

Growing our Future:  
*A Community Conservation Plan for Agriculture in Nevada County*

**Final Land Use, Economic and  
Agricultural Resource Resilience Assessment**

**October 2025**

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## **Growing our Future: A Community Conservation Plan for Agriculture in Nevada County**

*Final Assessment: Guiding Growth & Agricultural Preservation,  
Economic Vitality, and Agricultural Climate Resilience, October 2025*

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### **Purpose of This Assessment**

This Assessment is the first step in preparing ***Growing Our Future: A Community Conservation Plan for Agriculture in Nevada County***. Its purpose is to take stock of current policies, programs, and on-the-ground conditions that shape the viability of local farming and ranching. By understanding where things stand today—what’s working, what’s missing, and where there are challenges—this assessment lays the foundation for a set of strategies that can support agricultural land, livelihoods, and resource resilience moving forward. This document is intended to guide the community in making informed decisions about which strategies to pursue in the final Conservation Plan.

### **Introduction**

The ***Community Conservation Plan for Agriculture in Nevada County*** is a community-led effort to support local agriculture for the future. This means securing its economic viability and preserving the lands upon which it depends. As a cultural mainstay and important economic driver of Nevada County, protecting agricultural lands, maintaining a vibrant economic agricultural sector, and building the capacity of agriculture to prepare for climate-related changes will take the community’s thoughtful forward-thinking.

To look at these challenges holistically, a first step in the development of a set of strategies is an assessment of the County’s policy and program framework and the community’s existing initiatives using three objectives that aim to protect and enhance agricultural lands while supporting the people and businesses that depend on them. These objectives include:

1. **Economic Vitality:** Strengthen local agricultural businesses
2. **Agricultural Land Preservation and Guiding Growth:** Enhance land use policy and implementation tools to encourage conservation easements and other mechanisms that permanently protect farmland and rangeland while keeping these lands in production.
3. **Agricultural Resource Resilience:** Advance resource-smart land management practices that enhance water resources, habitat, and soil health, and address climate

challenges, while delivering social and economic benefits—such as supporting farm succession, fostering community stewardship and agricultural awareness, sustaining rural livelihoods, and strengthening the connection between residents and working landscapes.

This Assessment includes a synthesis of the consultant team’s initial review of existing local and regional planning policies, and community initiatives. In April and May 2025, two stakeholder workshops were held at the Ranch School with farmers, ranchers, agricultural organizations, and community members from western Nevada County to better understand the current conditions, challenges, and opportunities facing local agriculture. In addition, the Community Advisory Committee (CAC) provided invaluable insight and feedback to help shape the Assessment. Together, these stakeholders provided valuable insights into both long-standing and emerging issues affecting the viability of farming and ranching in the region—from land access and regulatory burdens to market shifts and the next generation of producers. Key take-aways are included as a part of this Assessment.

This assessment is the first step in the development of the **Community Conservation Plan for Agriculture** in Nevada County (“Community Conservation Plan”). It is intended to give community leaders a “discussion piece” to help develop new or revised policies, programs, collaborations, and implementation strategies to protect the agricultural land base and invest in the farming and ranching economy in Nevada County.

Funds for the development of the **Community Conservation Plan** were made available through the California Strategic Growth Council’s Sustainable Agricultural Lands Conservation Program (SALC) in collaboration with the Department of Conservation. SALC is part of California Climate Investments, a statewide initiative that puts billions of Cap-and-Trade dollars to work reducing greenhouse gas emissions, strengthening the economy, and improving public health and the environment – particularly in disadvantaged communities. The SALC Planning Grant program specifically funds the development of plans for the protection of agricultural lands under pressure of being converted to non-agricultural uses. Thus, this assessment does not include an analysis of forestry and timber. While it touches on cannabis, since it is not currently classified as “agriculture” under state or county policy, the assessment does not analyze or include it as an agricultural activity.

## **1.0 Economic Vitality**

This part of the initial assessment is to assess current conditions of Nevada County’s existing agricultural sector, understand existing efforts, and bring focus to potential economic opportunities for the county’s farmers and ranchers.

The goal of this section is to create a clear picture of where we are now, what barriers might be addressed, and where there are opportunities to strengthen the agricultural economy. By listening to farmers, ranchers, local experts, and community partners in workshops and interviews, and reviewing existing plans and data, the following section identifies assets to build upon and begins to shape potential strategies that help agriculture thrive.

### **Objective 1. Economic Vitality**

*Support the growth of a robust regional agricultural economy and its supportive infrastructure to maximize Nevada County’s food system potential.*

## **1.1 Snapshot of the Nevada County Agricultural Economy Today**

### **Economic Value and Contributions**

- In 2022, the U.S. Census on Agriculture reported 620 “farms” in Nevada County, which, by their definition includes cropland, pastureland, and woodland. This represents an eight percent decrease since 2017.<sup>1</sup>
- The gross value of agricultural production in 2023 was \$24,379,500, down by 17 percent from 2003.<sup>2</sup>
- Livestock remained the leading commodity in Nevada County in 2023, with a production value of \$13,280,400, followed by Pasture at \$3,700,000.<sup>3</sup>
- In the last decade, Fruit and Vegetable Production has nearly tripled in value, from \$1,225,065 in 2013 to \$3,539,000 in 2023. During this time, Nursery and Flower Production has nearly doubled to \$716,200, while Wine Grape Production was stable.<sup>4</sup>
- All other types of production have declined in the last 10 years: livestock by -12 percent, Pasture and Rangeland by -19 percent, and Timber Products by -90 percent.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> U.S. Census of Agriculture, 2022.

<sup>2</sup> Nevada County Crop and Livestock Reports 2003 and 2023. To make comparisons, all values are adjusted for inflation using 2023 values, based on the Consumer Price Index inflation calculator.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid

<sup>4</sup> Ibid

<sup>5</sup> Ibid

- The number of beef cows raised in Nevada County was 2,100 in 2022, down from 3,007 in 2002.<sup>6</sup>
- In 2022, organic producers' gross sales of \$2,236,536 represented a 41 percent climb since 2018. The county had 37 organic producers, representing approximately six percent of its farms and ranches.<sup>7</sup>
- For every dollar in direct economic output of the agricultural sector, 30 cents is induced indirectly. In 2023, this means that the \$24.4 million in agricultural production value generated another \$7.2 million in spending from employees, suppliers, and agricultural businesses. This equates to Nevada County's agriculture generating a total of \$31.6 million contribution to the local economy.<sup>8</sup>
- Preliminary estimates show that ecosystem services such as scenic wildlife habitat and wildfire protection provided between \$420 million and \$1.2 billion dollars in benefit to the county.<sup>9</sup>

#### **Note on Cannabis Production**

- While cannabis is not currently classified as “agriculture” under state or county policy, it represents a significant and complex component of Nevada County's rural economy. The cannabis sector contributes to local employment, land management, and entrepreneurial activity, often overlapping with agricultural infrastructure and markets. Its economic influence—both formal and informal—should be acknowledged as part of the broader context shaping land use, water demand, and rural economic trends in the county.
  - According to the **2023 Cannabis Supplemental Report** the total licensed cannabis **canopy size** in Nevada County was **32.3 acres**.<sup>10</sup>
  - That same report notes 154 cannabis permits in 2023 and an estimated gross value of \$10,203,800 for legal cannabis production.

#### **The Land**

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<sup>6</sup> U.S. Census of Agriculture, 2002 and 2022

<sup>7</sup> California Agricultural Statistics Review 2022-2023. CA Department of Food and Agriculture. This includes crops, orchards, livestock, pasture, and rangeland.

<sup>8</sup> Methodology utilizes the multiplier from the *Nevada County Crop and Livestock Report*, 2018.

<sup>9</sup> The *Nevada County Crop and Livestock Report* (2018) preliminary estimates for the valuation of ecosystem services were derived using a “back-of-the-envelope” approach by transferring existing benefit estimates from studies already completed for Santa Cruz, Santa Clara, and Sonoma Counties. The study provides two caveats: 1) The range gives some indication of magnitude but is by no means definitive. 2) Getting robust numbers would require a full study using the Benefit Transfer Methodology.

<sup>10</sup> Nevada County Agricultural Commissioner's Cannabis Supplemental Report, 2023. “Canopy size” refers specifically to the surface area occupied by mature cannabis plants, measured in square feet (or converted to acres).

*The following is from the U.S. Census of Agriculture (2002 and 2022) and defines “Land in Farms” as agricultural land used for crops, pasture, or grazing. It also includes woodland and wasteland not actually under cultivation or used for pasture or grazing, provided it was part of the farm producer’s total operation.<sup>11</sup>*

- Land in farms and ranches (all uses) has decreased from 82,336 acres to 64,185 acres in the last 20 years, a 22 percent decline.
- In 2022, land in farms and ranches included:
  - pasture with 34,500 acres,
  - cropland with 4,100 acres, and
  - woodland and other land with 25,500 acres.
- Over the last two decades, the acres of harvested cropland<sup>12</sup> has decreased by 60 percent.
- During this same 20-year period, the number of farms on harvested cropland has increased by 4 percent.
- During the last twenty years, the average size of Nevada County’s farms and ranches has decreased from 137 acres to 104 acres.
- The median size farm has decreased in half from 20 acres to 11 acres, indicating that there are more farms less than 11 acres compared to 20 years ago. In 2022, farms with one to nine acres represented 37 percent of all farms, compared to 28 percent in 2002. The significant increase in fruit and vegetable production value, combined with trends in smaller farm sizes, indicates a trend toward more intensive farming on smaller parcels.

### ***The Food and Agricultural Economic Sector***

- There are no USDA Food Safety Inspection Service (FSIS) multi-species slaughter and processing facilities available in Nevada County. The nearest multi-species facilities are in Reno (~90 miles), Orland (~100 miles), Modesto (~130 miles), and Petaluma (~140 miles).
- Regional aggregation, distribution, processing and packaging capacity in the county is limited for adding value and accessing diversified markets for fresh produce.
- According to the U.S. Census of Agriculture, 15 percent of Nevada County farms are selling direct to consumers. Over the last two decades, the number

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<sup>11</sup> U.S. Census of Agriculture 2002 and 2022. “Land in Farms” consists primarily of agricultural land used for crops, pasture, or grazing. It also includes woodland and wasteland not actually under cultivation or used for pasture or grazing, provided it was part of the farm producer’s total operation.

<sup>12</sup> U.S. Census of Agriculture 2002 and 2022. “Harvested Cropland” includes land from which crops were harvested and hay was cut, land used to grow short rotation woody crops, Christmas trees, and land in orchards, groves, vineyards, berries, nurseries, and greenhouses. Land from which two or more crops were harvested was counted only once.

of Nevada County farms selling direct remained about the same, but the value of sales has grown by nearly 400 percent (adjusted for inflation).<sup>13</sup>

- 4.7 percent of the \$340 million that county residents spend on food is spent on food that is grown locally.<sup>14</sup>
- Six certified farmers markets operate in Nevada County.
- Institutional demand for locally produced food is growing, in part due to the development and expansion of the scratch-cook kitchen program, Community Roots, serving Nevada County public schools.

See Appendix A for detailed economic and agricultural land background tables.

### ***Policy Framework Supporting the Agricultural Economy***

***An economic development policy framework for agriculture ensures that agriculture remains profitable and recognizes it as an important sector of the overall economy.*** Nevada County’s policy framework for supporting the agricultural economy exists within the *Nevada County General Plan*, the *Nevada County Economic Development Action Plan*, and other supporting County documents that demonstrate a historic commitment to supporting agriculture. The following provides a high-level summary of the County’s existing policy framework that supports agriculture. Section 1.3, *Findings and Potential Action Steps* below provides recommendations for future actions.

**The County General Plan** addresses agricultural economic development in its Economic Development and Agricultural Elements, while the Land Use Element establishes appropriate land use designations. The **Economic Development Element** addresses agriculture primarily through directive policies that emphasize providing a balance between land designated for various uses (including agriculture) as well as ensuring an adequate supply of properly zoned land to support a broad range of economic development opportunities (Policies 2.2; 2.5, 2.7).

**The Agricultural Element** remains a foundational part of Nevada County’s General Plan. It not only establishes directive policies specifying where and how agriculture is encouraged and allowed to exist as a land use (Policy 16.1), but also includes tactical measures that strengthen agricultural viability and minimize land use conflicts. These include policies to:

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<sup>13</sup> U.S. Census 2002 and 2022

<sup>14</sup> *Nevada County Food System Assessment, 2020*

- Minimize potential land use conflicts between agricultural and non-agricultural uses (Policy 16.5);
- Inform property owners and buyers of the County's "Right to Farm" provisions (Policy 16.6);
- Encourage clustering of new residential development to protect agricultural lands and open space (Policy 16.9);
- Support the marketing and sale of products grown or processed on-site (Policy 16.7); and
- Provide for supportive uses, agricultural worker housing, and adequate water supply (Policies 16.10–16.15).

Together, these policies support the Element's two overarching goals:  
16.1) Encourage the continued use of significant agricultural lands and operations in Rural Regions; and  
16.2) Promote a strong and sustainable local agricultural economy.

**Zoning code provisions supporting revenue-making agricultural activities** include the **Agritourism Ordinance** and **Wineries Ordinance**. A zoning code amendment in 2018 provides that agritourism activities are allowed under specific conditions, enabling farmers to diversify their income through tourism-related activities while ensuring that such uses remain secondary to primary agricultural operations. The ordinance applies to events and activities in zones Agricultural Exclusive (AE), General Agriculture (AG), Forest (FR) and Residential Agricultural (RA) zoning on working ranches and farms. Wineries have been permitted uses in Nevada County's zoning code since 2000, with **no discretionary (use) permit required**—a major advantage compared to many counties where wineries must obtain such permits. This streamlined approach has supported the establishment and operation of small to mid-scale wineries across Agricultural Exclusive (AE), General Agriculture (AG), Forest (FR), and Residential Agricultural (RA) zones.

**The Penn Valley Area Plan** was adopted in 2020 as a comprehensive land use and zoning plan **with one key focus being the preservation and enhancement of agricultural activities as a primary economic driver**. In Policy ED-1.2, it calls for "*Capitaliz[ing] on the area's rural and agricultural character by focusing economic development on agriculture, agricultural technology, and agritourism.*" The Area Plan identified the community's need for a refrigeration center, a certified USDA butchering facility, an agricultural centric makers or production space, and a shared commercial or commissary

kitchen to create value-added agricultural products, as a strategy for achieving the community's economic vision.

