

Effects of sprawl told

Current growth trend takes 25% of Valley's farmland out of production, study says.

By E.J. Schultz / The Fresno Bee

Thursday, February 10, 2005

Sprawling urban growth will swallow more than a quarter of the farmland in the San Joaquin Valley in the next four decades if current trends persist, according to a study made public today.

With population expected to double to more than 7 million people in the next 40 years, the eight-county region stands at the brink of its greatest transformation since the advent of large-scale farming in the 19th century, according to the Public Policy Institute of California study.

"It's basically large-scale urbanization," said Michael Teitz, a study co-author and senior fellow at the institute.

The study paints different pictures of urban growth based on four possible public policy strategies: protection of prime farmland, intensive highway construction, development of a light-rail system or, basically, doing nothing.

Three of the four scenarios result in a tripling of urbanized land to accommodate a doubling of population. And every scenario depicts the inevitable - that agriculture, the once-unstoppable force that gave rise to Fresno, Stockton and other Valley cities, will now bend to accommodate urban growth.

"When you drive [Highway] 99 in 40 years' time, unless policies change, you won't see much agriculture," Teitz said.

He is careful not to predict the demise of ag, which in the 19th century transformed the Central Valley from a barren frontier to a farming empire. Instead, Teitz said, growers will become more adaptable.

"I don't see a collapse of ag," he said. "I see pressure on agriculture and transformation that will be a terrific challenge for agriculture."

Specifically, farmers may grow more on less space. Or, under economic pressure to sell land for urban uses, growers may simply move to the remaining open spaces in the Valley, Teitz said. The study predicts nothing new. The Central Valley, which includes the smaller San Joaquin Valley, has been losing farmland for years - about 2.5 acres per hour, according to one recent state estimate.

But the study projects a faster decline. From 1998 to 2000, close to 10,000 acres of farmland were lost every year in the San Joaquin Valley, according to data from the state Department of Conservation. Using the study's most radical projection - that no steps are taken to control growth or protect farmland - the loss rate would almost quadruple to nearly 38,000 farmland acres lost every year.

It's a prospect that has Nat DiBuduo worried.

His family has been growing grapes and tree fruit in Fresno and Madera counties since emigrating from Italy in the early 1900s. DiBuduo grew up working in the fields of Copper River Ranch in north Fresno - now the site of a planned 2,800-unit housing development.

DiBuduo, president of Allied Grape Growers, misses walking into a restaurant and knowing just about everyone there. He longs for the days of strolling down a country road.

"We're losing some of that way of life," he said.

But he understands the economic pressure on growers: "When you're approached with an opportunity to sell land at high values, the temptation's there."

Here is a look at the four urbanization scenarios envisioned by the study:

The prime farmland conservation scenario assumes that 3.2 million acres of the 5.7million acres of farmland in the Valley would be protected from growth. But urbanization trends are so

overwhelming that even if prime farmland is protected, urban land would increase by 134% by 2040, according to the study. This scenario would scatter development across the Valley, preserving much of the farmland that straddles cities and towns along Highway 99.

To environmentalists, the do-nothing scenario is the most daunting.

If policies aren't put in place to direct or restrict growth, urbanized land in the Valley would increase more than fourfold, from about 589,000 acres to nearly 2.5 million acres, according to the study. At the same time, the Valley would lose 1.5 million, or 26%, of existing farmland.

The urban growth would be sprawling, meaning fewer people would live on each acre compared with today. In Fresno County, for instance, 2.8 people would occupy each acre, instead of the current 6.8 people, according to the study.

Such a pattern could lead to more traffic congestion and worsen Valley air, already deemed some of the dirtiest air in the nation.

"The basic question we all need to ask ourselves is if we want to live in Los Angeles, because that's what we're building," said Sierra Club member Kevin Hall. "It's not a pleasant picture."

Two scenarios focus on transportation planning.

One assumes a proposed high-speed rail line through the Valley. Of all the scenarios, this one would result in the greatest urbanization in the north Valley. That's because four of the proposed seven rail stops would be in Stockton, Modesto, Los Banos and Merced.

Overall, the rail scenario would spur development along the Highway 99 corridor and result in the loss of 1.09 million acres of farmland.

The final scenario envisions major highway improvements, including upgrades to most east-west routes and extension of Highway 65, a north-south route that now runs mostly through Tulare and Kern counties near the Sierra foothills.

