

To the San Diego Union-Tribune

Op-ed on General Plan Update

Next week, the Board of Supervisors will consider major changes in the County's General Plan, the document that guides future growth and development in the unincorporated areas of San Diego County.

Unfortunately, a process that started out as an effort to build community consensus about the future of our county's backcountry has morphed into a document that puts that future in doubt.

Keep in mind that 64% of the land in unincorporated San Diego County is already government-owned national forests, state preserves, and military installations. The County's General Plan controls use of the remaining private land in the areas outside of incorporated cities.

All of us want to preserve the rural character of our county's backcountry, the ranches and farms that are the backbone of our agricultural economy and quaint country villages like Julian and Ramona.

But if that was the original goal of the General Plan Update, it got badly lost somewhere during the 12 years county planners worked on it.

The majority of working farms in San Diego County are 10 acres or less, but the General Plan Update dictates minimum lot sizes of 20, 40 and 80 acres for most of the backcountry, making existing farms and ranches non-conforming and making it difficult for family farmers to get loans to finance improvements or expansion. While other businesses can build equity in buildings and commerce, a farmer's equity is restricted to the land. Take that away and the business of farming and the farmer are at risk. That's why the San Diego County Farm Bureau warns that the General Plan Update endangers the future of agriculture in San Diego County.

For most of us, our memories of the backcountry are based on visits to places like Julian or Ramona. As now recommended by county planners, the General Plan Update wipes property values to the point that the economic vitality of our rural communities will suffer.

For taxpayers, that translates into a threat against rural fire protection, schools, roads, and law enforcement. Without viable rural economies and adequate public services, the rural towns we cherish will suffer and declining tax bases will threaten the rural fire districts that form our first line of defense against the ravages of seasonal wildfires.

Compromised fire protection won't be the only regional impact. Just because you live in a city doesn't mean you won't feel the results. Under the proposed General Plan Update development will have to be denser in the already congested incorporated cities in order for our region to meet future housing needs.

That's why the San Diego Regional Chamber of Commerce, family farmers, rural property owners and backcountry businesses all strongly oppose the proposed General Plan Update.

You can make your voice heard by contacting your County Supervisor or by attending their public hearing at 9:00 am on Wednesday, October 20 at the County Administration Center, 1600 Pacific Highway, in downtown San Diego to request they vote "no" on the General Plan

The character of our county's rural backcountry, along with its economy, tax base, and public facilities, are all threatened by the proposed General Plan Update. The time to act is now.

Al Stehly, Valley Center farmer and Farm Bureau representative to the General Plan Update process