



Agricultural Update and Measure J:

Preserving Agricultural Land for Agricultural Use and Supporting Commercial Agriculture

Measure J was approved by Santa Cruz County voters and became law in 1978, codified as Chapter 17.01 of the Santa Cruz County Code. Responding to the negative effects of rapid population growth and uncontrolled development, the Measure J Growth Management Ordinance established visionary land use policies including the establishment of the Urban Services Line that laid the foundation for future development and land use in Santa Cruz County.

Fundamental to Measure J is the protection of agricultural land. The Measure J Ordinance recognizes that agricultural lands “are a local, state and national resource,” and that “agricultural lands are being lost to development, and the continued viability of commercial agriculture in Santa Cruz County is threatened by rapid population growth and inappropriately placed development.” To protect agricultural land, Measure J establishes “It shall be the policy of Santa Cruz County that prime agricultural lands and lands which are economically productive when used for agriculture shall be preserved for agricultural use.”

The policy to preserve lands for agricultural use is broadly protective, ensuring that agricultural land is not lost to non-agricultural development, while providing the flexibility necessary to ensure that county policies do not threaten the viability of the agricultural industry. Current regulations allow certain uses on commercial agricultural land necessary to support agriculture, including one single family dwelling and accessory structures, agricultural processing facilities, and farmworker housing, with regulations for siting structures to protect agricultural land. The proposed update supports and implements Measure J by preserving agricultural land for agricultural use and maintaining essential regulations protecting agricultural land, while responding to input from the local farming community that updates to agricultural regulations are needed to support the evolving and diverse needs of local agriculture.

Preserving agricultural land for agricultural use

The proposed update maintains existing policies preventing the conversion of agricultural land to non-agricultural uses, including:

- Minimum density of 40 acres per residential dwelling unit required on commercial agricultural land, limiting residential development
- Maintains existing prohibition against subdividing Commercial Agricultural Land, unless for agricultural purposes

Supporting the continued viability of commercial agriculture

The update supports the needs of diverse local farming operations, allowing uses on CA land that support agriculture while providing standards and appropriate reviews to protect agricultural land:

- Allow agri-tourism important to many smaller local farms, including classes and field trips, farm stays, and farm to table dinners, with discretionary review required for larger or more frequent events
- Allow agricultural service establishments, such as farm equipment repair or sales, on commercial agricultural land with discretionary approval, protecting agricultural land by siting requirements and by allowing only when the use is compatible with and secondary to the main agricultural use
- Allow agricultural support uses, such agricultural equipment storage, to serve larger farming operations spread over multiple parcels, while requiring that the storage is compatible with and secondary to the main agricultural use
- Allow housing for agricultural employees (up to 12 units) on agricultural land as a principally permitted agricultural use, as required by state law. A discretionary site development permit would be required to ensure appropriate siting.