

# Valley at the Crossroads

Agriculture and Urban Growth  
in California's Central Valley

**Bullfrog Films**

PO Box 149  
Oley, PA 19547

**PHONE:**

610.779.8226  
800.543.3764

**FAX:**

610.370.1978

**EMAIL:**

[video@bullfrogfilms.com](mailto:video@bullfrogfilms.com)

**WEBSITE:**

[www.bullfrogfilms.com](http://www.bullfrogfilms.com)

## Study Guide

by John Doxey

## About the Filmmakers

### John Doxey, Co-Producer/Director

John Doxey has worked as a journalist and researcher since 1991. After receiving a master's degree in journalism from Northwestern University, John worked as a general assignment reporter for the Associated Press in Baltimore and Nebraska. He then worked as a freelance correspondent in Romania and Turkey, where he reported on a wide range of political, economic and social issues for *Business Week*, *the San Francisco Examiner* and other publications. John now works with the Surface Transportation Policy Project, a non-profit organization that advocates for better transportation choices and smarter land use.

### George Spies, Co-Producer/Director

George Spies has been involved with film and video since 1977. He began working in documentary as a graduate student at San Francisco State University. Having worked with many local filmmakers, George has held nearly every position in both production and post-production, and teaches documentary video at San Francisco's Film Arts Foundation. His previous documentary "This Is The Life," has been featured in a number of festivals across the country. Recently he has contributed camerawork to documentaries on a guitar festival in Mexico, Silicon Valley start-ups and Jewish spirituality. This collaboration with John Doxey is his third documentary.

## About the Film

*Valley at the Crossroads* was partially funded through a grant from the non-profit Great Valley Center in Modesto, California. The Film Arts Foundation, a San Francisco-based non-profit film and video support organization, acted as the film's fiscal sponsor. The producers of *Valley at the Crossroads* are John Doxey and George Spies, independent documentary makers with a long-standing interest in land use and environmental issues.

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## Footnotes

<sup>1</sup> California State Board of Equalization.

<sup>2</sup> Nicolai V. Kuminoff, Alvin D. Sokolow and Daniel A. Sumner, *Farmland Conversion: Perceptions and Realities*, University of California Agricultural Issues Center (Davis), May 2001.

<sup>3</sup> Kelly Zito, "Eastward Ho: Bay Area Prices Drive Buyers to Central Valley," *San Francisco Chronicle*, Feb. 16, 2003 (Section G).

<sup>4</sup> California Department of Conservation, Farmland Mapping and Monitoring Program, *California Farmland Conversion Report, 1996-98*, June 2000.

<sup>5</sup> California State Legislature's Smart Growth Caucus, *Growth Challenges Facing the Golden State*, 2001. Urban Planner Rudy Platzek also estimates that 12 percent of the original valley's floor has been paved over.

<sup>6</sup> Residential and commercial development has in recent decades averaged three dwellings per acre.

<sup>7</sup> American Farmland Trust, *Alternatives For Future Urban Growth in California's Central Valley*, 1995

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> The valley now contains about 4.4 million acres of —"prime" and "of statewide importance" farmland. As previously mentioned, the valley contains a total of about 6.6 million acres of irrigated cropland.

<sup>10</sup> American Farmland Trust, *Alternatives For Future Urban Growth in California's Central Valley*, 1995.

<sup>11</sup> This assumes residential and commercial development averages six dwellings per acre, or double the lower density model.

<sup>12</sup> American Farmland Trust, *Alternatives For Future Urban Growth in California's Central Valley*, 1995.

<sup>13</sup> According to demographic statistics posted on the City of Tracy's website (<http://www.ci.tracy.ca.us>).

<sup>14</sup> Estimate by the American Farmland Trust.

<sup>15</sup> American Farmland Trust, *Alternatives For Future Urban Growth in California's Central Valley*, 1995. All economic impact figures are expressed in 1993 dollars.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

## Related Bullfrog Films & Videos

- *Subdivide & Conquer*
- *Save Our Land, Save Our Towns*
- *Livable Landscapes*
- *Store Wars: When Wal-Mart Comes to Town*
- *The Air We Breathe*
- *Possum's Rest*

- Isao Fujimoto, *Getting to Know the Central Valley*, (Book One of *Building Participation in California's Central Valley*), California Institute for Rural Studies, September 1998.
- Agricultural Task Force for Resource Conservation and Economic Growth in the Central Valley, *Central Valley Resource Conservation and Economic Growth*, July 1998.
- "Where City Meets Country: Farming at the Fragile Edge," *California Agriculture*, Vol. 52, No. 3 (May-June 1998).
- Alvin D. Sokolow, *Farmland Policy in California's Central Valley: State, County, and City Roles*, California Policy Seminar, Vol. 9. No. 4, October 1997.
- Kenneth W. Umbach, *A Statistical Tour of California's Great Central Valley*, California Research Bureau, California State Library, August 1997.
- American Farmland Trust, *Farming on the Edge*, March 1997.
- American Farmland Trust, *Alternatives For Future Urban Growth in California's Central Valley*, 1995.

