

- Friday
- »Next Story»
- News
- Local News
- Opinion
- Business
- Sports
- Currents Weekend
- Athens 2004
- The Last Week
- Sunday
- Monday
- Tuesday
- Wednesday
- Thursday
- Friday
- Saturday
- Weekly Sections
- Books
- Personal Tech
- Enlace
- Family
- Food
- Home
- Homescape
- Insight
- Night & Day
- Religion & Ethics
- Sunday Arts
- Travel
- Quest
- Wheels

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# S.D. County losing farmland, state report says

## Agriculture officials dispute the findings

By Elizabeth Fitzsimons  
STAFF WRITER

August 13, 2004

**Traffic jams at midday. Long lines at the movies.**

**Signs of the county's growing population are everywhere – even on its farms, a state report concludes.**

**As the region grows, so does its need for homes and the land on which to build them. Much of the county's open land is occupied by more than 6,000 farms, many of them small operations. The state study says the amount of farmland is steadily shrinking – a conclusion local officials dispute.**

**According to the state's Farmland Mapping and Monitoring Program, urban areas in the county grew by nearly 9,000 acres, or 14 square miles, about the size of the city of Coronado, while property used for agricultural diminished by about 7,000 acres from 2000 to 2002.**

**"San Diego's always been one of the most actively urbanized counties, along with Riverside and San Bernardino," said Molly Penberth, manager of the mapping program, part of the Department of Conservation.**



JOHN GASTALDO / Union-Tribune  
Juan Jimenez pulled a ripe cantaloupe from the Tierra Miguel Farm, an organic operation in Pauma Valley that has an easement to prevent nonagricultural development.

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**The conservation department does not oppose development, but wants to direct it to land that isn't agriculturally valuable, said Darryl Young, the department's director.**

**"A lot of this land is high-quality," Young said. "You can't grow more land."**

**Local agriculture officials, however, say the findings are misleading because many of the county's farms are not counted.**

**The county's Department of Agriculture, Weights and Measures reports that the amount of land devoted to farming in the county has actually increased. The county, in its 2002 Crop Report, reported an increase of more than 20,000 acres from 2001 to 2002.**

**Eric Larson, executive director of the San Diego County Farm Bureau, said the state does not count farms that are 10 acres or smaller. Nor does it count greenhouses.**

**"They don't really count what is our bread or butter, which is small farms and greenhouses," Larson said. "In reality, our acreage is continuing to increase."**

**In Riverside and San Bernardino counties combined, the state found that urban areas grew by 20,000 acres, or about 30 square miles.**

**The mapping program tracks land-use changes on 46 million acres of private and public land in California every two years. The findings are provided to local governments to aid in making decisions in land-use planning. As of 2002, it found urbanized land occupied 332,716 acres, and agriculture 323,631 acres of the county's total of 2.7 million acres.**

**The increase in the first and the decline in the second has slowed, however, the study says. From 1998 to 2000, urban areas grew by more than 12,000 acres while agriculture lost 8,500 acres, according to conservation department figures. Since 1990, the county has gained nearly 45,000 urban acres.**

**Analysis of changes from 2002 to 2004 are under way.**

**Agriculture in the county is a \$1.35 billion industry, the fourth largest after manufacturing, defense and tourism. The industry's worth in terms of dollars has grown steadily over the past decade. The county's population is expected to increase from 2.8 million people to 3.8 million by 2020. With more demand for housing and rapidly increasing property values, pressure on farmers seems certain to increase.**

**Among the most agriculturally valuable and threatened areas**

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**is Pauma Valley, a few miles east of Interstate 15 along state Route 76. The soil there is extremely rich, and the hillsides and valley provide several microclimates for growing a variety of produce, from greens and corn to citrus and avocados.**

**Three large developments are proposed at I-15 and Route 76, west of the valley. If approved by the county, they could eventually be home to at least 5,000 people and include buildings for commercial and light industrial businesses.**

**One parcel that will never be the site of tract homes is Tierra Miguel Farm in Pauma Valley. The organic, educational farm is the only agricultural operation in the county with a conservation easement to prevent nonagricultural development.**

**Tierra Miguel Foundation bought the 85-acre farm and the development rights with \$1.9 million in state and federal loans and grants awarded last year. The state conservation department granted \$1.64 million toward the purchase and the development rights, \$1.4 million of which Tierra Miguel will repay; the U.S. Department of Agriculture granted \$233,000 for development rights.**

**Through the state program, local governments and nonprofit groups receive grants to buy development rights from willing landowners, creating permanent easements. There are about 80 such agricultural conservation projects in the state covering 24,000 acres.**

**Easements funded by environmental groups and other entities account for about 100,000 acres, Penberth said.**

**Lands chosen for state grants typically are areas that can serve as buffers for nearby development, such as in the Salinas Valley, where there was a significant threat of development from the high-tech Silicon Valley.**

**As land is sold for development, it gets harder for the remaining farmers to survive. The department tries to keep farms together in clumps.**

**"We don't want to see fragmentation of farming," Young said. "You need a critical mass to have the services. If you're a farmer and surrounded by development, it becomes more expensive to get by."**

**Over the past year, neighboring farmers have expressed a curiosity about Tierra Miguel, which hopes to be a model for the preservation of farmland.**

**"Farmers aren't ones who are going to voluntarily jump on a big change," said Beth Ann Levendoski, the foundation's chief**

**financial officer.**

**"We realize we need urban development, and we realize we need agriculture at the same time. It's coming together in a crisis and we need to find a balance."**

**Robert Farmer, manager of the farm's educational program, walked recently past mulberry trees and through fields of squash, corn and melons. As the clouds parted and the late-morning sun began to heat the fields, Farmer stopped. He picked up a melon, and with a knife he pulled from his pocket, sliced into it, popping a few pieces into his mouth.**

**To the north of him was Palomar Mountain, to the south and west, hillsides covered with avocado and citrus trees. The valley, a green bowl in the center.**

**Farmer tried to picture tract homes lining the hillsides and covering the valley floor.**

**"It's such a wrong mental image in my mind," he said. "It's repulsive."**

**It may be what the future holds.**

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