

Latest Land Data Shows Continuing Trend
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Every two years the state's Farmland Mapping & Monitoring Program updates its data showing the acreage of all lands in each county. The public can view this at www.consrv.ca.gov/DLRP, along with supporting materials.

Farmland is divided into categories based on its capability to grow a wide range of crops and any limiting factors such as salinity, hardpans, shallowness or high water table. The best is Prime, followed by Statewide Important, Unique, Local Important, and finally grazing land. The data base also shows how much land in the county is converted to urban and wildlife uses.

The mapping system provides an excellent history of the Central Valley's gradual transition from a rural to an urban environment. The transition is faster in some places than others but the entire Valley is following a similar transition that took place in other great agricultural valleys: the Los Angeles basin (which used to be the number one ag county) and the Santa Clara Valley - home to San Jose.

Year to year farmland data can be confusing because some categories can decline one period and increase the next. This is not because new land was created. It reflects land being taken out and returned to production because of commodity prices or the cost of water. This is uncommon in the Prime category and most common in the lower categories of Unique and Local Important.

For 2002-2004, Merced County realized a net loss of 6,584 acres of Prime farmland and a net loss of 3,168 of Statewide Important farmland. We worry about these two categories of soil because they are the most capable of growing labor intensive and high value-added crops like peaches, tomatoes, walnuts and sweet potatoes. Those types of crops generate the most employment in our region – both on and off the farm. Peaches, for instance require many employees to care for and harvest on the farm and many more people to process and package at the processing plants.

It is interesting to examine what Prime farmland was converted to: 712 acres were converted to urban uses, 443 acres were split up into rural residential (ranchettes) and 528 acres became animal confinement facilities (dairies). With Statewide Important land (the second most valuable category) 262 acres went for urban, 268 acres for rural residential and 350 acres for animal confinement. Add in all the other categories of land and Merced County had 1,022 acres converted to rural residential ranchettes.

The value of farmland in the Central Valley continues to increase. This is not due primarily to its farming potential but to external demands. Farmland is highly desirable to developers and investors who hope it can be converted to an urban use some time in the future. Dairies have been forced to buy land at high prices because of the need to have enough acreage to safely utilize all the waste water generated by the dairy itself. Parcels, twenty acres or less are in very high demand as ranchette rural home sites.