

Legislative Update

Ag Cluster Amendments & Draft EIR

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Just this week it has come home to me again that what is good for the goose (the private sector) is not just as good for the gander (government). This article is a case in point over the proposed Ag. Cluster Amendments and Draft EIR.

Over the decades we have seen examples of government putting their facilities on agricultural land, such as animal services and the sheriff's department facilities way north of the City of San Luis Obispo. Now this doesn't mean that I support housing tracts on agricultural land. But where there are already legal lots that can be easily developed on existing agricultural parcels, wouldn't it be more beneficial to allow them to be clustered and save 95 percent of the agricultural land as opposed to having the property chopped up into many pieces (cookie-cutter development) where all agricultural use of the land is lost? This is the question that I have with the proposed Ag. Cluster amendment and Draft EIR.

Under the current proposal, it first states that clusters must be within five road miles of such urban areas as Arroyo Grande, San Miguel, San Luis Obispo, Atascadero, Templeton, Nipomo and Paso Robles. Now roads don't run in a straight line, so the actual distance from the urban area may be way less than five miles. This means that any legal lots beyond this five-road-mile area don't have the option of clustering as they do today.

The cluster amendment then states that if a groundwater basin is in a Level of Severity II or III, then there can be no clusters. A level II or III means that within a number of years the safe water yield of an area will be reached. This is a logical position because if there is a lack of water, development wouldn't be appropriate, but this eliminates those five-road-mile cluster areas around San Miguel, Paso Robles and Templeton as the Board of Supervisors agreed that a level III classification for the Paso Robles Ground Water Basin is appropriate. The amendments further eliminate other areas for clusters such as South County.

A lengthy EIR has been drafted for the Ag. Cluster, which includes an economic analysis that states, "Agriculture is currently a relatively small sector of the economy of San Luis Obispo County," and only "a fifth of the land in San Luis Obispo County is devoted to agricultural production." The EIR further proclaims that grazing is a conversion away from agriculture, placing grazing on the same level as urbanization. Now where did this misinformation come from? A poorly researched and written analysis that we have been trying to change.

We have sent letters and testified to various inaccuracies in documents such as the Ag. Cluster with mixed results. Unfortunately, we have a government that has totally lost contact with where their food, fiber and flowers come from. I guess it is partly our own fault, as we have always thought we were doing the great job feeding the country and the world.

But as I look at 2012, I think we are going to have to step up and speak even louder about what we are providing the community and the world beyond just food. Agriculture is one of the few entities that actually sequesters greenhouse gasses. Agriculture is the entity that creates, as a secondary benefit, the open space people enjoy looking at. Agriculture creates that connection with the land for people from the city through ag. tourism.

As we enter 2012, let's raise our voices just a little more and remind the government and the people that agriculture is truly a major sector of our economy. Let's see if we can make our voices heard.