### Additional Resources

- American Farmland Trust  
<http://www.farmland.org/>
- California Department of Conservation's Farmland Mapping and Monitoring Program  
<http://www.consrv.ca.gov/DLRP/fmmp/>
- California Farm Bureau Federation  
<http://www.cfbf.com/>
- Great Valley Center  
<http://www.greatvalley.org/>
- Smart Growth America  
<http://www.smartgrowthamerica.com/>
- Sprawlwatch Clearinghouse  
<http://www.sprawlwatch.org/>

# Valley at the Crossroads

## Agriculture and Urban Growth in California's Central Valley

Produced and directed by John Doxey & George Spies  
Study Guide written by John Doxey

Grade Level: 7-12, College, Adult  
Running Time: 27 minutes

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### The Structure of the Film

*Valley at the Crossroads* is broadly organized into four sections. Section 1 highlights the resources at stake in the Central Valley, Section 2 looks at the forces propelling urban growth in the region, Section 3 examines the potential consequences of continued growth for agriculture, and Section 4 outlines some of the potential solutions that could minimize the loss of farmland.

## Film Overview

*Valley at the Crossroads* examines one of the most urgent issues facing California today: the prospect that, if current growth trends and practices continue, urban sprawl will gobble up a significant amount of the Central Valley's most productive farmland.

The film highlights the valley's tremendous importance as an agricultural resource—one whose rare combination of soil, climate and irrigation enables it to produce more than 250 crops and about half of the nation's fruit and vegetable output. At the same time, *Valley at the Crossroads* looks closely at the forces that are driving population growth in the Central Valley, and the rapidly expanding residential and commercial development that threatens to transform the region from a patchwork quilt of farms and natural areas into a mostly urban landscape.

As it draws toward conclusion, *Valley at the Crossroads* gathers a broad spectrum of voices—including growers, regional planners, academics, politicians and farmland conservationists—to discuss potential scenarios that could allow the Central Valley to minimize the loss of prime farmland while accommodating its inevitable population growth. Among the possible solutions discussed are coordinated zoning that preserves active farmland and promotes higher-density housing, the purchasing of conservation easements to protect farmland and the development of an organized and politically active pro-conservation electorate.

With a focus on Tracy—one of the valley's fastest-growing communities—*Valley at the Crossroads* seeks to raise awareness and stimulate debate about an issue that, despite its obvious significance, still hovers below the radar screen for many Californians. The film should also resonate with audiences outside California, as the issues raised in *Valley at the Crossroads* are rising in urgency throughout the country. Wherever urbanization threatens agriculture—from New York, New Jersey and other Atlantic states to the fast

- Tracie Cone, "The Vanishing Valley," *San Jose Mercury News* (West Magazine), June 29, 1997.
- Noel Brinkerhoff, "Here Comes the Neighborhood," *California Journal*, May 1997.
- Mark Arax, "Suburbia Encroaches on State's Farm Belt," *Los Angeles Times*, November 30, 1996.
- Russell Clemings, "Group Says Valley Farmland in Danger from Urban Sprawl," *Fresno Bee*, November 3, 1996.
- Carey Goldberg, "Alarm Bells Ring as Suburbs Gobble Up California's Richest Farmland," *New York Times*, June 20, 1996.
- David Oltman, "Losing Ground," *California Farmer*, June 1996.

## Studies & Reports:

- Institute for Local Self Government, *Farmland Protection Action Guide: 24 Strategies for California*, 2002.
- Public Policy Institute of California, *Special Survey of the Central Valley* (in collaboration with the Great Valley Center), April 2002.
- Great Valley Center, *Can City and Farm Coexist? The Agricultural Buffer Experience in California*, March 2002.
- California State Legislature's Smart Growth Caucus, *Growth Challenges Facing the Golden State*, 2001.
- Nicolai V. Kuminoff, Alvin D. Sokolow and Daniel A. Sumner, *Farmland Conversion: Perceptions and Realities*, University of California Agricultural Issues Center (Davis), May 2001.
- Nicolai V. Kuminoff, Daniel A. Sumner and George Goldman, *The Measure of California Agriculture 2000*, University of California Agricultural Issues Center (Davis), November 2000.
- California Department of Conservation, Farmland Mapping and Monitoring Program, *California Farmland Conversion Report, 1996-98*, June 2000.
- Albert G. Medvitz, Alvin D. Sokolow and Cathy Lemp (editors), *California Farmland and Urban Pressures: Statewide and Regional Perspectives*, University of California Agricultural Issues Center (Davis), 1999.
- Great Valley Center, *Agricultural Land Conservation in the Great Central Valley*, October 1998.

## Recommended Reading

### Books:

- Robert Dawson and Gray Brechin, *Farewell, Promised Land: Waking From the California Dream*, University of California Press, 1999.
- Gerald Haslam, Stephen Johnson and Robert Dawson, *The Great Central Valley: California's Heartland*, University of California Press, 1991.
- Kevin Starr, *Americans and the California Dream, 1850-1915*, Oxford University Press, 1973.
- Marc Reisner, *Cadillac Desert: The American West and Its Disappearing Water*, Viking, 1986.
- Steven C. Blank, *The End of Agriculture in the American Portfolio*, Greenwood Publishing Group, 1998.

