonoma, and Alameda farmers benefit from strong established regional identities based on international reputation of their wines.

Studies and summits evaluating agricultural needs. As people in the Bay Area increasingly recognize the importance of protecting the future of the region's agriculture, many of the region's counties have embarked on studies and community forums to explore the challenges and opportunities for building a vibrant future for agriculture in their region. Marin, Sonoma, and San Mateo counties have convened regional agricultural summits. Alameda, Marin, and Solano counties have commissioned a variety of studies to identify land use and economic development strategies. Unfortunately, as government and foundation funding has become scarce, Bay Area counties have found it difficult to implement many of the recommendations resulting from the studies.

Linking local farmers with urban neighbors. While Bay Area farmers produce a remarkable volume and diversity of fruits and vegetables and animal products, some urban neighborhoods do not have access to

fresh, healthy food. Several Bay Area counties, including Alameda, Napa and Santa Clara, have active food systems projects that seek to increase food access for all residents. Increasingly, food access advocates are joining with farmers and agricultural organizations to build food connections between farmers and their urban neighbors. In Napa, the Agricultural Commissioner is working closely with the County government, farmers and advocates on the Local Food Initiative to increase local food production for the community. In Contra Costa, the County government, the Brentwood Agricultural Land Trust, and local farmers have developed a community-supported agriculture (CSA) that brings fresh fruits and vegetables directly from Brentwood farms to “food insecure” neighborhoods in Richmond.

