

The complete Agricultural Resources Element of the Sonoma County General Plan is available on the [General Plan – Agricultural Resources webpage](#).

Excerpts which include proposed amendments to the Agricultural Resources Element are as follows:

2.1 ASSIST IN THE MARKETING AND PROMOTION OF SONOMA COUNTY'S AGRICULTURAL PRODUCTS

Successful promotion and marketing of agricultural products grown in Sonoma County can both enhance the County's image and reduce economic pressure on farmers and ranchers to subdivide or convert the land to nonagricultural uses.

In the future, Sonoma County can expect challenges to its resources, particularly energy and water. Currently many farms, ranches and agricultural businesses are finding innovative ways to implement renewable resource programs and conserve energy, water and soil while increasing the economic viability of agriculture and thereby strengthening the local food system. Economic sustainability is being encouraged through niche marketing, direct marketing and evolving practices improving farm business management and intergenerational transfer of farms and ranches.

In recent years, the organic agricultural industry has been established and has grown rapidly. The success of this industry is projected to influence the agricultural economy in the coming decades. In addition to generating additional income, this industry has the advantage of providing diversity in the agricultural base of the County. This element establishes policies that will assist in promoting and marketing agricultural products grown or processed in Sonoma County.

GOAL AR-1:

Promote a healthy and competitive agricultural industry whose products are recognized as being produced in Sonoma County.

Objective AR-1.2:

Permit marketing of products grown and/or processed in Sonoma County in all areas designated for agricultural use **in compliance with applicable state regulations, including restrictions placed on cannabis advertising by the Department of Cannabis Control.**

2.4 AGRICULTURAL USES IN DESIGNATED AGRICULTURAL PRODUCTION AREAS

Both on the urban fringe and in the midst of agricultural areas, parcelization has occurred which has resulted in residential use being the primary use of the land. Complaints about noise, odors, flies, spraying and similar "nuisances" attendant to agricultural practices have discouraged and sometimes prevented farmers from managing their operations in an efficient and economic manner. Not only do residents complain about aspects of farming operations, but residential areas often directly affect the operations. ~~For example, residential sites can become a sanctuary for pests which could damage adjacent crops. Clear policy is needed operations.~~ For example, residential sites can become a sanctuary for pests which could damage adjacent crops. Clear policy is needed for County decision makers to balance the needs of the farmer with the concerns of ~~his or her many~~ residential neighbors.

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Cannabis is unique from other agricultural crops as it is classified as a controlled substance under the Controlled Substances Act and its production and use are prohibited under federal law. Largely due to this classification, the County initially defined cannabis as an agricultural product separately from other agricultural crops, and existing policies for agriculture and agriculture-related activities did not directly apply to cannabis. However, with the permitting and regulation of cannabis, the County finds that cannabis production has many similarities to traditional agricultural production and is more appropriately recognized as an agricultural use. Still, due to its federal classification, highly regulated status, and the complicated and evolving public sentiment around the crop and its classification, it is best categorized as a controlled agricultural crop that is at times subject to unique regulations to protect public health and safety.

While cannabis cultivation is not new to Sonoma County, it was only first regulated and permitted on agricultural lands in 2017, following State legislation (Medical Cannabis Regulation and Safety Act of 2015) and a State ballot initiative legalizing commercial medical and adult use cannabis businesses (Proposition 64: The Adult Use of Marijuana Act). Compared to most traditional agricultural production in Sonoma County, cannabis cultivation is more likely to occur within fully enclosed permanent structures utilizing artificial or supplemental lighting and imported growth media, a cultivation method that does not utilize the native soil or the sun. When located on agricultural lands, such structures result in a loss of agricultural soil, and crops produced in such structures do not exhibit unique characteristics associated with Sonoma County geographical environmental conditions, like climate, soils, and topography. In addition, year-round cultivation within structures involves continual activity throughout the year, unlike most traditional agricultural crop production, resulting in many of the same physical impacts as agricultural processing and agricultural support uses. Outdoor cultivation is therefore more appropriate on agricultural lands than cultivation within structures because it conserves agricultural soil, follows a traditional seasonal farming cycle, and produces an agricultural crop utilizing the native soil, climate, and sunlight specific to the area in which it is grown.