### Media Articles:

- Kelly Zito, "Eastward Ho: Bay Area Prices Drive Buyers to Central Valley," *San Francisco Chronicle*, Feb. 16, 2003 (Section G).
- Rick DeVecchio, "Bay Area Refugees Pour into Central Valley," *San Francisco Chronicle*, March 11, 2001.
- Patricia Leigh Brown, "In 'the Other California,' A Land Rush Continues," *New York Times*, December 27, 2000.
- Elizabeth Bell, "Delta's Field of Dreams," *San Francisco Chronicle*, July 18, 2000.
- Eric Brazil, "More with Less: State Growers Squeeze Abundance from Shrinking Farm Land," *San Francisco Examiner*, May 14, 2000.
- John Ritter, "Valley of Plenty Fights to Survive," *USA Today*, March 1, 2000.
- Robert Salladay, "A New California," *San Francisco Examiner*, January 23, 2000.
- Peter H. King, "Central Valley's Future Uncertain," *Santa Rosa Press Democrat*, December 2, 1999.
- Daniel Pedersen, Vern E. Smith and Jerry Adler, "Sprawling, Sprawling..." *Newsweek*, July 19, 1999.
- Todd S. Purdum, "Suburban 'Sprawl' Takes its Place on the Political Landscape," *New York Times*, February 6, 1999.
- "State's Farmland Vanishing at Unprecedented Rate, Study Says," *San Francisco Chronicle*, August 20, 1998.
- "Vanishing Valley Farmland," *Stockton Record*, August 22, 1997.

growing metropolitan areas of the South and the Pacific Northwest—the story repeats itself on a local level.

## Learning Objectives

After viewing this video, your students will be able to

- explain the causes of sprawl in California's Central Valley and in farmland across America
- describe the different motivations of farmers, developers, new residents, government officials, and conservationists in the struggle over land use policy in the Central Valley
- discuss the strategies for conserving farmland
- detail why the outcome of this struggle is important for the whole country.

## Overall Key Concepts

- A large portion of the food that is eaten throughout the US is grown in California's Central Valley.
- Because of the high cost of housing in the coastal metropolitan areas, more and more people are pouring into the valley in search of affordable housing.
- In many valley communities, home building has replaced agriculture as the leading economic driver.
- Continuation of current growth patterns in the long term threatens the nation's agricultural self-sufficiency.
- There are several viable strategies for conserving farmland.
- Sprawl is happening in one form or another all over the country.

*Valley at the Crossroads* aims, principally, to cause viewers to consider the resources at stake in the Central Valley and the long-term impacts of the choices being made there. Ultimately, the film should prompt viewers to consider the best uses of land in prime agricultural regions like the Central Valley. Should agricultural lands be protected from development that endangers their long-term productivity? Or should the housing needs of a burgeoning population take precedence and drive land-use decisions?

## Section 1: The Central Valley's Agricultural Bounty

### Key Concepts

- The Central Valley is one of the world's most productive farmland regions.
- It produces an unparalleled variety of crops including fruits, vegetables, nuts, rice, and cotton. The valley also leads the nation in dairy production, and is a major source of cattle.
- The nation's agricultural self-sufficiency is largely dependent on Central Valley farming.
- Agriculture is the largest source of income and jobs in the valley.
- The southern portion of the Central Valley is called the San Joaquin Valley. The northern section of the valley, is called the Sacramento Valley.
- The San Joaquin and Sacramento valleys get their names from the large rivers running through each of them.

More than 400 miles long and an average 50 miles wide, California's Great Central Valley is one of the world's most productive agricultural regions. Irrigated by water from the Sierra Nevada mountains and blessed with rich alluvial soil and a Mediterranean climate, the valley—which contains about 6.6 million acres of irrigated cropland—generates about half of America's fruits, vegetables and nuts. More tomatoes, grapes, raisins, almonds, peaches, apricots, figs, walnuts, cherries and cantaloupes come off these fields than any other fields in the world. The valley also leads the nation in dairy production, and is a major source of cattle, rice and cotton. The valley is virtually the only source in America of certain agricultural products, such as raisins, almonds and pistachios. Given the region's enormous output, it is safe to say the nation's agricultural self sufficiency is largely dependent on Central Valley farming.

Central Valley agriculture makes a staggering contribution to the state's economy. Crops grown in the valley had a farm

## Glossary

**Agricultural buffers** - Strips of land (sometimes called "setbacks") that separate farmland from urban uses and thereby reduce the conflict between farming and adjacent urban neighborhoods.

**Agricultural Zoning** – By zoning an area for agriculture, counties and communities can segregate farmland from all non-agricultural uses, protecting farmland and ensuring that neighboring uses are compatible with agriculture.

**Conservation Easement** – A conservation easement is a legal agreement between a landowner and a conservation organization (usually a non-profit land trust or government agency) in which the landowner voluntarily places a permanent restriction on the use of a land tract to ensure that it retains its current use. In exchange, the landowner receives something of value.

**Density** – The number of residential dwelling units or employees per acre.

**Greenfield** – Farmland and open areas where there has been no prior commercial, residential or industrial activity.

**Infill** – Development within existing communities, rather than in undeveloped areas.

**Jobs-Housing Imbalance** – A mis-match between the number of jobs and the amount of housing in an area.

**Proposition 13** – Approved by California voters in 1978, and arguably the most potent citizen's movement in California history, Proposition 13 limited the annual increase in the assessed value of real estate (and therefore property taxes) to 2 percent per year, unless the property is sold. By reducing property tax revenues, the measure has starved local governments for cash, and increased their dependence on alternative revenue sources such as sales tax.