This scenario, considered the most likely, would create "linear cities," connecting Stockton with Lodi, for instance. Tulare County would see the greatest amount of urbanization, with acreage increasing by 327%, according to the study.

The chances are slim that any one of the scenarios will become a reality in its purest form, researchers say. And the nonpartisan institute does not advocate for one over another.

What the study could provoke, though, is an urgency to further the relatively new push for regional planning efforts. In the Valley, where land is cheap, flat and mostly privately owned, there hasn't been an incentive to plan on a regional scale.

"The Valley as a whole has never politically, institutionally felt that it is necessary to grapple with the larger growth issues," Teitz said.

Indeed, as the study points out, "most land-use power still lies in the hands of the region's cities and counties. Thus, true regional coordination remains elusive."

"It does not exist," Hall said. But regional planning is necessary, said Hall, a former member of the Fresno County Planning Commission.

He points to the rapid development along roads that lead into what is known as the "Fresno eddy," a wind that swirls gently southeast around Fresno and carries pollution to Clovis.

"We are building into the dirtiest air pockets in the nation," Hall said.

Carol Whiteside, president of the Great Valley Center in Modesto, agrees that regionalism has been slow in coming, but said it is gaining momentum.

"In the last 10 or five years, people are beginning to understand they have a common interest in what's going on," Whiteside said.

The urbanization study, she said, is "another piece of information that ought to move us to doing the right thing."

The research comes on the heels of a Great Valley Center study showing that the population boom has done little to lift the economy of the Valley. The labor force in the region grew by 11.1% from 1998 to 2003, but job growth only increased by 10.5%, according to the study released last month.

The imbalance has kept the Valley as one of the most economically depressed areas in the nation, with jobless rates routinely stuck in double digits.

Because job growth in farming is not keeping up with population increases, the report recommends economic diversification. But the study cautioned against abandoning agriculture altogether.

"It provides 20% of the jobs in our counties, and you just can't wipe that out," Whiteside said. The question is, "How do we manage to grow and not destroy agriculture?"

Global Food Source

State's agricultural influence discussed at World Ag Expo.

By Dennis Pollock / The Fresno Bee

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TULARE - The global reach of California agriculture took center stage for two seminars Wednesday at the World Ag Expo- one focusing on the need for food security and specialty crops, and the other on dairy producers and air quality.

"Do we want a homegrown food supply or do we want our food to come from offshore," asked Chuck Ahlem, part owner and founder of Hilmar Cheese and former undersecretary of the California Department of Food and Agriculture.

Ahlem was among panelists for a program on "Clearing the air for dairy producers," but he also brought up stricter regulation on water quality. Water-quality enforcers have fined Hilmar, the world's largest cheese factory, \$4million.

"With the log pile of regulations on top of us, can we still provide a safe and competitive food supply?" Ahlem asked.

Earlier, at another seminar, state Agriculture Secretary A.G. Kawamura said California's stricter environmental controls pose challenges but also make the state a model for the world.

"It makes for a working landscape, agriculture as good neighbors, not bad," he said. "This is 2005, not 1965."

Pointing to increased globalization, Kawamura talked of visiting Japan with Gov. Schwarzenegger to promote tourism and trade.

"We went to a Japanese market looking for California citrus," he said. "We found citrus from South Africa, Israel and Chile and some California lemons. Fifteen years ago, we were the only citrus player in that market."

Kawamura suggested viewing the federal Farm Bill as "not a cost but an investment" in the nation's "food security and its national security." Among those in the audience for his talk was Moyiwa Omololu from Nigeria, who heads the Alliance for Agriculture in that country.

"We need to eat, but to eat right," he said. "We are trying to bring the president of Nigeria for an agricultural tour of the state of California. We want him to see the sophistication of agriculture in this place."

"Sophistication of agriculture" also was a topic at the dairy seminar, where there was much talk of a need to improve research on how dairy cows figure into the problem of poor air quality.

"We need to come up with what are called 'best available control technologies,'" said David Crow, with the San Joaquin Valley Air Quality District.

"But we don't know what those are."

He said a dairy advisory group has been convened to address that issue and others.

El Niño, greenhouse gases may make '05 hottest ever

Warmest year on record was 1998. 2002 and 2003 come in second and third.

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By TIMOTHY GARDNER, Reuters

Published in the Orange County Register

NEW YORK - A weak El Niño and human-made greenhouse gases could make 2005 the warmest year since records started being kept in the late 1800s, NASA scientists said this week.

While climate events like El Niño affect global temperatures; human-made pollutants play a big part as well.