Growth of the cannabis industry in other California counties has resulted in a trend towards large greenhouses in rural agricultural lands. Greenhouses and other agricultural structures can be compatible with surrounding agricultural areas if the size and scale of structures is subordinate to the overall production operation, so that structures support the operation rather than house it entirely. As with large wine processing facilities, large cannabis cultivation and processing facilities can begin to appear industrial in nature. Policies are needed to encourage diversified cannabis operations, which may integrate structures into the agricultural production operation, but which are not entirely contained within large structures better suited to industrial areas.

As a controlled agricultural crop, policies are needed to allow cannabis production on agricultural lands in a way that conserves agricultural soils and protects agrarian character while also protecting public health and safety.

The Agricultural Resources Element establishes policies that support the needs and practices of agriculture as the highest priority in areas designated for agricultural use. All policies in the Agricultural Resources Element include cannabis as an agricultural use, unless specifically excluded.

GOAL AR-4:

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Allow farmers to manage their operations in an efficient, economic manner with minimal conflict with nonagricultural uses.

Objective AR-4.1:

Apply agricultural land use categories only to areas or parcels capable of the commercial production of food, fiber and plant material, or the raising and maintaining of farm animals including horses, donkeys, mules, and similar livestock. Establish agricultural production as the highest priority use in these areas or parcels. The following policies are intended to apply primarily to lands designated within agricultural land use categories.

The following policies, in addition to those in the Land Use Element, shall be used to achieve this objective:

Policy AR-4a: The primary use of any parcel within the three agricultural land use categories shall be agricultural production and related processing, support services, and visitor-serving uses. Residential uses in these areas shall recognize that the primary use of the land may create traffic and agricultural nuisance situations, such as flies, noise, odors, and spraying of chemicals.

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Policy AR-4c: Protect agricultural operations by establishing a buffer between an agricultural land use and residential interface. Buffers shall generally be defined as a physical separation of 100 to 200' **feet** and/or may be a topographic feature, a substantial tree stand, water course or similar feature. In some circumstances a landscaped berm may provide the buffer. The buffer shall occur on the parcel for which a permit is sought and shall favor protection of the maximum amount of farmable land.*

Policy AR-4d: Apply the provisions of the Right to Farm Ordinance to all lands designated within agricultural land use categories. **These provisions are not applicable to cannabis operations.**

Policy AR-4e: Recognize provisions of existing State nuisance law (Government Code Section 3482.5).*

Policy AR-4f: Anticipated conflicts between a proposed new agricultural use and existing agricultural activities shall be mitigated by the newer use or application.*

Policy AR-4g: Permanent structures used for cannabis production should be limited in size and be subordinate to outdoor on-site agricultural production of any type. Consider all of the following factors when making a determination:

- (1) Whether and to what extent Prime Farmland or Farmland of Statewide Importance would be permanently encumbered by structures.**
- (2) The portion of the site devoted to agricultural production within permanent structures as opposed to outdoor agricultural production.**
- (3) The relative number of employees needed for on-site agricultural production within permanent structures in comparison to that needed for outdoor on-site agricultural production.**

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(4) The use of existing structures and infrastructure compared to new development.**

Policy AR-4h: Notwithstanding AR-4a and AR-4c, due to its unique classification, cannabis production on agricultural lands should be separated from existing residential areas and established in a manner that protects public health and safety, given the complicated and evolving public sentiment around the crop and its classification.

2.5 REGULATE THE LOCATION AND INTENSITY OF AGRICULTURE RELATED SUPPORT USES IN AGRICULTURAL AREAS

Given its broad diversity, Sonoma County agriculture requires a variety of support activities that are available in close proximity to production sites. The determination of which support uses belong on agricultural lands involves their connection to agriculture, potential for conflicts, the size, scale and adaptability of the use, and the amount of land lost to farming. Policies are needed to permit on agricultural lands those agriculture-related uses which support agriculture without undermining production activities.

