

May 30, 2008

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HUMBOLDT COUNTY  
BUILDING DEPT.

Re: Humboldt County General Plan Update, Chapter 5.2, Agricultural Resources

This letter will elaborate on previous comments that I made to the Planning Commission on September 20, 2007 on the agricultural section of the General Plan. Below, I offer further justification for the adoption of Alternative A.

I believe that the new General Plan should promote sustainable agriculture, locally grown foods, and energy-efficient transportation. Fortunately, there are many indications that the demand for locally produced, organic agricultural products is likely to steadily rise in the United States, and in Humboldt County. This presumption follows from the recent steep increases in food commodity and energy prices, and a growing concern about health problems, such as childhood obesity, correlated with industrially produced and processed food supplies. Here are a few recent news items to illustrate my point:

- Over the past few months (June 2007-March 2008) global food prices have increased by about 40 percent, leaving food reserves at a 30-year low. In the U.S., the cost of milk rose by 26 percent and the cost of eggs 40 percent, both directly related to the high cost of grain, which is directly tied to the high cost of oil. The advent of world food shortages and fast-rising food prices is forcing us to think twice about the daily food we eat, the reliability of foreign imports, and the need to protect and enhance our county's ability to produce food.
- Fuel prices also have risen precipitously in the last year. As oil prices increase and the price of fertilizer rises, there will be a premium on closing the nutrient cycle and replacing synthetic fertilizer with organic waste. In addition to food production (planting, harvesting, etc.), considerable oil is used in industrial agriculture for food transport, processing, packaging, and retailing. A focus on local organic production could reduce or eliminate many of these energy costs.
- Decoupling the food system from the oil industry is key to improving food security. Incentives to use environmentally friendly farming methods such as conservation tillage, organic fertilizer application, and integrated pest management could reduce farm energy use significantly. Direct farmer-to-consumer marketing, such as farmers' markets, bypasses centralized distribution systems, cutting out unnecessary food travel and reducing packaging needs while improving local food security.
- The recently passed 2008 Farm Bill provides \$78 million for organic agriculture research and education, an historic five-fold increase from the \$15 million allocated in the 2002 Farm Bill. These funds will dramatically expand competitive grants for the development and sharing of organic farming systems information through the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Integrated Organic Program.

- There has been an increasing awareness over the past few years of the need to fight obesity, especially to wean children off junk food in schools, and to support local farmers producing healthier home-grown foods. Humboldt County has 34 schools that are the focus of a new Farm to School effort, which includes various programs to educate children about local agriculture, and expose them to the farm products and producers.
- Humboldt County's growers and ranchers have been increasingly producing high value artisanal food, which is defined by Michael Pollan in The Omnivore's Dilemma as a "competitive strategy based on selling something special rather than being the least cost producer." Goat cheese (Cypress Grove), organic ice cream (Humboldt Creamery), grass fed beef (various producers), and authentic free range eggs and locally slaughtered chickens (Wild Chick Farm) are good examples of this trend. Of course, we have produce artisans as well: a November 2007 North Coast Journal article notes that, " 'Paul Giuntoli of Warren Creek Farms has some of the best beans in the state,' ...according to bean researcher Steve Temple from UC Davis."

Locally produced food may eventually become cost competitive with many imported foods, as energy prices rise, for the reasons noted above. It will also be more accessible and safer as markets for foreign food become increasingly shaky. Finally, many of our producers should be able to respond to the high demand for artisanal products coming from regional locations like the San Francisco Bay Area.

Our first priority should be to make farming profitable for those already in the industry. I concur with the Humboldt County Farm Bureau that there should be no net loss of any agricultural land. John LaBoyteaux wrote in a May 2007 article: "Approximately one-third of the feed required by our dairy industry must be imported to Humboldt County... An acre of bottom-land pasture, including reclaimed tidelands, has a livestock carrying capacity equal to 20 or more acres of rangeland in the hills. (Carrying capacity is generally the number of cattle or cow/calf pairs that can be sustained on pasture or rangeland with little or no supplemental feeding.)... Continuing public land acquisitions and residential development on bottomlands, even in flood zone areas, continue to erode the critical mass of land needed to sustain our local agricultural industry... A decreasing land base threatens the future of local small farms like mine and every other type of agriculture in Humboldt County."

Alternative A would help to preserve this precious agricultural land base. The Health Impact Assessment of the General Plan Alternatives commissioned by the Humboldt County Dept of Health and Human Services and others chose Alternative A as having "the most positive overall health impacts." They found that only Alternative A would retain the current proportion of county land for active farming uses, and also sustain food consumption from local sources at present levels; the other 2 alternatives would negatively impact these indicators of environmental stewardship.

The coastal agricultural lands also serve as key geographic buffers between our urbanized areas, such as the acreage east of Hwy 101 between Eureka and Arcata; or the coastal bottomlands that separate Eureka/Fortuna and Arcata/ McKinleyville. Of course, this open space also helps control floods, provides wildlife habitat, recharges groundwater, etc. We need to create an Open Space District, as recommended by Alternative A, to systematically protect and maintain these buffers.

Rather than propping up fossil-fuel-intensive, long-distance food systems through oil, irrigation, and costly conventional transportation, Humboldt County should stay on the cutting edge and actively promote sustainable agriculture, locally grown foods, and energy-efficient transportation. We have the necessary climate, soils, water, open space, and surplus of creative, energetic people to carry this out! The goal should be to generate a vibrant local economy supported by a diversity of local produce, dairy and meats, as well as high value artisanal products. Alternative A will be most effective in supporting such an agricultural future for Humboldt County.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Harriet Hill". The ink is dark and the handwriting is fluid and legible.

Harriet Hill