**The Nevada County Economic Development Plan** was adopted in 2023 as an action plan focusing on aligning economic development strategies with community needs, emphasizing collaboration among stakeholders to achieve measurable priorities. **Objective 2.4 calls for supporting the growth of Food and Agriculture**, including cannabis. It calls for an audit of existing food, agriculture, and cannabis-specific economic development and workforce activities in east and west County. It also recommends considering the formation of an employer led Ag and Food work group, organized with support from County partners, whose members would come together several times a year to identify current challenges and opportunities, serve as a forum for information gathering and dissemination, and surface needs and priorities that business and trade groups, educational institutions and workforce agencies, and local governments could act upon.

### ***Community Assessments and Programs Supporting the Agricultural Economy***

**The Nevada County Food System Assessment** was crafted and released in 2020 and evaluates the multidimensional components of the county's food and agricultural sectors, with a focus on the social, economic, and ecological contributions and impacts of locally grown food. The authors of the report, the Nevada County Food Policy Council (NCFPC), was established in 2015 and is a body of 55 diverse stakeholders in the local food system. The Assessment identifies 11 key opportunities to achieve that goal.

1. Expand farm-to-institution procurement of local products
2. Connect landowners and farmers to increase productive farmland
3. Implement more food recovery programs to reduce food waste
4. Incubate new businesses such as composting from food/green waste
5. Expand use of restaurant commercial kitchen space for processing shelf stable products from local produce
6. Establish county policies that support agricultural producers
7. Implement localized USDA-approved meat processing
8. Create marketing and branding campaigns to support Whole-sum Food purchases
9. Provide buyer education around local, fair, humane, and ecologically-produced foods
10. Increase opportunities for farmers and ranchers to share of knowledge, resources and market cooperatively

11. With the guidance of the Nisenan, curate educational curriculum to teach traditional ecological knowledge (TEK) and its importance in stewarding traditional food systems.

**The Tahoe Food Hub** contributes to agricultural economy and resilience in Nevada County by creating equitable market opportunities for small and diversified farms, promoting regenerative farming practices, and enhancing local food access. Through its Farm-to-Market program, the Hub connects over 50 regional farms—including those in Nevada County—to consumers, restaurants, schools, and food pantries, ensuring farmers receive fair prices and stable demand for their produce. By emphasizing regenerative agriculture, the Hub supports practices that improve soil health, sequester carbon, and increase farm sustainability.

### **Nevada County School Programs and Initiatives**

Agricultural programs in Nevada County schools play a vital role in cultivating the next generation of farmers, land stewards, and food system leaders—key to building long-term agricultural resilience. At the high school level, Nevada Union and Bear River High Schools offer comprehensive Career Technical Education (CTE) pathways in agriculture, including courses in agriscience, animal science, forestry, greenhouse management, and agricultural mechanics. Students participate in supervised agricultural experience (SAE) projects and engage with Future Farmers of America (FFA), gaining practical skills and leadership experience.

Nevada Union High School offers a Culinary Arts program through its Career Technical Education (CTE) pathway. Students learn hands-on cooking, nutrition, and food service skills, and gain real-world experience through the student-run "Miner Diner." The program supports agricultural resilience by connecting youth to the local food system and preparing them for careers in food and hospitality.

The Ranch School is an 86-acre working ranch donated to the Nevada Joint Union High School District (NJUHSD) to provide students with hands-on agricultural education. It will serve as an outdoor learning lab for various CTE pathways at Nevada Union High School, including Animal Science, Forestry and Natural Resources, and Agricultural Mechanics. Students engage in practical experiences such as livestock care, land management, and equipment operation, bridging classroom learning with real-world applications. This immersive environment not only enhances students'

understanding of sustainable agriculture but also prepares them for careers in the local food system.

Nevada County's scratch cooking initiative, known as **Community Roots**, is a collaborative effort among nine rural school districts to transition from pre-packaged, processed meals to nutritious, scratch-cooked meals made with fresh, whole ingredients. Launched in partnership with Sierra Harvest and the Chef Ann Foundation, the program aims to improve student health, support local agriculture, and reduce food waste. To facilitate this transformation, the districts formed the **Nevada County School Food Services Joint Powers Authority (JPA)**, also known as **Community Roots**. Not only will the program improve school food quality and the health of students, but with increased buying power, the program will be positioned to make a large investment in the local economy by purchasing products from local growers.

## **1.2 Core Considerations for the Community**

Nevada County is well positioned to develop a more robust agricultural economy and local food system. Over recent years, declines in the county’s historic timber sector have diminished its contribution to the overall agricultural value base. Meanwhile, non-timber agricultural production—particularly fruit and vegetable crops, wine grapes, and nursery as well as the emerging commodity, cannabis (see earlier note on cannabis production, Section 1.1)—has shown upward momentum in value, reflecting a structural shift in the composition of the county’s working lands. The increase in overall crop value, even as farmed acreage has declined, reflects a transition toward higher-value and more intensive crop production. When viewed alongside the reduction in average farm size, this suggests that Nevada County’s agricultural sector is becoming increasingly focused on smaller-scale, high-value production. While regional aggregation, distribution, processing and packaging capacity is falling short to support expanded markets for both fresh produce and livestock, the county’s agricultural producers are motivated to create more demand to serve local and regional markets. This is evidenced in the 400 percent growth in value of sales of direct market goods. Still, there is a significant opportunity for capturing consumer demand within the local, and especially, regional food system. As the *Nevada County Food System Assessment* points out, only 4.7 percent of the \$340 million that county residents spend on food is spent on food that is produced in the county. However, rather than focusing solely on Nevada County as a market, food producers benefit from a more regionally-focused food system with economies of scale supporting broader supply chains.

Behind these statistics is a strong momentum built by community members, recognizing the potential for Nevada County to grow a thriving and resilient agricultural economy. Commitments from Briar Patch and Nevada Union Unified School District’s new scratch-cook meal program (that will feed 10,000 students daily) to sourcing from local producers can pave the way for economies of scale, efficiencies, and creating more reliable market channels. The agricultural and food system community has identified several opportunities and challenges that will need to be addressed for this potential to be realized. These have been articulated from the agricultural community from years of studies, documents, surveys, and forums and include:

- 1) Reliable infrastructure for aggregation, distribution, processing, and marketing
- 2) Access to land
- 3) An understanding and commitment from the community that agriculture is central to the county’s identity and contributes to its prosperity and way of life.

Understanding the terms, “economic development,” “economic viability,” and “economic stability” will help focus efforts. The California Association of Local Economic Development

defines economic development as “*the creation of wealth from which community benefits are realized.*” Economic viability is the ability of a business or industry to be profitable and to grow, and it focuses on potential. While economic stability refers to steady growth, low overhead, and balanced employment.

Since the majority of Nevada County’s agricultural operators are small family farms and ranches that often hold tight profit margins, a priority for this Plan is the economic stability and viability of the agricultural sector. What are the surmountable barriers that can be overcome to achieve a greater level of economic success for Nevada County agricultural businesses? What are the strategies to increase the economic return to producers? A second focus should be on maximizing the agricultural production value and food system potential in the county. What are new or undertapped areas of economic activity that should be explored? And finally, how will the economic stability and viability of the agricultural sector provide benefits to the community and create a mutually reinforcing relationship? The following findings and Potential Action steps consider these questions and are a reflection of community input and an assessment of the County’s policy framework.

### **1.3 Findings and Potential Action Steps**

#### **1a. Support the Development of a Regional Agricultural Cooperative**

**Findings:** Small and mid-sized farmers in Nevada County are a significant growing segment of agricultural producers but face challenging barriers to accessing stable, high-volume, consistent markets. To address the barriers, a partnership formed among Sierra Harvest, Briar Patch, the California Center for Cooperative Development and a multi-stakeholder body including farm business owners and farmworkers, and buyer representatives. The partnership has begun the process of assessing the feasibility of a Sierra Nevada Farmer Cooperative (SNFC) community food hub, a farmer-led, farmer-driven initiative to strengthen regional food systems by enhancing market access and economic viability for local producers. Ensuring the long-term financial sustainability of the cooperative is an opportunity to ensure the long-term economic viability of Nevada County’s agriculture.

**Potential Actions:**

- Secure funding to complete the financial feasibility study, financial projections, and a business plan for a cooperative food hub.
- Establish a local preference procurement ordinance that sets clear goals and targets for sourcing from the SNFC for county institutions and encourages schools, senior centers, hospitals, and other large institutions to coordinate food purchasing through the cooperative. This coordinated effort would provide a

stable foundation for local food procurement and help normalize local sourcing across sectors.

- Explore County partnership opportunities to help acquire facility spaces (shared-use cold storage, wash/pack space, a delivery hub) and/or explore County-owned property for below-market lease or co-location opportunities for facilities.
- Complete needs assessment of local and regional producers to determine the scale and type(s) of need for value-added food processing infrastructure. (Also see 2c below).

**Description:** The cooperative food hub would facilitate shared distribution, collaborative sales, and streamlined aggregation for regional farmers to efficiently expand sales with public institutions. Since early 2021, the SNFC partnership group has been convening and has led various focus groups meetings, surveys, and research to inform the need for a cooperative food hub. This work built off of the Food System Assessment conducted in 2020 that identified several challenges and opportunities that a food hub could address. The partnership is seeking funding to complete the financial feasibility study, financial projections, and a business plan.

The vision for the SNFC is to both increase access to wholesale markets, and to own and shape those markets—capturing more value, building regional resilience, and reinvesting in the farming community. Cooperative farms would also collectively crop plan to leverage access to larger markets, e.g. rather than one farm being expected to provide total volume of the preferred product type for a school meal service, farmers would collaborate to meet that demand. In addition, inclusion of buying partners on the committee and engagement process also enables cooperative farmers access and knowledge of what are the preferred types, varieties, and volumes needed by larger-scale buyers.

The cooperative would include both producers and buyers located across Nevada, Placer, Yuba, and El Dorado counties, providing economies of scale at the regional level to leverage cooperative power and strengthen the ability to succeed by establishing:

- 1) *Cooperative Sales & Aggregation:* Establishing a shared marketing and sales strategy, to increase demand and improve farmer income.
- 2) *Infrastructure & Logistics Development:* Implementing an efficient food distribution system by utilizing dispersed aggregation points rather than immediate investment in permanent infrastructure.
- 3) *Farmer Support Services & Benefits:* Providing training on produce standards, packaging, and food safety while formalizing shared services such as bulk buying and equipment sharing.

The development of the SNFC as a regional food hub is a clear response to years of community input that have identified the need for expanding market channels and increasing cooperation within the farming and ranching community to achieve economies of scale. In addition, it would implement the County General Plan Agricultural Element Policy 16.11 that calls for developing and promoting a marketing program for Nevada County grown products. The Penn Valley Area Plan identified the need for a refrigeration center as well as other shared spaces for agricultural products. The Nevada County Economic Development Element supports the need for increasing local food procurement practices. Together with the 2020 Food System Assessment, these planning documents express alignment with the goals of the SNFC.

### **1b. Increase Opportunities for Value-added Food Processing**

**Findings:** The 2020 Nevada County Food System Assessment identified 11 key opportunities to strengthen the local food system, one being the need to “expand use of restaurant commercial kitchen space for processing shelf stable products from local produce.” This view was echoed in a Farmer Listening Session held in October 2023 by Sierra Harvest and again in stakeholder workshops held for this assessment. What has not been captured in these accounts is a comprehensive understanding of the scope and type of processing facility needed, whether several facilities serving different functions are needed, and the production patterns that would support such infrastructure.

#### **Potential Actions:**

- Complete needs assessment of local and regional producers to determine the scale and type(s) of need for value-added food processing infrastructure. To determine the scope and scale, part of this study should assess both production capacity as well as current consumer demand and market opportunities for locally grown and produced value-added foods within Nevada County and the surrounding region.
- Implement AB 626 (Microenterprise Home Kitchens (MEHKOs)) in Nevada County to permit home kitchens for retail use and effectively legalizing home-based food businesses. Determine an appropriate oversight agency to administer permitting in coordination with the Nevada County Environmental Health Department.
- Continue to implement the Penn Valley Area Plan, Policy ED-1.2, by identifying future sites and incentives for developing an “agricultural centric makers or production space and a shared commercial or commissary kitchen to create value-added agricultural products” and/or other community infrastructure such as refrigeration and freezer space for storage and washing and packing stations, as determined by a countywide or regional needs assessment.

- Develop a business initiative as a part of an “Agricultural Enterprise Program” (see Recommendation 1e below) to assist small producers with navigating local regulations and permitting, and identifying sites and other opportunities.

**Description:** A farm-to-fork culture like the one thriving in Sacramento and the Bay Area seems largely underdeveloped and potentially an untapped opportunity for Nevada County. While direct-to-consumer sales have grown 400 percent (adjusted for inflation) over the last 20 years, this accounts for only raw agricultural products. Value-added processing, which transforms raw agricultural products into higher-value items, can significantly increase revenue for local farmers by broadening markets that meet new demand, especially from the development and expansion of the scratch-cook kitchen program, Community Roots, serving Nevada County public schools. Community Roots is eager to source minimally processed whole ingredients from local producers and has expressed an interest in collaborating with a newly established Agricultural Cooperative (See 1a above). The Cooperative could lead a producer needs and consumer demand assessment as a part of the overall start up activities of the cooperative. An important part of this work will be understanding how to build out processing capacity that is flexible to changing demand so that it meets both current market conditions as well as future growth opportunities, such as expansion in retail and restaurants and the establishment of additional institutional procurement commitments.

Also important to this work is implementing AB 626, which allows Microenterprise Home Kitchens (MEHKOs) by permit and supports a new type of food processing facility. Since the bill passed in 2018, California has seen 350 MEHKOs permitted across the state, with county and city health departments administering the permitting and oversight.

### **1c. Support the Development of a Regional Meat Processing Facility**

**Findings:** For the last two decades there has been a perceived need for a slaughter and custom cut/wrap processing service facility that allows producers to direct-market their livestock products. This use does not conflict with General Plan policies or zoning ordinance permissions for slaughterhouse or processing facilities. Over the past 15 years, the livestock producer community in Nevada County and the surrounding region have conducted three studies to gauge the financial feasibility of a regional slaughter and processing facility.

In 2016, a group of Nevada and Placer County livestock producers and Sierra Foothills Meat Company formed a workgroup and hired a consultant to investigate the feasibility of constructing and operating a multi-species livestock slaughter and processing (cut and wrap) facility on an identified site in Placer County, as a producer-owned cooperative. The consultant determined that the project was feasible based on location, livestock supply, and estimated returns. However, the partnership did not secure the \$3 million in funding required

for construction, and the project faced strong opposition from nearby residents, ultimately putting the effort on hold..

Most recently, the Ranch School has explored the development of a **modular harvest unit (MHU)** to fill the gap for multi-species livestock slaughter and processing (cut and wrap). The concept integrates slaughter and cut/wrap operations into high school educational programming, while providing local producers access to essential processing infrastructure.

