



# County Land for Food Production

## Recommendations and Next Steps



June 2011

## Introduction

At the request of County of Sonoma (County) Board of Supervisors members Valerie Brown and Efren Carrillo, the University of California Cooperative Extension (UCCE), Department of Health Services (DHS), Sonoma County Agricultural Preservation and Open Space District (SCAPOS), Regional Parks Department, Sonoma County Water Agency, Agricultural Commissioner, and General Services Department collaborated to assess the feasibility of making land owned by organizations governed by the County Board of Supervisors (County Lands) available for food production. The County supports local agriculture and healthy communities as components of its strategic plan. Through the use of publicly-owned land for food production, the County has an opportunity to support the viability of local agriculture and increase access to healthy food.

Identifying public land potentially suitable for food production in Sonoma County provides an opportunity for multiple County departments and agencies to work collectively to meet identified strategic goals. Department of Health Services, Agricultural Preservation and Open Space District, Regional Parks, and UCCE, for example, all have strategic initiatives or goals that support local agricultural production and/or promotion of healthy eating. This opportunity could also reduce the vandalism and criminal activity that might occur on vacant lands by turning vacant lands into something useful and publicly requested. For example, turning a vacant lot into a garden, where people grow food, could reduce the incidences of loitering and other undesirable activity.

Other jurisdictions and states have successfully completed inventories of public land for food production. The City of Oakland, for example, identified approximately 1,200 acres of undeveloped open space, estimating the identified land could produce 5 to 10 percent of the city's vegetable needs. Likewise, the City of Portland conducted the "Diggable City Project" to inventory vacant, publicly-owned land for potential agricultural use. This Sonoma County assessment identified land potentially suitable for establishing community gardens, farm operations, or for grazing.

In Fall 2010, DHS worked with participating County departments and agencies to assess their capacity to participate in this project, to understand how this project fits with their strategic priorities, and to assess potential costs, benefits, risks, and impacts of granting access to public land for food production. The departments and agencies expressed support for moving forward and identified opportunities and future considerations relevant to their capacity and lessons learned from past experiences. Each department

and agency identified a liaison to participate in a planning group for this feasibility assessment.

This report presents the recommendations of the planning group regarding next steps for making County Land available for food production, including guiding principles, an initial inventory of potential sites, and a proposed process for making public land available.

### **Guiding Principles**

The following principles were developed to guide the planning and implementation of an effective County Land for Food Production (CLFP) program. These principles reflect the values identified by the planning group and can help guide the review process and selection of potential projects for identified County sites. Proposed projects could be reviewed and prioritized based on their degree of alignment with many or all of these principles.

1. **Increase access to healthy nutritious food:** Hunger and food insecurity are serious problems for many Sonoma County residents. County Land can be well-utilized by expanding opportunities for residents to grow, share, and sell healthy and nutritious food.
2. **Build community:** Sonoma County can provide opportunities for residents to come together and participate in transforming County Land into a community resource that reflects the strengths, needs, and desires of the local community. This is an opportunity to create shared community spaces where people can be outside, enjoy nature, and enjoy each other's company.
3. **Increase local production of food:** Sonoma County has potential to meet more of its food needs with local produce and livestock. Sonoma County can expand opportunities for food production by providing available land, information, and resources.
4. **Support economic viability of local agriculture:** The sustainability of agriculture in Sonoma County depends on the development of economically viable businesses. Sonoma County can utilize its County Land to help develop programs, infrastructure, or other services that support sustainable farming and ranching jobs and businesses.

5. **Assure stewardship of natural resources:** Assure careful stewardship of the land through ecologically sound techniques that enhance habitats and actively conserve water, soil and native vegetation.

