



CHAPTER 3 -- THE LAND USE PLAN: RESOURCES AND DEVELOPMENT ISSUES AND POLICIES

3.2 AGRICULTURE

[Policies](#)

Coastal Act Requirements

The Coastal Act establishes agriculture as a priority use:

Section 30241. The maximum amount of prime agricultural land shall be maintained in agricultural production to assure the protection of the area's agricultural economy, and conflicts shall be minimized between agricultural and urban land uses through all of the following:

- (a) By establishing stable boundaries separating urban and rural areas, including, where necessary, clearly defined buffer areas to minimize conflicts between agricultural and urban uses.
- (b) By limiting conversions of agricultural lands around the periphery of urban areas to the lands where the viability of existing agricultural use is already severely limited by conflicts with urban uses or where the conversion of the lands would complete a logical and viable neighborhood and contribute to the establishment of a stable limit to urban development.
- (c) By permitting the conversion of Agriculture land surrounded by urban uses where the conversion of the land would be consistent with Section 30250.
- (d) By developing available lands not suited for agriculture prior to the conversion of agricultural lands.
- (e) By assuring that public service and facility expansions and non-agricultural development do not impair agricultural viability, either through increased assessment costs or degraded air and water quality.
- (f) By assuring that all divisions of prime agricultural lands, except those conversions approved pursuant to subdivision (b) of this section, and all development adjacent to prime agricultural lands shall not diminish the productivity of such prime agricultural lands.

Section 30242. All other lands suitable for agricultural use shall not be converted to non-agricultural uses unless (1) continued or renewed agricultural use is not feasible, or (2) such conversion would preserve prime agricultural land or concentrate development consistent with Section 30250. Any such permitted conversion shall be compatible with continued agricultural use on surrounding lands.

Definitions



-MENDOCINO COUNTY COASTAL ELEMENT-



Agricultural Land. Prime agricultural land as defined below, land in existing agricultural use, land with agricultural potential, or lands under Williamson Act contracts. Plant crops include food and forage crops and nurseries. Animal raising includes grazing, stock raising activities, and feed lots.

Prime Agricultural Lands. Coastal Act Section 30113 and Section 51201 of the California Government Code define prime agricultural land as:

- All land which qualifies for rating as Class I or Class II in the Soil Conservation Service land use capability classifications.
- Land which qualifies for rating 80 through 100 in the Storie Index Rating.
- Land which supports livestock used for the production of food and fiber and which has an annual carrying capacity equivalent to at least one animal unit per acre as defined by the United States Department of Agriculture.
- Land planted with fruit or nut-bearing trees, vines, bushes, or crops which have a nonbearing period of less than five years and which will normally return during the commercial bearing period on an annual basis from the production of unprocessed agricultural plant production not less than \$200 per acre.

Feasible Agricultural Use. Section 30242 prohibits conversion to nonagricultural uses unless "continued or renewed agricultural use is not feasible" or if it "would preserve prime land or concentrate development." Section 30108 defines feasible as capable of being accomplished in a successful manner within a reasonable period of time taking into account economic, environmental, social, and technological factors.

Williamson Act Land. This legislation, also called the California Land Conservation Act of 1965, was enacted to preserve the maximum amount of prime agricultural land. Agricultural preserves may be established through contracts between owners of agricultural land and a city or county. Under an agricultural preserve designation, property taxes are based on agricultural yield rather than speculative land value; in exchange, owners accept a ten-year restriction on use of their property. This restriction is automatically extended each year unless the owner gives notice of nonrenewal. Type I preserves are prime agricultural lands and intensive cropland uses; Type II are non-prime agricultural lands and grazing and dairy uses. The County has updated their existing agricultural preserve ordinance to allow for a Type III agricultural preserve.

The County's current zoning ordinance specifies that Type II agricultural preserves shall not consist of less than 100 acres, unless the Board of supervisors finds that "smaller preserves are necessary due to the unique characteristics of the agricultural enterprises in the area..." The Board of Supervisors frequently has permitted small parcels, ranging from 10 to 40 acres, to be designated Type I agricultural preserves, particularly if these small parcels are adjacent to existing Williamson Act land. The Board of Supervisors has not permitted the designation of small parcels as Type II preserves, since large acreages are thought necessary to maintain an economically viable ranching operation.



