

# FARMLAND WORKING GROUP

Spring 2010

STRIVING TO PROTECT FOOD, FAMILIES AND FARMLAND

## CITIES SPRAWL!

**O**ur community is an economic powerhouse-producer of food, yet due to our long-term lust for more and more housing we sit atop national rates of home foreclosures. This paradox was not thrust upon us but rather a sequence of choices made by leaders over time.

Our condition is short-term, our opportunities full of possibilities. We are literally a land of milk and honey, yet today our local land-use planning process makes little review of the quality of soil or the value of the lands ability to recharge our underground water supply.

**S**ome of the cities in Stanislaus County could expand without significant elimination of prime farmland, but most are blessed and surrounded by superior soils.

Over the past decade our cities and unincorporated areas urbanized over 10,000 acres. Turlock and Patterson took the greatest amount for urbanization consuming just over and under 2,000 acres respectively.

While Modesto gets the most attention about sprawling developments, its figures are minor in comparison with less than 700 acres annexed in the same period.

The most chilling figures are those that show trends of sprawl. From 1980 to the present most cities in Stanislaus County more than doubled in size. Patterson sprawled at a rate over 335%! Patterson is surrounded by

prime soils and with each expansion it eliminates more production agriculture.

**T**his massive expansion has not come without pain. The foreclosure.com website shows: "Patterson, California, currently has 2,311 foreclosures, 3,220 preforeclosures, 1,175 bankruptcies, 5 for sale by owner (FSBO) listings, 3,245 tax liens, 17 auctions, 0 Quick-Sale<sup>SM</sup> listings" as of tax day, April 15, 2010.

**Turlock's expansion over three decades nearly matched that of Modesto, sprawling more than 5,798 acres to Modesto's 6,030 acres. Modesto's population is three times that of Turlock.** —LAFCO—Annual City Annex Charts

CITY	TOTAL ACRES W/in CITY LIMITS 2000	TOTAL ACRES Annexed 2001-YTD	TOTAL ACRES W/in CITY LIMITS YTD	% CHANGE under a DECADE
Ceres	4,422	596	5,018	13.5
Hughson	875	364	1,239	41.6
Modesto	23,167	667	23,834	2.9
Newman	1,239	158	1,397	12.8
Oakdale	3,206	689	3,894	21.5
Patterson	1,835	1,985	3,820	108.2
Riverbank	2,462	200	2,663	8.2
Turlock	8,607	2,094	10,701	24.3
Waterford	1,086	474	1,560	43.6
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>46,899</b>	<b>7,227</b>	<b>54,126</b>	<b>15.4</b>

Our Mission: To preserve the agricultural foundation of our region and promote smart growth in our urban communities through education, outreach and action.



A great many things affect the quality of our lives. Jobs, healthcare, housing, schools, air and water quality, the food we eat ... the list goes on.

One thing influences all of these things: how our communities grow and develop.

Decisions about growth and development are made by elected county supervisors, city councils, planning commissioners and other local officials. Too often, these decisions are made without much input from the people who are most affected. And too often, development diminishes rather than improves the quality of our lives and communities.

The air is unhealthy. Water supplies are short. Farmland and habitat are paved over. Traffic gets worse. Housing is unaffordable. Public services are being cut. And all of this is made worse by the wasteful, inefficient way land is being developed.

In the San Joaquin Valley today, only eight people are being accommodated for every new acre of land developed. Think of two four-person teams playing on a football field and you get an idea of how spread-out that is. This kind of growth makes almost everything more expensive and less sustainable.

If we want our quality of life to improve, this can't continue. And there are alternatives that keep the California dream alive. But if we want things to change, people have to show up and speak up whenever and wherever land use decisions are being made.

***That is the purpose of Groundswell, a network of people and organizations committed to improving the quality of life in the San Joaquin Valley through better land use decisions***

***Through public education and engagement, Groundswell will encourage the kind of growth and development that strengthens the economy, conserves resources, causes less pollution, demands fewer tax dollars and better serves the region's diverse population.***

We intend to make sure that Valley residents are better informed about the land use issues being considered by local officials and that more people of all backgrounds and walks of life participate in the decision making process. We want to help organizations work together to address land use issues that affect us all. In short, we want to create a groundswell of informed citizen involvement in public decisions about land use that determine our quality of life.

People and organizations are welcome to visit the Groundswell web site and to sign up to receive e-mail alerts about upcoming land use decisions and how the choices may affect their health, pocketbooks and communities. Organizations may also become Groundswell partners by pledging to encourage their members to get more involved in local land use decisions.

Visit [www.farmland.org](http://www.farmland.org) to follow the progress of Groundswell and how to become a partner.

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# Agriculture a source of strength for the San Joaquin Valley

**Out in the farmland, beyond the foreclosed homes and vacant storefronts, it might have been hard to hear the crash. Agriculture has stayed fairly strong amid the economic troubles of the Northern San Joaquin Valley.**

**G**ross farm income nearly doubled from 2000 to 2008, to an estimated \$7.6 billion worth of milk, fruit, nuts, poultry and other products. While this sector has some troubles of its own -- notably the still-low prices for dairy farmers -- experts see it as an overall source of strength for the region over the next few years.

