

# Preserving California's Farmlands — One Cluster at a Time

by Susan Stewart

Every minute of every day, America loses two acres of agricultural land to urban, commercial or residential development.<sup>1</sup> In California, roughly 50,000 acres of farmland is developed every year.<sup>2</sup> If patterns continue, another 2 million acres of California land will be paved over by 2050.<sup>3</sup> As farmers are increasingly pressured to convert fertile land into non-farm developments, the lyrical warning from 1970 — that we will “pave paradise to put up a parking lot” — is now an all too imminent threat. Will our desire to raise our children in a pristine rural setting, be suddenly unattainable? Will we one day wake up to find that our dreams of peaceful country living have just slipped out of reach?

A look at our past and a glance at our future offer hope — and some practical solutions.

“For over 300 years, ambitious and energetic people have flooded into these vast [California] lands, building missions, pueblos, ranchos, presidios, mining camps, seaports, military bases, universities and metropolises,” writes Sylvia Wright for *UC Davis Magazine* in 2005. “Feeding all these builders were cattle ranchers, dairymen, orchardists, vegetable farmers and grain growers.”<sup>4</sup>

“At first,” Wright continues, “the food providers farmed and ranched right alongside the settlements... Now the settlements are putting cities and suburbs on top of

the state's finest remaining farmlands at a record, and accelerating pace.”<sup>5</sup>

After World War II, California's agricultural and open space lands began to face increasing conversion pressure. In response, the first of two major vehicles for protecting California's agricultural land came into being in 1965, when the Williamson Act was passed. For volunteering to keep their farmland preserved in a 10-year contract, landowners receive a tax break. It was not an instant success.

But California kept trying, and in 1984, the Division of Land Resource Protection was recognized and by 1995, the second major tool for protecting farmland —

the California Farmland Conservancy Program — was established. Under this grants program, landowners sell the development rights for their property in perpetuity to a land trust while retaining the right to use the land for agricultural purposes. It worked.

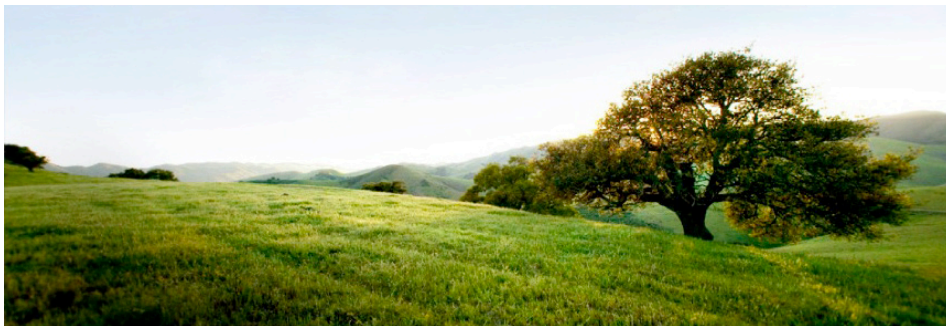
A UC Santa Barbara study conducted in 2002 reports that the majority of farmland conversions occurred between 1960 and 1980, and have been steadily decreasing ever since.<sup>6</sup> “While it may be argued that agricultural land is slowly being converted to residential use,” the report continues, “sprawl proponents would argue that rural parks and wildlife areas have been growing in number as a consequence.”<sup>7</sup>

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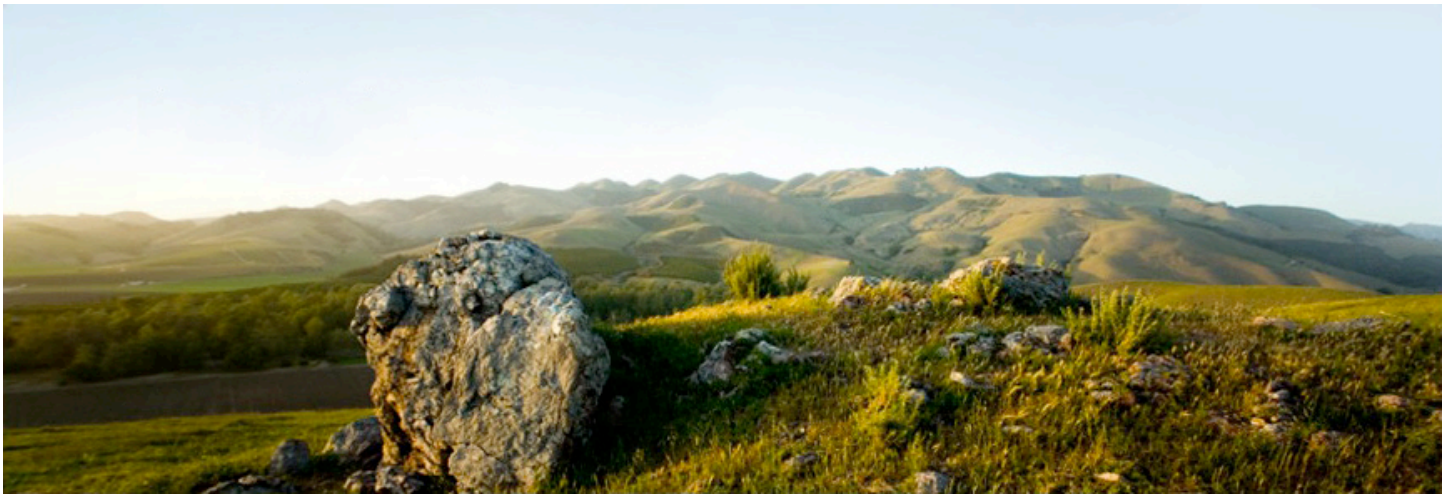
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In San Luis Obispo County, two additional farmland protection tools have been implemented — the Agricultural Cluster Ordinance adopted in 1984, and the Transfer of Development Credits program adopted in 1996. The former provides that landowners can double the number of allowable houses on the property, so long as they are concentrated on 5% of the land, leaving the other 95% as open space or in agricultural use. The latter provides that development rights can be transferred from an area intended for preservation (the sending site) to an area of targeted growth (the receiving site). Once these rights are transferred, the sending site lot will be protected via application of a conservation easement, in perpetuity.<sup>8</sup>



