

# Chapter 16: Agriculture

## Introduction and Setting

---

Agriculture has always been an integral part of Nevada County and has continually grown and changed along with the county. The beginning of major agriculture pursuits began concurrently with the discovery of gold in California. With the sudden influx of miners there was also a need for food. This need, along with the high prices miners were willing to pay, made it attractive for farmers (many of whom had been miners) to start raising crops in the western end of the county. This area, with its mild climate and good soils, attracted a large number of farmers who grew a variety of crops, including fruit of all varieties, small grains, hay, potatoes, and wine grapes. Some citrus was attempted at the extreme southwestern corner of the county. Sheep and cattle were raised in large quantities, utilizing the high mountain ranges in summer and the oak woodlands for winter grazing.

One commodity, often not thought of as agriculture, that was harvested extensively in this period was timber. During the initial phase of placer mining, the demand was mainly for construction lumber. With the advent of hardrock mining, the demand for mining timbers expanded greatly, and much of the easy-to-reach virgin forest was cut at this time. Most of the timber in the western county today is second or third generation which reseeded from the initial stand.

During the 1800s and early 1900s, the most limiting feature for agriculture in the county was the lack of irrigation water. This was changed dramatically in 1921 with the formation of the Nevada Irrigation District. This was the first in a series of steps which culminated in reliable irrigation water being delivered to many county farmers. With the availability of irrigation water, the number of livestock increased sharply and dairies in particular began to flourish, as farmers were able to raise larger quantities of hay for feed. Agricultural production in the county reached a peak in total acreage and head of livestock during the period before World War II.

During the post World War II era, timber continued to be a strong industry. With thousands of acres of prime timber soils, and moderate climate, the county was able to produce millions of board feet of lumber a year to supply the increasing demand for lumber in the growing state.

The last 20 years have been a time of considerable change for agriculture in Nevada County. Land prices have escalated rapidly and the pressure to subdivide large tracts of historical farmlands increases. However, there has also been an increase in the number of farms. From

## Chapter 16: Agriculture Element

---

1976 to 1982, farm numbers have increased 115 percent. The increase in farms has included a diversification of crops being raised. Many types of exotic livestock, including llamas, ostriches, colored sheep and pot-belly pigs, as well as the more historical types of livestock, are raised in the county. Numerous fruit and nut crops are also raised with the wine grape industry attracting national attention. Other diversified agricultural businesses include specialty nurseries, herb farms, mushroom farms, aquaculture, Christmas tree farms and fuelwood lots.

According to the 1987 Census of Agriculture, there were 386 farms in Nevada County (farm is defined as any place from which \$1,000 or more of agricultural products were produced and sold, or normally would have been sold during the census year). This is an increase of 122% since 1974. While the number of farms has increased, the size of individual farms has declined 73% since 1974. The average size of a farm in Nevada County is 146 acres; 267, or 69 percent, are less than 50 acres in size. According to the 1989 Nevada County Agriculture Commissioner's Crop Report, agricultural income reached \$20 million. This is an increase of 223% over the agricultural income of \$6 million in 1982.

Much of this increase can be attributed to the increase in specialty crops being grown in the area. Fruit, vegetables, herbs, nurseries, and Christmas trees, fish, and honey have all played a big role in this increase. Given the diverse nature of crops being grown in the County, agricultural income should continue to rise.

Further discussion of the agricultural resources of the county is contained in Section 4: Open Space/Conservation Inventory, of Volume 2 of the Nevada County General Plan; and in Section 3 and 7 of the Nevada County Master Environmental Inventory, which is part of Volume 3 of the Nevada County General Plan.

## Goals, Objectives, and Policies

---

The soils and climate of Nevada County make it an ideal area to sustain many agricultural endeavors. Agriculture in Nevada County is a mosaic of farm land intermingled with other uses in the rural setting which typifies the County. This land provides marketable products, open space, wildlife habitat, watershed and an aesthetic environment.

Additional goals, policies and objectives generally related to agriculture are located in Chapter 1: Land Use; Chapter 3: Public Facilities and Services; Chapter 5: Recreation; Chapter 6: Open Space; Chapter 10: Safety; Chapter 13: Wildlife and Vegetation; and Chapter 18: Aesthetics.