**Sprawl** – A development pattern characterized by low-density, automobile-oriented subdivisions and commercial areas, often outside of and extending away from existing communities.

**Urban Growth Boundary (UGB)** – Growth boundaries establish the long-term extent to which an area (usually a community) can grow. By preventing development beyond the boundary line, UGBs provide an effective means of protecting farmland and encouraging compact development.

## Featured Speakers

### (In order of appearance)

- **Greg Kirkpatrick**, a land protection representative with the American Farmland Trust
- **Alvin Sokolow**, a public policy specialist at U.C. Davis
- **Louis Galli**, a Tracy farmer
- **Robert Dawson**, photographer, author and Central Valley native
- **Patrick Johnston**, former state senator from Stockton. Now heads the governor's Workforce Development Initiative Task Force and serves as an advisor to the California Futures Network
- **Tony Souza**, a realtor and developer based in Tracy
- **Tim Coyle**, a vice president and lobbyist for the California Building Industry Association
- **Dan Bilbrey**, mayor of Tracy
- **Helen Thomson**, former state assemblywoman from Davis, since January 2003, has served as a Yolo County supervisor.
- **Paul Wenger**, a Modesto farmer and a vice president of the California Farm Bureau Federation
- **Carol Whiteside**, president of the non-profit Great Valley Center in Modesto
- **Mark Connolly**, a lawyer and rancher in Tracy who drafted slow-growth Measures T and A in Tracy
- **Larry and Kelly Henneman**, Tracy residents who oppose the city's rapid growth
- Madera farmers: **Dennis Prosperi, Matt Angel, Gino Petrucci, Dorothy Campbell**

gate market value of \$17 billion in 2000.<sup>1</sup> And when related businesses like processing, canning, trucking and tractor sales are included, agriculture is a \$30 billion-a-year industry in the valley. Six of the nation's 10 most productive agricultural counties are located in the Central Valley, based on the farm gate value of the crops raised in these counties.

Not surprisingly, agriculture is the largest source of income and jobs in the valley. Farming generates more than 30 percent of total personal income, and accounts for nearly 37 percent of all jobs in the San Joaquin Valley.<sup>2</sup>

The southern portion of the Central Valley, stretching from the Delta southward to the Tehachapi Mountains, is called the San Joaquin Valley. The northern section of the valley, between the Delta and Redding, is called the Sacramento Valley. The valley is bordered to the east by the Sierra Nevada mountains and to the west by a range of coastal mountains. The major cities in the 18-county valley—Bakersfield, Fresno, Modesto, Stockton and Sacramento—are connected by Highway 99, a former rail corridor running north-south along the valley's spine.

The San Joaquin and Sacramento valleys get their names from the large rivers running through each of them: the north-flowing San Joaquin River and the south-flowing Sacramento River. Both rivers converge at the Delta, an area of marshes, streams and wetlands that extends to San Francisco Bay. These rivers were the principal source of water available to farmers before oil, electricity and the centrifugal pump made large-scale pumping of the region's underground aquifer possible in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, setting the stage for major irrigation projects.

### Key Quotations From the Film:

*The Central Valley* "is undoubtedly the world's most productive farmland region...in no other place in the world can you grow as many different kinds of agricultural commodities."— Alvin Sokolow, public policy specialist at U.C. Davis



*“The Central Valley has just an amazing wealth of agricultural resources. First of all, it’s the soil. These deep, well-drained sands and sandy loams starts it all off. Then we’ve got the water from the Sacramento and San Joaquin rivers. Once we put water on that soil in this heat...that gives us our Mediterranean climate, then we’ve got the perfect situation for growing just about anything.” – Greg Kirkpatrick, American Farmland Trust*

**Discussion Questions:**

1. Where is the Central Valley located?
2. What factors make the region so agriculturally productive?
3. How does Central Valley agriculture contribute to California’s economy?

5. Developers often say they are simply responding to consumers’ demand for detached, single-family homes and large lots when they construct low-density, automobile-oriented “greenfield” subdivisions in places like the Central Valley. Moreover, developers are often reluctant to engage in smaller infill projects in existing neighborhoods because, as they explain, few families want to live in higher-density buildings or in homes with little yard and garage space. Is this a valid argument? Do developers create, as well as respond to, demand when they build new subdivisions in agricultural areas?
6. Assuming the cost of living in both places was equal, would you be willing to live in an older, higher-density neighborhood, or would you prefer living in a newer, low-density community? Would “big picture” considerations such as environmental impact, diminishing agriculture base, etc. influence your decision?



