

## Bill would require ag land preservation

Written by D.L. Taylor  
Apr. 10

thecalifornian.com

A bill being introduced into a state Assembly committee next week holds the potential to dramatically affect agricultural land in Monterey County.

Under Assembly Bill 823, for every acre of California farmland that is lost to development, another acre would be permanently protected. The proposal — authored by Assemblywoman Susan Talamantes Eggman, D-Stockton — would establish clear minimum requirements for mitigating the loss of agricultural land related to a project.

Among the bill's requirements:

- Conserve agricultural lands that are at least the same acreage as the farmland that is being converted to nonagricultural uses;
- Establish that the soil quality of the conserved land is at least comparable to the converted agricultural land;
- Ensure that the conserved land has an adequate water supply for agricultural purposes, and
- Ensure that the conserved land is located as close to the converted land as feasible.

Enforcing the legislation, should it pass the Legislature, would likely fall into the hands locally of the Monterey County Board of Supervisors, since AB 823 would add specifics to the California Environmental Quality Act. County planners are charged with ensuring all projects that come before them are in compliance with CEQA.

The support and opposition is fairly evenly divided, with building groups lining up against and farm and open space groups behind the bill.

“I think they should protect more land than that,” said Sherwood Darington, a spokesman for the Ag Land Trust in Salinas. “One acre for one acre is insufficient. We recommend three acres of ag land for one acre of development.”

But the way legislation moves forward is by building consensus, and Assemblyman Luis Alejo, D-Salinas, fears AB 832 is generating a lot of disagreement over the way it was written.

“It's an important issue that merits thoughtful discussion,” Alejo said Monday from Sacramento. “It is something that will be debated.”

Alejo has been supportive of conservation efforts such as smart growth boundaries around cities to protect prime agricultural land.

“But the California Chamber of Commerce just put AB 832 on its list of ‘Job Killers,’ ” Alejo said. “That tells me that there will need to be more work done toward building a consensus.”

California is the No. 1 agricultural state in the country, but it's losing farmland at an alarming rate, according to a statement from Assemblywoman Eggman's office. An average of 30,000 acres of California farmland is permanently converted to non-agricultural uses every year.

“A thriving agricultural sector is critical to the long-term strength of California's economy, our food security and natural resource protection,” her statement read. “We must ensure that appropriate policies are in place to preserve valuable agricultural land.”

Dennis L. Taylor covers agriculture for The Californian. You can reach him at 831-754-4175.