



## Conserving Farmland to Achieve a Triple-Bottom Line for California Communities



The kind of positive changes that communities want—more economic opportunity, greater mobility with less traffic, lower household and government costs, a cleaner environment, and vast open space—are central to the work of local and regional governments. Emphasizing greater efficiency, quality, and sustainability in how communities grow is integral to realizing these outcomes.

American Farmland Trust supports local California governments in realizing favorable economic, environmental, and public health outcomes in their communities through the successful protection and stewardship of agricultural land. California's farmland and ranchland yield vast benefits on

statewide communities, including abundant food, clean water, healthy soil, resilient landscapes, climate change mitigation, and local economic development. Achieving these outcomes means ensuring that agricultural land is protected via a smart growth approach to planning and policy.



AFT's *Saving Farmland, Growing Cities* study sets forth six key strategies to support local and regional governments in conserving agricultural land. While the report focused in the San Joaquin Valley, the strategies serve to promote improvements in land use planning and policy across jurisdictions and agencies.

policies and plans based on these six strategies. By elevating the important role that agriculture plays in our communities, we can better protect the highest quality agricultural land and key water recharge sites, all while meeting general plan requirements, mitigating climate change, and growing resilient and desirable cities.

AFT believes that local governments can achieve a *triple bottom-line* in the economy, environment, and public health through the adoption of agricultural land preservation

To access the full *Saving Farmland, Growing Cities* report, visit AFT's Farmland Information Center at [farmland.org/savingfarmlandgrowingcities](https://farmland.org/savingfarmlandgrowingcities).

## Key Strategies to Support Local and Regional Governments in Conserving Agricultural Land

### 1. Avoid Development of the Best Farmland

It's essential to understand where high-quality agricultural land is located in relation to city limits, spheres of influence, and other areas, and direct growth away from this land. Development is best guided toward less productive land or land not suited for agriculture.

### 2. Minimize Farmland Loss with More Efficient Urban Development

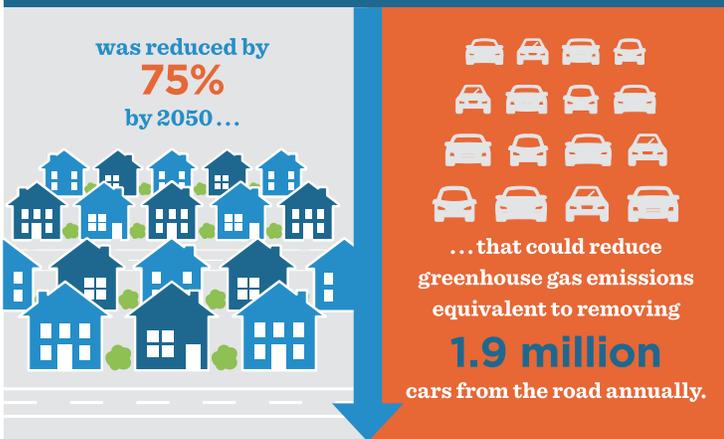
Focus new development toward vacant or repurposed land within existing cities and, if more agricultural land must be sacrificed, ensure development uses it as efficiently as possible.

### 3. Ensure Stability at the Urban Edge

Areas around cities designated for future development should not expand more than necessary—boundaries that are too large discourage cities from growing efficiently. LAFCOs should review the size of spheres of influence in comparison to the development needs of cities during the period covered by current general plans. Relatedly, LAFCOs should consider the efficiency of future development when reviewing proposals for annexation and expansion of spheres.



### If the annual loss of farmland to urban development in California



To create greater awareness around how California farmland and ranchland significantly contribute to climate change mitigation, AFT compiled recommended actions for partnering with farmers, local officials, state legislators, and communities on farmland protection and climate-smart agriculture. Educational resources and visual assets are available via our California Greener Fields project at [farmland.org/cagreenerfields](http://farmland.org/cagreenerfields).

#### 4. Avoid Rural Residential Development

Rural residences on large lots are the least efficient type of non-farm land use. This development should be kept to a minimum to avoid conflicts and encroachment on agricultural land. Counties can inventory existing parcels where non-farm rural residential development could occur and adopt policies that make such development more difficult on high quality agricultural land.

#### 5. Mitigate the Loss of Farmland Loss with Conservation Easements

Local governments can adopt farmland mitigation programs aimed at preserving farmland and ranchland while giving landowners the opportunity to recover equity in their property without developing it. LAFCOs can assist by adopting their own policy of requiring cities to mitigate farmland loss as a condition of annexation.

#### 6. Encourage a Favorable Agricultural Business Climate

Consider all land use, housing, water, and on-farm activities in the context of their impact on the costs, productivity, and profitability of agriculture.



## CASE STUDY

### A Regional Approach to Farmland Conservation in Stanislaus County

Over the last three decades, Stanislaus County has developed some of the most progressive farmland protection policies anywhere in the San Joaquin Valley. The communities in the county grew their farmland protection policies around effective tools that included the use of growth initiatives, farmland mitigation, and the development of local policies and programs.

At the county level, in 2007, the Agricultural Element, which had been in place since 1992, was updated in the General Plan. The new element included a Farmland Mitigation Program compelling developers to mitigate the loss of farmland by acquiring agricultural easements at one acre for every acre that their projects convert or by paying fees to enable land trusts to do so. This led the way for the City of Hughson to adopt the most aggressive farmland mitigation

program in the San Joaquin Valley requiring the preservation of two acres of farmland for every one acre developed.

In 2012, the county's LAFCO also incorporated mitigation into a new policy. The LAFCO policy requires cities to prepare a Plan for Agricultural Preservation before they annex more land or expand their spheres of influence. To get LAFCO approval, plans may propose actions such as reducing the size of spheres, farmland mitigation, and urban growth boundaries. Additionally, cities must demonstrate that they have not allocated more farmland to development than is necessary for the amount and type that is likely to occur.

To read more case studies about farmland conservation across California, visit AFT's Farmland Information Center at [farmland.org/cafarmlandconservation](http://farmland.org/cafarmlandconservation).

#### American Farmland Trust

*is the only national conservation organization dedicated to saving the land that sustains us by protecting farmland, promoting environmentally sound farming practices, and keeping farmers on the land. AFT works from "kitchen tables to Congress"—tailoring solutions that are effective for communities and can be magnified to have greater impact.*