Policies for support activities should also balance the need for such uses with the continued preservation of the rural character and agricultural diversity of the County, and should support products grown in Sonoma County over those produced elsewhere. The substantial growth in the wine industry during the last decade has, for example, resulted in a trend towards larger processing facilities, facilities that may appear more industrial than rural in character. **As with large wine processing facilities, large cannabis processing facilities also can begin to appear industrial in nature.** In addition, the apparent increase in the reliance of County processing facilities upon raw agricultural products imported from outside Sonoma County highlights the importance of demonstrating “connection” to local production in order to avoid County agricultural lands becoming defacto “industrial lands.”

GOAL AR-5:

Facilitate agricultural production by allowing agriculture-related support uses, such as processing, storage, bottling, canning and packaging, and agricultural support services, to be conveniently and accessibly located in agricultural production areas when related to the primary agricultural production in the area.

Objective AR-5.1:

Facilitate County agricultural production by allowing agricultural processing facilities and uses in all agricultural land use categories.

Objective AR-5.2:

Ensure that agriculture-related support uses allowed on agricultural lands are only allowed when demonstrated to be necessary for and proportional to agricultural production on site or in the local area.

Objective AR-5.3:

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Ensure that agriculture-related support uses allowed on agricultural lands are only allowed when demonstrated to be necessary for and proportional to agricultural production on site or in the local area.

Policy AR-5a: Provide for facilities that process agricultural products in all three agricultural land use categories only where processing supports and is proportional to agricultural production on site or in the local area.*

Policy AR-5b: Consider allowing the processing of non-viticultural agricultural products where the processing is demonstrated to support projected or new agricultural production, provided that the processing use is proportional to the new production on-site or in the local area. *

Policy AR-5c: Permit storage, bottling, canning, and packaging facilities for agricultural products either grown or processed on site provided that these facilities are sized to accommodate, but not exceed, the needs of the growing or processing operation. Establish additional standards in the Development Code that differentiate between storage facilities directly necessary for processing, and facilities to be utilized for the storage of finished product such as case storage of bottled wine. Such standards should require an applicant to demonstrate the need for such on-site storage.*

Policy AR-5d: Define "agricultural support services" as processing services that change an agricultural product from its natural state to a different form, maintenance and repair of farm machinery and equipment, veterinary clinics, custom farming services, cannabis centralized processing, agricultural waste handling and disposal services, and other similar related services.*

Policy AR-5e: Only permit agricultural support services that support local agricultural production consistent with the specific requirements of each of the three agricultural land use categories. ~~Insure~~ **Ensure** that such uses are subordinate to on-site agricultural production and do not adversely affect agricultural production in the area. Consider the following factors in determining whether or not an agricultural support service is subordinate to on-site agricultural production:

- (1) The portion of the site devoted to the service as opposed to production.
- (2) The extent of structure needed for the service as opposed to production.
- (3) The relative number of employees devoted to the support service use in comparison to that needed for agricultural production.
- (4) The history of agricultural production on the site.
- (5) The potential for the service facility to be converted to non-agricultural uses due to its location and access. *

Policy AR-5f: Use the following guidelines for approving zoning or permits for agricultural support services:

- (1) The use will not require the extension of sewer or water,

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- (2) The use does not substantially detract from agricultural production on-site or in the area,
- (3) The use does not create a concentration of commercial uses in the immediate area, and
- (4) The use is compatible with and does not adversely impact surrounding residential neighborhoods.*

Policy AR-5g: Local concentrations of any separate agricultural support uses, including processing, storage, bottling, canning and packaging, agricultural support services, and visitor-serving and recreational uses as provided in Policy AR-6f, even if related to surrounding agricultural activities, are detrimental to the primary use of the land for the production of food, fiber and plant materials and shall be avoided. In determining whether or not the approval of such uses would constitute a detrimental concentration of such uses, consider all the following factors:

- (1) Whether the above uses would result in joint road access conflicts, or in traffic levels that exceed the Circulation and Transit Element's objectives for level of service on a site specific and cumulative basis.
- (2) Whether the above uses would draw water from the same aquifer and be located within the zone of influence of area wells.
- (3) Whether the above uses would be detrimental to the rural character of the area. In cases where the proposed processing use would process only products grown on site, such use would not be subject to this concentration policy.*

2.6 REGULATE THE LOCATION AND INTENSITY OF VISITOR-SERVING USES WITHIN AGRICULTURAL AREAS

The benefits and potential adverse impacts of visitor-serving uses vary by diversity of the agricultural industry in Sonoma County. It is important to recognize that agricultural tourism directly promotes the sale of agricultural products. Activities such as special events attract customers, build a customer base, market products, and build customer loyalty. However, the economic benefits of agricultural tourism must be balanced against associated impacts such as increased traffic, particularly in areas such as in Sonoma Valley or along routes where multiple visitor-serving uses may be hosting events at the same time. In addition, visitor-serving uses must supplement agricultural production, not replace it.

Wine tasting is an important promotional component of the viticulture industry, yet the people who come to enjoy the wine country may create a conflict with necessary practices of land intensive farming. This "people versus practices" conflict suggests a limit to tourist activities in vineyard areas, most of which are sufficiently close to communities that have available sites for such visitor services as lodgings and restaurants.

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In extensive agricultural areas, some conflicts between visitors and agricultural practices are less severe due to the greater amount of land available to separate the activities. In these areas, small scale lodgings and some outdoor recreational uses could promote the agricultural activity and provide a secondary income source for the farmer or rancher without hindering the primary use of the land.

While cannabis tasting rooms could provide an important opportunity for the cannabis industry, there is insufficient guidance on the impact of consumption amounts to allow open cannabis tasting rooms with unlimited public access in rural agricultural areas that lack public transportation infrastructure. Instead, consumption activities should be limited such that the establishment can more effectively educate and control visitors related to the amount of consumption and the mode of visitor transportation.

The Agricultural Resources Element promotes the County's agricultural industry by establishing policies which allow specific, limited visitor-serving uses in agricultural areas.

GOAL AR-6:

Allow new visitor-serving uses and facilities in some agricultural areas but limit them in scale and location. These uses must be beneficial to the agricultural industry and farm operators and compatible with long term agricultural use of the land.

Objective AR-6.1:

Give the highest priority in all agricultural land use categories to agricultural production activities. Visitor-serving uses shall promote agriculture and enhance marketing of Sonoma County agricultural products but shall be secondary and incidental to agricultural production.

Objective AR-6.2:

Permit visitor serving uses in all agricultural land use categories if they support and do not adversely affect the agricultural production activities of the area. Bed and breakfast inns of five or fewer rooms, and campgrounds of up to 30 sites, are permissible recreational uses only in the "Land Extensive Agriculture" and "Diverse Agriculture" categories, if they do not adversely affect the agricultural production activities of the area.

Objective AR-6.3:

Develop a pilot event coordination program for the Sonoma Valley Planning Area that provides for monitoring and scheduling of special events on agricultural lands and for agriculture related events on other lands so as to minimize the adverse cumulative impacts of such uses, particularly in areas where agriculture related support uses and/or visitor serving uses are concentrated.