*“We should think about this before we destroy one of the last great agricultural areas in the world.”— Robert Dawson, photographer*

*“We can’t rely just on the people we elect to public office...citizens are going to have to take action.”— Al Sokolow, public policy specialist*

*“The expansiveness of the Central Valley is a lot like the expansiveness of the American West. I think that that expansiveness has led in some ways to its own demise because in some ways there are no limits. We can certainly put a row of houses here because there’s plenty of fields around it. I think that what’s changed now is that we’re at the point where we’re starting to see the limits.”— Robert Dawson, photographer*

*“Here we are with the most productive farmland in the world and we’re paving it over as fast as we can.”— Mark Connolly, Tracy rancher and slow-growth activist*

### **Discussion Questions:**

1. What are some of the strategies that can be used to minimize the conversion of farmland to urban uses? Which of these do you think will ultimately have the most success?
2. Why is the development of a politically engaged smart growth electorate and widespread citizen action important?
3. Is it feasible to manage growth so that its negative consequences, including the loss of a significant amount of California’s best farmland, are minimized? Or is it inevitable, in a state that’s projected to reach a population of 50 million by 2025, that the Central Valley will follow in the footsteps of Los Angeles, Orange County and the Santa Clara (Silicon) Valley—regions that only a few decades ago were agricultural juggernauts themselves?
4. Is a shortage of water the only factor that could slow population growth in California, and lead to different development patterns? If not, what other factors might control growth?

## **Section 2: A Rapidly Growing Valley**

### Key Concepts

- Home building has replaced agriculture as the leading economic driver in many valley communities.
- As housing prices continue to soar on the coast, more and more people are pouring into the valley in search of affordable housing.
- Many of the new residents commute to jobs in the coastal job centers.
- In Tracy, a new home sells for about half of what it would cost 60 miles away in San Francisco.
- Most valley communities were originally situated near the best places to farm, and therefore when these communities extend outward, they cover prime farmland.
- More than 12% of the valley’s original, irrigable farmland has already been paved over.
- Roughly one-quarter of the Central Valley’s best farmland could be permanently removed from agricultural production by 2040.
- ‘Zones of conflict’ are created where farmland is adjacent to developments. Farmers often conflict with neighboring residents over noise, odors, blowing dust, pesticide spraying and other by-products of agriculture.
- A more compact, efficient pattern of growth would reduce farmland conversion to less than half the amount projected with a continuation of current patterns.

Despite the region’s enormous bounty, home building has replaced agriculture as the leading economic driver in many valley communities. As housing prices continue to soar in California’s coastal metropolitan areas, more and more people are pouring eastward into the valley in search of affordable housing. Many of the new residents commute to jobs in the coastal job centers. In Tracy, a valley city that is rapidly being transformed into a bedroom community for people with jobs in the Bay Area, a new home sells for

about half of what it would cost 60 miles away in San Francisco.

*\*\*\*SIDEBAR: The median home price in San Francisco in 2002 was \$545,000, and average home prices top \$400,000 in many Bay Area counties. Although rising demand is causing home prices to rise in the Central Valley, the median price remains below \$250,000. New homes are more expensive than the average valley home, but are still a bargain compared to Bay Area prices—the median price of a new home in San Joaquin County, where Tracy is located, was \$281,000 in 2002.\*\*\**

As the population has swelled—the valley gained almost a million new residents in the 1990s—cities like Tracy, Fresno and Sacramento have sprawled, covering vast tracts of farmland with subdivisions, roads, shopping centers, golf courses and other development. In the most recent six years for which data are available (1992-1998), about 128,000 acres of irrigated valley farmland were taken out of production, according to the California Department of Conservation.<sup>4</sup> While new urban development covered only about one-quarter of this farmland, a large percentage of the remainder was removed from production in anticipation of future residential and commercial development.

More than 12 percent of the valley's original, irrigable farmland has already been paved over.<sup>5</sup> If the region's population grows as projected—the California Department of Finance projects that the valley's current population of about 5 million will triple by 2040—and current low-density growth patterns<sup>6</sup> are maintained, it is estimated that urban development will consume more than 1 million acres of farmland by 2040.<sup>7</sup> That equates to more than 7 percent of the valley's 13.6 million total agricultural acres.

However, this loss would include about 600,000 acres, or 14 percent, of the valley's most productive land<sup>8</sup>—irrigated farmland classified as “prime” and “of statewide importance” by the Department of Conservation.<sup>9</sup> New homes and businesses tend to be built on productive

practices (dust, noise, odors, etc.) on nearby agricultural lands is to establish **right to farm ordinances**. These ordinances typically require that purchasers of homes adjacent to farms be notified about the nuisances associated with agriculture.

- Utility service controls: By restricting utilities from providing services in undeveloped areas, cities and counties can effectively control urban growth. Since new subdivisions are dependent on this infrastructure, limiting or phasing the extension of water and sewer services places a physical limitation on sprawl, and can encourage more compact development patterns.

These strategies can be effective tools for farmland conservation, particularly when used in tandem with other protection measures. Ultimately, however, the long-term growth patterns in regions like the Central Valley will be determined by their residents. If the public demonstrates its support for policies that protect farmland and encourage smarter, higher-density growth, elected officials and government agencies will respond.

Therefore, a key step toward meaningful farmland protection is the development of a politically engaged electorate that will advocate for smarter growth patterns. In politically conservative regions like the Central Valley, where private property rights have long reigned supreme and the conversion of farmland is unquestioned by many residents, the development of a robust smart growth constituency will require that many people open their eyes or change their minds. The filmmakers hope *Valley at the Crossroads* contributes to this process.

#### **Key Quotations From the Film:**

*“Why don't we save the best farmground for farming and put houses on some of that ground that can't be farmed?”*  
– Paul Wenger, Modesto farmer

residential development. One major problem with zoning is that it does not guarantee permanent protection for farmland. A legislative body can vote at any time to redesignate an agricultural zone to commercial or residential use.