Local livestock producers consistently report significant delays and unavailability of processing services. Waitlists at existing facilities force producers to schedule harvests months in advance, creating financial and logistical strain. Given the time-sensitive nature of meat production and the growing consumer interest in locally produced proteins, there is an existing need for regionally accessible, small- to mid-scale processing capacity.

**Potential Actions:**

- **Conduct an assessment of demand to determine market demand**, volume, animal types, operational needs, economic feasibility, and technical and regulatory considerations such as water, waste disposal, and other necessary infrastructure.
- **Document and quantify existing processing gaps.** Undertake a producer survey or working session to document real-time constraints such as current wait times, seasonal bottlenecks, number of head turned away, and impact on producer revenue or animal welfare. Use this data to inform facility sizing, scheduling models, and economic feasibility analyses.
- **Launch a community education and outreach campaign.** Work with local agricultural organizations, FFA programs, and producers to develop outreach materials explaining how small-scale meat processing supports local food systems, reduces animal transport distances, and creates jobs. Include messaging that flips the “*not in my neighborhood*” narrative into “*how can we help*” by highlighting safety, waste management, and odor control technologies.
- **Develop a local buyer and marketing partnership strategy (refer also to 1f).** Pair facility planning with development of a “local protein” branding and buyer education initiative to grow markets for local meats. Partner with restaurants, institutions, and grocers to create transparent farm-to-fork relationships and highlight how local processing infrastructure makes these supply chains viable.
- **Create a producer led working group to assist in facility development.** Form a Livestock Producer Working Group composed of small-scale producers, butchers, educators (e.g., The Ranch School), and local agencies to advise on facility design, business model, and siting. ***Ensure the group plays a lead role in outreach to neighbors and local decision-makers.***

**Description:** Local livestock producers are increasingly turning to direct marketing as a way to increase their revenue by avoiding traditional middlemen like wholesalers, distributors, and retailers. Direct marketing involves utilizing a slaughter and processing facility that offers custom butchery and cut/wrap services. However, meat processors who offer custom cut/wrap services have shifted away from custom work due to the need for economies of scale and consistent supply.

The intention of the 2016 slaughter facility feasibility study and workgroup was to build and operate a USDA-inspected livestock processing facility to provide slaughter and cut/wrap services to producers from Placer and Nevada Counties and throughout the greater Sacramento Region. The intent of that facility was to provide livestock producers with the key infrastructure piece they need in order to direct-market their livestock products to the widest available audience. With the 2016 feasibility study out of date and a community of livestock producers still expressing the need for a custom cut/wrap service facility, the Ranch School could fill this gap for the local community with a smaller-scale facility than envisioned in 2016. At the same time, it would provide a career pathway for soon-to-be graduates to gain skills in operating slaughter and meat processing facilities.

A next step should assess current demand for local processing to understand the volume, animal types, and capacity that an MHU at the Ranch School could provide to the local community of livestock producers.

#### **1d. Develop a Countywide Agritourism Strategy and Program**

**Findings:** The County has already begun the process to support and grow agritourism with the 2018 Agritourism Ordinance that enables farmers to diversify their income through tourism-related activities and small marketing events. To facilitate better relationships and understanding of the policy, the Nevada County Food Policy Council (NCFPC) and the director of Nevada County's Department of Environmental Health have worked together to help agricultural operations successfully put on food-related events.

Several successful agritourism efforts are underway. The Farm Bureau's annual Ag Tours and the NCRCD's annual Farm Day event as well as other public-facing activities have been overwhelmingly successful year after year, demonstrating a local demand for agritourism. At the same time, the *Nevada County Economic Development Plan* calls out food tourism as a key opportunity and the *Nevada County Strategic Tourism Plan*, though not evaluated specifically in the plan's *Destination Strategy*, building agritourism could be a promising strategy to position Nevada County well as a destination brand.

At the policy level, the County's **Agriculture and Forestry Element**—particularly **Objective 16.5** and **Policies 16.10 and 16.11**—already promote agricultural marketing and

diversification. In parallel, the **Economic Development Element contains** complementary objectives supporting **value-added production, local enterprise development, and tourism growth**, which together provide a strong foundation for a more cohesive agritourism framework. However, agritourism is not explicitly referenced in either Element, and clearer integration across agricultural and economic policies would strengthen alignment and implementation.

**Potential Actions:**

- **Build on existing efforts and partnerships** - Develop a countywide strategy by building on existing community efforts such as **Sierra Harvest's Farm Days** program and Farm Guide, the Farm Bureau's **Farm Tours**, and individual farm and ranch events. Begin with a baseline assessment and inventory of successes, challenges, and regulatory needs to guide the expansion of coordinated agritourism efforts.
- **Establish a Nevada County Agritourism Program - Create a program** that includes 1) technical assistance for agritourism activities 2) marketing and promotion, coordinated with other county tourism initiatives; 3) partnerships with government departments, nonprofit organizations, UC Cooperative Extension, schools, and others to implement the program; and 4) economic incentives and options regarding land use entitlement and building permit fees as part of the program.
- **Refine and strengthen existing General Plan policies (Agriculture & Economic Development Elements)** - Review and strengthen existing policies in both the **Agriculture and Forestry Element** (Objective 16.5; Policies 16.10 and 16.11) and the **Economic Development Element** that promote local enterprise, value-added production, and tourism. Explicitly include **agritourism** as a supported activity that advances agricultural marketing, diversification, and rural economic development. Clarify how agritourism contributes to the County's broader economic goals and identify any new implementation measures—such as program coordination, marketing partnerships, or streamlined permitting—to align the County's agricultural and tourism policies..

**Description:** Agritourism offers an opportunity to strengthen both agricultural viability and the rural economy by connecting the public directly to working farms and ranches. Nevada County has already taken meaningful steps to support this through its **2018 Agritourism Ordinance**, which allows a range of small-scale, low-impact agritourism activities without requiring a land use permit—such as farm tours, tastings, and educational events directly tied to agricultural production. This approach has lowered barriers for producers while ensuring activities remain compatible with surrounding agricultural operations.

**The intent of this strategy is to build upon and enhance the County’s existing framework**—not to imply that Nevada County’s process is burdensome, but rather to recognize that in many other counties across California, land use and building permit requirements remain a major constraint for small producers. Nevada County’s current approach offers a model of how local governments can balance flexibility with the protection of agricultural lands and rural character.

Agritourism is increasingly recognized at the state level. The California Department of Food and Agriculture (CDFA) has committed major resources to support agritourism as a driver of rural stability. In 2024, CDFA awarded over \$23 million in Specialty Crop Block Grants, with several projects aimed at strengthening direct-to-consumer models through agritourism. CDFA’s Open Farm Passport Project will bring more than 10,000 visitors to over 130 farms across nine counties—directly connecting people to working farms and generating income through product sales and on-farm experiences. Additionally, CDFA is partnered with UC Agriculture and Natural Resources to host the California Agritourism Summit in May 2025, fostering strategic partnerships and providing a platform for knowledge-sharing among farmers, planners, and community organizers. The UC Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education Program’s Agritourism Program provides resources, information, and trainings for those interested in expanding agritourism.

While the ***Nevada County Agritourism Ordinance*** has taken a low-impact approach by allowing for smaller marketing events and activities, there are lessons learned from other California counties that encourage caution against concerts, weddings and other commercial events/activities as these can be disruptive to surrounding agricultural operations and creep into non-related promotion of the agricultural operation. As the County refines its agritourism strategy, maintaining this **low-impact, small-scale approach** will be key—emphasizing authentic, production-based experiences over large entertainment-oriented events. Clarifying the County’s existing ordinance and programmatic framework within this strategy will help ensure consistent understanding, continued producer participation, and long-term community support.

#### **1e. Develop a Countywide Agricultural Enterprise Program (AEP)**

**Findings:** Nevada County’s agricultural sector faces ongoing challenges related to land access, regulatory complexity, infrastructure, workforce, access to funding, and market development. While several organizations provide valuable services, efforts are often fragmented and lack a central coordinating mechanism. The ***Nevada County Economic Development Plan*** calls for the creation of an Ag and Food work group, highlighting the need for a formal structure to bring together agricultural producers, support organizations, and public agencies. Establishing a countywide ***Agricultural Enterprise Program (AEP)***, anchored by a recurring ***Agricultural Economic Vitality Roundtable***, would provide a

coordinated platform to identify emerging needs, align resources, and advance policies and programs that strengthen the agricultural economy.

At the same time, the County would benefit from a coordinated strategy to pursue and align funding for climate-resilient agriculture, despite growing opportunities at the state and federal levels. Access to grant fundings like CDFA's Healthy Soils Program and USDA's Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) and Beginning Farmer and Rancher Development Program (BFRDP) is often limited to those with the time, knowledge, or technical support to apply—leaving many producers and land managers behind.

While Nevada County's **Agricultural Advisory Commission (AAC)** provides an important forum for formal policy recommendations to the Board of Supervisors, its role is necessarily limited by its **Brown Act** requirements and its focus on regulatory and land use matters. The proposed **Agricultural Enterprise Program (AEP)** and **Agricultural Economic Vitality Roundtable** would not replace or duplicate the AAC's function, but rather complement it by serving as a **non-regulatory, collaborative platform** that can engage a broader network of producers, nonprofits, consumers and agencies in ongoing coordination, innovation, and project development. The AEP would operate outside of formal hearing structures, allowing for more flexible dialogue, joint problem-solving, and partnership building that can feed insights and recommendations back to the AAC and County staff for policy consideration.

#### **Potential Actions:**

- Establish a countywide **AEP** to support land access, marketing, infrastructure, education, regulatory navigation, and coordinated funding for agricultural resilience.
- Create an **Agricultural Economic Vitality Roundtable** composed of producers, nonprofits, government agencies, consumers and business partners to guide the program and meet regularly to identify priorities and inform County planning and mapping efforts.
- Develop a countywide funding strategy that identifies priority grant programs, shared investment goals, and opportunities to leverage existing initiatives and partnerships to attract future funding. Pursue regional and multi-benefit funding opportunities that connect land, water, wildfire, and food system priorities.
- Coordinate with existing partners such as Sierra Harvest, BriarPatch, Bear Yuba Land Trust, and the Nevada County Farm Bureau to build on current initiatives and avoid duplication.
- Integrate the program with broader County economic development and land use goals to support a resilient and thriving working lands economy.
- Ensure the AEP and Roundtable engage stakeholders from both Eastern and Western Nevada County, fostering collaboration across geographic, climatic, and

market differences to support a more connected and resilient **countywide agricultural economy**.

**Description:** A countywide **Agricultural Enterprise Program** would provide the structure and support needed to strengthen Nevada County’s agricultural economy and resilience in a coordinated and strategic way. Guided by an **Agricultural Economic Vitality Roundtable**, the program would serve as a hub for collaboration, policy input, project development and funding alignment—bringing together producers, support organizations, consumers and local agencies to coordinate investments and advance shared priorities. By expanding access to technical assistance, streamlining regulatory navigation, and supporting innovation and land access, the program would help ensure that farming and ranching remains economically viable and resilient in the face of changing conditions.

By building on the strong foundation of collaboration among partners such as Sierra Harvest, Bear Yuba Land Trust, the RCD, Farm Bureau, and BriarPatch, the program could position Nevada County to be significantly more competitive in securing regional, state, and federal funding. The AEP would operate outside of formal hearing structures, allowing for more flexible dialogue, joint problem-solving, and partnership building that can feed insights and recommendations back to the Agricultural Advisory Commission (AAC) and County staff for policy consideration.

This approach would also help the County proactively pursue multi-benefit projects—linking agricultural resilience with wildfire prevention, watershed health, and local food system development—while ensuring equitable access to grant opportunities and technical assistance across both eastern and western Nevada County.

#### **1f. Strengthen Public Education, Community Awareness, & Consumer Connection**

**Findings:** Both agricultural producers, consumers and the organizations that support agriculture understand the critical role of education and awareness in sustaining the county’s agricultural resources. They are eager to grow and enhance some of the already successful programs and identify new actions that raise public awareness, sense of connection, and community commitment to action. Currently there are several successful efforts underway that are capturing the attention of local residents and increasing awareness around the importance of local agriculture. Some of these efforts include the myriad programs of Sierra Harvest, the Farm Bureau’s Farm Tours, the Nevada Union School District’s Career Technical Education (CTE) Agricultural Pathway, Briar Patch’s commitment to supporting local producers, and the producers offering direct-to consumer sales through Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) and farmers’ markets.

#### **Potential Actions:**

- Expand/build on and provide funding support for ag education in schools (e.g., Ranch School, school gardens, farm internships).
- Build on western and eastern food system connections by strengthening coordination between western Nevada County’s producers and eastern County’s growing food, tourism, and institutional markets. Support collaborative distribution, marketing, and education initiatives—such as linking Sierra Harvest’s programs with Truckee-area buyers and restaurants, expanding local food distribution between regions, and developing a shared countywide agricultural brand.
- Increase ag literacy campaigns that highlight the true cost, value, and benefit of local agriculture, drawing inspiration from successful regional models such as the Hudson Valley’s “Know Your Farmer” initiatives.
- Develop a strategic marketing initiative to promote agritourism, elevate the Ranch School and Forever Farms programs, expand awareness of direct-to-consumer sales, and strengthen regional agricultural branding..

**Description:** Education and awareness efforts span a wide range of activities. These can include programming and efforts such as K-12 education programs, agriculture and food education in higher education, community events, on-farm education and events, food security, marketing campaigns, and local agriculture awareness and education through direct-to-consumer and retail.

## **2.0 Agricultural Land Preservation & Guiding Growth**

This part of the initial assessment is based on a review of current efforts in Nevada County to protect agricultural lands and the current land use policy framework including the General Plan and other land use policy documents. The goal of this section is to understand the existing and ongoing efforts regarding agricultural preservation and development pressures. This section brings together insights from existing data, the policy framework, and listening sessions with farmers, ranchers, local experts, and community partners to identify potential actionable strategies, programs and policies that enhance agricultural land protection.