### Goal 16.1

**Encourage the use of significant agricultural lands and operations in *Rural Regions*.**

#### *Objective 16.1*

**Identify and encourage the use of significant agricultural lands based on soil type and suitability for various forms of agriculture.**

**Directive Policies**

**Policy 16.1** Agriculture is strongly encouraged in *Rural Regions* and allowed in *Community Regions*. Agricultural land shall include all those land areas of Nevada County now used for agricultural operations, or upon which agricultural operations may be established in the future in conformance with applicable zoning regulations.

**Policy 16.2** Agricultural operations shall include, but not be limited to:

- a. Cultivation and tillage of the soil
- b. Dairying
- c. Production, irrigation, frost protection, cultivation, growing, harvesting, storage, and processing of any agricultural commodity, including production of timber, trees, shrubs, flowers, herbs and all other plants
- d. Viticulture, including vineyards
- e. Horticulture
- f. Apiculture
- g. Raising of livestock, fur-bearing animals and all other kinds of animal husbandry
- h. Culture or breeding of poultry, fish, marine life, mollusks, and all other types of animal or plant life
- i. Commercial practices performed incidental to or in conjunction with such agricultural operations, including selling, processing, packing, preparation for market, delivery to storage, market or to carriers for transportation to market.

**Policy 16.3** Allow aquaculture (the raising, harvesting and production of fish) on lands zoned for agricultural use on the same basis as land-based agricultural operations.

***Objective 16.2***

**Maintain and encourage agriculture on lands zoned for agricultural use, especially those which border *Community Regions*, while minimizing conflicts with adjacent non agricultural lands.**

**Directive Policy**

**Policy 16.4** In *Rural Regions*, maintain existing agricultural zoning on lands designated as Rural on the General Plan Land Use maps, including land in the RA, A1, AE, FR and TPZ districts, to allow for the continuation of existing agricultural operations, as well as the

introduction of new agricultural operations consistent with the regulations of the respective districts.

**Action Policy**

**Policy 16.5**

All new residential land divisions adjacent to important agricultural lands shall require a setback of not less than 100 feet to minimize potential land use conflicts. All such development will require the recording of a declaration acknowledging proximity of agricultural resources and the potential for conflict.

***Objective 16.3***

**Minimize and reduce pressures to convert lands zoned for agricultural use to more intensive uses.**

**Action Policy**

**Policy 16.6**

Amend the Right to Farm Ordinance to provide for notice to buyers of land in the RA, A1, AE and FR zoning districts describing normal agricultural practices which may occur in such districts and informing buyers of the right to continue such practices in conformance with the applicable district regulations.

**Directive Policy**

**Policy 16.7**

Support efforts by private conservation organizations to utilize voluntary conservation easements as a means of preserving land in agricultural use.

***Objective 16.4***

**Identify the appropriate parcel sizes on lands zoned for agricultural use that provide for a range of agricultural operations that may be carried on in those zones.**

**Directive Policies**

**Policy 16.8**

Allow new development in *Rural Regions* outside of *Rural Centers* only for those land use types which are consistent and compatible with the rural agricultural character of these areas. Compatible land use types are those defined in the following General Plan land use designations:

- a. Estate 0.3 du/acre (3 ac/du)
- b. Rural -5 0.2 du/acre (5 ac/ du)
- c. Rural-10 0.1 du/acre (10 ac/du)

- d. Rural-20 0.05 du/acre (20 ac/du)
- e. Rural-30 0.03 du/acre (30 ac/du)
- f. Rural-40 0.025 du/acre (40 ac/du)
- g. Rural-160 0.00625 du/acre (160 ac/du)
- h. Highway Commercial
- i. Rural Commercial
- j. Public
- k. Open Space
- l. Forest
- m. Water Area
- n. Planned Development

*Also see: Chapter 1: Land Use  
Policy 1.6*

**Policy 16.9**

Clustering of new residential development in *Rural Regions* shall be encouraged and utilized in accordance with Policy 1.18 to reduce potential conflicts between agricultural operations. Such clustering shall provide for a natural or man-made buffer between the residential development and adjacent agricultural uses.