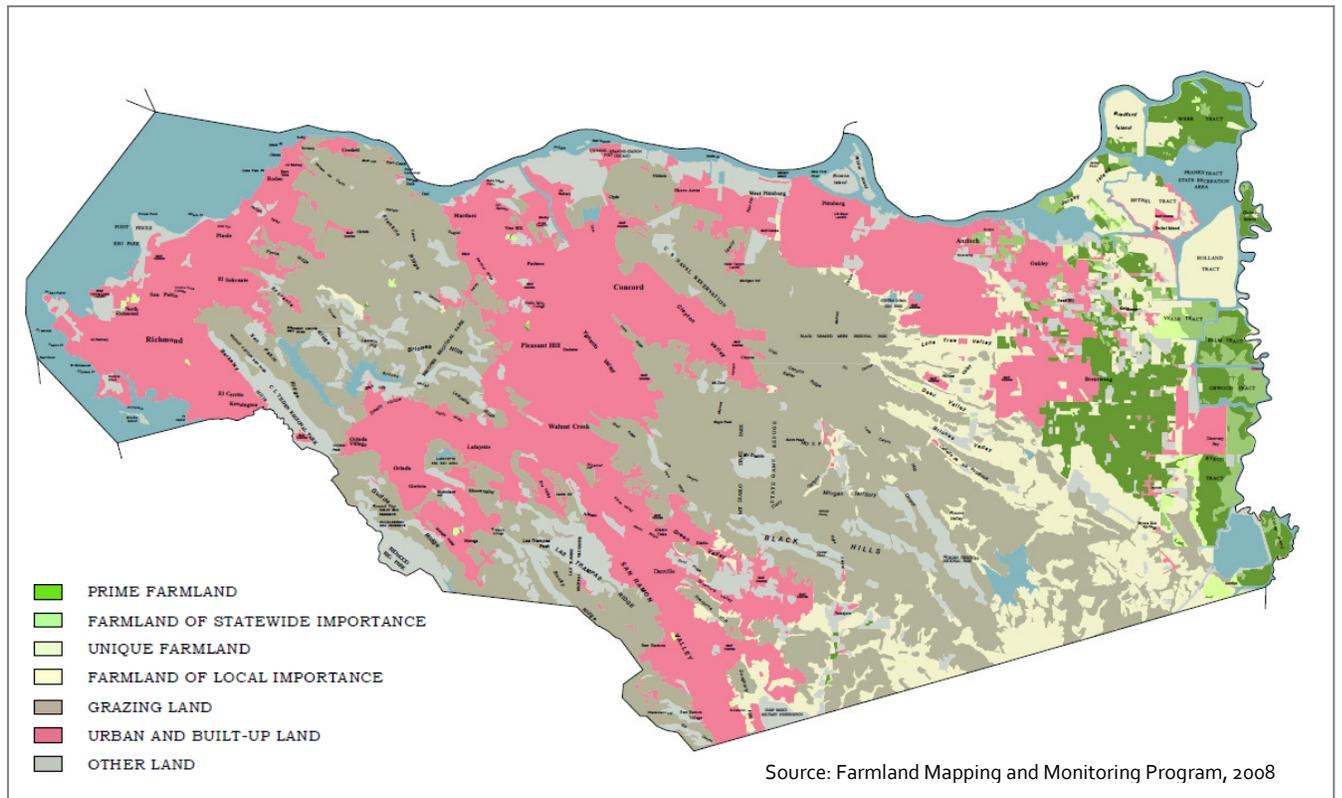
Contra Costa County



Contra Costa farmers have grown food for the Bay Area since the Gold Rush: from vast fields of winter wheat in the 1850s to the famous Brentwood sweet corn, peaches and cherries that we enjoy today. For generations, Bay Area families have traveled to Brentwood each summer to pick fruit at the U-pick farms, making Brentwood one of the Bay Area’s most beloved and iconic farming regions. At one time, Contra Costa farms stretched from the San Francisco Bay shoreline of Richmond to fertile delta lands east of Mt Diablo. Over the past fifty years, Contra Costa has urbanized. However, Contra Costa County continues to have over 23,000 acres of harvested farmland and over

160,000 acres of rangeland. The Brentwood farming region east of Mt. Diablo remains one of the Bay Area’s most productive agricultural regions, with more than 12,000 acres of contiguous, irrigated prime farmland less than 50 miles from Bay Area cities.

Figure 3.1. Contra Costa County, Important Farmland 2008



Contra Costa Agriculture Today

Table 3.1 Contra Costa County Agricultural Statistics

Acres of Agricultural Land	1990	2008	% Δ
Cropland	112,187	90,915	-19%
Grazing	178,875	168,905	-6%
Number of Farms	1997	2007	% Δ
Total	587	634	8%
Producing \$10,000 or Less Per Year	348	421	21%
Regionally Serving Agriculture	1997	2007	% Δ
Farm Products Sold Directly to Consumers (\$ Thousand)	\$1,277	\$1,776	39%
Annual Value of Production at Farm Gate (Inflation Adjusted)	2000	2008	% Δ
Total	\$114,471,085	\$71,962,340	-37%
Fruit & Vegetable Crops	\$43,362,178	\$39,518,900	-9%
Other Production	\$60,194,314	\$19,714,720	-67%
Livestock Products	\$10,914,594	\$12,728,720	17%
Leading Production, 2008	Value	Acres	
Vegetable & Seed Crops	\$23,153,900	5,552	
Fruit & Nut Crops	\$16,365,000	3,957	
Field Crops	\$15,507,000	15,507,000	
Livestock	\$12,728,720	n/a	

Sources: County Agricultural Commissioner's Crop Report, 2000 & 2008; California Farmland Mapping and Monitoring Program, 2008; USDA Census of Agriculture, 1997, 2002, & 2007.

Production, Producers, and Places

Over the past 150 years, Contra Costa agriculture has adapted to changing markets and loss of farmland to urban development. Just a decade ago, the greenhouses of Richmond produced \$32 million in nursery crops, almost one-third of the county's agricultural values. East Contra Costa County dairies still produced milk valued over \$7 million. Today the nurseries of Richmond are almost gone, and there are no dairies remaining in the county. While the 2007 Agricultural Census shows that there are over 600 farms in Contra Costa County, most of the county's 275 irrigated farms are in East Contra Costa County.

The 12,000 acres of farmland south and east of the City of Brentwood continue to produce a remarkable diversity of crops – sweet corn, stone fruit, vegetables, olives and wine grapes. The California Department of Conservation classifies the rich delta land of the Brentwood region as "prime farmland" with high quality soils and growing conditions that maximize productivity. With water rights established in the early 20th century, Brentwood farmers have access to inexpensive water through two agricultural irrigation districts. The year-round growing season, with hot days and cool nights, creates an extraordinary Mediterranean climate for food production.