### **Objective 2. Guiding Growth and Agricultural Land Preservation**

*Retain agricultural lands by focusing on protecting agricultural land with policy and conservation tools, and at the same time reducing low density development and urban sprawl and promoting compact, city-centered development.*

## **2.1 Snapshot of Nevada County's Agricultural Land Today**

### **Agricultural Land Inventory and Conversion Trends**

- *Agricultural lands in Nevada County represent about 23 percent of the total land base. Grazing land accounts for 95 percent of agricultural land (133,489 acres), which is dispersed throughout the western portion of the county. Irrigated farmland accounts for five percent (7,389 acres), which is primarily located in Penn Valley and west of Higgins Corner.<sup>15</sup>*
- *272,888 acres of land are protected in Nevada County (including federal, state, and local protected lands, conservation easements, and Williamson Act parcels), or about 43 percent of the county. Of that, approximately 4,583 acres of agricultural lands are permanently protected by conservation easement (all of which are held by the Bear Yuba Land Trust) and 7,542 are currently enrolled in Williamson Act contracts.<sup>16</sup> This equates to only 9 percent of agricultural lands in the county under protection from development.*
- *Between 1984 and 2020, Nevada County saw the conversion of over 21,000 acres of agricultural land, a 13 percent loss.<sup>17</sup>*

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<sup>15</sup> California Department of Conservation, Farmland Mapping and Monitoring Program, 2020

<sup>16</sup> Nevada County Open Data Portal – <https://www.nevadacountyca.gov/604/Open-Data-Portal> (2025); California Conservation Easement Database (CCED) – [www.CALands.org](http://www.CALands.org) (June 2025)

<sup>17</sup> California Department of Conservation, Farmland Mapping and Monitoring Program, 2020

- *In the last 20 years, mapping data shows significant conversion from agricultural lands to urban development taking place around Grass Valley, Penn Valley, Higgins Corners, and Lake of the Pines.*<sup>18</sup>

See Appendix A for detailed land conversion statistics. See Appendix B for maps.

### ***Policy Framework Supporting the Preservation of Agricultural Lands***

Nevada County's policy framework for supporting the preservation of agricultural lands exists within the *Nevada County General Plan*, County area plans, the County Zoning Ordinance, and the Nevada County Local Area Formation Commission (LAFCo) policies.

A land use policy framework for agriculture ensures that agricultural lands remain in agriculture and recognizes agriculture as an important land use to support the economy, rural character, and environmental quality. The following provides a high-level summary of the County's existing policy framework that supports the preservation of agricultural lands. Section 2.4, *Findings and Potential Action Steps* below evaluates their effectiveness and provides recommendations for future actions.

To provide context for this Assessment, it is also important to clarify what a General Plan is and why it matters. **The General Plan** serves as the foundational policy document that guides all land use decisions within the county. By outlining a long-term vision and establishing broad goals alongside specific policies, the General Plan sets the direction for how a community will grow, change, and protect its resources over time. Understanding the role and purpose of the General Plan helps ensure that recommendations related to working lands and agricultural policy are evaluated within the framework of the County's broader land use vision:

*"A general plan outlines the future development of a city or county in broad terms through a series of general policy statements. It is intended to depict a vision of the community's future. A general plan is often considered a local land use "constitution," from which all local land use decisions must derive. Typically covering a period of 20 to 30 years, it includes both broad goals for the community and specific policies and programs designed to achieve those goals."*<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> National Land Cover Database (NLCD), 2003-2023

<sup>19</sup> *General Plans and Zoning A toolkit for building healthy, vibrant communities*. Change Lab Solutions (formerly Public Health, Law & Policy), 2007.

The **County General Plan, Land Use Element** emphasizes the preservation of agricultural lands through several strategies:

- **Maintain distinction between “Community and Rural Regions”.** Policies 1.1.1, 1.1.2, 1.2.2, and 1.2.3 aim to reduce fragmentation of the rural areas of the county, preserve open spaces and agriculture, and promote efficient development in areas with existing services.
- **Williamson Act Participation.** Nevada County utilizes the Williamson Act to establish agricultural preserves. This state program offers property tax incentives to landowners who commit to keeping their land in agricultural or open space uses under long-term contracts, to discourage premature conversion to urban uses.

**Land Use Designations** are a planning tool to designate and map areas for specific purposes, such as residential, commercial, or industrial uses, and to set regulations for how, where, and what kind of development may or may not occur. The County General Plan does not provide for a distinct agricultural land use designation but does provide agriculture as an appropriate use in the following land use designations: *Residential, Estate, Rural, Rural Commercial, and Open Space*. The intent of the General Plan is to be broad and allow the zoning ordinance and zoning districts to implement the goals and policies of the General Plan through specific agriculture districts including the very specific and specialized Agricultural Exclusive (AE) zone.

The **County Zoning Ordinance** establishes zoning regulations that restrict land use to agricultural activities and compatible purposes as a primary use in the following zoning districts: "AG" General Agricultural and "AE" Agricultural Exclusive. In "RA" Residential Agricultural, "FR" Forest & Recreation, and "TPZ" Timber Reserve. The standards in these zoning districts are consistent with all agricultural-oriented General Plan land use designations.

The AE zone falls under the County's Rural District and “provides for the preservation and protection of important agricultural lands that are being used for commercial agricultural production.” The County zoning code (Section 12.01.040) states that **in the AE zone, “Agricultural uses are of primary importance and all other uses determined to be incompatible with agriculture shall not be permitted.”** However, currently the zoning code allows for a wide range of uses in the AE zone which may facilitate agricultural conversion, including: Residential Care Facilities for 6 or fewer people; Day Care Homes (up to 14 children); Transitional and Supportive Housing; Accessory and/or Junior Accessory Unit; Low Barrier Navigation Centers; Residential accessory uses and structures; and Residential Guest Quarters. Several of uses requiring use permits in the AE zone likewise may facilitate

conversion of agricultural operations, including Multiple-Family Dwellings; Bed & Breakfast Inns; Community meeting and social event facilities; Nursery Retail; and Veterinary Hospitals and Clinics.

The **General Plan's Agricultural Element**, through **Objectives 16.2 and 16.3** and related policies, emphasizes preservation of agricultural lands from conversion to non-agricultural uses by supporting the *Right to Farm Ordinance* and efforts of conservation organizations, and maintaining appropriate zoning.

The current **Housing Element** outlines strategies to meet state housing requirements but offers limited direct protection for agricultural lands. While it emphasizes accommodating growth within existing community regions and rural centers, it does not include strong policies that explicitly prevent the conversion of agricultural or resource lands to residential use. The housing site inventory appears to focus largely on infill and previously designated residential areas; however, **there is no clear policy language that restricts housing development on parcels zoned for agriculture**, nor is there a coordinated framework linking housing goals with agricultural land conservation. As a result, the **Housing Element** provides some incidental protection through its emphasis on compact development but lacks proactive measures or zoning safeguards to ensure long-term preservation of agricultural lands. The County is planning to update the **Housing Element** in the next year which provides an opportunity to strengthen alignment with the County's broader land use and conservation policies to avoid unintended land use conflicts and safeguard working landscapes.

**Williamson Act** - The county participates in the Williamson Act program, offering property tax relief to landowners who commit to maintaining their land in agricultural use under long-term contracts. This incentivizes the preservation of agricultural lands and supports the economic viability of farming and ranching operations.

The **Right to Farm Ordinance** is one of the most important economic policy tools, used widely throughout California. It gives farmers and ranchers the ability to farm the land unhindered, protecting them from nuisance complaints that might arise as a result of normal farming and ranching operations. It was updated in 2021 and states that "normal agricultural operations will not be considered a nuisance" and requires notices to buyers of nearby land. The Right to Farm Ordinance is a commitment to agricultural operations within the county.

The County has adopted five distinct **Area Plans**, that serve as a comprehensive land use and zoning guide for different regions in the County, and supplement the General Plan. They do not provide specific agricultural land preservation policies, but

support goals such as maintaining rural character, more compact residential and commercial development patterns, and promoting economic development. See Section 1.1 for a summary on the Penn Valley Area Plan.

The **Nevada County Local Agency Formation Commission (LAFCo)** is an independent regulatory body that establishes policies to encourage the orderly growth and development of the local agencies within the county. Though not a land use authority, among the LAFCo's core purposes is preservation of open space and prime agricultural lands. The Nevada County LAFCo applies its policies when it receives proposals for changes of organization or reorganization (e.g. annexations and changes in cities' spheres of influence). According to its policies, when those proposals are likely to result in the conversion of prime agriculture/open space land use to other uses, the LAFCo applies a heightened level of review using a set criteria to determine the likely impact on agricultural lands.

**Cannabis** is not classified as traditional "agriculture" under the General Plan or zoning code and is instead regulated as a distinct land use through the *County's Cannabis Ordinance*. While cultivation is allowed in certain rural zones, including agricultural and forest lands, it requires a separate permit and must comply with specific regulations beyond those for conventional farming. Because of this, cannabis does not qualify for agricultural benefits like the Williamson Act or right-to-farm protections. Despite this, cannabis plays an increasingly important role in the local economy, quickly becoming one of the county's highest-value crops. It offers new income opportunities for some landowners and farmers but also raises concerns around land use conflicts, water use, and regulatory costs. As a result, cannabis remains a growing but tightly managed sector that needs to be carefully balanced with the county's broader land use and conservation priorities.

## **2.2 Community Partnerships**

A wide range of local and regional organizations play an active role in supporting Nevada County's working lands and shaping the agricultural land use framework. These community partners contribute to land stewardship, farm viability, policy development, and conservation efforts.

### **Land Conservation & Stewardship Organizations**

- **Bear Yuba Land Trust (BYLT)**  
An accredited land trust serving the Bear and Yuba River watersheds. Leads conservation efforts on working and natural lands through the purchase of agricultural conservation easements, fee title ownership of agricultural lands, stewardship agreements, and community outreach. Some of the most critical efforts

to date in protecting agricultural land in Nevada County have been through BYLT's purchase of agricultural conservation easements through its Forever Farms Program, launched in partnership with Sierra Harvest, BriarPatch Food Co-op and Tahoe Food Hub. (Refer also to Section 3).

- **Nevada County Resource Conservation District (NCRCD)**  
The NCRCD provides technical assistance to landowners for conservation practices, including erosion control, invasive weed management, and pasture improvement.
- **Sierra Nevada Conservancy (SNC)**  
Provides funding and regional leadership for land conservation, climate resilience, and sustainable land use across the Sierra Nevada region.
- **California Department of Conservation – Division of Land Resource Protection**  
Offers state-level programs, such as the Sustainable Agricultural Lands Conservation Program (SALC), that support farmland protection and land use planning aligned with climate and conservation goals.

#### **Agricultural Advocacy & Producer Support**

- **Nevada County Farm Bureau**  
Advocates on behalf of farmers and ranchers regarding zoning, land use policies, and regulatory challenges impacting agricultural operations.
- **Sierra Harvest**  
Focuses is a Nevada County nonprofit that trains farmers, educates students, and engages the community to build a thriving local food economy where farms are viable and everyone has access to fresh, nutritious food.on transforming lives and strengthening the community through fresh, local, seasonal food.
- **Nevada County Cannabis Alliance**  
Represents licensed cannabis cultivators and works to ensure cannabis regulation aligns with broader agricultural and land use goals.

#### **Planning & Resource Management Partners**

- **Nevada County Planning Department**  
Oversees the County General Plan, zoning, and policy implementation affecting rural lands, agricultural zoning districts, and land conservation strategies.
- **Nevada County Department of Agriculture, Weights and Measures**  
Carries out state-mandated programs that protect consumers, producers, and the environment. Core responsibilities include enforcing laws and regulations related to

pesticide use, direct marketing, organic certification, pest prevention, and weights and measures to ensure fairness and accuracy in commerce. The department also provides technical assistance and outreach to producers and the public to promote compliance and support a safe, equitable, and sustainable agricultural industry.

- **Nevada County Agricultural Advisory Commission**

Advises the Board of Supervisors and Agricultural Commissioner on matters affecting the agricultural community, including land use, policy, and program implementation. The Commission serves as a public forum for discussion of issues related to agricultural preservation, economic viability, and resource management. Its membership represents a cross-section of the local agricultural industry, including farming, ranching, forestry, and related enterprises. Meetings are conducted in accordance with the Brown Act, providing transparency and opportunity for public participation in decisions that shape the future of agriculture in Nevada County.

- **Local Agency Formation Commission (LAFCo)**

Administers proposal for city/county land use boundaries, special districts, and service delivery areas (refer to description above).

- **Nevada City, Grass Valley, and Truckee**

Administers housing, transportation, and development policies.

### **2.3 Core Considerations for the Community**

Nevada County's agricultural land base has been gradually shrinking since 1984, with agricultural lands being converted to development both in concentrated areas where the County has planned for development, as well as areas throughout the western portion of the county due to the growing popularity of rural estates, which have subdivided agricultural lands to make way for low density housing. However, as Section 1.0 discusses, ***agriculture remains a dominant land use in the county, with a strong set of community partners building momentum toward strengthening the underlying drivers that support and grow the agricultural economy.*** At the same time, Section 3.0 reveals that the community is taking meaningful steps to integrate agricultural land preservation, soil health, water security, and land stewardship as core strategies for community and resource resilience.

As a community's demographics, economic drivers, and resiliency goals evolve over time, so do its priorities for the future. One of the main messages heard in stakeholder meetings was the need ***for a clear, contemporary vision for agriculture that reflects today's values and challenges.*** To support the future of the agricultural sector and the land upon which it depends, the County and community partners can work together to define potential opportunities to permanently protect agricultural land and support its continued viability.

## **2.4 Findings and Potential Action Steps**

### **2a. Develop a Collaborative Planning Framework and Map for Significant Agricultural Lands**

**Findings:** Findings from recent stakeholder forums as well as years of collective work and community involvement of several local organizations, show that accessing and retaining land for farming and ranching is increasingly challenging. The Bear Yuba Land Trust’s 2024-2025 Strategic Plan points out that “...farmers are finding it more and more difficult to secure long-term access to land. The supply of properties with suitable soil, terrain, and size is limited. Pressure to subdivide and develop land is growing. Long-term lease agreements are hard to negotiate. On-site housing for farmworkers is often not permitted. And land prices are out of range for new farmers.”

While Nevada County has supportive policies—such as agricultural zoning, Williamson Act contracts, and this current SALC planning effort—there is no formally adopted, countywide map or policy framework identifying its most **significant agricultural resource lands**. The County’s “Important Farmland” GIS layer offers a starting point, but stakeholders emphasized the need **for a shared, transparent, and policy-embedded mapping process** that reflects local knowledge and integrates agricultural, ecological, and climate resilience values.

This effort would help the County, cities, and partners **speak with one voice** about where agriculture should be protected, where compatible rural uses may occur, and how to guide future growth and conservation investments.

#### **Potential Actions:**

- **Co-define “Significant Agricultural Lands.”** Convene a multi-stakeholder process (County Planning, RCD, Agricultural Commissioner, cities, BYLT, producers, NID, and community partners) to set criteria—e.g., soils/productivity, water access, parcel size/configuration, existing operations, infrastructure proximity, climate resilience value, habitat connectivity, and risk of conversion. Collaborate on establishing criteria for “Significant Agricultural Resource Lands” and an agricultural overlay for the General Plan.
- **Adopt the “Significant Agricultural Lands Map” and Criteria into Policy -** Once identified, the “Significant Agricultural Resource Lands” map and criteria should be formally adopted by the Board of Supervisors—either as a General Plan appendix, map overlay, or through a Board resolution—to serve as the

County's reference framework for farmland conservation and agricultural investments.