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Successful uses of these tools can be seen in AG cluster projects like San Luis Obispo’s award-winning [Varian Ranch](#). Aimed at preserving San Luis Obispo’s valuable agricultural resources, [RRM Design Group](#) created the land plan for this 48-unit residential cluster development sited on less

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than 60 acres of a 3,127-acre property. In accordance with the county’s Agricultural Clustering Ordinance, the project preserves the agricultural use of the ranch while providing enhanced agricultural operations (using capital generated by the residential development). The undeveloped 3,067 acres was placed into an agricultural preserve and a perpetual open space easement.<sup>9</sup>

These same tools are also at work in the proposed [Las Ventanas](#) project nearing completion this year just above the Arroyo Grande Valley. Founded on a 150-year-old working cattle ranch, these 56 home sites occupy just 125 acres of a more than 4,000-acre historic land grant belonging to the Talley family. “Long-term sustainability and a commitment to quality are hallmarks of our four-generation history in the Arroyo Grande Valley,” says [Brian Talley](#), grandson of Oliver Talley, who began farming there in the 1940s. “We believe that Las Ventanas is the ultimate expression of these beliefs.”

Talley Farms is a diversified farming company that grows vegetables, wine grapes, lemons and avocados. Talley Vineyards, founded in 1986, is the family’s winery. “My dad’s idea was to preserve our prime farmland by allowing very limited development on the hillsides which weren’t suitable for farming,” Talley continued. “Consequently, our farms, vineyards, and rangeland are now protected from development forever with a permanent open space easement.

The majority of Las Ventanas will continue to operate much as it has over the past 150 years—as a working cattle ranch.”

Believed by many to be a win-win solution, AG clustering—along with other recently devised farmland protection tools—gives landowners a chance at the fair market value they deserve, while preserving precious farmland forever, *and* offering home buyers the chance to build and to live in the pastoral settings of their dreams.

“The older I’ve gotten,” says Talley, “the more faith I have in market-based solutions. This is a market-based solution. And in keeping with my family’s legacy, we are preserving what *is* productive by building on what *is not* productive—off the valley floor.”

In order to protect sensitive resources such as view-shed and oak trees, the Talleys worked with the San Luis Obispo County Planning and Building Department to relocate the home sites. They also collaborated with the County Parks Department to align the multiuse trail to enhance its utility, reduce environmental impact, and minimize conflicts with agriculture. And they enlisted the help of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers to design an arched culvert in order to mitigate disturbance to a seasonal stream. Open, cooperative relationships with state and county regulatory agencies

are key to ensuring the success of developments like Las Ventanas over time.

Clustered among oak woodlands and rolling hillsides with panoramic views of the ocean and mountains, as well as the Talley Farms and Vineyards, the 2 or 3-acre home sites of Las Ventanas will attract discerning buyers who are invested in the preservation of the land. Protected forever by a permanent open space agreement, Las Ventanas—and communities like it—offer hope that we can live with the land, without destroying it.

1. “Farmland Protection Issues” – American Farmland Trust, April 2007.
2. “Disappearing Act,” by Sylvia Wright, quoting Al Sokolow, retired UC Davis Cooperative Extension land use specialist in *UC Davis Magazine*, Winter 2005
3. “Paving Paradise: A New Perspective on California Farmland Conversion” – American Farmland Trust, April 2008
4. “Disappearing Act,” by Sylvia Wright, *UC Davis Magazine*, Winter 2005
5. *Ibid.*
6. “Predicting the Spatial Pressures of Development in San Luis Obispo County: Is the Transferable Development Credits Program Controlling Urban Sprawl?” – Casso, Diethofer, Eichel, Huang. UCSB 2002
7. *Ibid.*
8. *Ibid.*
9. [www.rrmdesign.com](http://www.rrmdesign.com)