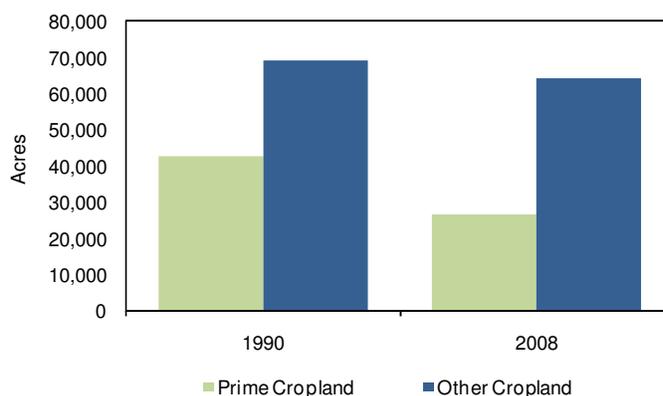
In 2008, Brentwood area farmers produced over \$55 million of fruit, nut, vegetable and field crops. For the past decade, Brentwood sweet corn has grown in acreage and value due to its exceptional quality and a successful branding campaign by local growers. With one-fourth of the Brentwood area's irrigated farmland currently planted in sweet corn, corn was the leading vegetable crop in 2008 with a \$13.5 million value. Brentwood is also an ideal climate for tomatoes (\$6,382,000), green beans (\$1,395,000), and stone fruit (cherries, \$2,003,000; apricots, \$1,800,000; and peaches, \$1,419,000). In recent years, Brentwood farmers

have revived Contra Costa wine grape growing (\$5,754,000). Brentwood farmers work collaboratively to annually rotate corn, tomato, bean, and alfalfa crops on their land.

Over the past 20 years, the Brentwood farming region has rapidly lost prime agriculture land to urban development. As Brentwood became an affordable bedroom community for Bay Area families, some of the qualities that make the region perfect for food production also made it attractive for suburban development. Brentwood is near Bay Area cities and jobs, the prime farmland is flat and easy to build on, and the weather is beautiful. Since 1990, the City of Brentwood grew from a small farming town of 7,500 to a suburb of over 53,000 people, sprawling out over the prime delta soils of the Brentwood region.

Between 1990 and 2008, Contra Costa County lost almost 16,000 acres of its most fertile farmland – a decline of almost 40 percent of the county’s prime cropland. During the housing boom, Contra Costa County lost 4,381 acres of cropland in the three-year period between 1997 and 2000, ranking fourth among counties in California in the loss of agricultural land to urban use. Today East Contra Costa County leads in foreclosure rates with home and land values dropping as much as fifty percent since 2008.

Figure 3.2 Contra Costa County Agricultural Land Trends



Source: California Farmland Mapping and Monitoring Program, 2008.

Markets and Value-Added Activities.

Brentwood is remarkable for the diversity of its farming operations. Several large sweet corn producers grow over 3,000 acres of sweet corn, supplying Brentwood corn to the Western United States all summer through Safeway and other major retailers. Brentwood farmers also deliver a large volume of processing tomatoes to Northern California canneries each summer. Organic growers such as Frog Hollow Farms and Knoll Farms also thrive in Brentwood’s perfect soil and climate, selling to high-end restaurants and markets. However, in 2008 only 336 acres of Brentwood farmland was in organic production indicating that Brentwood farmers may have an opportunity to expand organic production to meet consumer demand.

Brentwood’s long tradition of U-picks and roadside stands make it one of the best known agricultural areas on the urban-edge of the Bay Area. With over 200 acres of U-pick cherries, hundreds of thousands of people continue to travel from around the Bay Area to Brentwood during cherry season, and many Bay Area residents have fond summer memories of childhood trips to Brentwood during the summer to pick fruit. Seventy-six farmers, some of whom have been farming in Brentwood for generations, sell to direct markets through roadside stands, U-pick operations and farmers’ markets.

Policy Influences on Farmland and Agriculture.

In the 1970s, the Contra Costa Board of Supervisors recognized the importance of East Contra Costa County’s prime farmland in the County General Plan by creating the County Agricultural Core to the east and the south of the City of Brentwood. In 1994, the Board of Supervisors established a countywide urban limit line and further limited subdivision in the 12,000-acre County Agricultural Core. Land in the County Agricultural Core cannot be subdivided smaller than forty acres. While one home is allowed on each parcel, the land can only be used for farming and agricultural processing. Because of the protections provided by

the County Agricultural Core and the countywide urban limit line, the Brentwood farming region continues to have a contiguous block of 12,000 acres of irrigated, prime farmland.

When the County created the County Agricultural Core, the primary goal was to protect prime farmland from development. While well intentioned, the zoning in the County Agricultural Core was so restrictive that farmers were unable to take full advantage of direct marketing and agricultural tourism opportunities. In 2004, the County revised the agricultural zoning to allow wineries, tasting rooms and olive oil processing facilities. Additional changes were needed to reduce the fees from the local transportation authority to accurately reflect the traffic created by seasonal agricultural processing, and to make these facilities economically feasible. In 2007, the zoning in the County Agricultural Core was further amended to allow farmer to make and sell “value added” products from their harvests. The amendment also allowed farmer to operate larger roadside stands. The County is considering additional zoning changes to expand agricultural tourism opportunities for Brentwood farmers.