Policy AR-6a: Permit visitor serving uses in agricultural categories that promote agricultural production in the County, such as tasting rooms, sales and promotion of products grown or processed in the County, educational activities and tours, incidental sales of items related to local area agricultural products, and promotional events that support and are secondary and incidental to local agricultural production. Limit recreational uses to the "Land Extensive

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Agriculture" and "Diverse Agriculture" categories, specifically to bed and breakfast inns and campgrounds of 30 or fewer sites.*

Policy AR-6b: Except as allowed by Policy AR-6a, prohibit new restaurants and lodging. Recognize existing restaurants or lodging facilities and those which were approved prior to adoption of this plan, but limit their expansion or intensification.*

Policy AR-6c: Nonagricultural land use categories shall not be applied to lands surrounded by agricultural land use categories for purposes of permitting visitor serving or recreational uses or facilities.*

Policy AR-6d: Follow these guidelines for approval of visitor serving uses in agricultural areas:

- (1) The use promotes and markets only agricultural products grown or processed in the local area.
- (2) The use is compatible with and secondary and incidental to agricultural production activities in the area.
- (3) The use will not require the extension of sewer and water.
- (4) The use is compatible with existing uses in the area.
- (5) Hotels, motels, resorts, and similar lodging are not allowed.
- (6) Activities that promote and market agricultural products such as tasting rooms, sales and promotion of products grown or processed in the County, educational activities and tours, incidental sales of items related to local area agricultural products are allowed.
- (7) Special events on agricultural lands or agriculture related events on other lands in the Sonoma Valley Planning Area will be subject to a pilot event coordination program which includes tracking and monitoring of visitor serving activities and schedule management, as necessary, to reduce cumulative impacts.*

Policy AR-6f: Local concentrations of visitor serving and recreational uses, and agricultural support uses as defined in Goal AR-5, even if related to surrounding agricultural activities, are detrimental to the primary use of the land for the production of food, fiber and plant materials and may constitute grounds for denial of such uses. In determining whether or not the approval of such uses would constitute a detrimental concentration of such uses, consider all the following factors:

- (1) Whether the above uses would result in joint road access conflicts, or in traffic levels that exceed the Circulation and Transit Element's objectives for level of service on a site specific and cumulative basis.
- (2) Whether the above uses would draw water from the same aquifer and be located within the zone of influence of area wells.
- (3) Whether the above uses would be detrimental to the rural character of the area.*

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Policy AR-6g: Define in the Development Code compatible visitor serving uses such as tasting rooms, sales and promotion of products grown or processed in the County, educational activities and tours, incidental sales of items related to local area agricultural products, and promotional events which support and are incidental to local agricultural production, and define their permissible sizes and intensities. *

Policy AR-6h: Revise existing regulations to allow farm homestays in agricultural areas.*

Policy AR-6i: Consumption of cannabis and cannabis products in rural agricultural areas is only allowed associated with cannabis events and periodic special events in compliance with permit conditions. Events may include small groups of people throughout the day. Permitted events should encourage education and consider appropriate modes of visitor transportation and methods to control consumption amounts. Policies allowing all other visitor-serving uses apply to cannabis, including sales and promotion of products grown or processed in the County, educational activities and tours, and incidental sales of items related to local area agricultural products.

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Amendments to the Glossary of the Sonoma County General Plan to modify or replace certain definitions and add definitions are shown below in alphabetical order:

Agricultural Production Activities: Those activities directly associated with agriculture, but not including agricultural support services, processing, and visitor-serving uses. Activities include growing, harvesting, crop storage, milking, etc. Ancillary processing of cannabis grown on-site is considered an agricultural production activity because it does not change an agricultural product from its natural state to a different form, as grapes to wine, apples to juice or sauce, agricultural crops to extracted oils, etc.

Agricultural Support Services: Processing services, maintenance and repair of farm machinery and equipment, veterinary clinics, custom farming services, agricultural waste handling and disposal services, and other similar services. Processing of cannabis grown off-site (i.e., “centralized processing”) is considered an agricultural support service.

Controlled Agriculture or Controlled Agricultural Crop: A type of agriculture or agricultural crop that is subject to unique regulations but is included as agriculture (agricultural crop) in all General Plan agricultural policies unless stated otherwise. Cannabis is the only crop defined as a controlled agricultural crop. Cannabis does not include "industrial hemp" as defined by Section 81000 of the California Food and Agricultural Code.

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