

10 AGRICULTURE

Agriculture production is essential for the County’s future. The Agriculture Element of the General Plan identifies issues and delineates programs related to agriculture in Mariposa County. Agriculture is a crucial policy issue because it contributes to the County’s economic and social sustainability; and is a major aspect of the County’s rural character. The County maintains rural character and creates an important long-term fundamental economic base when agriculture is nurtured, sustained, and preserved.

10.1 AGRICULTURE ISSUES AND SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

This Element implements programs resolving issues related to agriculture in Mariposa County. Some programs cross element boundaries and are also implemented elsewhere in this Plan. The key issues addressed in the Agriculture Element are:

- preserving agricultural lands,
- working landscape stewardship,
- nurturing the agricultural economy throughout the County, and
- maintaining the rural character of the County.

The inclusion of agriculture as its own element is recognition of the essential contributions agriculture makes to the County’s economy and character.

10.1.01 PRESERVING AGRICULTURAL LANDS

A cornerstone of the General Plan is the preservation of the working landscape and the lifestyle it supports for future generations. Mariposa County was one of the first counties in California to enact “**right to farm**” regulations. Agricultural lands need to be conserved, because they have both direct and indirect impacts on local jobs. If agriculture lands are not maintained, the County’s economic strategy fails to attract new investment capital, misses opportunities to diversify other economic segments, and loses momentum to increase tourism.

Land use policies of the County directly impact the viability of agricultural lands. Agricultural businesses, especially ranching, operate on small profit margins and therefore their viability is susceptible to shifts in pricing, the cost of regulation, and the cost of operation. A key strategy to preserving the County’s working landscape is to nurture the agricultural sector. By maintaining viable agricultural businesses, the County will retain the working landscape.

Operating a viable business is not enough to assure the working landscape is maintained. A number of issues place additional strain on agriculture; however, the County has programs to preserve agriculture and aid the owners. The pressure to convert the Agriculture/Working Landscape to urban uses in Mariposa County will intensify in the 21st century with the development of the new University of California/Merced campus and the continued growth of the Central Valley.

Maintaining the agricultural fabric in the County requires a diverse base of professionals working together. Duties, responsibilities, skills, and experience are distributed among the Natural Resource Conservation Service/Resource Conservation District, the Agriculture Commissioner/Sealer, the Farm Advisor’s Office, the Farm Bureau, and the Cattlemen’s Association, as well as those operating in the industry and providing jobs.

10.1.02 WORKING LANDSCAPE STEWARDSHIP

Stewardship is the act of land use conservation and land resource protection. The General Plan is based on the precept that those who live on and manage the land are the best stewards. This is particularly true with agriculture and forestry.

Agriculture utilizes primary resources of soil, water, sun, and air. The viability of agriculture is dependent on conserving and managing these resources for the future. The partnership between the County and private interests create collaboration opportunities to ensure the County’s resources are used in beneficial ways that enhance the value of agriculture in the local economy.

Mariposa County is noted for its diverse habitat, ranging from grasslands in the western part of the County to towering mountain environments in the eastern part of the County. Agricultural lands provide habitat for a variety of plant and animal species. Balancing habitat and wildlife with agricultural uses is essential.

Some exotic plants and animals, such as star thistle and feral hogs, are nuisances in the County. These species are impacting the ability to farm, ranch, and conserve the County’s native vegetation. Although stewardship and conservation ensure agriculture works in

balance with the ecosystem, measures may need to be taken to attempt to control these invasive species.

10.1.03 NURTURING THE AGRICULTURAL ECONOMY THROUGHOUT THE COUNTY

Specialty crops grown in Mariposa County include organic hops and organic vegetables. Hydroponics and aquaculture are types of farming techniques located in the County. In recent years, there has been a greater interest in growing new crops. The County’s diverse soils and microclimates provide opportunities for increasing the number of specialty crops. Many of these specialty crops are grown on small specialty farms. These small farms provide opportunities to attract the investors to the County and serve as incubators for new and “spin-off” businesses.

Small farms, specialty crops, and working ranches provide opportunities for agritourism. With over three million visitors to Yosemite National Park annually, agritourism provides two benefits—it creates opportunities for additional revenue for the property owner and provides visitors one more reason to stay in the County longer. As specialty operations grow or produce direct consumables, opportunities exist for a “farm trail” similar to Apple Hill in El Dorado County, wine tasting rooms similar to Sonoma and Napa, dude ranches with conferencing centers such as those in Wyoming, or working farms where visitors get to experience ranch life, as is done in Arizona and New Mexico. Such specialty operations are important in California. In addition to maintaining the County’s working landscape, the economic vitality of agriculture is essential to maintaining the rural character.

