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Reduced Support for Farmland Conservation

The current 2000-2020 plan includes strong support for agriculture. The proposed 2020-2040 plan deletes or significantly weakens several policies and programs that were designed to strengthen farmland conservation.

Agriculture is Fresno County's largest industry, and agricultural jobs represent 13 percent of total employment. Farming and agricultural processing are the County's primary economic drivers.

In recognition of the importance of agribusiness, the current 2000-2020 General Plan contains goals and policies that conserve agricultural lands, accommodate agricultural-support services and direct urban growth away from farmland to existing urban centers.

That said, Fresno County's economy is changing. Fresno County is shifting from a primarily agricultural economy to a more diversified economy with thriving business sectors such as manufacturing, retail trade, education, finance, health care and professional business services. Since 1990, the percentage of agriculture-related jobs in Fresno County has continuously declined. Agriculture-related jobs accounted for over 50% of the jobs within the County's ten top industries in 1990, but by 2013, agriculture-related jobs had dropped to around 36%.

Just as the economy is evolving, so too is County planning. The County proposes to amend the current 2000-2020 General Plan to reflect the fact that the County no longer accepts new Williamson Act contracts. The Williamson Act (1965) provides property tax relief to farmers in exchange for ten-year agreements that land is not converted to other uses. The majority of farmland (1,444,100 acres) is under Williamson Act contracts. Williamson Act contracts reduce County tax revenue, and because the State of California discontinued reimbursements to counties for lost revenue after 2009, the County of Fresno no longer accepts new Williamson Act contracts. This fact is reflected in the proposed 2020-2040 General Plan where the word "shall" is replaced by the words "should" and "may."

An implementation program in the current 2000-2020 General Plan directs the County to periodically review agricultural land preservation programs to assess their effectiveness in furthering the County's agricultural goals. Another requires the County to establish criteria to prioritize the funding of agricultural conservation easements. The County's annual progress reports on the implementation of the General Plan do not demonstrate that these two programs were ever implemented, and now the County proposes to delete them both.

The County also proposes to eliminate mandates that the County (1) develop an outreach program to inform agriculturalists of the advantages of participating in farmland conservation programs and (2) actively pursue grant funds for farmers seeking conservation easements.

The County intends to remove from the General Plan two policies which allow agricultural preserves to be established within the Golden State Industrial Corridor and within areas designated for Rural Residential use. The County also plans to eliminate the requirement that the County develop guidelines for the design of buffers between agricultural and non-agricultural uses.

The proposed 2020-2040 General Plan deletes a requirement that the County evaluate the need to establish an agricultural quality scale system to assist the Board of Supervisors in agricultural land use conversion discussions. It also deletes a directive that the County evaluate the minimum parcel sizes necessary for sustained agricultural throughout the county.

(Fresno County has never had a policy to mitigate the loss of farmland. Some counties do. Stanislaus County has a program that requires developers to mitigate the loss of farmland by acquiring agricultural easements at one acre for every acre that their projects convert to other uses.)

Notwithstanding the goals, policies and programs in the proposed 2020-2040 General Plan that support agribusiness, taken altogether, these proposed changes signal a shift in priority regarding farmland conservation.