"Agriculture is the engine that can drive an economic recovery in California," said Paul Wenger, who grows walnuts and almonds west of Modesto and is president of the California Farm Bureau Federation. County crop reports likely will show a decline in gross income for 2009 because of the milk prices, but the trend clearly is up.

Contrast that with what happened in housing. Median home sale prices tripled in the first half of the past decade, then sank to their previous level by last year. This brought foreclosure for one in seven of the region's homes and contributed to a recession that has pushed the jobless rate close to 20 percent. Five years ago, farming advocates warned of development spreading across the fields and orchards. That threat could return sometime in the future, but for now ag is standing its ground. "Agriculture will continue to shore up our valley's and our state's economy," said Mark Bender, chairman of agricultural studies at California State University, Stanislaus. Graduates are finding plenty of job offers in farming and related fields, he said.

## **On the plus side**

The valley has advantages that keep it in the front ranks of the world's food-producing regions: Mostly warm, dry weather from spring to fall. Ample irrigation water in most places, although the West Side has suffered from federal cutbacks. Roads, rails and ports that help move goods. Research and education that make farming and processing highly efficient.

Agriculture nationwide has also benefited from the sound state of the farm credit system amid the crisis in mortgage lending... Farming is what economists call a primary sector, bringing money into the region from elsewhere. The farmers spend their income on tractors, fertilizer, pesti-

cides, veterinary care and other needs. Plenty more of the region's residents work at places that process the raw products, including wineries, poultry plants, nut processors and fruit canneries. "The money that comes into California turns over many times before it leaves," said Dave Long, president of Hilltop Ranch Inc., an almond processor near Ballico.

...The push to protect the environment also brings opportunities for farmers. They could grow their crops in a way that increases the capture of carbon dioxide, believed to be the main cause of climate change, and be paid for it under an emerging system. They could generate energy from cattle manure or orchard prunings, including a wood-burning plant proposed for Modesto.

The valley also could serve consumers who want to get their food close to home -- a movement that is especially strong in the Bay Area.

"People want to know where their food is coming from," Wenger said. "They want a face on the farmer." He added that exports will continue to be vital to valley farming. Almonds, wine and dairy foods are among the top products from California.

**E**xports have been strong recently thanks to the weak dollar, which makes U.S. products more attractive, but this could change. Farmers also have to deal with trade barriers around the world. The outlook for agriculture is never certain, whether it's the price of walnuts next year or the odds of rain next week. But farmers in the valley have shown that they can keep producing when the economy overall is stumbling.

**"I am cautiously optimistic that left to their own abilities, farmers will be able to create a lot of value and a lot of wealth and a lot of economic development for California," Wenger said.**

**"Agriculture  
will continue  
to shore up  
our valley's  
and our state's  
economy,"**

-Mark Bender, Chairman,  
Ag Studies, CSUS

*By John Holland — excerpts from The Modesto Bee, April 18, 2010*

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## WE ARE WATCHING...

### California High Speed Rail

[www.cahighspeedrail.ca.gov](http://www.cahighspeedrail.ca.gov)

The Preliminary Alternatives Analysis for the Merced to Fresno portion of the project reconfirms that the alternatives that closely follow existing rail corridors – the Union Pacific Railroad and the Burlington Northern Santa Fe Railroad – best serve the purpose and need of the high-speed train project.

The Analysis found that the Union Pacific Railroad alignment optimizes travel time while minimizing environmental impacts, and has the support of a number of local governments, including Merced County, the City of Merced, the City of Atwater and local transportation agencies and water districts.

### City of Modesto

[www.modestogov.com](http://www.modestogov.com)

Work continues to expand Modesto's Sphere of Influence despite across-the-board losses in November for all Council-placed ballot measures. The stated logic for spending money on voter rejected growth planning is that Kiernan Avenue is logically located as a commercial corridor and Modesto should control its borders. The City's plans include converting the current

Village Residential designation to Business Park or something of a multi-purpose commercial/industrial use. FWG believes that Kiernan Avenue is a logical buffer between urban and agriculture. The City may also, by a simple Council action, convert this area to residential. Stanislaus County is currently the land-use authority and is restricted from converting agriculture land to residential without a public vote.

It is particularly important to note that the area north of the Modesto City limits is a large contributor of ground-water recharge for City residents and all those served by the Modesto water system.

### City of Turlock

[www.ci.turlock.ca.us](http://www.ci.turlock.ca.us)

In Turlock, following a decade of smart growth planning and City Council votes that focused on revitalization of underdeveloped areas, the current Council seems destined to abandon smart growth principles and march onto prime farmland west of the freeway. Calls to urbanize the area west of the Golden Triangle shopping area neglect to recognize the value of long-term planning such as living within your means, and better utilizing underdeveloped areas, such as those near the

future Fwy 99/Hwy 165 interchange. But far more disconnected from reality is the traffic congestion that will come to important Freeway 99 interchanges at Taylor Road, Monte Vista, and Fulkerth Roads if housing is allowed west of the freeway. Turlock would be better off to flow traffic than grow housing.

