

THE FUTURE OF SOLANO COUNTY AGRICULTURE: WHAT COUNTY GOVERNMENT CAN DO

**Final Report and Recommendations
Solano Agricultural Futures Project**

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Agricultural activities remain an important segment of the Solano County economy. Farming and its allied industries contribute about 7 percent of the economic activity in the County and account for 3.9 percent of private sector employment.

Agriculture is even more important to the county's landscape and environment. Agricultural land covers 81 percent of the non-incorporated area of Solano County. Virtually all of this land is privately owned — by farmers, ranchers and other landowners — and used for the production of countless agricultural products. Retaining this land in agricultural production contributes to the wellbeing of the County in four important ways—as an economic asset, as the principal source of open space, the repository of multiple natural resources, and as a valuable element of the local quality of life. Maintaining this land in agricultural production requires an economic environment in which individual producers can be profitable over time in their agricultural businesses. .

Local agricultural prosperity is driven mostly by forces beyond the control of County government—global, national and regional markets for commodities, also technologies developed elsewhere, the demand for farmland for residential use, and such social patterns as intergenerational farm family relations.

Yet there is an important role for County government in facilitating agricultural viability.

At the request of Solano County government, the University of California is conducting the Solano Agricultural Futures project, an 18-month comprehensive examination of the county's farm and ranch sector. Our focus is on the problems and future prospects of the economic base of local agriculture, with particular attention to the production and marketing of specific commodities. Two UC programs are involved in the project—the Agricultural Issues Center at UC Davis and the Cooperative Extension office in Solano County.

The project began in April, 2006, and has four major phases:

Farmer and Rancher Perceptions and Projections—as captured in focus group interviews and individual questionnaires.

The Economic Roots of Solano County Agriculture—covering production patterns, commodity markets, land ownership and leasing arrangements, agricultural land markets, operator and farm family characteristics, and the sources of agricultural income.

Lessons from Other Areas—a comparison of agricultural patterns and county programs in a half dozen other California counties.

Future Report and Recommendations—economic options for Solano County agriculture focused on commodity markets, the services provided by agricultural land, and the role of county government.

The County has the capacity, in the exercise of its policy and regulatory powers, to make a difference in five areas:

- Presenting a positive image about the value and future of local agriculture, both for the general public and the agricultural community.
- Protecting the agricultural land base through informed and effective land use policies.
- Advancing value-added opportunities for agricultural operators by minimizing regulatory barriers.
- Helping operators to promote and market their commodities.
- Relying on pertinent information and expertise to make agriculture-related policies and decisions. .

Covering all five of these areas, we present in this final report of the Solano Agriculture Futures project 10 separate recommendations for consideration by county government.

Recommendation One

Adopt in County government a more friendly and supportive approach to agricultural issues in the work of the Board of Supervisors and county staff.

A widespread perception among Solano County agricultural producers is that county government is unsympathetic to the conditions of their industry and the contributions they make to the county's economy, environment, and quality of life. Expressed during our focus groups (Report I, page 13), the belief is that since urban portions of the county are dominant in population and political power and that further urban growth is inevitable, county government leaders do not find it necessary to pay much attention to the particular needs and circumstances of agriculture. This is a matter both of image and policy. Reversing this perception requires statements and actions that build confidence in the continuing importance and future of agriculture in Solano County.

