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Viewpoints: Climate change is another reason to protect farmland

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Food and farming are a big part of California's identity. After all, the state produces 400 different crops and livestock products; provides more than half of the U.S. supply of fruits, vegetables and nuts; and is the country's leading dairy supplier.

Many agricultural landscapes pervade California culture – cattle grazing among oak woodlands; vineyards splashing fall colors; almond orchards blooming pink in spring; vast rows of tomatoes, strawberries and lettuce, and more.

Most Californians take the existence of farming and ranching for granted, but this is a mistake. There are mounting pressures to convert farmland to other types of land uses. More than 1.3 million acres of important farmland and grazing land has been converted to other uses since 1984, including more than 1 million acres lost to urbanization. Most aging farmers want to see their land stay in agriculture, but it's challenging for new farmers to get into the business because of the high cost of land and equipment, so farm families sometimes have little choice but to sell to developers.

Protecting the state's working lands is important not just for reasons of culture and identity. Agriculture is a $37 billion industry and the backbone of many rural Californian communities and related industries. California's Central Valley is one of the last great Mediterranean climate agricultural production areas on the globe, and the food produced here for California and the nation is an issue of national security. There are also recreational benefits to be considered since hunting, hiking and tourism can be compatible on agricultural lands.

Ranches and farms also offer numerous environmental benefits. They provide wildlife habitat for birds, pollinators and many other animals. Importantly in our arid climate – especially because water scarcity will become more acute with climate change – agricultural lands serve as groundwater reservoirs where rainfall penetrates soils, in contrast to paved urban areas. And when farmland is properly managed, it can filter water for nearby communities.

New reports released Tuesday by the California Natural Resources Agency and the California Energy Commission provide valuable data on climate change adaptation. One of the studies, funded by the Energy Commission's Public Interest Energy Research Program, adds a new and compelling reason to protect California's working lands. Led by Louise Jackson, a team of researchers at the University of California, Davis, in cooperation with county agencies, conducted an inventory of greenhouse gas emissions on Yolo County farmland and studied how agriculture can adapt to climate change. This study, which can be found at http://agadapt.ucdavis.edu, provides a tool for assessing agriculture's responses to climate change at the regional level.

Importantly, the study found that urban land accounts for 70 times more greenhouse gas emissions per acre than cropland. According to the authors, this finding "suggests that land-use policies which protect existing farmland from urban development are likely to help stabilize or reduce future emissions, particularly if they are coupled with 'smart growth' policies that prioritize urban infill over expansion."

The authors go on to state that even greater climate benefits can be gained by using farming practices that reduce emissions, sequester carbon and buffer crop production from uncertainties in future climate and fluctuating energy prices.

Until three years ago, the state funded a popular program called the Williamson Act, which offered property tax reductions for farmers who agreed to keep their land in production for 10-year periods. Budget cuts have axed the funds, and there are now virtually no public funds to encourage farmers to hold onto their land.

There are other well-documented policy tools available for protecting farmland. Three ingredients are needed to make them work.

First, we must balance competing uses and develop criteria and guidelines for prioritizing the most high-value agricultural lands. Accommodating a growing population, preparing for a secure renewable energy future and building a 21st-century transportation system must not be accomplished at the cost of paving or "solar paneling" over vast acreages of prime land that we need to feed ourselves.

Second, we must find sources of funding to ensure that maximal community benefit can be obtained from working lands while ensuring that farmers and ranchers can afford to get in and stay in business. One potential source of new funds is California's cap-and-trade program, which is expected to raise more than a half billion dollars this year, increasing in following years. The Legislature is currently debating an investment plan for the funds; it should include farmland protection.

Third, because land use decisions are difficult, development pressures intense and issues of property rights sometimes contentious, we need political leadership, public awareness and support. Thanks to the team of UC Davis researchers and government funding for their study, we can add climate protection to the compelling list of reasons to invest in the long-term protection of California's farms and ranches.

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