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Agricultural Uses. Are defined as uses of land to grow and/or produce agricultural commodities for commercial purposes, including: Production or by-products of; poultry, cattle, sheep, goats, rabbits, fish, frogs, horses and other livestock; production of hay, grain, silage, vegetables and nursery products; accessory, structures or other uses pertinent and necessary to the operation of agricultural uses including; barns, fences, stable, corrals, coops and pens.

Agricultural Issues

Coastal terraces and bottom land historically were farmed in small units by families dependent on agriculture for their livelihood. Potatoes, truck crops, hogs, poultry, beef cattle and dairies did well and farm products were sold both locally and outside the area. However, in the past 30 years, government regulations and technological changes in food processing and trucking have encouraged large-scale, centralized agricultural operations, ill-suited to the coast's small areas of prime soils, relatively small land holdings, and family-run enterprises. Since the late 1960's, commercial coastal agriculture has consisted primarily of livestock and dairy farms and flower and plant nurseries.

Several physical and market factors limit agricultural production in the coastal zone, including insufficient soil depths; excessive or irregular drainage; lack of water; a cool climate; predation of livestock; isolation from agricultural support services; limited labor availability; and small parcels.

About 3,500 acres of land in the coastal zone are tilled, irrigated or cropped, mostly for forage. Milk production has been reduced to three dairies, and former dairy operators are raising replacement dairy heifers. There are 40 livestock operators in the coastal zone, raising 1,200 head of beef and 4,300 sheep. However, only one quarter of these farms are operated as the full-time occupation of their owners. Full-time operations are concentrated between Elk and Point Arena, where the largest areas of prime soils are found. Elsewhere, highly productive soils are found only in small patches, rendering full-time farming uneconomical at this time. North of the Navarro River, agricultural activity has been affected by residential development. This trend is not significant in the Point Arena area, but some farmers, uncertain about the continued viability of agriculture in the coastal zone, may have deferred capital investment. The land use policies of the Coastal Element, with its emphasis on the preservation and enhancement of agriculture, should encourage these landowners to maintain their farms in production.

Coastal agriculture includes several nurseries principally raising fuchsias, azaleas, and rhododendrons. Forty acres near Caspar supports daffodils, suggesting a potential for a bulb industry similar to that in Del Norte County. Many farms sell produce locally and many residents are industrious part-time fruit and vegetable farmers.

For raising sheep and cattle, the minimum parcel size required to support an operator varies from year to year, depending upon livestock prices.

Only 10 ranches have "full-time" acreage and are operated as a principal source of income. Minimum parcel sizes for field crops are smaller-about 10 acres of specialty vegetables and



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general crops is sufficient to realize a return on the cost of production and labor. Marketing is a primary constraint: a few growers could saturate the local market, while a large total acreage (perhaps as many as 1,000 acres of a crop such as brussel sprouts) would be necessary to make marketing outside the County economically feasible.

There are two main barriers to assembling parcels of a size sufficient for profitable, full-time farming. Land division and conversion to non-agricultural uses has progressed in certain sections of the coast to the point that consolidation to raise livestock is no longer practical. In other areas, property owners, anticipating subdivision of their Williamson Act lands, ask high prices of would-be buyers.

However, the outlook for coastal agriculture in Mendocino may not be as bleak as the previous discussion implies. Small-scale or part-time farming could become more practical if current agricultural trends change. Energy costs could increase to the point that local production of food becomes competitive. Indeed, many residents stress that coastal agriculture is not dead but growing in directions other than toward large-scale, one-crop farming.

Offering Williamson Act tax benefits to small agricultural parcels is seen by many residents as a potential means of encouraging local agriculture. Although the Board of Supervisors has accepted parcels as small as 10 acres at a few locations, allowing small parcels that are primarily used for rural residential purposes into an agricultural preserve could invite a legal challenge. The County has received few applications for Williamson Act contracts from coastal property owners since Proposition 13 diminished potential tax benefits. However, if there is a dramatic rise in the assessed value of coastal land when ownership changes, Williamson Act contracts will become increasingly attractive.