10.1.04 MAINTAINING THE RURAL CHARACTER OF THE COUNTY

Mariposa’s agricultural heritage helps define its character and is fundamental to the County’s rural lifestyle. These aspects of the County’s character attract vacationers and new residents, bringing investment to real estate, businesses, services, and general County employment.

Degradation of the agricultural landscape diminishes Mariposa’s character and threatens agricultural economic opportunities. It also threatens the indirect or secondary economic opportunities associated with agriculture. A fundamental principle of the General Plan is the retention of the Agriculture/Working Landscape.

The agricultural business in Mariposa County has typically been family owned. The introduction of large agribusiness operations could change the character of the County if not properly selected and located with consideration for impacts on views; resources; open space; circulation systems; and the patterns of life on the County’s ranches, small farms, and communities.

There are several key benefits associated with agriculture as a fundamental part of Mariposa County’s character.

- Agricultural land provides a transition from the surrounding urban landscape to rural agricultural areas of Mariposa County.

- Agriculture is a major contributor to the local economy in terms of dollars, community commitment, volunteerism, and work ethic.
- Keeping lands in agriculture protects them from the pressure for suburbanization from the neighboring metropolitan areas.
- The concentration of agriculture lands allows the County to focus its service deliveries into more concentrated Town Planning Areas and Residential areas. This is fiscally more efficient, cost effective, and provides for orderly growth.

There are effective programs to assist agricultural business owners in preserving their land. Some property owners have sold development rights creating “conservation easements.” The Sierra Foothill Conservancy, the California Rangeland Trust, and the recently-formed Sierra Nevada Conservancy are among the organizations that assist owners in establishing conservation easements.

The most common agriculture land preservation program in California is the Williamson Act. This state legislation provides a significant property tax reduction for active farms and ranches participating in the program. Land under a Williamson Act contract in Mariposa County has a 20-year rolling term. This means a property owner enters into a contract with the County to preserve the land for 20 years with a new year added as each year passes. To exit a Williamson Act contract, a property owner files a “notice of non-renewal.” Then over the next two decades, the property taxes incrementally increase each year so that at the end of 20 years, the property taxes are at regular levels. There are significant penalties for early withdrawal with contract cancellation.

The Agriculture/Working Landscape classification incorporates both the County’s traditional ranch lands and timberlands at the mid-elevations of the County west of Yosemite National Park. Additionally, there are scattered agricultural holdings and ranches within the Residential land use classification.

The concentration of timber and agricultural lands and their distribution in the County is a major contributing element to the rural character, scenic values, and the preservation of the economic viability of these lands. This presents a policy challenge; how to protect agriculture and timber lands in balance with the need to provide land for housing to accommodate population.

Many of the County’s current large agriculture preserves were assembled by an acquisition of smaller properties over a long period of time. Although the large property today may show on the assessor parcel rolls as a single piece, it may actually consist of a number of legally created smaller parcels. Property owners have the ability to seek a certification of compliance for these legal parcels—even though they may not conform to current zoning regulations.

The challenge that results from the issuance of a certificate of compliance is the recognition, and subsequent sales to individual owners of individual parcels that may be incapable of meeting Williamson Act Contract requirements. The requirements of the overall Williamson Act contract still apply to the entire contracted property even when an underlying parcel is recognized or otherwise sold. To maintain overall economic viability of an agriculture preserve and ensure it remains in compliance with new Williamson Act Contracts, the General Plan places a great emphasis on ensuring that substandard agricultural parcels are not recognized through the certificate of compliance process during the tenure of the new

contract and that the sale of substandard contract parcels does not create premature expectations of residential development.

Another challenge is the County’s limited available land to accommodate residential development. There are Williamson Act contracts located within the Residential land use classification. Because Williamson Act contracts have a 20-year term, no agriculture preserve will be available for use or residential subdivision during the 20-year life of this General Plan.

Maintaining rural character and accommodating future population requires resolution of these challenges by balancing competing uses. The Plan’s intent is to seek land for future residences in the Residential land use classification and to maintain agriculture uses within the Agriculture/Working Landscape classification.

The General Plan establishes a policy that directs residential subdivision activity around the Highway 49 corridor and designated town planning areas. The remainder of the County’s land use classifications preserves agriculture, timber, and other resources.

