



## Legislation Text

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**File #:** 19-1782, **Version:** 1

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Department of Agriculture, Weights and Measures recommending the Board adopt and authorize the Chair to sign Resolution **104-2020** establishing protocol for a Conservation Easement Program for El Dorado County.

### **DISCUSSION / BACKGROUND**

An Agricultural Conservation Easement program is another tool that can protect farm and grazing lands. The program involves the voluntary purchase or donation of development rights from willing landowners to public agencies or nonprofit organizations such as a land trust. The easement can be tailored to meet conservation objectives and allows farming/ranching to continue. It is a deed restriction that runs with the land in perpetuity. Easement prices are established by an appraiser with the expertise to segregate the value of the development rights. Voluntary funds collected from property owners or developers requesting General Plan Amendments can be held in a trust by the public agency or transferred to a nonprofit like the Community Foundation. A draft of such an agreement is attached to the item. Should the Board approve the Resolution, staff will bring forward a finalized agreement for Board consideration.

The funds would be held until a willing seller with property that meets the County's conservation objectives (number of acres, adequate water supply, soils, etc.) is available. The public agency or land trust would monitor and enforce the restrictions set forth in the easement agreement.

Agricultural Conservation Easement benefits include:

- Keeping families on their farms by easing the intergenerational transfer of property
- Keeping land in farming or ranching uses
- Increased access to capital for agricultural uses by property owners
- Undeveloped grazing lands cost less in public services
- Can contribute to watershed or oak woodland protections

El Dorado County has established various protections for agricultural lands such as: the General Plan Agricultural District overlay with minimum parcel sizes, the Agricultural Zones, Right to Farm, Ranch Marketing, Wineries, and Agricultural Preserves (Williamson Act) sections of the Zoning Ordinance. Even with these protections the California Department of Conservation's Farmland Mapping and Monitoring Program continues to show conversions of farm and grazing lands to urban uses in the county.

Urban development next to agricultural lands indirectly reduces the agricultural potential of remaining farms by increasing the potential for urban and agricultural conflicts. These conflicts can also reduce the current and future uses of the surrounding land for agricultural purposes.

The County's agricultural lands are currently facing two key development pressures. One is the pending retirements of many of the existing farmers and how the farm land will be handed down to family members and secondly, the subdivision of former grazing lands next to existing ranches.

## **ALTERNATIVES**

- 1) A stronger mitigation program could be enacted following General Plan Policy 8.1.3.4 where projects found to have a significant impact on agricultural lands have a mitigation of 1:1 replacement or conservation for loss of land in agricultural production or suitable for agricultural production.
- 2) The Board could choose to not take any action at this time.

## **PRIOR BOARD ACTION**

Resolution No. 245-99 and 188-2002 which established agricultural preserve (Williamson Act) criteria.

Board Item 18-1425 11/20/18 requesting department to proceed with establishing the Conservation Easement Plan.

Board Item 18-1916 4/10/19 requesting department to return to Board with a Resolution/Conservation Easement Plan.

## **OTHER DEPARTMENT / AGENCY INVOLVEMENT**

County Counsel, Planning and Building, El Dorado Community Foundation

## **CAO RECOMMENDATION / COMMENTS**

Approve as recommended.

## **FINANCIAL IMPACT**

Staff time to outline elements of the program administration, determine the program goals, priorities and criteria. Bring the program/resolution back to the Board of Supervisors. Outreach to organizations, and landowners

## **CLERK OF THE BOARD FOLLOW UP ACTIONS**

Chair to sign Resolution 104-2020 establishing protocol for a Conservation Easement Program for El Dorado County.

## **STRATEGIC PLAN COMPONENT**

This recommendation is in alignment with the County' Strategic Plan, the Economic Development Component to enable a prosperous and vibrant economy - Objective 1; Attract, develop and retain businesses that provide economic sustainability and quality job creation.

## **CONTACT**

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