*Also see: Chapter 1: Land Use  
Policy 1.18*

*Objective 16.5*

**On all lands zoned for agricultural use, allow and provide for on-site and off-site support facilities, services and uses that further local agricultural production and marketing.**

**Action Policy**

**Policy 16.10**

Allow permanent facilities for marketing of products grown or processed on-site as a permitted use on lands zoned for agricultural use; allow agricultural support services, visitor-serving uses and facilities, and lodging facilities for visitors on all lands zoned for agricultural use with a Use Permit (UP), which addresses but is not limited to the following:

- a. The use clearly supports local agricultural production and promotes or markets agricultural products grown or processed in Nevada County; is clearly subordinate and incidental to agricultural production; and does not substantially detract from agricultural production on-site or in the area.

- b. The use will not require the extension of public sewer or potable water.
- c. The use does not create a concentration of commercial uses in the immediate area.
- d. There shall be no significant adverse effect on the surrounding area.

Agricultural support services shall include processing services, maintenance and repair of farm machinery and equipment, veterinary clinics, custom farming services, agricultural waste handling and disposal services and other similar services.

**Directive Policy**

**Policy 16.11**

Support efforts by the Nevada County Department of Agriculture and other sponsoring agencies to develop and promote a marketing program for products to be recognized as originating in Nevada County.

***Objective 16.6***

**Allow housing for agricultural workers and their families on lands zoned for agricultural use, to serve seasonal requirements.**

**Action Policy**

**Policy 16.12**

Allow housing for the farm operator and employees of the farm operator and their families (including temporary or permanent housing for seasonal employees) on all lands zoned predominantly for agricultural use provided that:

- a. Housing units are not subdivided from the primary agricultural parcel.
- b. Housing is clearly subordinate to and incidental to agricultural production on the site.
- c. All employees occupying such housing are employed on the site or on another site under the same ownership within Nevada County.
- d. Housing is constructed and maintained to conform to the minimum standards approved by the State Department of Housing and Community Development.
- e. The use will not require the extension of sewer or potable water.
- f. All housing in excess of the maximum density permitted in the applicable zoning district shall be limited to use by employees or immediate family of the farm operator.

To facilitate the approval of employee housing, the County shall establish appropriate standards and pre-approved plans for temporary dormitory or trailer housing for seasonal agricultural employees in conformance with the minimum standards approved by the State Department of Housing and Community Development.

*Also see: Chapter 8: Housing  
Policy EO-8.5.5*

**Goal 16.2**

**Promote a strong and sustainable local agricultural economy.**

*Objective 16.7*

**Allow marketing of products grown or processed on-site in all areas zoned for agricultural uses.**

*See: Policy 16.10*

*Objective 16.8*

**Facilitate the placement of significant agricultural lands in the Williamson Act.**

**Directive Policy**

**Policy 16.13**

Continue participation in the Williamson Act program. Parcels eligible for Williamson Act contract shall be 5 or more acres in size.

*Objective 16.9*

**Promote new means for the recycling of waste that could be used by agricultural operations.**

**Directive Policy**

**Policy 16.14**

Cooperate with wastewater generators in establishing programs for voluntary agricultural reuse of treated water in a manner which would be economically beneficial to agriculture, including investigations of reuse alternatives and establishment of a wastewater irrigation district.

**Goal 16.3**

**Provide for and protect agricultural water supplies.**

*Objective 16.10*

**Support the provision of adequate water for agricultural irrigation in Nevada County, while encouraging conservation in its use.**

**Directive Policies**

**Policy 16.15**

Encourage the Nevada Irrigation District and the Nevada County Resource Conservation District in their efforts to implement water conservation and greater efficiency of water use by agricultural as well as urban users through measures such as:

- a. Development of an irrigation system that could supply water on an “as needed” basis.
- b. Continued efforts to line existing canals.
- c. Increased use of sprinklers and drip irrigation.
- d. Monitoring of water usage through the use of current technology such as tensiometers and gypsum blocks.

**Policy 16.16**

Encourage multiagency participation in water projects where such coordination may facilitate providing affordable irrigation water to areas of the County which have water deficiencies.

*Also see: Chapter 11: Water  
Policy 11.5*