**Other approaches to protecting farmland not discussed in *Valley at the Crossroads* include:**

- Providing incentives for infill: **Infill** development in existing urban areas can provide needed housing and decrease the pressure to build low-density subdivisions on farmland. Local agencies can provide economic incentives for infill construction, such as fee reduction and permit streamlining
- Making farmland protection part of the general plan: In California, all local land-use planning is based upon the state-mandated general plans formulated at regular intervals (often 10 or 20 years) by cities and counties. General plans reflect cities' and counties' long-term goals, and map out specific plans and policies to achieve them. All policies that control zoning and development must be consistent with the general plan. Therefore, a general plan that emphasizes farmland conservation can go a long way toward protecting agricultural lands from development because local agencies would not be able to re-zone farmland for other uses without amending the general plan.
- Establishing **agricultural buffers**: Buffers are strips of land (sometimes called "setbacks") that separate farmland from urban uses and thereby reduce the conflict at the agricultural-urban edge. Some counties and cities in California already require these buffers, as a condition of approval for all new development. Another way to reduce the complaints from urban residents about farming

cropland because this land is generally flat and located near existing towns and cities—in other words, the best farmland is also well-suited for development purposes. Most valley communities were originally situated near the best places to farm, and therefore when these communities extend outward, they cover prime farmland. Less productive farmland is often located away from cities, and therefore faces fewer development pressures.

If this 14 percent potential loss is added to the 12 percent of the valley floor that has already been converted to urban uses (much of which was high-quality farmland located in or near the valley's oldest communities), roughly one-quarter of the Central Valley's best farmland could be permanently removed from agricultural production by 2040.

Additionally, a continuation of today's low-density growth patterns would place an estimated 2.5 million acres of farmland within one-third of a mile of residential neighborhoods and other urban development by 2040,<sup>10</sup> meaning these acres would be within a "zone of conflict." Agricultural lands within this zone would be sufficiently close to encroaching urban areas to put farming operations at risk, as farmers would likely conflict with neighboring residents over noise, odors, blowing dust, pesticide spraying and other by-products of agriculture.

In contrast, a more compact, efficient pattern of growth<sup>11</sup> would reduce farmland conversion to about 474,000 acres by 2040,<sup>12</sup> less than half the amount projected with a continuation of current patterns. About 266,000 of the acres lost would be farmland classified as "prime" and "of statewide importance." A more compact growth pattern would also reduce the "zone of conflict" by nearly 40 percent to about 1.6 million acres, resulting in considerably less risk to agricultural operations.

It should be noted that urban sprawl is not the only reason the Central Valley is losing farmland. Over the past decade, thousands of acres have been taken out of production after

they were purchased by conservation agencies for habitat and wetlands restoration. Some land has also been retired from farming due to the high cost or unavailability of irrigation water.

## Factors That Enable Sprawl

### Key Concepts

- Developers can offer farmers \$30,000 or more per acre for land that's worth \$4,000 as a tomato patch.
- Farmers often view their land as their retirement income.
- Farm salaries are comparatively low and unemployment rates often reach double digits.
- Many valley politicians want to build up local populations to the point where they will attract new businesses and jobs.
- Because of the passage of Proposition 13, which limits the amount of revenue local governments can raise through property taxes, land use decisions are being driven by the competition for sales tax dollars.
- Cities throughout the state have increasingly encouraged the development of regional shopping malls, "Big Box" retailers, auto dealerships and other sales tax-generating businesses.

Home builders haven't had much trouble finding land to develop in the Central Valley. Many farmers, tired of low crop prices and government regulations, are eager to listen when developers offer \$30,000 or more per acre for land that's worth \$4,000 as a tomato patch. Farmers with a small income but a big property asset often view the land they own as their retirement fund. For this reason, farmers have been among the staunchest opponents of proposals for urban growth boundaries, agricultural zoning and other measures that could limit their ability to sell their land at a large profit to developers and speculators.

Developers have also benefited from the pro-growth stance of political and business leaders in valley communities like Tracy. Eager to swell the local population, attract more

opportunity to develop his or her farmland, and the land is permanently restricted to agricultural use, even if ownership of the land changes. Money for the purchase of conservation easements comes from a variety of state, federal and private sources. In California, the Department of Conservation's Farmland Conservancy Program funds easement purchases, as have various statewide bond measures approved by voters. It should be noted that, although most easements are permanent, they can also be purchased for a specific term, such as 20, 30 or 50 years.