- **Integrate into CEQA, annexation, and capital planning processes** - Direct County staff, cities, and LAFCo to reference and integrate the adopted "Significant Agricultural Resource Lands" map in project review processes and annexation decisions. Recognize the conversion of these lands as a potentially significant impact under CEQA and require corresponding mitigation (e.g., easements or funding for land protection). Incorporate the map into capital improvement planning to ensure public investments do not inadvertently encourage farmland conversion.
- **Align incentives and funding priorities to significant agricultural lands** - Use the identified farmland and ranchland areas as the geographic priority for incentive-based programs and funding opportunities, such as Forever Farms, conservation easements, technical assistance, and infrastructure support. Offer expedited permitting and fee reductions for agricultural improvements and worker housing located within these designated areas.
- Based on the mapping results that establishes the "Significant Agricultural Resource Lands" and an agricultural overlay, build a case and develop goals for expanding the use of agricultural conservation easements, "Forever Farms," and evergreen leases in those designated areas.
- **Formalize Interagency Coordination** - Develop a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) among the County, cities, LAFCo, RCD, and conservation partners to ensure consistent use of the "Significant Agricultural Resource Lands" map in local decision-making, annexation review, and grant funding coordination.
- **Build and sustain an endowment for sustaining the Forever Farms program** in partnership with community organizations such as Bear Yuba Land Trust, Sierra Harvest, BriarPatch Food Co-op, and other agricultural and conservation partners. These partners, working with the County and the RCD, could establish and manage a dedicated fund that connects local farmland and working ranchland conservation goals to broader climate resilience and conservation funding sources. The endowment would provide a stable, long-term funding base to acquire, protect, and steward farmland, while leveraging additional state, federal, and philanthropic investments. by connecting conservation goals to a climate resilience district for conservation funding (see 3a) as a means to leverage other conservation funds.
- **Identify Land for Expanded Crop and Livestock Production.** As part of the mapping process, evaluate underutilized lands suitable for crop expansion, rotational grazing, or diversified production to support food security and local market growth.

**Description:** This strategy builds on Nevada County’s existing agricultural preservation framework **by creating a shared, actionable map and policy foundation** for long-term farmland protection. The 2019 Forever Farms Program, launched by Bear Yuba Land Trust, Sierra Harvest, BriarPatch Food Co-op, and Tahoe Food Hub, demonstrated how local collaboration can make farmland more affordable and secure through buy-protect-sell models and evergreen leases. In 2020, the partners purchased and conserved 3,718 acres of Mountain Bounty Farm as the first Forever Farm, offering a renewable 10-year lease, farmer housing, and operational infrastructure—setting a model for sustainable, equitable land access.

By aligning these innovative tenure programs with County conservation planning, establishing clear mapping criteria, and securing long-term funding through an endowment, Nevada County can protect its most productive and climate-resilient working lands. This coordinated framework will provide a durable foundation for land-use planning, funding alignment, and equitable access to farmland—ensuring that agriculture remains a defining and thriving element of the County’s future.

## **2b. Refine and Align Agricultural and Economic Development Policies and Land Use Regulations**

**Findings:** Nevada County’s **Agricultural** and **Economic** Development Elements establish strong foundations for supporting agriculture, working lands, and rural enterprise. Both recognize agriculture as an essential part of the County’s economy, community character, and environmental health. Opportunities now exist to refine and enhance these existing policies to better align with emerging strategies from the *Community Conservation Plan for Agriculture* and to strengthen coordination across County departments and community partners.

These refinements can focus on improving the connection between land conservation and economic development goals—supporting diversified farm and ranch operations, local food systems, agritourism, and resource resilience—while ensuring County policies remain clear, practical, and implementable through collaborative partnerships.

### **Potential Actions:**

- **Enhance and align existing policies within the Agricultural and Economic Development Elements** to reflect shared priorities for resource resilience, diversified agricultural enterprises, agritourism, and long-term land access. The final *Community Conservation Plan for Agriculture in Nevada County* can serve as a starting point for identifying refinements. These refinements should take the form of targeted policy updates or administrative guidance, not a formal General Plan amendment.

- **Refine the zoning code’s Agricultural Exclusive (AE) zone** to be more restrictive on what is allowed by right, with development permits, and with use permits so that the code is not inadvertently allowing conversion of important agricultural lands.
- **Integrate the Significant Agricultural Resource Lands Map** and related data tools into County planning, zoning, and economic development programs through Board resolution or as a referenced policy map (see Strategy 1d).
- **Strengthen County–Community coordination** by establishing an implementation framework among County departments (Planning, Environmental Health, Agricultural Commissioner, and Economic Development) and community partners (RCD, Bear Yuba Land Trust, Sierra Harvest, Farm Bureau). Regular coordination meetings or annual progress reviews could help align grant efforts, priorities, and policy actions. The Ag Vitality Roundtable could serve as a platform for this coordination (see 2a).
- **Link agricultural and economic development initiatives** by ensuring the County’s existing economic development programs and communications ***recognize agriculture and working lands as central to the local economy***. The County can coordinate with community partners to highlight agricultural enterprises in business outreach, marketing, and tourism materials, and support partner-led efforts that advance value-added production, agritourism, and local food system development..
- **As a part of the Housing Element update**, provide clear policy language that restricts housing development on parcels zoned for agriculture, and link housing goals with agricultural land conservation.

**Description:** Refining and aligning County policies across agriculture and economic development will ensure consistency with the *Community Conservation Plan for Agriculture* and reinforce the County’s role as a community partner agency. Through small but strategic enhancements—updated mapping, clearer policy connections, and lightweight coordination with local organizations—the County can help strengthen the link between agricultural viability, economic opportunity, and land stewardship, supporting a resilient working lands economy without requiring new regulatory programs or major plan amendments.

## **2c. Improve Incentives and Expand Support for Farm Succession to Protect the Future of Working Lands**

**Findings:** Nevada County’s participation in the Williamson Act remains an important and effective tool for preserving agricultural land and supporting the economic viability of farming and ranching. The program provides property tax benefits to landowners who commit to keeping their land in agricultural use and already accommodates intergenerational transfer and stewardship-based management.

However, enrollment has declined in recent years, ***suggesting that the challenge lies not in the program's structure but in awareness, outreach, and long-term engagement.***

Many landowners, particularly small or nontraditional producers, are unfamiliar with eligibility criteria or unsure how the program complements other land management goals. At the same time, Nevada County's agricultural land base is aging, and many producers face barriers in planning for succession or transitioning operations to new farmers and ranchers.

By enhancing outreach, providing education, and developing complementary tools that work alongside the Williamson Act, the County and its partners can help more landowners take advantage of existing incentives and strengthen pathways for intergenerational continuity in working lands.

**Potential Actions:**

- **Enhance awareness and participation in the Williamson Act** through targeted outreach, simplified communication materials, and workshops that help landowners understand eligibility, compatible uses, and the program's flexibility in supporting intergenerational land transfer and stewardship.
- **Evaluate opportunities to complement existing incentives**—such as conservation easement support, bridge financing for succession, or technical assistance programs—that can fill gaps not addressed by the Williamson Act while reinforcing its conservation intent.
- **Partner with state and regional partners** to secure funding that supports voluntary conservation, economic viability, and generational transfer of farmland (such as Sierra Nevada Conservancy (SNC), UCCE, California FarmLink and UCANR).
- **Explore the establishment of a Climate Resiliency District** as a framework for financing and coordinating land conservation incentives. (See 3b).
- **Develop a countywide farm succession support network** in partnership with organizations like Sierra Harvest, FarmLink, Bear Yuba Land Trust, and the Farm Bureau to connect landowners, retiring farmers, and beginning producers with legal, financial, land access resources, and regional and statewide lessons learned.

**Description:** Nevada County's ongoing participation in the Williamson Act and Bear Yuba Land Trust's strong expertise in facilitating land conservation transactions provides the foundation for expanding agricultural land protection and supporting long-term stewardship. Building upon this base, the County and its partners can increase outreach, expand conservation programs, and connect landowners with technical and financial assistance to plan for generational transfer. These efforts can strengthen continuity in ownership and management, keep agricultural lands productive, and sustain the local agricultural

economy—aligning with the broader goals of conservation, resource resilience, and community vitality.

### **3.0 Agricultural Resource Resilience Assessment**

This part of the Assessment looks at how well Nevada County is positioned to support its farms and ranches in the face of a changing climate. Agriculture is uniquely vulnerable to climate change because it depends so directly on healthy soils, reliable water, and stable weather patterns. As climate-related threats like drought, wildfire, and shifting growing conditions intensify, the stakes for agricultural resilience grow higher.

In recent years, the federal government has increased support for resource resilience, but the long-term availability and consistency of that funding remains uncertain. This shifting federal landscape highlights the importance of developing local strategies and stable, place-based solutions to protect agricultural land and livelihoods.

The goal of this section is to provide a clear snapshot of current conditions, identify emerging risks and pressures, and surface opportunities to strengthen resilience across Nevada County’s agricultural landscape. Through workshops, interviews with farmers, ranchers, and local experts, and a review of current plans and programs, this assessment identifies key gaps and lays the groundwork for community-led strategies to help agriculture adapt and thrive.

#### ***Objective 3. Agricultural Resource Resilience***

*Advance climate-smart land management practices that enhance water resources, habitat, and soil health, address climate challenges, while delivering social and economic benefits.*

#### **3.1 Snapshot of Nevada County’s Current Agricultural Resource Resiliency Efforts**

This section takes stock of the County’s current resource resiliency efforts—what plans, policies, and partnerships are already in place to help communities, farms, and natural systems adapt to a changing climate. By reviewing existing work, we can identify where there’s momentum to build on, where gaps still exist, and how these efforts connect to Nevada County’s agricultural and working lands. This snapshot will help us shape future strategies so they are well connected in what’s already underway.

##### **1. Existing Policy Framework Related to Resource Resilient Agriculture**

Nevada County’s policy framework for supporting agricultural resilience exists within the Nevada County General Plan.

**County and Agency Programs** - Key county programs and policies supporting agricultural resilience:

- **General Plan**

***Support for Sustainable Agricultural Practices*** - The General Plan encourages agricultural practices that conserve natural resources, such as soil and water, and that are compatible with environmental conservation goals. This includes promoting water-efficient irrigation methods, water reuse alternatives and soil improvement and conservation techniques.

***Preservation of Agricultural Lands*** - The General Plan emphasizes minimizing the conversion of important agricultural areas to non-agricultural uses. It seeks to reduce the adverse impacts of incompatible land uses on agricultural operations and to maintain the productivity of agricultural lands.

- **Resource Resiliency Roadmap** - Nevada County is currently developing its first-ever climate action and adaptation plan to address the current challenges posed by climate change, such as wildfires, droughts, and extreme weather events. This initiative aims to create a comprehensive county-wide roadmap for reducing greenhouse gas emissions and enhancing community resilience.
- **Nevada Irrigation District (NID)** - NID plays a vital role in supporting agricultural resilience by delivering water to over 32,000 acres of farmland. Crops receiving the most irrigation by acreage are irrigated pasture (20,167 acres) and family gardens/orchards (6,444 acres).

However, NID faces significant challenges in maintaining reliable water deliveries due to aging infrastructure and external factors. Recent delays in repairs to PG&E's infrastructure, particularly at Lake Spaulding, have disrupted water conveyance systems, leading to emergency conservation measures and impacting irrigation customers during critical periods. Additionally, the presence of algae, invasive species and vegetation within irrigation canals poses challenges to water flow and delivery efficiency.

To address these issues, NID is implementing an ***Integrated Vegetation Management Program*** and engaging in long-term planning through its "**Plan for Water**" initiative, aiming to enhance system reliability and adapt to changing climate conditions. These efforts are essential to ensure the sustainability of local agriculture and the broader community's water needs.

**Nevada County Agricultural Commissioner's Office** – Administers state-mandated programs that protect agriculture, natural resources, and the public through pest prevention, detection, and management. The office supports agricultural resource **resiliency** by coordinating invasive pest monitoring, biological control, and weed management programs, and by partnering with regional agencies and landowners to reduce threats to crops, rangelands, and native ecosystems.

## **2. Current Projects and Programs that Address Agricultural Resilience**

- **California Department of Food and Agriculture (CDFA) - Healthy Soils Program Incentives Grants (HSP)**

The HSP offers financial incentives to farmers and ranchers to implement conservation management practices that improve soil health, sequester carbon, and reduce greenhouse gas emissions. In 2024, Nevada County farmers benefited from the Central Sierra HSP, which allocated \$3.4 million to support soil health initiatives across eight counties, including Nevada County. This funding aimed to implement conservation practices such as compost application, cover cropping, and hedgerow planting. The program prioritized equitable distribution, ensuring at least one project per county and dedicating over 25 percent of funds to socially disadvantaged farmers and ranchers.

- **USDA's Beginning Farmer and Rancher Development Program (BFRDP)**

Sierra Harvest was awarded over \$750,000 in federal support from the USDA's Beginning Farmer and Rancher Development Program (BFRDP) in November 2024. This three-year grant aims to strengthen the support and resources available to new farmers and ranchers in Nevada, Placer, Yuba, and El Dorado counties. With this funding, Sierra Harvest plans to expand its efforts in providing technical support, outreach, and education to help farmers and ranchers build successful, sustainable farm businesses. Programs funded by this grant will include specialized training, business planning, grant coaching, support with market development, land access, and connections to key resources and collaborators that empower farmers to innovate, remain resilient, and grow the regional food system. Funding from the BFRDP ends in September 2027 with uncertainty about renewal.

- **USDA's Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP)**

The USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) has distributed approximately \$13 million to landowners in Nevada County through the EQIP since 2015. This funding has supported a range of conservation practices,

including forest thinning and pruning, conversion of brush fields to timberland or pasture, irrigation system efficiency improvements, fencing for improved livestock distribution, and wildlife habitat enhancements.

- **USDA’s Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP)**

The NRCS has distributed approximately \$800,000 to landowners in Nevada County. The CSP offers financial and technical assistance to agricultural producers to enhance and maintain conservation practices on their land. CSP supports a range of activities, including soil health improvement, water quality enhancement, and wildlife habitat preservation.