A community planning area or special planning area is not necessarily an area for residential growth and development. These planning areas represent a separate policy approach. A planning area’s character is generally based on the character of the General Plan land use classifications in which the area is situated. At the policy level, area plans are developed specifically to reflect community values. As described in the Land Use Element, community plans and special plans may assign strict standards for agricultural land protection, and unless otherwise specified in the area plan, agricultural lands are not to be considered a future “urbanizing” area. Lands within community or special plan areas for which a plan has not yet been adopted, and to which have the Agriculture/Working Landscape land use classification is assigned, will be subject to all of the policies established in the General Plan to protect and preserve agricultural lands from conversion to nonagricultural uses.

At the same time, it is important to allow lands within the Residential land use classification to accommodate new rural style subdivisions and the town planning areas to develop as population and business centers.

10.2 GENERAL PLAN IMPLEMENTATION

Goal 10-1: Create a support staff for agriculture providing assistance and innovation for agricultural activities.

Policy 10-1a: Support the agriculture industry through the Agriculture Commissioner’s office.

Implementation Measure 10-1a(1): The Board of Supervisors should maintain a full-time agriculture commissioner and provide support within budgetary and staff constraints.

Timing:	Intermediate-term.
Responsibility:	Board of Supervisors.
Fiscal Impact:	Increased ongoing operational costs.
Consequences:	Continued support of agriculture.

Policy 10-1b: The County shall collaborate with landowners, federal agencies, state agencies, universities, stakeholders and community-based organizations for continued agricultural preservation.

Implementation Measure 10-1b(1): The Agricultural Advisory Committee shall expand its role to provide recommendations to the Board of Supervisors on all agriculturally-related issues and resources.

Timing: Ongoing.
Responsibility: Mariposa Planning.
Fiscal Impact: Ongoing Staff assistance.
Consequences: This creates a more versatile Agricultural Advisory Committee to serve the needs of the Board of Supervisors.

Implementation Measure 10-1b(2): The County shall coordinate with the Mariposa Unified School District to enhance the District’s agricultural educational programs.

Timing: Ongoing.
Responsibility: Agriculture Commissioner, Farm Advisor Office, Resource Conservation District, and Mariposa Unified School District.
Fiscal Impact: Staff time allocation.
Consequences: Supports the rural challenge program as a County policy. If the program were discontinued by the State, this Measure would be inapplicable.

Policy 10-1c: Maintain uses compatible with agriculture in the Agriculture/Working Landscape land use classification.

Implementation Measure 10-1c(1): Clearly define uses compatible with agriculture.

Timing: Short-term.
Responsibility: Mariposa County Planning Department, Agricultural Advisory Committee.
Fiscal Impact: Included in the cost of updating Title 17.
Consequences: Preservation of agricultural land.

Goal 10-2: Avoid loss of agriculture lands in the Agriculture/Working Landscape land use classification to maintain rural character.

Policy 10-2a: Agriculture lands should be retained.

Implementation Measure 10-2a(1): Areas of the General Plan classified as Agriculture/Working Landscape and proposed for reclassification to a Residential, Planning Area, or Natural Resource land use classification will be reviewed against the following criteria. No land within the Agriculture/Working Landscape land use classification shall be changed to a Residential, Planning Area or Natural Resource land use classification unless the Board of Supervisors adopts all of the following findings :

- The subject property is not within an area in which the majority of the surrounding parcels are currently being used or historically have been used for agriculture, timber, or mineral purposes.
- The soils, water rights, topography, terrain, and location are not suitable as an economic production unit of sufficient quality for commercial agricultural production.

- There are no other lands within the proposed land use classification available for the proposed or similar project.
- The characteristics and size of the subject properties make it unsuitable for open space, conservation easements, or other preservation opportunities which further implement the goals and policies of the General Plan.
- The subject property has not been identified in the County General Plan or any area plan as a location with characteristics worthy of preservation within the Agriculture/Working Landscape land use classification.

Timing: Ongoing review standard.
Responsibility: Mariposa County Planning Department and Agricultural Advisory Committee.
Fiscal Impact: Ongoing review.
Consequences: This sets a high standard of review.

Implementation Measure 10-2a(2): Lot line adjustments in the Agriculture/Working Landscape land use classification, including Williamson Act contracted parcels, shall result in parcels which are in compliance with the underlying land use designation, including minimum parcel size. The County may approve a boundary modification of an existing parcel that does not meet the minimum size requirements when a finding is made that the modification results in an improvement of the circumstances and/or design of both parcels or lots and in achieving the goals and policies of the General Plan and the purpose of the Agriculture/Working Landscape land use classification.

Timing: Ongoing review standard
Responsibility: Mariposa County Planning Department.
Fiscal Impact: Ongoing review.
Consequences: This sets a higher standard of review.