Recommendation Two

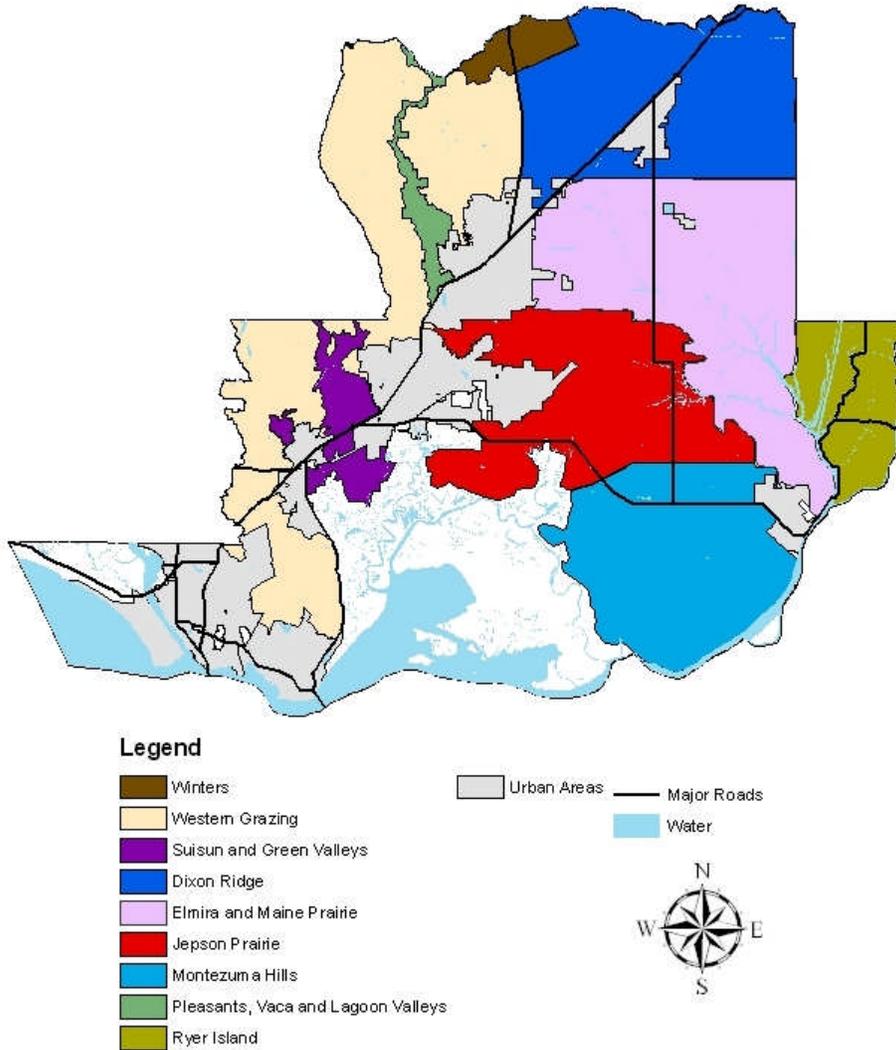
Establish, in the general plan, a regional basis for policies, land use designations and zoning code standards that accommodates important geographical differences in local agricultural conditions.

Solano's current general plan differentiates between Intensive Agriculture and Exclusive Agriculture based on soil quality and access to irrigation. This simple distinction does not do justice to the multiple local factors that influence agricultural production and prosperity

Certainly, soil quality and good water supplies are useful proxies for agricultural viability and should be retained as key general plan and zoning criteria. But there are other important factors that differentiate among local agricultural systems—including production contracts, crop rotational patterns, and specific environmental conditions. In our Phase II report we used several map layers, produced by Geographical Information System (GIS) data and aided by advice from producers, to define nine agricultural regions. Specific commodity and geographical profiles are presented in Appendix 2 of the Phase II report.

We identify nine agricultural regions in Solano County. This scheme or a similar geographical classification can be used as the basis for modifying current agricultural zones to better reflect differences in local agricultural conditions. One possibility would be to apply different regional land use standards according to whether the land supports high value commodity production or is more important as an open space and aesthetic resource.

Map 1: Agricultural Regions of Solano County



Recommendation Three
Give priority in zoning and other farmland protection policies to the Dixon Ridge and Winters agricultural regions of Solano County.

Taken together, the Dixon Ridge and Winters regions account for 40 percent of the county’s total agricultural market value. More significantly for the future, they contain some of Solano’s best farming soils, most diverse cropping patterns, and large agricultural expanses —providing the greatest flexibility in the county for commodity choices and varied cultivation practices. At the same time, these two regions are square in the path of urban growth, more so than any other agricultural areas of the county with the exception of the Suisun Valley. While the argument has been made that further residential and commercial development in the I80 corridor—which splits

the Dixon Ridge region— would be an efficient way of accommodating growth, it is likely that substantial additional urbanization would have major impacts on future agricultural production in these regions. The Dixon Ridge and Winters regions offer the greatest range of options for Solano County agriculture. Protecting these options for the future could be the most effective decision county government could make on behalf of agricultural sustainability.

Recommendation Four

Consider policies to support small scale and value added agricultural operations.

Profitable or potentially-profitable farms and related value-added enterprises on small parcels present different policy challenges than the large-scale agriculture typical of the Dixon Ridge and other regions. Zoning and other land use standards in regions like the Suisun Valley should address the unique production and marketing needs of small-scale growers and methods for buffering their operations from adjacent or nearby urban land uses. To this end, we suggest the creation of a Small Scale/Value Added Agricultural Committee, composed of successful small-scale producers, to advise county government on pertinent land use, permitting, and other issues.

Recommendation Five

Minimize the negative impact of rural residential development in agriculturally zoned areas.

As our Phase II report suggests, agricultural land in the County is in great demand for rural homesites. Large minimum parcel sizes in agricultural zones may help to limit this demand and are a desirable standard. But large minimums by themselves do not substantially impede the purchase of agricultural land for residential purposes. The evidence is the escalation of local land prices in recent years beyond the level of affordability for producers seeking land for expansion and the conversion of prime farmland from crop production into rural residences. A common development pattern in Solano County



that illustrates this exposure of conflicting land uses is the positioning of rural residences in the middle of agricultural parcels, requiring long driveways to connect to local roads. (See image.)