- **Nevada County Composting Program**

Nevada County has implemented a composting program in compliance with California's Senate Bill 1383 (SB 1383), which mandates the reduction of organic waste in landfills to curb methane emissions. As of January 2025, residents in unincorporated areas of Nevada County are required to separate food and organic waste from regular trash.

The composting program plays a key role in supporting future agricultural resilience by turning food and organic waste into nutrient-rich compost. This compost can be applied to local farms and ranches to improve soil health, boost water retention, and reduce the need for synthetic inputs—all essential for adapting to drought, extreme weather, and changing growing conditions. By starting to create a local, circular system that returns organic matter to the land, the program helps strengthen both resource resilience and long-term agricultural sustainability.

### **3. Local and Regional Organizations Working on Agricultural Resiliency Issues**

As noted in previous sections of this report, several local and regional organizations in Nevada County are actively collaborating on various programs and initiatives to enhance agricultural resilience through conservation, training, education, climate smart ag practices and strategic planning. This network of partnerships provides a strong foundation to build on for future efforts:

- **Nevada County Resource Conservation District (NCRCD):** The NCRCD provides technical assistance to landowners for conservation practices, including erosion control, invasive weed management, irrigation practices, education and pasture improvement.
- **Nevada-Placer Weed Management Area (WMA) Group:** A cooperative partnership of agencies and land managers coordinated by the County Agricultural Commissioners

to prevent and control invasive weeds through education, early detection, and joint management efforts.

- **UC Cooperative Extension – Nevada/Placer Counties**

Provides research-based support, technical assistance, and educational resources for landowners, including soil health, irrigation management, and crop planning.

- **Sierra Harvest:** This nonprofit organization focuses on transforming lives and strengthening the community through fresh, local, seasonal food. They offer programs like the Ag Skills workshop series to build core farming and ranching skills and have been awarded over \$750,000 from the USDA’s Beginning Farmer and Rancher Development Program as discussed above.

- **Nevada County Farm Bureau:** As a local chapter of the California Farm Bureau Federation, they advocate for the agricultural community, providing resources and support to farmers and ranchers to ensure the sustainability of agriculture in the county.

- **Bear Yuba Land Trust (BYLT):** This is an accredited land trust that is one of 94 community-based land trusts in California. BYLT works to protect and enhance natural, historical, cultural, and agricultural lands in the Bear and Yuba watersheds. They collaborate with local partners to conserve working landscapes and support agricultural viability.

- **Nevada County Food Policy Council:** Comprising diverse stakeholders, the council conducted a food assessment of the region to establish a baseline for the regional food system, highlighting the need for county-wide policies that support local agriculture to enhance economic vitality and food security.

- **BriarPatch Food Co-op:** This co-op plays a pivotal role in fostering a resilient food system in the region through its commitment to sustainability, local agriculture, and community engagement. As a community-owned cooperative, BriarPatch prioritizes sourcing from local and regional farms, ensuring that fresh, organic produce is readily available to its members and customers. Their sustainability initiatives include diverting food waste from landfills and providing inedible organic waste to local farmers for composting and animal feed. Additionally, BriarPatch’s PatchWorks volunteer program encourages community members to engage with local nonprofits, strengthening the social fabric and support systems important for a healthy local food economy. In 2014, BriarPatch drafted “A Common Wealth Food System, Proposal For Strengthening Our Food Shed by Means of a Local Food Hub” , concluding that a local food hub is needed to expand the local food system and provide local producers with a high

volume wholesale outlet. Their work since has established the forward-planting crop-planning and bidding system that BriarPatch uses with local and regional producers. They are also a key partner in the effort to establish a Sierra Nevada Farmer Cooperative.

- **Forever Farms Initiative:** A notable collaboration between BYLT and Sierra Harvest is the **Forever Farms** initiative, launched in partnership with BriarPatch Food Co-op and Tahoe Food Hub. This program aims to secure and protect farmland in Nevada County for long-term agricultural use. The inaugural project under this initiative focused on **Mountain Bounty Farm**, the region's largest Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) operation and largest certified organic farm in Nevada County. Facing the expiration of their lease and potential loss of farmland, BYLT, with support from Sierra Harvest and BriarPatch, worked to purchase the 37-acre Birchville Road property. The goal was to place the land into a conservation trust and establish a long-term lease with Mountain Bounty Farm, ensuring the land remains dedicated to organic food production and farmer training. This effort not only preserved a vital local food source but also set a precedent for protecting other farms in the region.

### **3.2 Core Considerations for the Community**

Nevada County stands at a pivotal moment in shaping a resource -resilient future for its farms and ranches. Agriculture has long been a cornerstone of the County's economy, culture, and landscape, and while the sector faces increasing pressures—from drought and wildfire to rising costs, land access challenges, and generational transitions—it also remains a critical part of the solution. Agriculture's close relationship with natural systems uniquely positions it to drive climate mitigation and adaptation through land stewardship, soil health, and water conservation.

The County is not starting from scratch. Nevada County has already taken meaningful steps to support agricultural resilience through programs like its Williamson Act implementation, General Plan policy framework, right-to-farm protections, Forever Farms initiative, and compliance with SB 1383 through a growing composting program. The development of the RRR presents a timely opportunity to **enhance these existing policies**, clarify linkages between agricultural viability and climate action, and align local programs around shared goals for soil health, water security, and land stewardship.

At the same time, farmers, ranchers, educators, nonprofits, and public agencies are already working collaboratively on the ground to build resilience. Programs like the Healthy Soils Initiative, EQIP, and Sierra Harvest's USDA-funded support for new farmers are bringing technical and financial resources to local producers. NID is actively working to modernize its infrastructure and adapt to climate pressures through its "**Plan for Water.**" Local schools

are investing in the next generation of land stewards through CTE pathways, the Ranch School, and farm-to-school programs that strengthen food system literacy and local supply chains.

Perhaps most importantly, a strong collaborative network already exists across the county—anchored by partners like the NCRCD, Bear Yuba Land Trust, Sierra Harvest, and BriarPatch Food Co-op. Initiatives like the **Forever Farms** partnership demonstrate the potential to align land conservation, food production, and long-term community benefit in tangible and lasting ways.

Moving forward, the County’s focus should be on **enhancing existing policy tools** and **supporting these collaborative efforts** through alignment of land use, conservation, and climate planning. Rather than pursuing major policy overhauls, Nevada County can strengthen agricultural resilience by clarifying and connecting current programs, investing strategically in shared priorities, and continuing to work in partnership with the agricultural community to ensure farmland preservation, regenerative practices, and on-farm innovation remain central to the County’s climate action and adaptation goals.

### **3.3 Findings and Potential Actions**

#### **3a. Integrate Agricultural Preservation into Nevada County’s Resource Resiliency Roadmap (RRR)**

**Findings:** Nevada County’s first climate adaptation plan (**Resource Resiliency Roadmap, (RRR)**) is already recognizing agriculture and working lands as a key component of the County’s climate strategy. Agricultural stakeholders are actively engaged in the plan’s development, ensuring that local producer perspectives and on-the-ground realities help shape future climate adaptation and mitigation actions..

Preserving farmland and rangeland, promoting regenerative and water-efficient practices, and supporting on-farm modernization all contribute to reducing greenhouse gas emissions, enhancing carbon sequestration, and improving drought and wildfire resilience. The County’s existing programs—such as **Williamson Act participation, Forever Farms, Healthy Soils**, and **EQIP**—already advance these outcomes.

This effort, the **Community Conservation Plan for Agriculture (CCPA)** also complements and supports this work by providing the agricultural community and partners a roadmap for land stewardship, conservation, and economic vitality. Together, the Conservation Plan and RRR provide a **coordinated framework** for aligning agricultural preservation, climate action, and community resilience.

### **Potential Actions**

Integrate goals for agricultural land conservation and conservation-oriented farming and ranching and land management practices into the ongoing RRR preparation as follows:

- **Continue coordination between the RRR team and agricultural partners** to ensure ongoing representation of agricultural priorities and practical implementation perspectives.
- **Highlight working lands as a climate resilience asset** by documenting co-benefits such as carbon sequestration, water recharge, wildfire mitigation, and local food security within the RRR framework.
- **Support the permanent protection of existing agricultural farm and rangeland through agricultural conservation easements** and ownership for long-term sustainability of the local food supply.
- **Align agricultural land conservation goals** between the RRR and CCPA to reinforce the role of farmland and rangeland protection in climate mitigation, adaptation, and long-term economic sustainability.
- **Support participation in voluntary incentive programs**—including Healthy Soils, SWEEP, and EQIP—to promote regenerative practices and energy-efficient upgrades on farms and ranches.
- **Leverage partnerships and existing funding mechanisms** to jointly implement, track, and communicate agricultural resilience actions through both the RRR and the CCPA processes.

**Description:** Agriculture is already an integral part of Nevada County’s RRR process. Continuing to align farmland protection, regenerative practices, and on-farm innovation with the County’s climate roadmap will strengthen both efforts and highlight agriculture’s essential role in achieving community resilience.

The *Community Conservation Plan for Agriculture* directly complements the RRR by offering a sector-specific implementation path—grounded in agricultural realities and partnerships—that helps operationalize the County’s broader climate and resource goals. By aligning these two efforts, Nevada County can ensure that agriculture remains recognized and supported as both a climate solution and cornerstone of community resilience, while maintaining consistency across land use, conservation, and climate planning initiatives.

### **3b. Explore a Long-term Funding Mechanism: Climate Resilience District (CRD)**

**Findings:** Nevada County’s working lands are increasingly vulnerable to climate-related threats such as wildfire, drought, and water scarcity—jeopardizing both agricultural viability and broader community resilience. While various efforts are underway to address these risks, there is currently no coordinated, long-term funding mechanism dedicated to

implementing climate adaptation strategies across agricultural and rural landscapes. Uncertainty around the availability and consistency of federal funding further underscores the need for a dependable, locally driven solution.

A **Climate Resilience District (CRD)**—authorized under California Senate Bill 852 (2022)—could provide a structured framework for long-term financing and coordinating climate-smart land management, wildfire mitigation, water resource protection, and regenerative agricultural practices. The **Sonoma County Regional Climate Protection Authority** was the first entity in California designated as a CRD, serving as a model for how local governments can integrate resilience funding and planning.

**Potential Actions:**

- Assess feasibility and leadership options for a Climate Resilience District in Nevada County. This effort could be co-led by the **Nevada County Resource Conservation District (NCRCD)**, with participation from **County Planning**, **Nevada County LAFCo**, **Nevada Irrigation District (NID)** and community partners such as the **Bear Yuba Land Trust** and **Sierra Harvest**.
- Identify sustainable funding mechanisms, including state grants (e.g., SB 852), special assessments, and public-private partnerships.
- Define priority projects that a CRD could support, such as fuels reduction on agricultural lands, Williamson Act funding, sustainable irrigation infrastructure, and adoption of regenerative farming and ranching practices.
- Engage producers, landowners, and rural residents early to ensure the concept reflects on-the-ground needs, supports voluntary participation, and builds broad-based community trust.
- Coordinate with regional peers—including Sonoma County’s CRD—to learn from their governance, funding, and implementation models.
- Collaborate on public education with the NCRCD, Bear Yuba Land Trust, and Climate Action Now to increase understanding of how agricultural and natural resource resilience benefits the entire community.

**Description: A Climate Resilience District** would provide Nevada County with a dedicated vehicle to finance and coordinate climate adaptation efforts across its working landscapes. By aligning land use, resource management, and climate strategies, a CRD could help protect agricultural lands from wildfire and water-related threats while investing in long-term land stewardship and economic resilience.

Exploring this option begins with a **feasibility and coordination process** led by local and regional partners—not a new regulatory body. Building on Nevada County’s strong collaborative network and aligning with the **Community Conservation Plan for Agriculture**

and the **Resource Resiliency Roadmap**, a CRD feasibility effort could position the County to access new state and regional funding tools and strengthen community-based climate resilience across its agricultural and rural lands. See [Preliminary Concept: Climate Resilience District for Nevada County](#).

### **3c. Advance Compost Use for Agricultural Resilience**

**Findings:** Nevada County has established a composting program in compliance with SB 1383, creating an important foundation for residents and businesses to divert organic waste from landfills. Additionally, the County administers a costshare program via Zero FoodPrint which works with counties in California to distribute compost to farms and ranches to promote healthy soil and carbon sequestration. However, Zero FootPrint approved compost is trucked in from outside communities and shipping is costly, creating a barrier for many small crop farmers to utilize the program. To fully realize the resource resiliency and agricultural benefits of composting, the County must take the next step by creating a closed-loop system that returns compost to local working lands. Leveraging the existing infrastructure presents a key opportunity to enhance soil health, support regenerative practices, and improve long-term agricultural resilience.

#### **Potential Actions:**

- **Establish local compost distribution channels** - Leverage partnerships such as the RCD, NRCS, agricultural organizations (Sierra Harvest, Briar Patch, Farm Bureau), and composting facilities to make finished compost available and accessible to local farmers and ranchers.
- **Pilot on-farm compost application projects** - Support demonstration projects on farms and ranches to showcase the benefits of compost and monitor outcomes.
- **Develop incentives for agricultural use** - Explore cost-share programs, technical assistance, or grant funding (e.g., Healthy Soils Program) to encourage compost adoption by producers.
- **Connect it up** - Connect food-generating institutions (schools, restaurants, grocers, etc.) with composting programs and agricultural users to foster a local, regenerative loop between waste and soil.

**Description:** Nevada County has taken an important first step by establishing a composting program in compliance with SB 1383, laying the groundwork for reducing landfill waste and greenhouse gas emissions. To fully unlock the potential of composting as a tool for agricultural and resource resilience, the County must now close the loop—ensuring that

finished compost is returned to local working lands to build soil health, improve water retention, and support regenerative practices.

By expanding compost use in agriculture, the County can enhance the productivity and sustainability of its farms and ranches, while supporting state climate goals. Strategic partnerships with local resource agencies, composting facilities, and agricultural organizations can accelerate this effort and ensure that compost benefits both producers and the broader ecosystem.

### **3e. Prepare Localized Climate Modeling and Agricultural Mapping**

**Findings:** Nevada County currently lacks **localized climate and agricultural data** that can help identify where climate change will most affect farming and ranching operations. While the County's **Resource Resiliency Roadmap** includes regional climate modeling, those datasets are not yet tailored to the County's varied topography, microclimates, and production systems.

To close this gap, the County can **align and enhance existing efforts** by integrating agricultural data—such as crop viability, soil health, and water resource information—into its broader climate resilience work. This effort would be most effective if led jointly by the **Nevada County Resource Conservation District (NCRCD)**, **County Planning Department**, and **Nevada Irrigation District (NID)**, with support from the **Agricultural Commissioner's Office**, **UC Cooperative Extension**, and **Sierra Nevada Conservancy**, which together bring the technical capacity, local knowledge, and outreach networks to make the data meaningful and actionable for producers.

