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SAN DIEGO COUNTY LOSES FARMLAND

SACRAMENTO -- The amount of agricultural land in San Diego County continued to decrease as urban areas grew, according to a new map released by the California Department of Conservation.

Urban land increased by nearly 9,000 acres between 2000 and 2002; agricultural land declined by more than 7,000 acres. The rate of change has slowed somewhat, however. In the 2000 mapping cycle, urban acreage increased by more than 12,000 and about 8,500 fewer agricultural acres were observed.

The Farmland Mapping and Monitoring Program (FMMP), part of DOC's Division of Land Resource Protection, documents land-use conversion on 45.8 million acres of California's private and public land every two years. The maps and statistics are designed to help local governments evaluate land-use planning decisions. The 2002 analysis is nearly complete statewide, while 2004 mapping is underway.

"This information helps counties and cities see the patterns and make informed choices about how they want to direct growth in the future," Department of Conservation Director Darryl Young said. "The population of California will continue to grow, and it's vital that we ensure there's enough room for people and agriculture."

The Farmland Mapping and Monitoring Program classifies land as either farmland (prime being the best of four types of farmland), grazing land, urban land, other land or water. The "other" category includes low-density "ranchettes," wetlands, and brush or timberlands unsuitable for grazing.

In San Diego County, according to the most recent FMMP report, 8,807 acres were urbanized between 2000 and 2002 – an area larger than the City of Coronado. Since the 1990 FMMP survey, the county has gained nearly 45,000 urban acres. The

net loss of farm and grazing land, which includes conversions such as ecological restoration or low-density rural development, was more than 34,000 acres between 1990-2002. Nearly 14,000 of those acres were considered Unique Farmland (a United State Department of Agriculture designation) due to their ability to grow specialty crops such as citrus and avocados.

In addition, cities within San Diego County reported that nearly 10,400 acres have been committed to future non-agricultural use due to the approval of subdivision maps, the sale of bonds for infrastructure, or other permanent commitments.

Examples of recent urbanization in San Diego County include golf course/housing developments ranging from 70 to 600 acres in San Luis Rey Heights, Escondido, Borrego Springs, upper Otay Lake and Rancho Santa Fe; the 100-acre Encinitas Ranch housing development; 40 acres of new homes north of Oceanside; the 15-acre Casino Pauma complex; 20 acres of new homes on the eastern edge of Vista; and 30 acres of new industrial buildings in the Otay Mesa area.

The agricultural land in San Diego County will continue to face development pressure in the foreseeable future. The California Department of Finance projects that the county's population will increase from more than 2.8 million 2000 to nearly 3.9 million by 2020.

According to the California Department of Food and Agriculture, the gross value of San Diego County's agricultural production was nearly \$1.3 billion in 2002, ranking it eighth among California's 58 counties.

There are ongoing efforts to preserve San Diego County farmland. For example, DOC's California Farmland Conservancy Program

recently issued a grant that helped the Tierra Miguel Foundation and the Fallbrook Land Conservancy permanently shield their 85-acre Pauma Valley farm from development. Escrow just closed on the property, an educational demonstration farm that offers a hands-on opportunity for youngsters and other interested parties to learn about sustainable organic agriculture.

"Given the rate of growth in San Diego County and the amount of land going out of agricultural production each year, we saw a permanent agricultural conservation easement as a perfect fit for our farm, which serves an important need in the community," said Charlene Orszag, president of the not-for-profit Tierra Miguel Foundation. "Protecting farmland is critical, and I would encourage other individuals and groups involved in agriculture in the county to explore this option."

The California Farmland Conservancy Program makes funds available to local governments, land trusts or resource conservation districts to purchase permanent development rights on property from willing landowners. DOC also oversees Farmland Security Zone and Williamson Act contracts, which provide potential tax benefits to landowners who commit to keeping their land in agricultural use for periods of 20 or 10 years, respectively.

The new land-use conversion map has been sent to San Diego County planning officials and organizations such as the county Farm Bureau, Local Agency Formation Commission, city planners, irrigation districts and county resource conservation districts. Printed copies, enlargements, or digital versions of the maps are available to the public. Call (916) 324-0859 or email fmmp@consrv.ca.gov for more information.

The latest statewide study by the FMMP, Farmland Conversion Report 1998-2000, was released last June. More than 91,000 acres were urbanized throughout the state – a 30-percent increase from the 1996-98 mapping cycle – and 27 percent of that total came from irrigated farmland.

For more information about the Tierra Miguel Foundation, visit www.tierramiguel.org or phone 760-742-4213.

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