



We all benefit by protecting valley land

April 17, 2015 • [Rue Ziegler](#)

“People perceive land use controls as exclusive — an attempt to keep others out. But protecting agriculture is actually inclusive — in the long term everybody benefits.” (Volker Eisele, 1937-2015)

Every minute America loses more than 1 acre of farmland to urban development. In California, we lose 30,000 acres of cropland each year. In the last decade the nine-county San Francisco Bay Area has lost 18 percent of its prime agricultural acreage. This trend is likely to continue. Even California’s greatest agricultural resource, the Central Valley, is expected to lose more than 800,000 acres to urbanization by 2040.

Farmland preservation is not a priority for most Americans and perhaps especially not for today’s young adults. Those who live in rural areas, such as the Napa Valley, may take the benefits of an agrarian lifestyle for granted and ignore the multiple threats to farmland. Or they may prefer the opportunities available in cities and abandon the countryside altogether. We should be concerned that subsequent generations may lack the dedication necessary to protect the future viability of agricultural areas.

Urban and suburban growth will continue to threaten farmland. The Bay Area today comprises 7.4 million residents — America’s fourth largest metropolitan region. Since 2010 the rate of population growth has outpaced that in the U.S. or in California itself. An additional 2 million Bay Area inhabitants are expected within the next 20 years. Thus far, population increases have mostly occurred outside of Napa County, where municipalities annex unincorporated areas for new housing and urban services.

For example, Napa County increased its cultivated farmland between 1990-2008, while Santa Clara County lost 41 percent to high-rises, shopping malls and sprawling residential subdivisions. Our enviable position in the Napa Valley is not an accident, but due to innovative land-use policies that began in 1968 with the creation of the Agricultural Preserve by the Board of Supervisors. This landmark statute – the first of its kind in America – limits subdivision of valley floor parcels that lie beyond the incorporated cities to a 40-acre minimum.

Today this secured area comprises 38,000 acres. By 1993 land-use policy further designated 160-acre minimum parcels in Ag Watershed zones on the surrounding hillsides. Seven years ago county voters extended this restrictive zoning through 2058, unless changed by a subsequent majority vote of county residents.

Few citizens in the county have been as vigorously active in the struggle to maintain and strengthen both the Ag Preserve and Agricultural Watershed lands than grape-grower and winery

owner Volker Eisele, who died in January. The German-born Eisele was one of the valley pioneers who championed the protection of agricultural land. He was influenced by European policies that support rural landscapes as a social goal. Eisele envisioned viticulture as open space, a common good that provides environmental benefits, scenic vistas, hiking trails and a respite from urban life.

Two years ago I addressed a class of seniors in a California history course at a local high school. I showed how the history of Napa County has mirrored that of California. One notable exception is the lack of urbanization on the scale of San Jose and Los Angeles. I described how the valley today retains its pastoral beauty solely because of the Agricultural Preserve. I was dismayed to discover that not one of the students had ever heard of it.

While the creation of the Ag Preserve encountered internal conflicts and external resistance, the greatest challenge to its future is indifference. As the valley's population grows, an increasing number of full-time residents will not work in agriculture and may not be as committed to protecting it. Another challenge may result from the current transition in agricultural land ownership to nonresident individuals and corporations.

Finally, as the price of Bay Area real estate continues to climb, supporters of the Ag Preserve may relocate elsewhere. Will these changes diminish support for agricultural land preservation? How can we encourage a new generation of residents to follow in the footsteps of leaders like Volker Eisele?

{!—BC Emph—} Rue Ziegler, Ph.D., is adjunct professor at the University of San Francisco and a board member of the Jack L. Davies Napa Valley Agricultural Land Preservation Fund.