#### **Potential Actions:**

- **Coordinate with the RRR team and NCRCD** to expand existing modeling to include agriculture-specific variables—such as soil moisture trends, irrigation demand, and fire risk on working lands.
- **Collaborate with UC Cooperative Extension, Sierra Nevada Conservancy, and the Department of Water Resources** to refine localized projections for temperature, precipitation, and water availability, and to develop agricultural production and hydrologic mapping specific to Nevada County.
- **Develop and maintain user-friendly mapping tools and dashboards**, hosted by the NCRCD and shared through the County's public portal, to provide current information to farmers, ranchers, and land managers on climate risks, funding opportunities, and adaptation options.

- **Align climate modeling results with County planning and land-use tools**—including the **General Plan** and the **RRR**—to ensure consistent data use across departments and policy frameworks.
- **Review best practices from other counties**—such as **Sonoma, Marin, and San Luis Obispo**—that have successfully integrated agricultural mapping and localized climate modeling to guide drought planning, soil health programs, and farmland conservation priorities.

**Description:** Localized climate modeling and agricultural mapping will help Nevada County **connect science with practice**, giving producers, planners, and policymakers shared, actionable data to guide future decisions. Rather than launching a new program, this effort should **build on existing County and partner initiatives**—leveraging the technical expertise of **UC Cooperative Extension** and **Sierra Nevada Conservancy**, the outreach and project management capacity of the **NCRCD**, and the policy alignment role of **County Planning** and the **Agricultural Commissioner’s Office**.

Together, these partners can ensure that localized climate information is accurate, accessible, and relevant—helping farmers and ranchers anticipate risks, adapt management practices, and align with County resilience planning. By coordinating existing resources and improving communication across agencies and producers, Nevada County can make climate modeling and mapping a practical tool for sustaining its working lands and advancing its broader resilience goals.

## **Appendices**

**Appendix A. Economic and Land Background Tables**

**Table 1. Land in Agricultural Production, 2002-2022**

	2002	2022	% change
Total Acres	612,872	612,966	0.02%
Land in Farms (acres) (a)	82,336	64,185	-22%
Percent of land in farms	13%	10%	
Total # of Farms	599	620	4%
Harvested Crop Land (acres) (b)	3,326	1,334	-60%
Number of Farms with Harvested Cropland	203	287	41%

Source: U.S. Census of Agriculture 2002 and 2022 - Volume 1, Chapter 2: County Level

(a) The acreage designated as “land in farms” consists primarily of agricultural land used for crops, pasture, or grazing. It also includes woodland and wasteland not actually under cultivation or used for pasture or grazing, provided it was part of the farm producer’s total operation.

(b) This category includes land from which crops were harvested and hay was cut, land used to grow short rotation woody crops, Christmas trees, and land in orchards, groves, vineyards, berries, nurseries, and greenhouses. Land from which two or more crops were harvested was counted only once.

**Table 2. Production Value 2013 and 2023**

	2013	2013 (inflation adjusted 2023\$)	2023	2013-2023 % change
Livestock & Products	\$11,637,800	\$15,114,026	\$13,280,400	-12%
Pasture & Rangeland	\$3,510,000	\$4,558,442	\$3,700,000	-19%
Nursery & Flower	\$280,300	\$364,026	\$716,200	97%
Winegrapes	\$1,886,900	\$2,450,519	\$2,516,500	3%
Fruit & Vegetables	\$966,400	\$1,255,065	\$3,539,000	182%
Timber Products	\$4,924,900	\$6,395,974	\$627,400	-90%
<b>Total</b>	<b>\$23,206,300</b>	<b>\$30,138,052</b>	<b>\$24,379,500</b>	<b>-19%</b>

Source: Nevada County Agricultural Commissioners Annual Crop Reports, Consumer Price Index

(CPI) inflation calculator: 2003-2023

**Table 3. Organic Producers' Gross Sales**

2018	\$1,591,134
2019	\$1,696,304
2020	\$1,848,985
2021	\$2,554,353
2022	\$2,236,536
<b>2018-2022</b>	
<b>% Change</b>	<b>41%</b>

Source: California Agricultural Statistics Review 2022-2023

**Table 4. Size and Number of Farms, 2002 -2022**

Acres	# of farms		# of farms	
	2002	% of total	2022	% of total
1 to 9	167	28%	229	37%
10 to 49	301	50%	248	40%
50 to 69	27	5%	18	3%
70 to 99	18	3%	15	2%
100 to 139	15	3%	10	2%
140 to 179	11	2%	20	3%
180 to 219	7	1%	27	4%
220 to 259	9	2%	8	1%
260 to 499	19	3%	29	5%
500 to 999	7	1%	5	1%
1,000 to 1,999	2	0%	5	1%
2,000 acres or more	6	1%	6	1%
<b>Total farms</b>	<b>599</b>	100%	<b>620</b>	100%
<b>Average Size</b>	<b>137</b>		<b>104</b>	
<b>Median Size</b>	<b>20</b>		<b>11</b>	

Source: U.S. Census of Agriculture 2002 and 2022 - Volume 1, Chapter 2: County Level

**Community Conservation Plan for Agriculture - Nevada County**  
*Final Land Use, Economic and Agricultural Resource Resilience Assessment*  
 October 2025

**Table 5. Inventory of Agricultural Land and Conversion**

	1984	1990	2000	2010	2014	2016	2020	% Change 1984-2020
Prime Farmland	312	394	374	398	309	290	271	-13%
Farmland of Statewide Importance	961	948	987	1,586	1,274	1,283	1,016	6%
Unique Farmland	230	198	285	480	436	462	438	90%
Farmland of Local Importance (1)	32,349	33,186	20,327	23,470	23,411	6,043	5,664	-82%
<b>IMPORTANT FARMLAND SUBTOTAL</b>	<b>33,852</b>	<b>34,726</b>	<b>21,973</b>	<b>25,934</b>	<b>25,430</b>	<b>8,078</b>	<b>7,389</b>	<b>-78%</b>
Grazing Land	128,377	125,400	129,758	116,808	117,278	133,508	133,489	4%
<b>AGRICULTURAL LAND SUBTOTAL</b>	<b>162,229</b>	<b>160,126</b>	<b>151,731</b>	<b>142,742</b>	<b>142,708</b>	<b>141,586</b>	<b>140,878</b>	<b>-13%</b>
Urban and Built-up Land	12,889	13,897	14,727	17,541	17,579	17,609	17,478	36%
Other Land	114,671	115,386	122,785	128,961	128,963	130,057	130,861	14%
Water Area	1,598	1,979	2,145	2,145	2,145	2,145	2,175	36%
<b>TOTAL AREA INVENTORIED (2)</b>	<b>291,387</b>	<b>291,388</b>	<b>291,388</b>	<b>291,389</b>	<b>291,395</b>	<b>291,397</b>	<b>291,392</b>	<b>0%</b>
<b>Percent of land in agriculture (2)</b>	<b>56%</b>	<b>55%</b>	<b>52%</b>	<b>49%</b>	<b>49%</b>	<b>49%</b>	<b>48%</b>	

Notes:

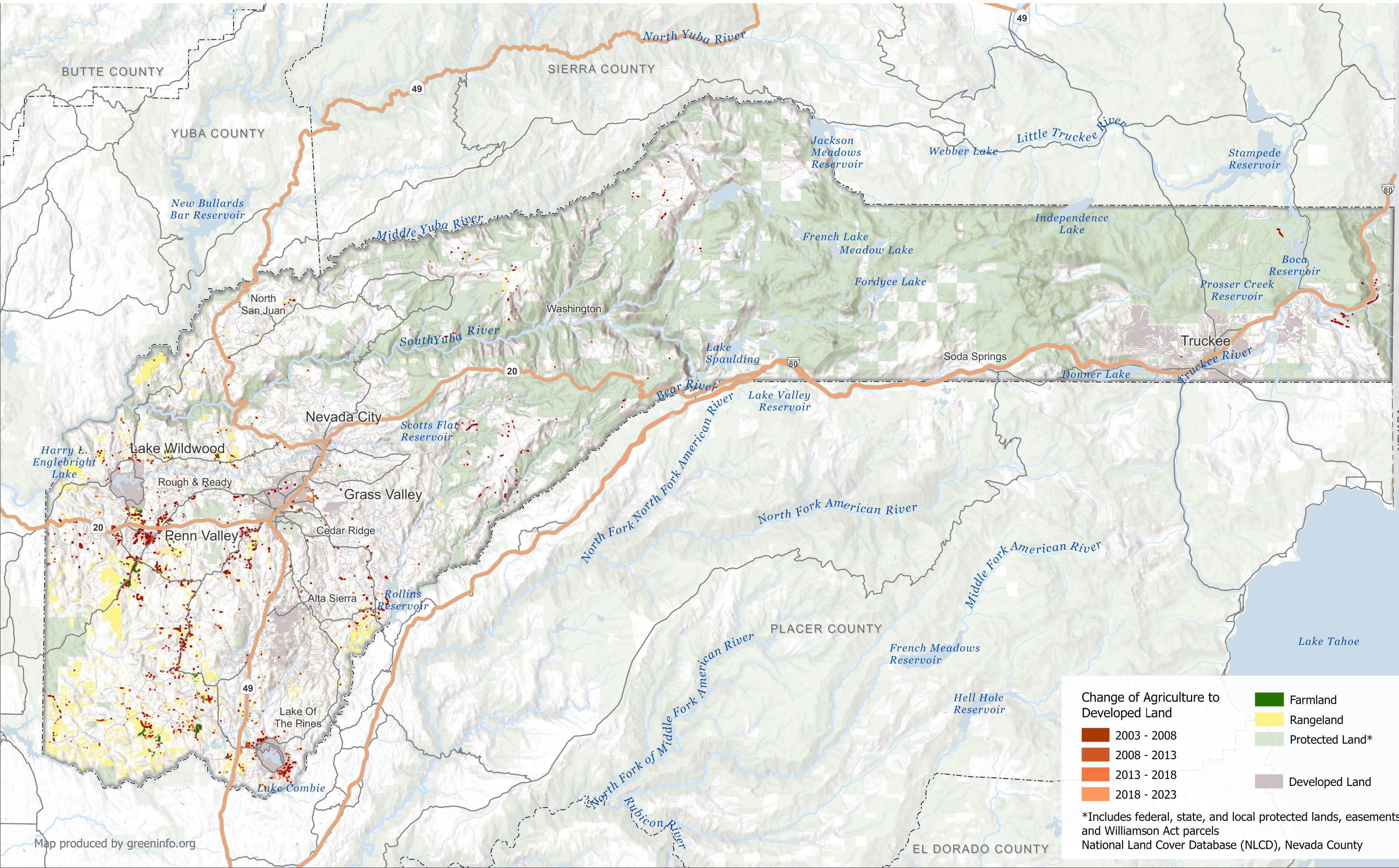
Source: California Department of Conservation, Farmland Mapping and Monitoring Program

(1) Conversions between Farmland of Local Importance and Grazing Land are due to the adoption of a revised Farmland of Local Importance definition and the assessment of land qualifying for Farmland of Local Importance.

(2) Land inventoried does not represent the total land base of Nevada County, which is 623,360 acres.