## Site Selection

The planning group developed site selection criteria for identifying and categorizing publicly-owned land suitable for the following three categories of food production:

1. Community gardening
2. Small-scale farm operations
3. Grazing

The site selection criteria were established based on recommended measures from other land inventory processes (e.g. Diggable Cities, Portland; Cultivating the Commons, Oakland), available data, and advice from local advisers on the environmental conditions necessary for community gardens, farm production, and grazing. The following criteria were used to identify an initial inventory of County-owned vacant sites under each production category:

### Community gardens

- Within a ½ mile of medium density population (as defined by general plans)
- At least ¼ acre – 1 acre (could be part of a larger site)
- Less than 2% slope
- Vacant

### Farm operations

- 1 acre – 25 acres
- Less than 10% slope
- Farmland Mapping & Monitoring Program (FMPP) soils: prime, state-wide, local, unique
- Vacant

### Grazing

- Greater than or equal to 25 acres
- FMPP soils: grazing, local importance
- Vacant

Using these criteria, an initial list of potential sites was generated for a closer review by staff from the participating departments and agencies. Staff reviewed the identified

sites under its ownership to assess whether each site would be suitable for food production based on existing knowledge of property conditions, adjacent uses, and any plans for future use or development of the identified land.

Appendix A contains the current inventory of 12 community garden sites, 6 farm production sites, and 10 grazing sites that, after Staff review, appear potentially suitable for food production and are not included in future development plans of the participating departments and agencies. Each site would need to undergo a more thorough and detailed assessment to confirm its suitability for inclusion in this program.

### **Recommendations**

The planning group recommends moving forward to make County Land available for food production in a phased approach.

- ▶ Phase One – Community Gardens: Develop and implement a general solicitation process to select suitable proposals to develop and maintain community gardens on identified County Land.
- ▶ Phase Two – Small Farm Operations: Develop a process for making identified County sites available for selected small farm operations and consider how to integrate this effort with the creation of a Beginning Farmer and Rancher Development program proposed by UCCE.

This phased approach will allow the County to respond in the short-term to the growing public desire for access to land for food production. Phase One would give the County an opportunity to recognize and encourage the existing momentum for community gardens that is reflected in the iGROW garden movement, the 350 Home & Garden Challenge, and the recent community mobilization to create a community garden at Larson Park. Phase One would build on the lessons learned by Regional Parks Department in the development of the community garden at Larson Park and would incorporate the best practices identified by similar projects in other jurisdictions. It would create a process and compile resources to facilitate replication of community gardens in other communities throughout the County.

Phase Two would allow the County to tap into existing land resources to support the training and development of the next generation of farmers and ranchers in the county. In partnership with SCAPOSD, DHS, and other local agriculture and farm organizations, UCCE plans to develop a training and internship program to increase access to business training for beginning farmers and ranchers, provide mentorship opportunities, increase access to affordable lands for food production, and develop a collaborative learning

community to share best practices. The planning committee recommends that use of County Land for farm operations should be integrated with this development program and should be phased in as that program develops. This process could include developing a pilot small-scale farm operation to incorporate the Beginning Farmer and Rancher program objectives and identify lessons learned for the future development of small-scale farm operations on County Land.

Finally, although the planning group identified some County Land suitable for grazing, the planning group does not recommend initiating a new process for making these available to the public. Several departments or agencies already have processes in place to effectively lease County Land for this purpose. Therefore, the group recommends that each department or agency evaluate the identified grazing sites for suitability of an expanded grazing program, concurrently with the implementation of Phase One and Two. The planning group does not believe that creating a new or separate process to contract land for grazing is necessary. However, the group does suggest that each department or agency review existing mowing and disking contracts to identify opportunities to expand grazing as a way to reduce costs, support food production, and improve sustainability practices.

### **Recommended Process for Phase One: Community Gardens**

The most equitable method to make the identified County Land available for community gardens is through a competitive request-for-proposal (RFP) process through which an organization, individuals, or groups can submit proposals for using the land for community gardening. This section briefly outlines recommendations for soliciting proposals, reviewing and selecting proposals, and developing and monitoring contracts.

