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Urbanization continues to swallow local farmland, but agriculture still growing

By: LORELL FLEMING - Staff Writer

A new California Department of Conservation survey of San Diego County farmland for the period 2000-02 shows that nearly 5,000 acres were lost to what the report calls urbanization, which typically means housing.

But local farm industry leaders say the state agency's survey is only one perspective on the county's farmland status and not necessarily the most accurate.

Despite the increase in farmland being converted into homes, roads and other forms of development, county agricultural officials say the overall amount of acreage considered in production between 2000 and 2002 was up from 164,357 to 226,665, a figure that includes grazing lands.

The major difference between the survey and county figures is that the state does not take into account farmland of less than 10 acres and many county growers are operating on tracts of that size and smaller.

Residential and commercial developments did gobble up more agricultural land in the latest survey, but at a slower rate than in the previous two-year period. The survey showed that 4,944 acres of farmland countywide were urbanized between 2000 and 2002, with many of the changes occurring in the northern and eastern parts of the county.

"The largest conversion of irrigated farmland occurred in the Encinitas area adjacent to Paul Ecke's poinsettia greenhouses where the Encinitas Ranch housing development (about 100 acres) was added," according to field notes from the survey.

Other development cited in the report for 2000-2002:

- Homes built on about 40 acres of formerly irrigated farm land just north of Oceanside near Camp Pendleton.
- Homes built on 40 acres of former agricultural land near Valley Center.
- The addition of a golf course and homes on about 300 acres in the San Luis Rey Heights area, a golf course on about 150 acres in the Valley Center area .

Maintaining farm viability

Urbanization can be troubling to an industry that the county's Department of Agriculture, Weights and Measures says has an estimated annual economic impact of about \$4.5 billion.

Agriculture was the fourth-largest industry in San Diego County as of 2002, according to the department's latest statistics, and has held its own in the wake of the development. The No. 1 crop in dollar value in the 2000-02 reporting period for the county was indoor flowering and foliage plants.



While this Pauma Valley property has been preserved as farmland, a new state report shows that urbanization is continuing to take land out of agricultural use in San Diego County.

Waldo Nilo

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"This crop is also known for its long history of thriving side-by-side with urban development," county Agricultural Commissioner Kathleen Thuner wrote in the crop reports for those years.

Now, with more new homes, roads and other signs of city living springing up near farms ---- usually driving up the value of nearby farmland ---- some owners of agricultural land are deciding it's time to sell.

Fallbrook avocado and orange grower Jean Berk said she and her husband, Sid, have felt the pressures from surrounding development and are slowly getting out of farming. Five of their 35 acres on Winterhaven Road now in production are for sale in 1-acre blocks. The Berks own 60 acres in all.

"We've had real estate brokers and real estate business owners tell us that the best and highest use for our land is development," Jean Berk explained. Homes built at one unit per acre have begun springing up around the farm, according to the couple.

For the last seven years, the couple have been running the farm, which has been in Jean Berk's family since 1925. While personal matters figured into the Berks' decision to get out of farming, the advice of real estate professionals was the major factor in their decisions, Jean Berk said.

"I want farmers to succeed," she added. "But, I guess we're not going to be a part of it anymore. I respect farmers and the hard work they do."

Longtime farmer Michael Anthony Mellano of Bonsall said that while urban encroachment is a problem, he believes agriculture in San Diego County remains viable.

"It's the costs of doing business ---- the cost of energy and water, the competition from imported goods, things like that apply the most pressure on growers," said Mellano, who grows flowers on 400 acres.

Thuner sums up the challenges confronting growers this way:

"The question before us in San Diego County today is, how do we maintain a viable agricultural industry in the face of urbanization?" Thuner said. "And the bottom line is, does it pay to raise that crop?"

Thuner said the county is collaborating with farmers and organizations representing growers in efforts to keep farming viable. For example, the county is paying for a study now under way to see if composting chicken manure could reduce flies and odor ---- turning a waste into a resource and reducing conflicts that often arise between farmers and their nonagricultural neighbors.

Agriculture industry view

Farm industry leaders say that in the end, it's not really how much farmland you have, it's what you do with it.

"We don't think the sky is falling," said Eric Larson, executive director of the San Diego County Farm Bureau. "When we look at agricultural production in San Diego County, it continues to climb."

Figures from the county's soon-to-be released 2003 crop statistics and annual report bear that out.

San Diego County's farm acreage classified as "in production" in 2003 was 265,041---- up from 226,665 in 2002, according to Thuner. Much of the increase is attributed to a jump in rangeland used for grazing, which grew from about 158,000 acres in 2002 to about 188,000 acres in 2003.

"There was an increase in rangeland used for grazing during that period," explained Dawn Nielsen, the county's deputy agricultural commissioner. "Because of low amounts of rain, or a lack of rain, it takes more acreage to support grazing if the quality of the food (vegetation) the animals eat is not as good as it was previously."

The county's 2003 crop report also will note a jump in the amount of acreage devoted to nursery products such as flowers and ornamental plants, up from 5,380 acres in 2002 to 5,924 in 2003.

"We had a large nursery move into Pauma Valley," Nielsen said, adding that the business, Village Nursery, now has several hundred acres in agricultural production.

More than 60 percent of the county's agricultural income is derived from nurseries, operations that don't require nearly as much land as row crops or fruit groves.

"Our biggest (farm) industry since 1984 has been nursery and flower crops," Thuner said.

Making the best of what's left

Growers from San Diego County have mastered the task of getting the most out of the available farmland, Thuner said.

"Our farmers are extremely innovative," she said. "They're farming where no one usually farms. They have avocado orchards on slopes. You also see some flowers on slopes."

Given North County's avocado production levels, it appears the innovative ideas are working.

North County and Southwest Riverside County produce about half of California's avocados, with the state as a whole providing about 90 percent of America's avocado crop.

Development pressures also were noted in the county's 2002 crop report. For example, the county's 2002 values for mushrooms posted a 57 percent decline when one grower near Bonsall ceased his big operation because of pressures from neighbors about odors.

One farm saved

There is a bright spot noted in the conservation department's survey. Eighty-five acres of certified organic farmland in Pauma Valley that was once slated for homes is being permanently preserved for agricultural purposes because of efforts made by the Tierra Miguel Foundation.

Teaming up with the Fallbrook Land Conservancy, the foundation leased the land in September 2000 with the intention of purchasing and maintaining it as farmland. The effort was helped along with a recent grant from the state's Farmland Conservancy Program.

Escrow recently closed on the property, which is being used as an educational demonstration farm focusing on organic agriculture.

William Potter, the previous owner of that Pauma Valley farmland, bought the property in 1986 with the intention of selling it to a housing developer. He wanted \$2.5 million for the site, according to previously published reports.

Last month, Potter signed the land title to the foundation in exchange for the \$2 million the foundation had for the sale, and an agreement that the foundation will make payments on the balance.

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