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Planning Commission Comments
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I've been a Humboldt County resident for 33 years, and a property owner in an Ag Exclusive zone for 18 years. I own a very small farm of less than two acres. It supports grazing for dairy cattle, an orchard, and gardens that feed two extended families. Our place also sits right on the edge of the urban area in the Arcata Bottom. We are part of the green belt and buffer between agriculture and residential neighborhoods.

While our farm is productive, it might not be considered "viable" for agriculture, by some folks. It would be difficult or impossible to support my family by farming on this small piece of land. But it does provide supplemental income and food to my family and to another family's garden on our prime Ferndale loam soil. It is important to my neighbor who grazes replacement heifers on my pasture. It is important to the flocks of curlews, egrets and songbirds that spend a few weeks at the same times each year, and to the individual herons, hawks, flycatchers and owls that follow the same patterns I suspect they've followed for centuries. It is important to the quality of life of surrounding neighbors who enjoy the view, the wildlife, and who walk or bicycle in the Arcata Bottom, and to the generations who will follow them.

I prefer Alternative A in the draft land use plan, because it offers the strongest protection for agricultural and timberlands. I believe the county needs to shoulder responsibility for preserving agricultural and timberlands, since the self-interest of agricultural and timber property owners may be inclined more toward profit than maintaining these lands in production. If the ranch isn't making ends meet, the temptation for the current owner to sell and retire, or for the next generation to sell, will be very strong. But the constitutional guarantee of enjoyment of my property does not give me the right to abuse it, to remove it forever from providing the productive values all of our lives depend on. *short-term*

Alternative A, however, inadequately defines protection required for ag land conversion. In AG-P6, the term "offsetting permanent protections" is used, though the degree of offset is not defined. If an acre of prime ag land is lost to development, simply protecting another acre is not sufficient. At least another acre of prime ag land, and preferably more, must be recovered from a degraded use and restored to production, with deeded protection via a conservation easement. Alternately, we need a formula where any conversion requires protection of other prime ag lands in the urban interface via easement, at a ratio of at least 9 to 1. Any conversion of agricultural or timber lands should help us guarantee, much more strongly than we can with planning and zoning, that our productive lands at the urban edges are permanently protected.

None of the alternatives address the intensity of agricultural uses on ag land. Is a huge greenhouse operation with attendant warehouses and parking areas, such as Sun Valley's Arcata operation, really to be treated the same as a beef ranch or dairy farm? How about a feedlot or animal confinement operation? A regional manure management facility? Is a 3,000-cow dairy really in the same category as a 100-cow dairy? As family farms are consolidated into ever-larger holdings, the intensity of agricultural operations increases, with greater impacts on environmental quality and resource use, and greater potential for conflicts with non-agricultural uses. This plan element needs to identify where the industrial agriculture has already been crossed, and apply a different set of zoning and land use restrictions where operations clearly different in scale and impact from what we know as locally managed, family farms and ranches. Incremental conversion of ag land to industrial agriculture is not tolerable, yet has been actively supported by the county for too long. 20 years ago I spoke in front of this planning commission, asking for a projected plan of development for Sun Valley, as it started to build its first greenhouses. I was told by a planning commissioner, in public session, that if I didn't like it, I could leave Humboldt County. Now we have the end result, "big box" agriculture, with a drainage ditch leading straight to Humboldt Bay. I hope times have changed. Please clarify that the "Industrial, Resource Related (IR)" land use designation is not appropriate for lands planned for agriculture. We have enough unused IR sites to accommodate, without sacrificing more productive land.

In timberland it's about the same. The North McKay Tract and Forster-Gill projects sits along Ryan Creek, which 150 years ago was one of the most productive Coho salmon streams flowing into Humboldt Bay. It is a low-elevation, low-gradient, redwood-forested watershed that is a rare habitat type, the best habitat for silver salmon. But it is nearly devoid of fish. Multiple entries to log this tract since the 1850s have left it battered. Should we now say it is not economically feasible to grow timber there, and allow it to be converted to rural residential parcels that will increase runoff of sediment and toxins to Ryan Creek and the bay? Or should we view it as a unique opportunity to restore a once-great salmon population on Humboldt Bay? We know that land use in forests is directly tied to its values for healthy watersheds, fish and wildlife, yet this plan separates the issues, and we haven't seen the Conservation and Open Space elements yet. How can we make decisions about timberland before we consider all of its values? I hear my unborn grandchildren and their grandchildren calling to me from the future about this one. It's an important decision for their future, and it is in your hands now. Thanks for your time and attention.