- Establishing **urban growth boundaries (UGBs)**: Growth boundaries establish the long-term extent to which an area (usually a community) can grow. By preventing development beyond the boundary line, UGBs provide an effective means of protecting farmland and encouraging compact development. Communities have generally adopted UGBs through the initiative process, following their approval by voters. In most cases, the boundary is scheduled for review after some period of time, usually 20 years. In the meantime, the only way to change the boundary is through another ballot measure.
- **Agricultural zoning**: Zoning is one of the most effective methods of protecting farmland and ensuring that neighboring uses are compatible with agriculture. And it is relatively easy to implement: by simply passing an ordinance, counties and communities can segregate farmland from all non-agricultural uses. However, it is important that zoning be properly implemented. It is important, for example, for agricultural zones to require minimum lot sizes (such as one residence for every 80 or 160 acres) to ensure that farmland parcels remain large enough to be farmed profitably. Large lot zoning also discourages land purchases for

## Section 4: Strategies for Farmland Conservation

### Key Concepts

- Certain strategies have proven effective in conserving farmland throughout the U.S.
- ‘Conservation easements’ enable farmers to receive financial compensation in return for keeping their land permanently in agriculture.
- ‘Urban growth boundaries’ limit development within specified boundaries.
- ‘Agricultural zoning’ restricts certain areas to farming uses only.
- The long-term growth patterns in regions like the Central Valley will be determined by their residents.
- Elected officials and government agencies will respond if the public demonstrates its support for policies that protect farmland and encourage smarter, higher-density growth.

Fortunately, there is still time to chart a different course. *Valley at the Crossroads* highlights several programs that can be implemented at the local, regional and state level to better manage and redirect growth so that conversion of the most productive farmland in regions like the Central Valley is minimized as their populations expand. These strategies include:

- Acquisition of **conservation easements** on farmland: A conservation easement is a legal agreement between a landowner and a conservation organization (usually a non-profit land trust or government agency) in which the landowner voluntarily places a permanent restriction on the use of a land tract to ensure that it remains in agriculture. In exchange, the landowner receives something of value—usually a financial compensation such as cash or a tax advantage. In other words, the landowner sells the

businesses and boost tax revenues, Tracy’s city council approved a general plan in the 1980s that aims to turn the city into another San Jose within the next few decades. The plan—which has been challenged in recent years by slow-growth advocates (like those who backed Measures T and A described in the film)—permits developers to build 1,500 new single-family homes per year in the city.

*\*\*\*SIDEBAR: Tracy’s population has grown explosively since 1980, when it stood at just over 18,000. Having more than doubled since 1990, the city’s population topped 65,000 in 2002.<sup>13</sup> While the state as a whole grew at about 1.5 percent annually between 2000 and 2002, Tracy’s population grew 6 to 8 percent each year. Tracy’s population is expected to reach 85,000 in 2010 and 120,000 by 2025.\*\*\**

The stated goal of many valley politicians and developers is to build local populations to the point where they will attract businesses and jobs from the Bay Area and other commercial centers. In a region where salaries are comparatively low and unemployment rates often reach double-digits, leaders are understandably committed to job growth and to attracting higher-paying white-collar businesses.

But land use decisions are also being driven by the competition for sales tax dollars, a major revenue source for cities and counties. Following the approval of Proposition 13 in 1978, which limited the amount of revenue local governments can raise through property taxes, cities throughout the state have increasingly zoned for and encouraged the development of regional shopping malls, “Big Box” retailers, auto dealerships and other sales tax-generating businesses—as well as the new homes and larger populations they expect will give their communities a competitive edge in attracting these sales-tax generating retailers.

## **The Central Valley Is Not Alone**

### Key Concepts

- Many agricultural regions throughout the U.S. are threatened by sprawl.
- The U.S. is losing 3,000 acres of productive farmland each day to urban development.

To be sure, the Central Valley is not the only agricultural region threatened by sprawl. According to the American Farmland Trust, the United States is losing more than 3,000 acres of productive farmland each day to urban development, and a farmland area the size of Delaware disappears every year. If current trends continue, it is estimated that an additional 13 percent of our nation's most productive farmland will be removed from production by 2050.<sup>14</sup>

### **Key Quotations From the Film:**

*"Anyone that wants to stay in farming in Tracy is going to have a hard time."*— Louis Galli, Tracy farmer

*"Growth will occur in the state of California...and their housing needs need to be accommodated."*— Anthony Souza, Tracy Realtor and Developer

*"What you would buy for \$250,000 or \$300,000 in Tracy would cost you \$750,000 and up in the Bay Area."*— Dan Bilbrey, Mayor of Tracy

*"Most new housing consumers prefer a detached, single-family home with a front yard and a back yard and probably two side yards."*— Tim Coyle, California Building Industry Association

*"Those of us who live in urban areas tend to see agricultural land as open space... We ought to be able to see it as productive agricultural land."*— Helen Thomson, former state assemblywoman from Davis

*"Although farmers may espouse the fact that they love*

became concerned that over-development would ruin treasured resources. If current growth patterns continue in the Central Valley, and local and regional officials remain unable or unwilling to implement measures to conserve valuable agricultural lands, do you feel it would be appropriate for the state to step in and begin regulating development in the valley? Even if this means that some landowners lose control over their own land?

