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Developers to pay fee to preserve farmland

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Farmland in the southern part of San Joaquin County will be preserved with money from a new fee charged to developers.

Leaders in Manteca, Tracy and Lathrop have agreed to adopt a \$2,000-per-acre development fee that would be used to buy farmland conservation easements. Those easements would restrict the land to only agricultural uses and prohibit future development.

The fee stems from a 2004 lawsuit agreement with the Sierra Club over a water pipeline project involving Manteca, Tracy, Escalon and the South San Joaquin Irrigation District. That pipeline allows the cities to expand. The goal of the new fee is to make up for the area's booming development that paved over thousands of acres of farmland in the past several years.

The Manteca City Council adopted the fee Monday. Tracy officials adopted it Tuesday evening, and Lathrop leaders voted for the fee last month.

The fee will go into effect over the next two months in development projects that involve farmland inside the cities' boundaries.

Eric Parfrey, head of the Mother Lode chapter of the Sierra Club, said he was pleased that the cities adopted the fee but added it was "very low."

He said the fee should be higher to match current prices for typical agricultural land, which run from \$8,000 to \$11,000 per acre, according to a study conducted by a San Francisco-based consulting firm hired by the three cities.

Manteca Mayor Willie Weatherford said the fee would eventually have to be raised.

"But this is a good starting point," he said. "Before, we had nothing."

Although the fee is not equal to today's farmland prices, it would still help preserve farmland, said Pam Carder, Lathrop's city manager.

"The payment of the fee is going to preserve a significant amount of farmland," Carder said.

According to the study, which was conducted by Environmental Science Associates, the county lost 22,332 acres of prime farmland from 1990 to 2002. In its report, the consulting firm suggested a minimum fee of \$2,000 for every acre of farmland that's developed.

"We intended for that agricultural mitigation fee to be a starting point," Parfrey said.

In the next two weeks, Parfrey said his group will ask officials in the three cities to set "reasonable fees." That means about \$5,000 to \$6,000 per acre of farmland that is developed, he said.

Eventually, Parfrey said, he would like to see the fee equal to the prices of typical farmland in the area.

"We could save a tremendous amount of farmland from development," Parfrey said. "If we don't conserve one acre for every acre developed, we will see the entire county develop into suburbs like Los Angeles."

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