In 2002, the City of Brentwood enacted an agricultural mitigation program. The City ordinance requires that developers who build on farmland must pay an agricultural mitigation fee to the City. The City holds the mitigation fees to fund agricultural conservation easements. The program also provides for a transfer of density from farmland to development within the City. The City has collected over \$12 million in agricultural mitigation fees since 2002.

In 2002, the City also formed the Brentwood Agricultural Land Trust (BALT), to implement the City’s agricultural mitigation program. The City funded BALT with mitigation fees until 2007 when the City decided to administer the agricultural conservation program with City staff. The City continues to contribute mitigation funds to the purchase price of the easements acquired by BALT and local land trusts. The City has recently amended the agricultural mitigation program to allow expenditure of the mitigation funds for regional marketing and other agricultural enterprise activities.

Challenges and Opportunities

Despite the countywide urban limit line and the County Agricultural Core zoning, development pressures continue to threaten the agricultural lands surrounding the City of Brentwood. A 2005 Brentwood ballot initiative to push the urban limit line into the County Agricultural Core was narrowly defeated by 148 votes. Although the county voters affirmed the urban limit line in 2008, another initiative to allow development of agricultural land was considered by Brentwood voters in June 2010. The 2010 initiative was soundly defeated by the voters.

Prior to the current limitation on subdivision within the County Agricultural Core, half of the land located in the County Agricultural Core had been subdivided into parcels of ten acres or less. Consequently, even with the county urban limit line and agricultural zoning, estate home development remains a threat to the region’s prime agricultural land.

At the same time that suburban and estate home development has threatened Brentwood farmland, the globalization of food production has made it increasingly difficult for Brentwood’s farmers to compete in their traditional commodities markets. For instance, in the past decade Brentwood farmers have found it impossible to compete with apples grown in China and Washington, and most Brentwood apple orchards have been pulled out and either been replaced with row crops or left fallow. While some Brentwood farmers may not have the acreage and scale of operations necessary to compete in the global markets, the proximity of Brentwood to the Bay Area presents exciting opportunities to directly access local markets.

At one time, Brentwood Boulevard was lined with packing sheds. Railroad lines ran through the agricultural region picking up produce for delivery to local canneries, Bay Area markets, and the East Bay ports. Local businesses provided farmers with farm equipment repair services, fertilizers, irrigation systems and agricultural inputs. As the Brentwood region has lost agricultural land to development and California agriculture has consolidated, the packing sheds and agricultural businesses have moved to larger agricultural areas. Today Brentwood lacks the agricultural infrastructure needed to support local farming, and many Brentwood farmers do not have the resources to deliver source-identified Brentwood produce directly to nearby Bay Area consumers seeking local food.

Initiatives and Goals

In 2008, the Association of Bay Area Governments designated the County Agricultural Core as a “Priority Conservation Area.” The Brentwood Agricultural Land Trust has acquired conservation easements on six Brentwood farms, and is working with agricultural property owners on several additional easements. While the easement transactions currently underway will expend the remainder of the City’s agricultural mitigation fund, state agencies that fund agricultural conservation have expressed an interest in funding easements on Brentwood farmland.

Over the past thirty years Brentwood farmers have worked to brand and promote Brentwood agriculture. Established in 1976, the Harvest Time growers publish an annual map of Brentwood U-pick farms and roadside stands. Brentwood corn growers have been very successful in branding Brentwood sweet corn through their retail markets. Over the past few years, Brentwood Agricultural Land Trust has worked with local growers to develop the Brentwood Buy Fresh Buy Local marketing campaign through advertising, billboards and events. BALT’s Buy Fresh Buy Local campaign has been funded with government and foundation grants. In 2008, the City of Brentwood also created a marketing campaign funded with agricultural mitigation fees. The City has certified “Brentwood Grown” and local farmers can apply to use the certification to market their products.