"There has been a strong warming trend over the past 30 years, a trend that has been shown to be due primarily to increasing greenhouse gases in the atmosphere," said James Hansen of NASA's Goddard Institute for Space Studies, based in New York.

The warmest year on record was 1998, with 2002 and 2003 coming in second and third, respectively.

Short-term factors like large volcanic eruptions that launched tiny particles of sulfuric acid into the upper atmosphere in 1963, 1982 and 1991 can change climates for periods from months to years.

Last year was the fourth- warmest recorded, with a global mean temperature of 57 degrees Fahrenheit, which was about 1.5 degrees warmer than the middle of the century, NASA scientist Drew Shindell said in an interview.

Average temperatures taken from land and surfaces of the oceans showed 2004 was 0.86 degrees Fahrenheit above the average temperature from 1951 to 1980, according to Hansen.

The spike in global temperatures in 1998 was associated with one of the strongest El Niños of recent centuries, and a weak El Niño contributed to the unusually high global temperatures in 2002 and 2003, NASA said.

Carbon dioxide, emitted by autos, industry and utilities, is the most common greenhouse gas.

Hansen also said that the Earth's surface now absorbs more of the sun's energy than gets reflected back to space.

That extra energy, together with a weak El Niño, is expected to make 2005 warmer than 2003 and 2004 and perhaps even warmer than 1998, which had stood out as far hotter than any year in the preceding century, NASA said in a statement.

The U.S. National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration said Thursday the current weak El Niño will diminish and end during the next three months.

Study shows substantial growth

Thursday, February 10, 2005

By Charles Doud-Editor & Publisher <<mailto:cdoud@maderatribune.net>>

The Madera Tribune

By 2010, just five years from now, Madera County will have 175,132 residents - up from 123,109 in 2000 - according to a report issued this month by the Public Policy Institute of California.

Most of that population is likely to be in existing but expanded cities and towns, the report says, and will have a profound effect on what Madera County and other counties will be like.

"Urban Development Futures in the San Joaquin Valley" talks about how the valley has grown since the 1800s, and how it is likely to grow in the future.

Agriculture will remain the second-most important private economic enterprise - second only to retailing - although some agricultural acreage near existing cities will be converted to urban uses such as housing, commercial, industrial and infrastructure, the report predicts.

By 2010, Madera County's rate of growth, at 42 percent over 10 years, will be the fastest in the San Joaquin Valley. However, in hard numbers, Madera will remain among the less-populated valley counties. Only one county, Kings, will have fewer people than Madera County through 2040.

Fresno County is likely to grow to 953,457 by 2010, the report says, and to 1.5 million by 2040.

Even as Madera County more than doubles in population by 2040, the report says, population density won't necessarily increase at the same rate. In fact, the new population's effect will be more than offset by the conversion of once-agricultural lands into urban use, most of it in and around the City of Madera. About 12,000 acres of farm land will have been converted by the end of 2010.

Much of this, although not all of it, would be prime farm land.

Unless development patterns change, though, much more farm land will be converted to urban use between 2010 and 2040 - about 31,000 acres - almost doubling the urban acreage in the county from 33,621 acres in 2000.

Madera County in 2040, however, still will be largely rural, compared to neighboring Fresno County, which will have almost a quarter-million acres in urban use, some 100,000 more than in 2000.

The biggest factor luring new residents to the valley will be housing prices. While people who have lived here for years see housing prices here rising at an alarming rate, residents of coastal areas see local prices as bargains. If east-west highway improvements or the advent of high-speed rail improve transportation from coastal to valley communities, growth likely would be faster.

Growth in Madera County is not likely to be job-driven, according to the report, because wages are among the lowest in California and jobs paying even close to living wages are relatively scarce.

Nevertheless, growth will occur, and its effect on the valley is likely to be profoundly felt by those already living here.

"Of the estimated 4 million people expected in the next 40 years (in the San Joaquin Valley), fewer will be employed in agriculture, and they will live in urban areas that are largely yet to be built," the report says.

"Given the fact that people throughout the United States are living at lower densities than in the past, this additional population is likely to have an even greater effect on the (San Joaquin Valley) landscape than their numbers would suggest. What will actually happen is far from clear."

Phasing out of agricultural burning focus of public meetings

Friday, Feb. 11, The Stockton Record

Local air pollution regulators next week will begin a series of public hearings on a plan to phase out agricultural burning of prunings, field-crop stubble and for weed control.

