

## Protecting Farmlands and Keeping Local Agriculture Viable with the General Plan Update

The decisions we make in the General Plan Update process will shape Humboldt County's economy, environment, and public health for generations to come. An important component of a healthy General Plan is **protection of resource lands and the jobs they support**. Our rural quality of life can be preserved or destroyed along with our community's unique economic and environmental values, depending on the General Plan Update we adopt.

**Conversion of resource lands** can be devastating to salmon and other wildlife, but also threatens to continue the erosion of the timber and farming jobs that have historically formed the backbone of Humboldt County's economy. Increased consumption of local produce is good for our health, keeps more money in the local economy, and reduces greenhouse gas emissions by reducing our dependence on fossil fuels to import food.



**Humboldt County's rural traditions** include family farming operations such as beef and dairy production, row crop production, cheesemaking, and beekeeping. **Adopting policies that protect agricultural lands from residential development will help ensure that local farmers continue to thrive.** Agriculture is an important part of the economic base of Humboldt County, including many small producers and self-employed farmers. Productive farming land is part of what many local residents value about the County.

As agricultural lands are subdivided, land costs increase, making less land available to buy or lease for farming. The long-term result is that fewer young farmers will be able to enter the ag industry, diminishing our agricultural economy and a way of life that is quickly disappearing throughout the U.S.

**60,000 acres of Humboldt County ag lands were converted to non-agricultural uses from 1985 to 2001, and 53,000 acres were converted from 2001 to June 2005.** Nearly all of the large lot subdivisions have been on agricultural and timber lands, primarily through the breakup of old family ranches. From 1985-2000, the County approved 531 subdivisions, creating a total of 2,945 residential lots, 29% of which were within an Agricultural Resource Zone.

17% of houses built in the past 5 years in unincorporated areas of Humboldt County were built on lands zoned for Agriculture. The McKinleyville area is of particular concern due to the concentration of much of the county's prime ag soils, many of which have been converted to housing.

### Conversion of Prime Ag Lands to Residential Uses, 1941-2009, unincorporated town of McKinleyville.



Working for a General Plan that ...

## Protects Farmlands and Keeps Local Agriculture Viable

### Healthy Humboldt's Goals for the Agricultural Resources Chapter of the Land Use Element

- **Minimize subdivision and conversion of agricultural lands** through strong land use and zoning ordinances. Minimum agricultural parcel sizes should be adopted that will ensure that agricultural areas can be maintained as economic units. Adopt policies that prohibit new non-agricultural use or development of a parcel located in an agricultural area unless it is needed for the agricultural use of the parcel.
- **Maintain the maximum amount of land in large enough parcel sizes** that are practical and useful for the full range of agricultural products raised in Humboldt County. Several agricultural interest groups recommend 60-acre minimums on Ag-Exclusive (AE) and 160-acre minimums on Ag-Grazing (AG).
- **Limit new residential uses in agricultural areas by accommodating most future development within and adjacent to existing communities.**  
Limiting the conversion of agricultural production lands to other land use designations will ensure long-term viability of ag lands throughout the county. Allowing ag lands to be used for residences raises the price of land, making purchase for farming unrealistic, discourages new agricultural investment and uses, and increases the likelihood of purchase for nonagricultural use.
- **Establish urban growth boundaries and buffer areas.**  
Adopting stable zoning boundaries prevents the loss of productive farmlands. Buffer areas that separate urban and rural areas minimize land use conflicts on the agricultural-residential boundary.
- **Adopt a No Net Loss Policy for Agricultural Lands.**  
Where conversion of farmlands cannot be avoided, require long-term preservation through farmland easements or similar mechanisms, with the caveat that the farmland to be preserved be in Humboldt County and must be preserved prior to the proposed conversion.
- **A Recreational and Conservation Easement Program** should also be used to protect open space in the form of ranchlands, many of which contain oak woodlands and riparian areas that provide valuable wildlife habitat.

**For more information, visit [www.healthyhumboldt.org](http://www.healthyhumboldt.org) or call 822-4328.**

*Healthy Humboldt is a coalition of public interest groups working for a County General Plan that provides healthy housing and transportation choices while protecting resource lands and watersheds by focusing future growth in existing communities.*

To read the draft GPU, visit <http://co.humboldt.ca.us/gpu/>. See "Plan Alternatives—Key Issues and Comparison Charts" for policy alternatives under consideration.

Submit comments to [mspencer@co.humboldt.ca.us](mailto:m Spencer@co.humboldt.ca.us).

**COPIES of the GPU are also available at libraries, or from the County Planning Department at 268-3074.**