Contra Costa County is geographically divided between the productive Brentwood farming region in the east and dense urban populations in the west, and therefore has remarkable potential to build a local food system. Over the past decade, farmers and agricultural organizations have sought to engage urban supervisors in positive, politically viable projects that demonstrate the benefits of local farming to urban constituents, educate the Board of Supervisors about Brentwood agriculture, and build political support for farmland conservation and agricultural land-use reforms. For the past few years, the Board of Supervisors has celebrated local farming by declaring June “Buy Fresh Buy Local” month. The County is working with the Green Purchasing Institute to create a local food purchasing policy that will increase the local food purchased by county hospitals, clinics and correctional facilities. The county’s produce distributor has created a “Brentwood vegetable mix” for local hospitals and institutional purchasers. Since 2008, Richmond Supervisor Gioia and Brentwood Supervisor Piepho have worked closely to develop an innovative community-supported agriculture (CSA) program that brings Brentwood produce directly to Richmond families. In 2010, the County began developing a county agricultural mitigation program and additional zoning reforms to support local agriculture.

Insights and Analysis

Although the Brentwood region has experience intensive development pressure over the past 20 years, county zoning and an urban limit line have protected a remarkable, productive farming region that continues to produce premium fruits, vegetables and field crops. While the prime farmland of the Brentwood region remains at risk of suburban and estate home development, the reaffirmation of the urban limit line, the defeat of developer initiatives and the current decrease in development pressure provide opportunities to create a positive future for Brentwood farming. With greater land use certainty,

Brentwood farmers are beginning to permanently protect their land with conservation easements, invest in agricultural infrastructure and increase their efforts to brand Brentwood agriculture for local markets.

The Brentwood farming community is diverse – in scale of production, growing and marketing techniques, growers' alliances and politics. While the diversity of Brentwood agriculture has been its strength, allowing it to adapt to market changes and the pressures of urban growth, it has also made it difficult for Brentwood farmers to develop community consensus and support for a unified effort to conserve land and brand Brentwood farming.

Significant public and private investment will be needed to fund land conservation, agricultural infrastructure and build a local food system that links Brentwood farmers directly to Bay Area markets. While City mitigation funds and foundation grants have supported efforts over the past seven years, no sustainable funding source has been identified to support a countywide agricultural land trust, regional marketing campaign, or agricultural land-use reforms.



Source: Grown in Marin

Toward a Bay Area Agricultural Sustainability Strategy

What emerges from this reconnaissance of Bay Area agriculture is a landscape that enjoys significant protection from urban sprawl, with some notable and troubling exceptions. What also emerges is an initial understanding of a farm and ranch industry that is struggling to compete in the global marketplace at the same time that segments of it are experiencing a renaissance by taking advantage of regional and local markets for food and agritourism. While some producers will continue to do well in global markets, it seems clear that for many of the region's farmers and ranchers – both established and nascent – the greater opportunity lies in capitalizing on the potential competitive advantage of their proximity to seven million Bay Area consumers, many of whom take pride in their region and its unique quality of life, who are sympathetic with the idea of preserving family farms, and many who have embraced the idea of eating locally.

To help agricultural producers meet the challenges they face, a regional strategy to sustain agriculture into the future is needed — a strategy that focuses on helping the industry in the Bay Area transform itself into one that can take better advantage of regional and local markets, while attempting to expand those markets themselves. Such a strategy might include the following objectives:

- Conserve the maximum amount of remaining agricultural land
- Maximize the amount of food being produced locally that is sold in regional and local markets
- Maximize farm income potential of local agricultural producers from regional and local markets (including agritourism)
- Increase access to affordable local food to all residents of the region
- Maximize the ability of regional agriculture to “produce” environmental quality and ecosystem services

To achieve these objectives, a regional agricultural sustainability strategy must address what appear to be the most significant challenges farmers and ranchers in the area:

- High cost of farmland and competition with rural estates
- The need to balance the water needs of urban and agricultural users, as well as water for wildlife
- Inadequate regional food distribution system infrastructure
- Inadequate processing facilities due to regulations that discourage them
- Inadequate financing for all of the above

In early 2011, the sponsors of the Bay Area Agricultural Sustainability Project plan to bring together leaders from agriculture, government, and other stakeholders groups to discuss these and other ideas. Our hope is that this gathering will be the beginning of a process to design a comprehensive strategy that will best serve Bay Area agriculture and everyone who benefits from it. Meanwhile, as the Association of Bay Area Governments begins to formulate its Sustainable Communities Strategy under SB 375, we invite others to join us in attempting to assure that it recognizes the importance of agricultural land – and the health of the enterprise that defines it – to the overall livability and sustainability of the region.