

Shrinking Napa farmland raises questions for Farm Bureau



October 31, 2015 • [BARRY EBERLING BEBERLING@NAPANews.COM](mailto:BARRY_EBERLING@NAPANews.COM)

Napa County, a rural county devoted to protecting agriculture, has lost 5,919 acres of farmland – an area bigger than St. Helena and Calistoga combined—since 1984.

That figure, reported by the California Department of Conservation for the period of 1984 through 2012, has caught the attention of the Napa County Farm Bureau. Bureau President Norma Tofanelli said that this is the equivalent of five 40-acre farms being lost annually. Whether it's something to be concerned about is another matter.

“We don't know. This is why we raised the question,” Tofanelli said. “We feel it's something we need to look at. We really want to get to the bottom of what these acres represent. Should we be concerned or not, we don't know.” The Farm Bureau has presented the numbers to county planners to start the conversation.

There's more to the numbers than immediately meets the eye. The state reported Napa County acreage considered as top-quality farmland under cultivation grew over three decades by 6,715 acres.

But the county lost 12,634 acres of grazing land, leading to the overall 5,919-acre farmland loss and prompting an exchange at the Oct. 7 Planning Commission meeting.

“Napa County is about preserving agricultural land, not just vineyards,” Tofanelli told the commission. “Grazing land is significant. Orchard land is significant. Wheat producing land is significant.”

Planning, Building and Environmental Services Director David Morrison tried to put the figures in perspective. He sees much of the farmland losses tied to the growth of American Canyon and the city of Napa.

Since 1984, Napa County has seen its population grow from 102,000 to more than 140,000, according to the U.S. Census Bureau. Morrison said that, while the loss of farmland isn't necessarily something to celebrate, it shouldn't come as a complete surprise.

Morrison said later that Napa County is doing a “fabulous job” protecting farmland. There's always room for improvement, he added.

The county's Agricultural Protection Advisory Committee recently recommended the county take an additional step. It said that all new rural development such as winery buildings, parking lots and houses should be limited to 20 percent of properties up to 40 acres and eight acres on properties larger than 40 acres.

Morrison said that rural residential development could become an issue looked at by the county in coming years.

State Department of Conservation field reports show the dynamics of how Napa County farmland acreage changes. It's more complicated than farmland getting gobbled up by asphalt.

For example, the 2012 report noted that 11 acres of irrigated farmland northeast of the city of Napa became urban. About 223 acres of irrigated farmland went fallow and 56 acres of vines and orchards went from being irrigated to non-irrigated.

On the other hand, Napa County added 285 acres of irrigated farmland.

Adding vineyards can generate its own controversies when the gain involves cutting down forests. That can be seen with the recent opposition by Save Rural Angwin to Davis Estates' proposed, 13.6-acre Friesen vineyard. Farmland can also be lost to nature. The 2006 field report said 700 acres of grazing land behind levees along the Napa River was restored to tidal wetlands.

And farmland can be lost to recreation. The 2000 field report said 90 acres of farmland near Yountville were converted to the Yountville golf course and eight acres added to Crane Park boundaries in the St. Helena.

The Metropolitan Transportation Commission's Vital Signs website shows Napa County since 1990 has lost more than 4,000 acres of "greenfield" for new subdivisions, businesses, golf courses and other development. Not all of this land was necessarily being actively farmed.

Most of this development took place in the city of Napa and

American Canyon. Since 1975, the city of Napa has had an urban limit line that was cemented by voters in 1999. In 2008, American Canyon set an urban limit line in a deal with the county that defines city boundaries until 2030.

In 2012, the Farm Bureau expressed concern about Upvalley cities possibly growing into the agricultural preserve.

Tofanelli noted that cities take on housing requirements for Napa County to help keep rural growth at bay. Still, she and others have asked for a larger, county-wide discussion on growth.

“I would hope we have reached this point of awareness that we are a very small physical body, here in this valley,” Tofanelli said. “We are at this point where we are impacting each another, no matter what we do.”

The Agricultural Protection Advisory Committee recommended the county hold a regional summit among the county and its cities to look at regional land use and transportation issues.

Napa remains a mostly rural county with the growth concentrated in its southern portion. The county is 15 percent non-grazing farmland, 35 percent grazing land, 40 percent “other lands” such as forests, 5 percent water and 5 percent urban, according to the state.

Farmland conversion is a statewide issue. California has lost 1.3 million acres of farmland since 1984, including grazing

land. That area is more than twice the size of Napa County's 504,000 acres, according to the county's website.