Implementation Measure 10-2a(3): Standards shall be developed for issuance of development permits for substandard size parcels under Williamson Act contract.

Timing: Short-term.
Responsibility: Mariposa County Planning Department and Assessors office.
Fiscal Impact: Ongoing review.
Consequences: This sets a higher standard of review.

Implementation Measure 10-2a(4): Develop criteria for transfers of lands within the Agriculture/Working Landscape land use designation for lands within other land use designations which result in no net loss of like kind of agricultural lands (type and quality) and that demonstrates a benefit to agricultural lands .

Timing: Intermediate-term.
Responsibility: Mariposa County Planning Department .
Fiscal Impact: Ongoing review.
Consequences: Provides for the consolidation of agricultural lands.

Goal 10-3: Preserve agricultural economic viability to the greatest extent possible.

Policy 10-3a: Collaborate with the Mariposa County Farm Bureau, agricultural interests, institutions, agencies, and groups to devise strategies defining resource stewardship.

Implementation Measure 10-3a(1): The Agriculture Commissioner and Agricultural Advisory Committee should create a document identifying successful practices used in the County.

Timing: Short-term.
Responsibility: Mariposa County Planning Department, Agriculture Commissioner.
Fiscal Impact: Cost of strategic plan development.
Consequences: Creates a detailed policy planning document.

Implementation Measure 10-3a(2): The County shall maintain a commitment to programs for invasive species eradication.

Timing: Ongoing.
Responsibility: Mariposa County Planning Department, Agriculture Commissioner, Farm Advisor Office, Resource Conservation District.
Fiscal Impact: Unknown.
Consequences: Puts the County in an active role with the noxious weed program.

Policy 10-3b: Maintain our agricultural resources to diversify the local economy.

Implementation Measure 10-3b(1): Develop and implement a program cataloguing sources of funding and resources providing technical and economic assistance for agriculture stewardship.

Timing: Short-term.
Responsibility: Mariposa County Planning Department, Agriculture Commissioner, Farm Advisor Office, Resource Conservation District.
Fiscal Impact: Staff time or possible consultant or UC/Extension costs to prepare the catalogue.
Consequences: Creates a support program for Agriculture interests.

Goal 10-4: Preserve heritage crop varieties.

Policy 10-4a: Establish preservation strategy for local heritage crop varieties.

Implementation Measure: 10-4a(1): The agricultural resources program should include support for identifying a market for heritage crop varieties.

Timing: Intermediate-term.
Responsibility: Agriculture Commissioner.
Fiscal Impact: Unknown.
Consequences: Support for agricultural economy.

Goal 10-5: Encourage the expansion of the agricultural economy.

Policy 10-5a: Identify adaptive uses of agricultural properties.

Implementation Measure 10-5a(1): Accommodate agritourism uses through changes in Agriculture zones.

Timing: Short-term.
Responsibility: Mariposa County Planning Department.
Fiscal Impact: Incorporated into the costs of the Title 17 revision.
Consequences: Enhance agritourism.

Policy 10-5b: Develop and implement strategies to enhance the agricultural economy.

Implementation Measure 10-5b(1): The Economic Development Strategic Plan should include strategies for agritourism.

Timing: Intermediate-term.
Responsibility: County Administrative Officer, Agricultural Commissioner, Farm Advisor.
Fiscal Impact: Minimal Staff time to add to the existing Strategic Plan development.
Consequences: Creates Economic Development strategic plan content requirements.

Implementation Measure 10-5b(2): Coordinate with the private sector to implement an economic development strategy for agriculture.

Timing: Intermediate-term.
Responsibility: Agriculture Commissioner, Agricultural Advisory Committee, County Administrative Officer.
Fiscal Impact: Staff costs.
Consequences: Expand economic opportunities for agriculture.

Goal 10-6: Preserve agriculture lands to maintain County character.

Policy 10-6a: Maintain viability of agriculture lands when historic parcels are discovered.

Implementation Measure 10-6a(1): Prohibit the construction of residences on parcels that are subject to a Williamson Act contract unless they comply with the terms of a Williamson Act contract .

Timing: Ongoing review standard.
Responsibility: Mariposa County Planning Department.
Fiscal Impact: Ongoing program.
Consequences: Ongoing review standard.

Implementation Measure 10-6a(2): Review enforcement of Williamson Act provisions requiring onsite residents to be actively performing qualifying agricultural activities on all contracted property.

Timing: Short-term.
Responsibility: Mariposa County Planning Department.
Fiscal Impact: Ongoing program.
Consequences: Review standard.