Gov. Gray Davis in 2003 signed a law requiring that air districts stop issuing permits for such farm burning by June 1, 2005. Under certain circumstances, air districts can postpone the ban if the halt to burning would cause economic hardship.

The San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District serves the region from Bakersfield to San Joaquin County. Local district staff members are recommending that the district postpone until 2010 the burn ban for rice stubble, prunings from apple, pear, quince and fig crops, and certain weeds, such as star thistle and tumbleweeds.

The regulators say there is no economically viable way to dispose of those materials without burning.

The air district is trying to develop alternatives to burning the stubble, prunings and weeds.

District staff will look into whether the materials can be ground up, composted or sold for other uses.

The live hearings will be held over three days, with one day each at the district's offices in Fresno, Bakersfield and Modesto.

Each meeting will also be displayed through the district's video-teleconferencing system at the offices that aren't hosting the hearing that particular day.

The hearings will be:

* 1:30 p.m. Tuesday at 1990 E. Gettysburg Ave., Fresno

* 1:30 p.m. Wednesday at 2700 M St., Suite 275, Bakersfield

* 1:30 p.m. Feb. 23, 4230 Kiernan Ave., Suite 130, Modesto

More information can be obtained at the Web site www.valleyair.org or by calling (209) 557-6400.

Wal-Mart fights supercenter ban

Court ruling appealed; retail giant pushed plan to build Turlock store

By JOHN HOLLAND - BEE STAFF WRITER

Friday, Feb. 11, Modesto Bee

TURLOCK - Wal-Mart has appealed the December court ruling that upheld the city's ban on the supercenter the retail giant proposed near Highway 99, city officials said Thursday.

Despite the ban, Wal-Mart recently filed a formal application to build a store on the site. Whether this project actually would come under the ban is unclear.

The ban, approved by the Turlock City Council in January 2004, applies generally to new or expanding discount stores that exceed 100,000 square feet and devote at least 5 percent of the space to groceries and other nontaxable items.

The application says the proposed store would be 226,000 total square feet and would use "more than 10,000 square feet" of this space for groceries and other nontaxable items, said Michael Cooke, planning manager for the city.

Five percent of a 226,000-square-foot store would be 11,300 square feet, so the proposed grocery department is either slightly below the cap or above it.

Cooke said he wrote to Wal-Mart for clarification but has not heard back.

"I need to know how much more than 10,000 square feet," he said. "The application is vague."

Peter Kanelos, a Wal-Mart spokesman in San Diego, said he did not have an exact figure for the grocery department. He did say that the company remains committed to the supercenter, which would replace a smaller Wal-Mart built nearby in 1993.

"It's no secret that we would like to have a supercenter to serve the needs of our Turlock customers, and we are going to do everything possible to meet the needs of our customers in Turlock and other areas," Kanelos said.

He said he did not have details on Wal-Mart's appeal of the ruling in Stanislaus County Superior Court.

Turlock is one of several cities that have resisted supercenters, which combine the department store selections of a traditional Wal-Mart with a full-service grocery store. The chain has more than 1,200 supercenters across the nation but only three so far in California, including one that opened in Stockton in October.

Cooke said the recent application for a Turlock supercenter was the first formal submission for this site, on Countryside Drive between the Monte Vista Crossings and Countryside Plaza shopping centers.

Informal talk of a supercenter started about two years ago and eventually prompted the City Council to pass the ban. Council members said such a store would congest traffic as customers made frequent crosstown trips for groceries. They also said the store could drive out supermarkets that anchor smaller shopping centers around Turlock.

Lawsuit's anniversary

Wal-Mart sued the city a year ago today, claiming that officials welcomed the supercenter idea in early 2003 but later changed their minds at the behest of competing grocers. The resulting ban was an improper use of zoning powers to regulate competition, the lawsuit says.

It also says the council did not do the state-required study on the environmental effects of the ban - namely, that it would prompt people to shop at multiple stores, causing more traffic and [air pollution](#) than if they did one-stop shopping at a supercenter.

Superior Court Judge Roger Beauchesne upheld the ban Dec. 7. He acknowledged the effect on competition but said the goals behind the ban were "reasonably related to the public welfare."

Wal-Mart also sued in federal court, arguing that the ban violated the commerce clause of the U.S. Constitution. That case is pending.

The appeal in the Superior Court case was filed in the Fifth District Court of Appeal in Fresno. City Attorney Dick Burton said he received a brief notice of the action but no details on Wal-Mart's grounds for appeal. The chain's attorney in Fresno could not be reached Thursday.