Possible options for avoiding in the future such inefficiencies and negative impacts on agricultural production include, size and locational controls on new residences in agricultural zones, confining them to parcel edges and corners, perhaps in cluster arrangements with homesites on adjacent parcels. More generally, some agricultural regions of the county may be more suitable for rural residences than other regions.

Recommendation Six

Commission a detailed study of County regulations and their implementation with the intent of minimizing the regulatory obstacles to value-added opportunities for local agriculture.

A significant additional issue relates to county policies and procedures for allowing, reviewing and permitting proposals for value-added enterprises on agriculture land—produce stands, processing facilities, ag tourism, etc. The key objective here is to balance the economic merits of such projects with the legitimate and mandated role of County government to protect the health, safety, orderly development, and other needs of the public. A complicating factor is that many of the County-administered regulations are imposed by state and federal requirements and hence leave little room for County government discretion. Our Phase III report compares Solano and seven other northern California counties in this area, but it is limited in scope and depth. We recommend that County government commission a detailed, expert examination of the local regulatory arena. As well as covering the substance of regulations and relevant county fees, the study should: (1) examine their administration, seeking ways to make the application and review process more efficient, economical, and less time-consuming; and (2) examine how the burdens of state- and federal-originated requirements can be modified in their local implementation.

Recommendation Seven

Protect and encourage agricultural processors through local and regional actions.

As illustrated in our Phase II report, Solano County agriculture is largely dependent on processors located outside of the county for the marketing and processing of commodities produced locally. The Campbell Soup and Superior Farms facilities in Dixon are major exceptions to this generalization. They process tomatoes grown in the Dixon Ridge area and sheep and lambs produced in the Montezuma Hills. The

Heritage Dairy is another important outlet for local production, purchasing alfalfa, corn and other feed stuffs grown in the Elmira and Maine Prairie regions. Retaining these facilities and encouraging new processors, including wineries, to locate in Solano should be a top agricultural priority for the county.

At the same time, it makes sense also to follow a regional strategy for obtaining new processing facilities since the volume of most commodity types grown in Solano is too small to justify a one-county approach. Solano County should work with neighboring counties, especially Yolo County to the northeast and perhaps Napa to the west and Sacramento or San Joaquin to the southeast, to maintain current and attract new processors to the area. It is especially the case that a regionally focused initiative would reflect the current organization of agriculture in the Winters and Dixon Ridge areas that includes many producers who farm in both Solano and Yolo Counties. Yolo and Solano have similar agricultural conditions and pressures, making a shared approach suitable for helping both counties to secure the production needed to maintain large scale processing facilities.

Recommendation Eight

Consider county government funding and other support for promoting local agriculture.

Recognizing the contributions local farms and ranches make to their economies, several other county governments directly assist the marketing efforts of producers by funding and directing promotion activities. Marin, San Joaquin, and Yolo Counties have such programs (Phase III Report). Such programs include the branding and advertising of local commodities, workshops for producers, supermarket campaigns, institutional purchases, websites, special events, and other activities. There are no such countywide activities in Solano currently, although Suisun Valley is represented by a promotion program supported by Fairfield and the Solano Irrigation District.

Recommendation Nine

Improve the information and expertise used by county government to evaluate and decide land use issues affecting local agriculture through better information and expertise. Establish a new agricultural land use evaluation framework.

The previous recommendation concerning a regional basis for agricultural land policies implies the need to account for the diverse conditions inherent in Solano County agriculture. These complexities are only likely to increase in the future, given market, technological, and urbanization trends affecting local agriculture. To help county government to cope with these conditions, we suggest improvements in agriculture-related information and expertise, especially in these two areas:

- Systematic use of Geographical Information System (GIS)- based parcel level information on agricultural production, land use, and ownership, with coordination between the Resource Management division and the Agricultural Commissioner office
- Enhancing county staff expertise on farmland and other agricultural issues. (See Recommendation Ten).

Recommendation Ten

Bring agriculture-related expertise into County government.

Our Phase III report presents examples of how other California county governments have used agricultural expertise within their organizations. . Solano County government can go a long way to enhance its agricultural economy by developing internally certain areas of expertise as a means of informing its own programs and assisting producers. Based on the experiences of other counties (notably Marin and San Luis Obispo) and ideas developed earlier in this project, consideration should be given to the employment of one or more agricultural specialists in the following areas:

- Initiating an economic development program for local agriculture, including the development of new markets, value-added options for individual farms and ranches, processing facilities for local products, and cooperation with other counties on regional facilities.
- Bringing an agricultural perspective to important land use decisions, especially the ability to assess the consequences for viable agricultural operations of rural residential and other developments in agricultural areas.
- Assisting agricultural producers pursuing value-added projects to better negotiate the county's regulatory process.
- Promoting and marketing local farm products through countywide branding, advertising, institutional sales, and other programs.