#### **Solicitation Process**

The UCCE will provide staff to manage the program. This will include soliciting a RFP on behalf of all County departments and agencies participating in a County Land for Food Production (CLFP) program. The RFP will highlight available land suitable for Community Gardens (see Page 3) and will require applicants to address the following elements:

- ▶ Proposed site and specific acreage included in project
- ▶ Project goals, objectives, and timelines for food production
- ▶ How the project is aligned with CLFP guiding principles
- ▶ Capacity and experience to achieve objectives (can include assistance from advisors)
- ▶ Level of community partnering and neighborhood support
- ▶ Integration of a monitoring program

The RFP may also induce additional criteria for site specific properties, depending on the management objectives of the department or agency which owns the land. The RFP will contain clear instructions as to eligibility, project and proposal requirements, process for selecting proposals (including the number of anticipated projects to be selected), contracting, and contract administration procedures.

The RFP will also address a process to identify and mitigate non-performance or non-compliance with the CLFP guiding principles if the awarded program violates compliance regulations.

### **Proposal Review and Selection**

UCCE would convene a CLFP proposal review committee comprised of Staff from departments and agencies participating in the CLFP program and community representatives with expertise in community gardening. Proposals would be reviewed using a standardized scoring process using weighted scores for each criteria listed below.

Criteria for judging proposals could include but are not limited to:

- ▶ Extent that goals and objectives are aligned with CLFP guiding principles
- ▶ Feasibility of goals, objectives, and timelines
- ▶ Evidence of organizational capacity, experience, and ability to achieve objectives
- ▶ Evidence of community and neighborhood support

### **Contracting and Contract Administration**

After the proposal selection process, the UCCE liaison will work with each County department or agency, as needed, to ensure contracts are executed and a monitoring compliance in place. As requested by the property owner, the UCCE liaison will manage and respond to any issues that arise during project implementation or ongoing operation.

The CLFP planning group suggests developing a contract template that each participating department or agency could customize as needed, depending on their individual department or agency requirements. For consistency across the program, this contract template might include the following standardized elements:

- ▶ Definition of Landlord and Tenant
- ▶ Site location
- ▶ Allowed uses of land and permitted infrastructure improvements
- ▶ Terms of lease

- ▶ Rent and security deposit
- ▶ Compliance with applicable laws (including agricultural, conservation, hazardous materials)
- ▶ Irrigation and water responsibilities
- ▶ Maintenance responsibilities
- ▶ Subleasing
- ▶ Condition of access to site
- ▶ Renewability of contract
- ▶ Liability protections

In addition to the elements outlined above, the contract could address the following considerations related to project development and management:

- ▶ Tractor use, or appropriate times for using
- ▶ Use of pesticides, fertilizer, fungicides, etc.
- ▶ Expected traffic to the site
- ▶ Hours of operation
- ▶ Number of people expected on plot at any given time
- ▶ Expected decibels of noise pollution created
- ▶ Use of animals and restrictions thereof
- ▶ Runoff and water pollution
- ▶ Tenure of project on land

### **Next Steps for Phase One: Community Gardens**

- ▶ Confirm available sites (August 2011)
- ▶ Develop RFP and RFP process (instructions, timelines, etc) (August 2011)
- ▶ Compile “how to” resources to help community groups successfully plan, build, and maintain a community garden (August 2011)
- ▶ Develop contract agreement template (September 2011)
- ▶ Identify proposal review committee (September 2011)
- ▶ UCCE will provide liaison staff to coordinate with each department or agency, serving as a point person for contract negotiation, approval, and monitoring (September 2011)

- ▶ Release RFP (September 2011)
- ▶ Proposals due (November 2011)
- ▶ Review proposals and select projects (December 2012)
- ▶ Contract negotiation and execution (Winter/Spring 2012)
- ▶ If deemed necessary, the UCCE liaison will conduct a resource assessment relative to what staff resources are needed to manage the multiple contracts established. (Spring 2012)
- ▶ UCCE liaison will begin Phase Two (Spring 2012)
- ▶ Report back to Board of Supervisors (June 2012)