### City of Riverbank

[www.riverbank.org](http://www.riverbank.org)

New Mayor Virginia Madueno and the City Council will likely face difficulty rationalizing the General Plan stated policies with GP proposed boundaries. Riverbank's policy reads: Riverbank in 2025 will be a pleasant, quiet, friendly community with distinct small-town character. Curiously the GP calls for Riverbank to expand to McHenry Avenue, some 4+ miles west of the current city limit. Because nearly all of the land is prime farmland it will be even tougher to get past high cost mitigation requirements under the California Environmental Quality Act standards.

**Vote  
Smart  
June 8**



Graceada Park, Modesto, CA — April 17, 2010





## Message from the Chair

I recently drove home from Chicago via I-80. The primary colors, white and dead, dominated the long trek. Until California. The splendor of the Sierra Nevada is a great entrance to the lush Great Central Valley. The spectacle of our growing, flowing, colorful valley was a well earned "welcome home." It reminded me of why FWG fights the good fight.

There is so much dimension and diversity to what we hold, why don't we hold it with greater regard? We know that we have soils of the highest qualities in specific areas yet we treat it all like dirt. The public seems to "get it" - for their voting record on issues of farmland protection are positive and growing. Yet their elected representatives often reflect conflicting votes and actions.

Recently, the Stanislaus County Board of Supervisors voted to ignore heir own Planning Commission and Ag Element Policy by approving a cemetery on prime farmland on Dakota Avenue. Not just marginal farmland but the best of the best. We know it, they know it, but they again breached public interest long-term planning for a special interest. How is the public to respond or respect its representatives?

Other examples of incredibility show up in other forms. Policies regarding farmland mitigation are often talked about but little action is often the result. What's odd about this issue is that if City Councils and Boards of Supervisors had land-use policies and plans that directed urban expansion away from our prime farm lands there would be no need to mitigate for farmland loss. We know there is a higher value to higher quality soils so why wouldn't it cost more to take it? Problem again is our electeds favor the special interest over the public interest.

**I don't know what the tipping point is for voters' tolerance of their representatives breaching the public trust. With high voter support of land-use issues like the countywide Measure E (Stamp Out Sprawl Initiative) or the high voter rejection of all five Modesto growth measures last November, it is likely just a matter of time before the voters have another opportunity on farmland protection. My bet is that campaign will be more colorful than my journey from Chicago.**

## FWG Executive Board

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## Support your local Certified Farmers Market

**Ceres** — Wednesday — 10am-2pm — May-November  
Whitmore Park, 3rd & North Streets

**Modesto** — Thursday & Saturday — 7am-noon  
May-November — 16th St. between H & I Sts.

**Turlock** — Friday — 8am-1pm — May-November  
Broadway between Olive Ave. & Main Street

Farmers Markets are places for the community to gather, to support local businesses and learn more about the benefits of a healthy lifestyle including locally grown foods. California has over 440 Certified Farmers Markets located throughout the state. Farmers can only sell what they produce and cannot buy and

resell. Studies have shown that the presence of farmers markets is linked to higher fruit and vegetable consumption and make a difference in the health and wealth of a community.

Go to [www.cafarmersmarkets.com](http://www.cafarmersmarkets.com) for a complete market list.

**Always Local ~ Always Fresh**

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**Linda Macedo**



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[www.farmlandworkinggroup.org](http://www.farmlandworkinggroup.org)



**T**he Farmland Working Group is celebrating a decade of promoting smart growth and farmland protection in our local region of the Great Central Valley of California – the most productive agricultural region the world has ever known.

Stanislaus LAFCO — ANNUAL CITY ANNEXATION SUMMARY PAST DECADES COMPARISON—1980-2009 (YTD)						
CITY	Total Acres w/in City Limits 1980	1990	2000	2009	Total Acreage Increase 1980-2009	Percent Change 1980-2009
Ceres	2,784	3,550	4,422	5,018	2,235	80.28%
Hughson	579	772	875	1,239	660	113.87%
Modesto	17,804	19,483	23,167	23,834	6,030	33.87%
Newman	744	959	1,239	1,397	652	87.60%
Oakdale	1,887	2,570	3,206	3,894	2,007	106.37%
Patterson	878	1,090	1,835	3,820	2,942	335.15%
Riverbank	1,022	1,606	2,462	2,663	1,641	160.56%
Turlock	4,903	6,143	8,607	10,701	5,798	118.27%
Waterford	938	1,024	1,096	1,560	622	66.31%
TOTAL	31,582	37,242	46,943	54,170	22,587	71.62%

Developers tell us if we pave over more farmland we will produce more jobs.

*The result over the last 20 years:*

The destruction of thousands of acres of the world's best farmland  
*yet ... Unemployment Nearly Doubled!*