**Key Quotations From the Film:**

*“Most people don’t realize this is where we get our food. By destroying this landscape, we’re really hurting ourselves.”*

*– Robert Dawson, photographer*

*The Central Valley “is changing due to urbanization and it’s change that will eventually undermine agriculture.”*

*– Patrick Johnson, former state senator from Stockton*

*“As cities have expanded, the threat is apparent that we could lose our best soils and our best farmland.”– Greg Kirkpatrick, American Farmland Trust*

*“The decisions we make today will determine what...our grandchildren experience in this state. And by then it will be too late.”– Patrick Johnson, former state senator from Stockton*

**Discussion Questions:**

1. How would the Central Valley’s agricultural productivity be affected by a continuation of current growth patterns?
2. Why is a continuation of current growth patterns likely to cause many farmers to give up on agriculture and sell their land?
3. Will technology allow farmers to continue producing enough fruits and vegetables to feed the nation despite the decreasing amount of farmland?
4. Is it important for California, and for the nation, to be able to grow a sufficient supply of fruits, vegetables and other foods? Would it matter if agriculture largely disappeared from our landscape and the United States became dependent on food imports? What are some of the potential positive and negative consequences of such a development?
5. On various occasions, voters and/or government agencies have taken steps to protect valuable natural resources from over-development—even when it meant that some property owners lost the right to develop their land. The California Coastal Commission and the Tahoe Regional Planning Agency were established when the public and lawmakers

*farming...no farmer is going to walk from a \$50,000 an acre offer.”– Anthony Souza, Tracy realtor and developer*

*“If we don’t slow growth in Tracy now, what we’re going to have is a 100 percent commuter community...and we’ll have destroyed all of the farmland.”– Mark Connolly, Tracy rancher and slow-growth activist*

*“Developers come in and say ‘jobs, jobs, jobs’ and everyone wants jobs...so you’ll have people come in and say we want to build an industrial park or a commercial park. And once [the land] gets re-zoned from agricultural to commercial or industrial, then the developers come in and say, ‘you know what, we’d really like to provide jobs, but it’s going to be 30 years to realize the full build out and we just can’t wait that long. We’d like to switch to houses.’ And with the right input into the city councils they can usually get that changed to houses, and yet you’ve just exacerbated the problem.”– Paul Wenger, Modesto farmer*

*“How many more subdivisions, how much more sprawl, how much more traffic will we experience in the San Joaquin Valley, and how many fields will be lost?”– Patrick Johnston, former state senator from Stockton*

**Discussion Questions:**

1. What are some of the factors driving growth in the Central Valley?
2. Why are farmers often willing to sell their land to developers and speculators? Are their reasons understandable?
3. Why is the valley’s most productive farmland also the most attractive land for developers?
4. What percentage of the valley’s best farmland could be developed by 2040 with current growth patterns?
5. What are some of the ways in which urban growth makes farming more difficult, especially in areas adjacent to residential neighborhoods?
6. What factors influence local governments to side with developers over agriculture interests?



### Section 3: Potential Consequences For Agriculture

#### Key Concepts

- Current development trends will cost the farming industry billions of dollars per year in lost business.
- Sprawling development threatens the viability of agriculture in the valley, and could result in California becoming a net importer of fruits and vegetables.
- We are approaching a ‘tipping point’ where farmers could lose confidence in their own future in agriculture and begin to sell out.
- Pointing to recent record crop years, developers argue that through technology and better management farmers will be able to increase their productivity and use fewer acres.

The continuation of current farmland conversion trends—or a development acceleration—could substantially reduce the valley’s agricultural productivity and cost the farming industry billions of dollars per year in lost business. The American Farmland Trust estimates that losing 1 million acres could cut the value of agricultural products grown in the valley by about \$2.1 billion annually by 2040—a reduction equivalent to virtually the entire annual agricultural output of New York, Virginia, Oregon or Mississippi.<sup>15</sup>

Moreover, the enormous “zone of conflict” that would be created with a continuation of low-density sprawl would further diminish the valley’s agricultural productivity—contributing to an estimated \$2.7 billion drop in annual commodity sales by 2040.<sup>16</sup> If continued at current rates, farmland conversion will also hurt agricultural support businesses, causing additional sales losses of more than \$3 billion per year for suppliers, processors and others by 2040.

Over the long term, many experts agree, sprawling development threatens the viability of agriculture in the

valley, and could result in California becoming a net importer of fruits and vegetables. “The long-term consequences of farmland going to urban uses is that eventually the Central Valley would no longer be a premier production area, and it would be less competitive to produce in this region than in Mexico or Chile,” says Al Sokolow, a public policy specialist at U.C. Davis.

We are approaching “a tipping point” in places like the Central Valley, says Carol Whiteside, president of the Great Valley Center in Modesto. “Will agriculture get to a point where [farmers] don’t feel confident about their own future and begin to sell out? Or will the cities decide that agriculture’s important and that they have to in fact learn to grow and accommodate growth without destroying agriculture?” Farmers whose land borders on sprawling cities are most likely to lose confidence in agriculture, particularly when these cities impose restrictions and regulations on such agricultural by-products as noise, dust, livestock waste and pesticide use.

Not everyone agrees that urban growth threatens the productivity of farming regions like the Central Valley. Developers and other supporters of current growth patterns argue that technological advances and management efficiencies can allow farmers to continue boosting their crop yields despite a shrinking farmland base. As evidence, they point to the fact that Central Valley farmers have achieved record crop yields in recent years, and that the market value of crops grown in the valley surged from \$12.8 billion in 1990 to \$17 billion in 2000, according to the State Board of Equalization.

But technology can only do so much, counter many scientists and farmers. “Even with technology, you’re going to reach a critical point where you can no longer produce more food and fiber on a diminishing landmass,” says Paul Wenger, a Modesto almond farmer who doubles as vice president of the California Farm Bureau Federation.