**Appendix B. Mapping Analysis**

# Conversion of Agriculture to Developed Land

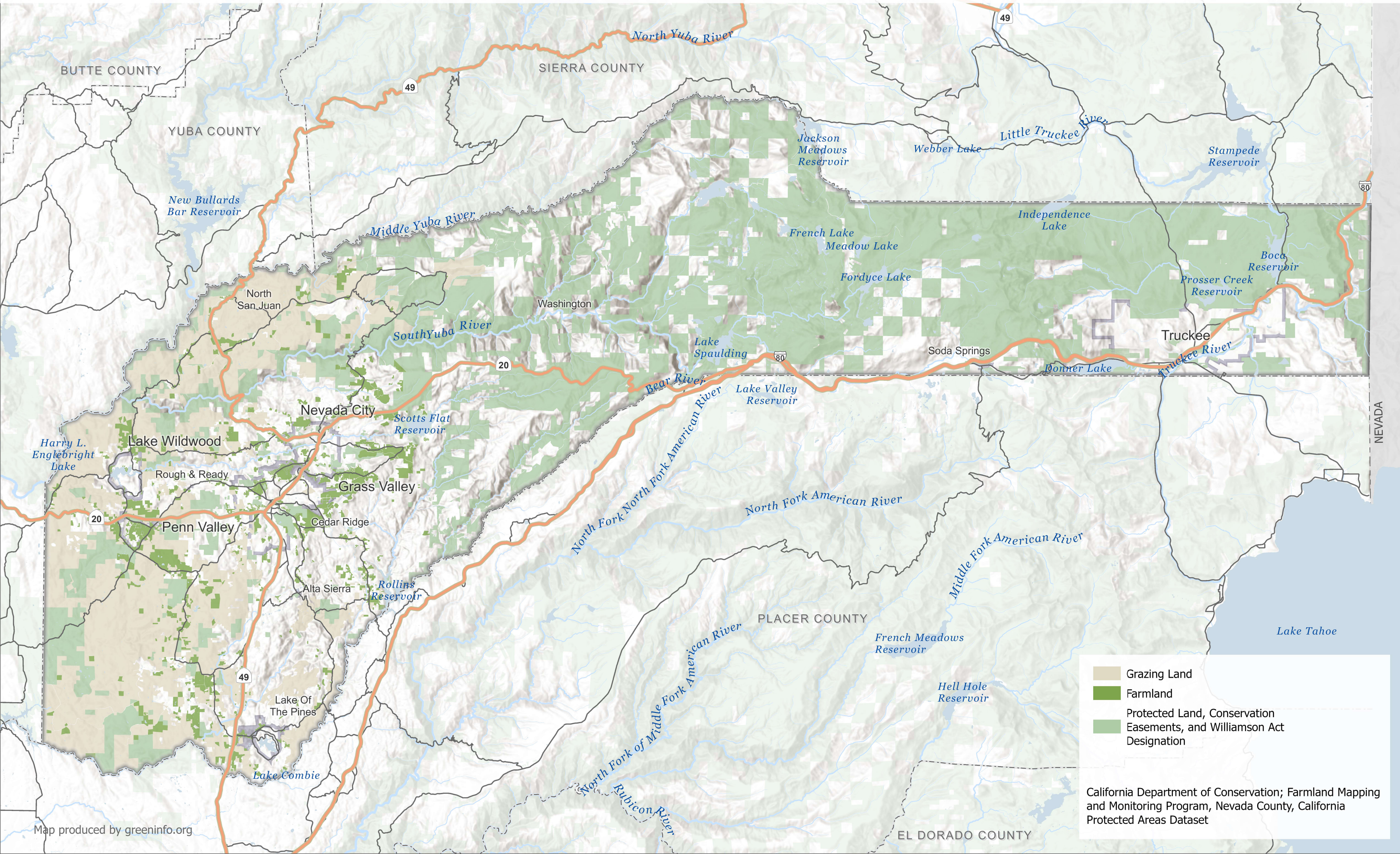


**Change of Agriculture to Developed Land**

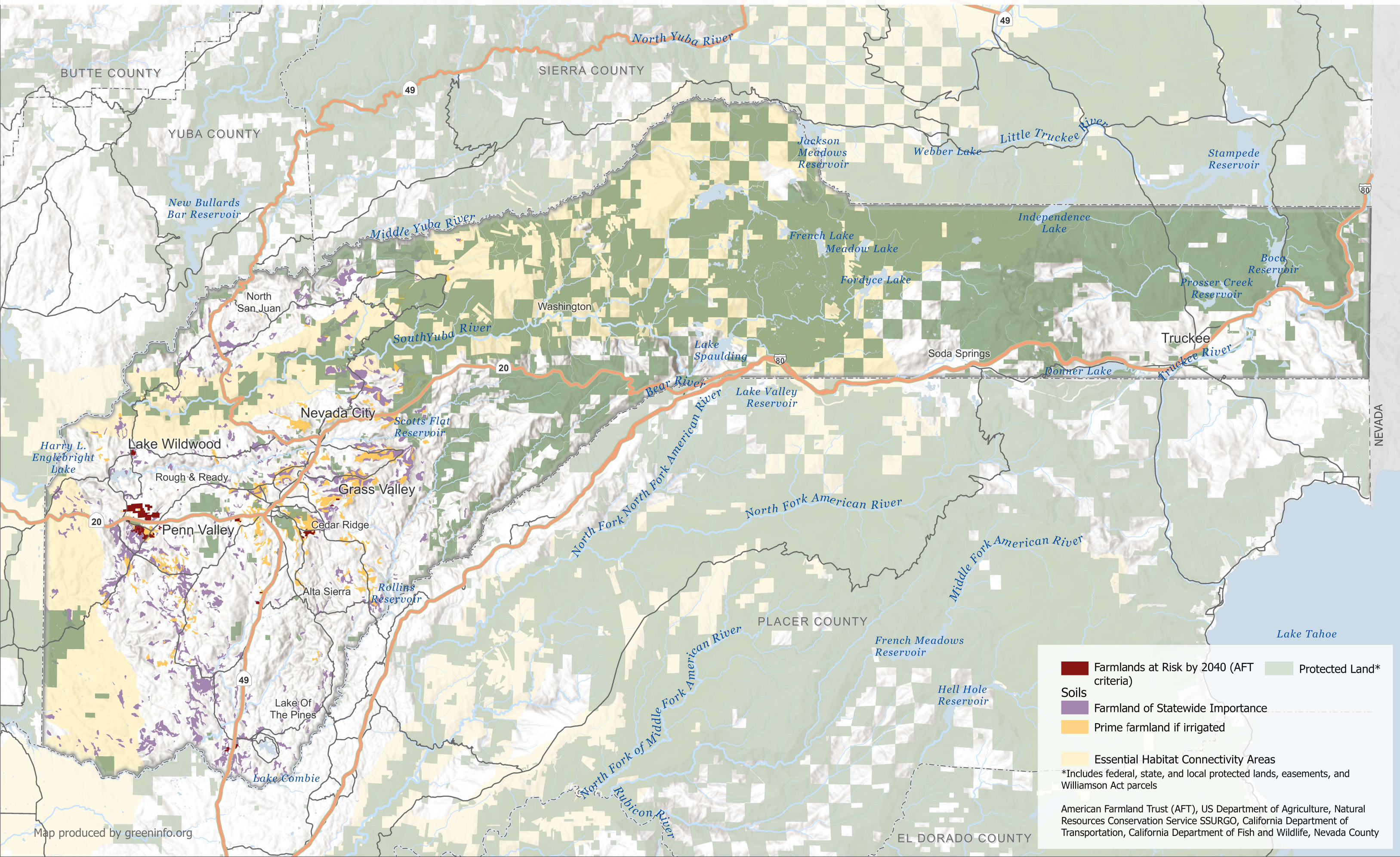
<span style="display: inline-block; width: 15px; height: 10px; background-color: #8B4513; border: 1px solid black;"></span> 2003 - 2008	<span style="display: inline-block; width: 15px; height: 10px; background-color: #008000; border: 1px solid black;"></span> Farmland
<span style="display: inline-block; width: 15px; height: 10px; background-color: #D2691E; border: 1px solid black;"></span> 2008 - 2013	<span style="display: inline-block; width: 15px; height: 10px; background-color: #FFFF00; border: 1px solid black;"></span> Rangeland
<span style="display: inline-block; width: 15px; height: 10px; background-color: #FF8C00; border: 1px solid black;"></span> 2013 - 2018	<span style="display: inline-block; width: 15px; height: 10px; background-color: #90EE90; border: 1px solid black;"></span> Protected Land*
<span style="display: inline-block; width: 15px; height: 10px; background-color: #FFD700; border: 1px solid black;"></span> 2018 - 2023	<span style="display: inline-block; width: 15px; height: 10px; background-color: #A9A9A9; border: 1px solid black;"></span> Developed Land

\*Includes federal, state, and local protected lands, easements, and Williamson Act parcels  
National Land Cover Database (NLCD), Nevada County

# Types of Agricultural Land



# Farmlands at Risk



**Farmlands at Risk by 2040 (AFT criteria)**

**Soils**

- Farmland of Statewide Importance
- Prime farmland if irrigated

**Essential Habitat Connectivity Areas**

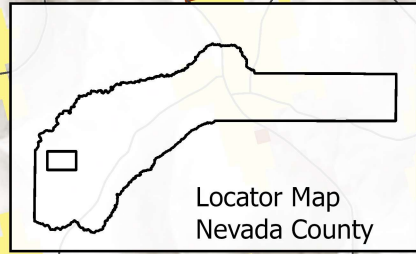
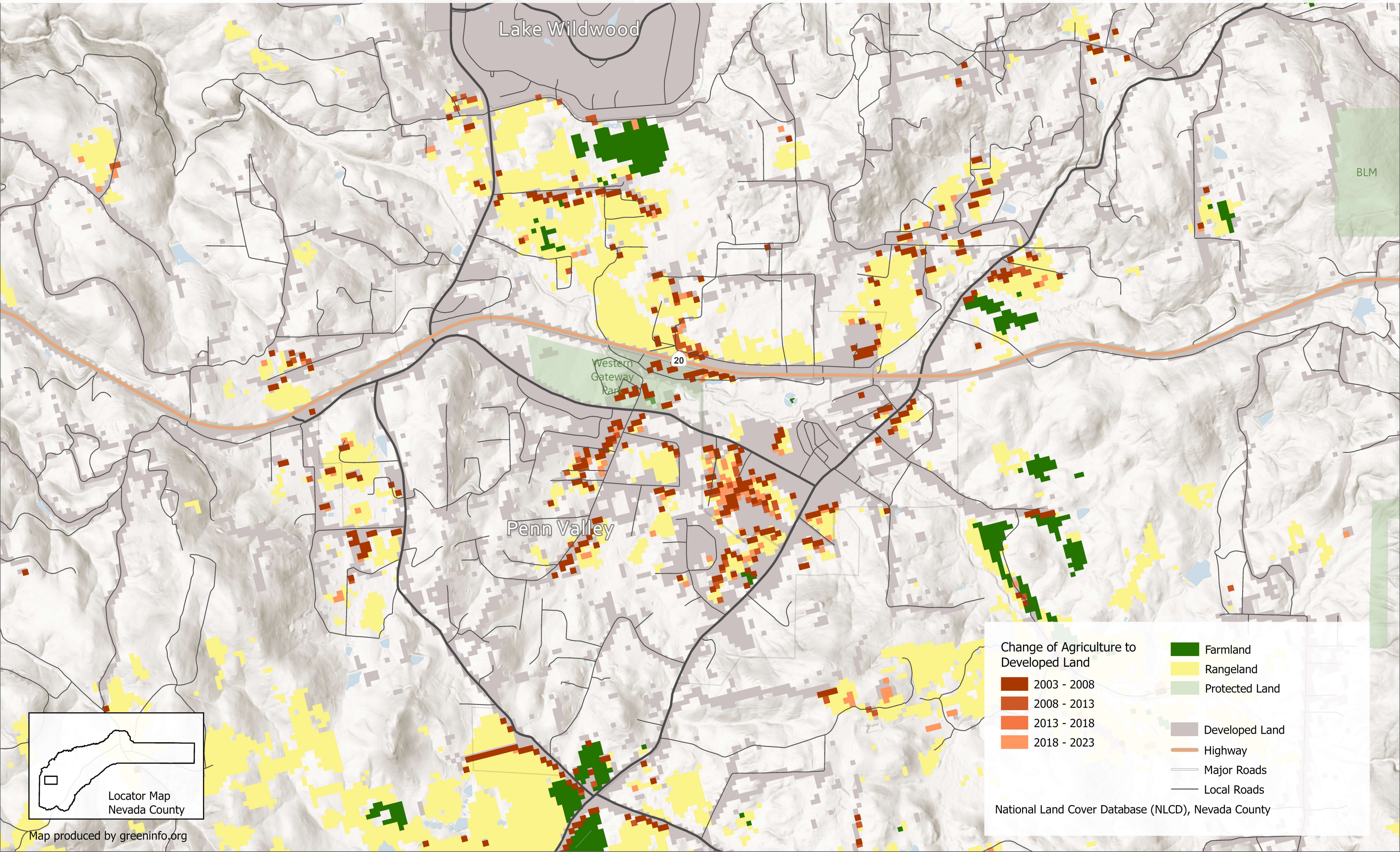
**Protected Land\***

\*Includes federal, state, and local protected lands, easements, and Williamson Act parcels

American Farmland Trust (AFT), US Department of Agriculture, Natural Resources Conservation Service SSURGO, California Department of Transportation, California Department of Fish and Wildlife, Nevada County

# Change of Agriculture Land to Developed Land

Rough & Ready



Map produced by greeninfo.org

Change of Agriculture to Developed Land

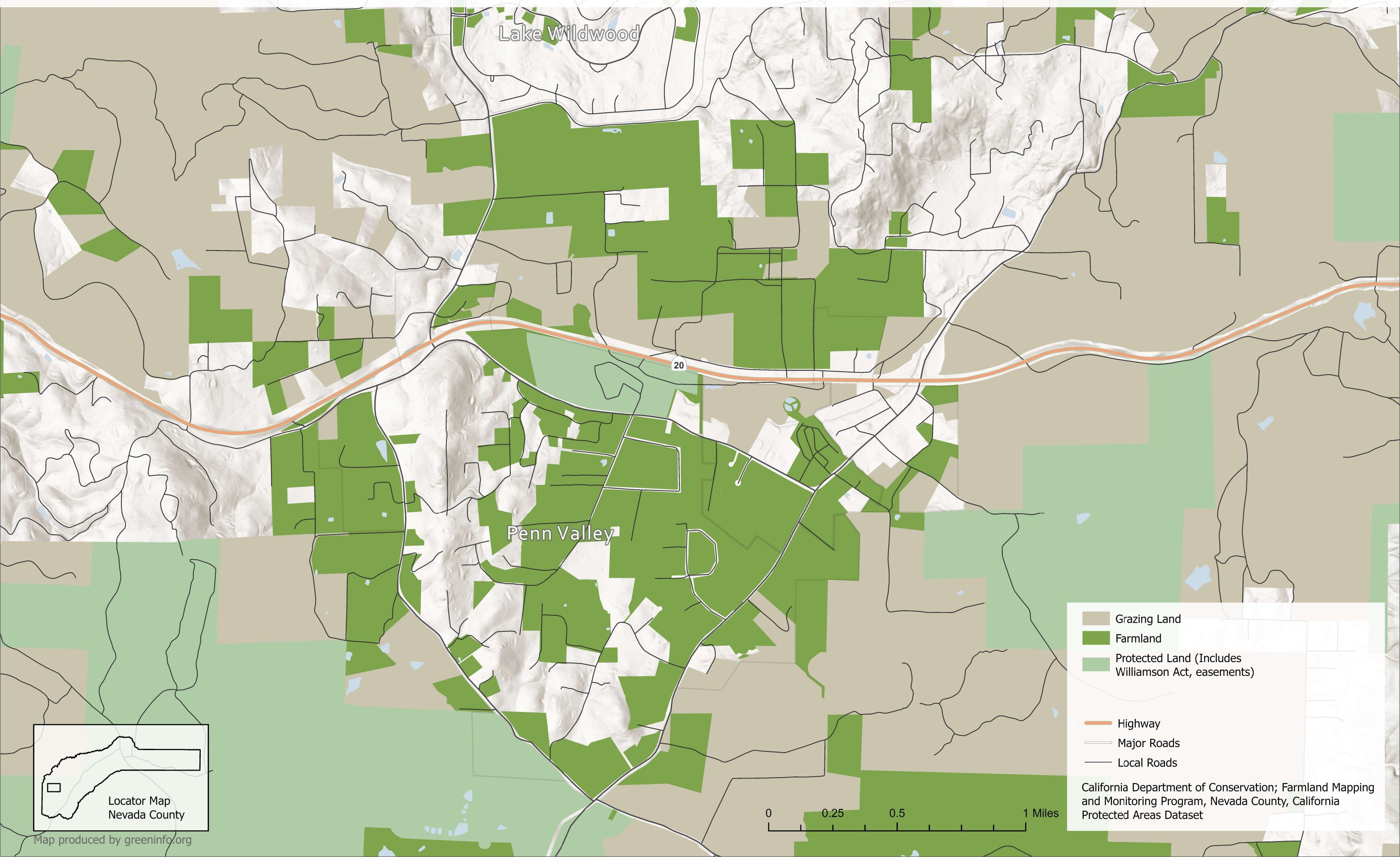
- 2003 - 2008
- 2008 - 2013
- 2013 - 2018
- 2018 - 2023

Farmland  
Rangeland  
Protected Land

Developed Land  
Highway  
Major Roads  
Local Roads

National Land Cover Database (NLCD), Nevada County







# Types of Agricultural Land



Lake Wildwood

Penn Valley

20

-  Grazing Land
-  Farmland
-  Protected Land (Includes Williamson Act, easements)
-  Highway
-  Major Roads
-  Local Roads

California Department of Conservation; Farmland Mapping and Monitoring Program, Nevada County, California Protected Areas Dataset

