



# DEPARTMENT OF CONSERVATION

*Managing California's Working Lands*

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## **BETWEEN 2006 AND 2008, IRRIGATED FARMLAND ACRES DECREASED DRAMATICALLY IN CALIFORNIA, ACCORDING TO STATE DEPT. OF CONSERVATION LAND-USE REPORT**

**The entire report is available at**

[http://www.conservation.ca.gov/dlrp/fmmp/pubs/2006-2008/Pages/FMMP\\_2006-2008\\_FCR.aspx](http://www.conservation.ca.gov/dlrp/fmmp/pubs/2006-2008/Pages/FMMP_2006-2008_FCR.aspx)

**Time-lapse animations of land-use change in communities around the state are available at**

<http://www.conservation.ca.gov/dlrp/fmmp/trends/TimeSeriesImg/Pages/TimeSeriesImages.aspx>

SACRAMENTO – Between 2006 and 2008, irrigated farmland in California decreased by a record amount according to Department of Conservation (DOC) report. The amount of lost irrigated farmland is equivalent to an area larger than New York City.

“Although California continues to lead the nation in agricultural production by a wide margin, the amount of outstanding farm and grazing land being developed or idled is something we need to be aware of,” DOC Acting Director Derek Chernow said. “Agricultural land is a limited natural resource, just like clean water, minerals, and hydrocarbons, so it’s important that we be good stewards in planning how we use it.”

The land-use change report by DOC’s Farmland Mapping and Monitoring Program (FMMP) is released every other year. The latest report showed a slowdown from the record urbanization pace seen in the state during recent years. However, 317 square miles (203,011 acres) of irrigated farmland were idled, urbanized, or otherwise reclassified. That’s 30 percent more than the 2004 to 2006 total. The report noted 98,471 fewer acres of the highest-quality agricultural soils, known as Prime Farmland, which is also a record.

Land idling was particularly noteworthy in the southern San Joaquin Valley: five of the region’s eight counties saw at least 10,000 acres idled. More than 56,000 acres were idled in Fresno County alone.

“Most of that was related to water – either to drought conditions or to high salinity,” said Molly Penberth, manager of the FMMP. “Because irrigation ceased, most of that land was reclassified to, for example, grazing land. At the same time, we noted a 29-percent decrease in the amount of land being converted to urban uses, which is easily explainable by the economic slowdown.”

In each of the previous two reports, covering 2002 to 2004 and 2004 to 2006, the FMMP catalogued about 102,000 acres of newly urbanized land. In the latest report, only 72,548 acres (113 square miles) of new urbanization were mapped – the

## **New Land-Use Change Report 2-2-2**

lowest total since the late 1990s. Just over a fifth of that development occurred in Riverside County. Kern, San Bernardino, San Diego, Orange, Los Angeles, Placer, San Joaquin, Sacramento, and Contra Costa rounded out the top 10 urbanizing counties.

The FMMP, which began in 1982, has grown to cover about 98 percent of the privately-owned land in the state. That's 49.1 million acres in 49 counties. More than 900,000 acres were added to the mapping area in 2008, including the Carrizo Plain in San Luis Obispo County and the Pit River Valley in Modoc County, due to the availability of new U.S. Department of Agriculture soil surveys. Counties without significant agricultural production or lacking modern soil maps are excluded from the report.

"There are a lot of numbers in the report and people use them in a variety of ways," Penberth said. "The data is utilized in elements of some county and city general plans, in environmental impact documents, and in regional studies on agricultural land conversion."

The maps classify agricultural land under one of the following categories based on soil quality and irrigation status: Prime Farmland, Farmland of Statewide Importance, Unique Farmland or Farmland of Local Importance. Other categories include Grazing Land, Urban and Built-up Land, Other Land, and Water. The FMMP tracks the changes in the acreage of each type of land; provides data on a statewide, regional and individual county level; and also provides a narrative field report of what's happening in each county.

New agriculture was noted in some areas, typically with almond and pistachio orchards replacing grasslands in the western foothills of the Sierra Nevada and the eastern flank of the coast range. Some formerly idled land in the Antelope Valley of Kern and Los Angeles counties were used to grow carrots and other high-value crops.

The FMMP has completed 12 mapping cycles. In that time, more than 1.3 million acres of agricultural land – an area larger than Merced County – have been converted to other uses or fallowed.

Land-use change is determined by a variety of methods and sources, including analysis of aerial photographs, a computer mapping system, public review, and field reconnaissance. That data is combined with soil quality data to produce maps and the report. The FMMP issued data to individual counties as work was completed locally over the last two years.

"Agriculture is a major component of the state's economy," said Brian Leahy, head of DOC's Division of Land Resource Protection. "Yet, over time, we've noted a conversion rate of about one square mile of agricultural land every four days. The thing about land-use change and the urbanization of agricultural land is that it's often subtle. It doesn't happen all at once, and it's so common that you barely notice it. But one day, you look around and say, 'where did all the farms go?'"

DOC manages two voluntary agricultural land conservation programs, the Williamson Act and the California Farmland Conservancy Program (CFCP).

"We can't just say, 'Oh, there's plenty of farmland in the San Joaquin Valley or the Sacramento Valley or on the Monterey Peninsula;' we have to proactively manage California's working lands," Chernow said.

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