City Councilman Billy Wallen, who took part in the unanimous vote for the ban, said he is undaunted by the appeal.

"I'm willing to fight," he said. "It's an ordinance that's for the good of our city."

The council has authorized spending of \$130,000 to have an Oakland law firm defend Turlock against the lawsuits. Burton said he did not know how much of that money remained as of Thursday.

Wallen said he would support spending more if needed to resist the appeal.

"It's not about Wal-Mart," he added. "It's the size of the store. It's just too big."

The ban exempted membership stores, such as the Costco that opened last year near Monte Vista Avenue. Turlock officials said their customers come infrequently and buy in bulk, thus not tying up traffic.

Fuel cells get one stop closer to the driveway

Friday, Feb. 11, from the Washington Post, in the Modesto Bee

The brakes are controlled by a computer, so the car can stop a full length shorter than most. Each rear wheel has its own motor and can turn by itself, which not only improves traction but also makes parallel parking a snap. And the only thing this car emits is water vapor.

But for all the exotic gizmos on the Sequel, an experimental hydrogen-powered car by General Motors Corp., the biggest breakthrough is that it is designed to drive as far and accelerate as quickly as the cars in most driveways.

The Sequel on fuel-cell technology that until now has not matched the overall performance of gasoline engines.

Passengers at Dallas-Fort Worth International Airport will soon ride on buses with hydrogen-powered engines, Ford Motor Co. CEO William Clay Ford Jr. has announced. Ford also will create three gasoline-electric hybrid vehicles for retail sale, and rush the hybrid Mercury Mariner sport-utility vehicle to showrooms later this year - a year ahead of schedule to capitalize on consumer interest in hybrids.

Honda has a new-generation hydrogen-fuel-cell car called the FCX. While not ready for retail sale, it will be in municipal fleets in New York, California and elsewhere in the coming year.

After a century of dependence on oil-based fuel, the auto industry is finally giving consumers a serious look at a future with little or no gasoline power.

"It's a frenzy" to get out front with new technology, said Mary Ann Wright, director of such efforts at Ford. "What you're seeing is a groundswell, not really of industry pushing as much as everybody demanding that we really get serious about these solutions. ... The market's telling us something - they're ready for this kind of stuff. The public is aware that we can't continue to consume oil like we do."

Friday, Feb. 11, Modesto Bee, [Editorial](#)

Environmental cost is too steep to keep using methyl bromide

This was supposed to be the last year strawberry farmers in the United States could use highly toxic methyl bromide to treat their fields.

Instead, the farmers might end up using record quantities of the gas, which significantly contributes to the depletion of Earth's protective shield, the ozone layer.

In 1987, leaders from throughout the world, including President Reagan, recognized the implicit dangers of methyl bromide and agreed to phase out its use under terms of the Montreal Protocol. But the pledge has proved harder to live up to than initially hoped.

Research has not found a substitute that is as cheap or effective as methyl bromide in killing various weeds and microscopic soil pests prior to planting fields with strawberries or nut and fruit trees. The biocide also is used for fumigation before some produce is shipped abroad.

That, however, is an inadequate reason for perpetual dependency.

Another political solution - a simultaneous, universal phaseout - is the only fair one for California farmers.

A problem with the initial solution, stemming from the Montreal Protocol, is that it was the equivalent of unilateral disarmament for California farmers.

Under the original idea, an emerging competitor - Mexico - would have been allowed to continue using methyl bromide for at least two more years, especially on strawberries.

Those varying timetables created the prospect of an unfair playing field. It left too much doubt whether Mexico would actually follow through with its ban.

Despite lots of research - much of it at the University of California at Davis - a painless solution did not emerge. There are other chemicals that kill insects, weeds and bugs, but they are almost as toxic and not as effective.

"Basically, we need to breed strawberries that are resistant to soil pests," UC Davis researcher Steve Fennimore told the San Jose Mercury News.

But would consumers swallow such a genetically modified strawberry? The same question could be asked about the other crops that depend on this deadly poison.

Absent a technological breakthrough, farming without methyl bromide would mean higher costs, which means consumers would have to pay more for some products. The new costs would be a function of more labor (such as weed pulling) and less productivity (lower yields per acre). If every farmer in every country has to live by these rules, however, it is a price consumers can live with.

One thing is clear: Earth can't live without its ozone layer.