

## A Vibrant Future: Committing to the Bay Area's Open Space and Working Lands

The Bay Area is unique in its natural beauty, globally important landscapes and waters, vibrant farm and ranchlands, parks and open spaces. Bay Area residents recognize the value of these natural and working lands and consider them essential contributors to the high quality of life and economic prosperity of the region. They support residents' health by providing clean drinking water, clean air, fresh food, and opportunities for outdoor recreation, as well as protection from disasters like flooding, landslides, and climate change. The recently released draft *Plan Bay Area* outlines a strategy for developing an economically and environmentally sustainable region. The Plan integrates planning targets for housing, health and safety, transportation, economic growth, and equity, as well as climate protection, open space and agricultural land. **Draft *Plan Bay Area* achieves its goal on Target #6, Open Space and Agricultural Land, by virtue of directing any new housing and commercial development into already urbanized areas. This is a critical first step; however, more needs to be done.** With improvements, the draft *Plan Bay Area* can provide an effective land-use and transportation plan for the Bay Area's future. A successful plan will accurately identify the range and character of parks, open space, and working lands and provide the tools and incentives to ensure that these lands remain viable and productive.



We applaud the steps ABAG and MTC are taking to develop an integrated approach to land-use planning that encourages development away from open space. However, the Plan should include specific policies and programs to reflect the Bay Area's commitment to the stewardship and restoration of conservation and working lands. **This document provides specific policy and program recommendations to ensure that the role of open space and agricultural land for creating a sustainable Bay Area is supported. Our recommendations can be used by ABAG and MTC to revise the final version of *Plan Bay Area* and also act as a guide for Bay Area residents to take concrete actions to ensure the long-term investment in and stewardship of open space and agricultural lands, promotion of healthy communities and a strong economy, and maintenance of a high quality of life.**

### Goal 1: Safeguard and Restore Diverse Natural Habitats

Target #6 of *Plan Bay Area* is on point in its proposal to direct any new housing and commercial development towards previously designated urban development and urban growth boundaries and away from priority conservation areas (PCAs). Although this approach may reduce urban sprawl, *Plan Bay Area* takes a reactive approach by calling for protection of open space only as a consequence of development and does not map out strategies or policies that ensure the permanent protection of conservation lands. Although the One Bay Area Grant (OBAG) program directs some funds (\$10 million) as part of a pilot to support PCAs, this financial investment is only a fraction compared to the \$310 million investment provided for priority development areas (PDAs), transportation improvements and infrastructure over four years.

**To strengthen protections of open space and natural resources, we recommend *Plan Bay Area* consider the following supportive steps:**

- ❖ Initiate an updated PCA program to identify new PCAs linked to regionally important conservation goals and priorities
- ❖ Grow the OBAG PCA pilot program and focus investment from OBAG, mitigation, and other sources on protecting and managing the Conservation Lands Network (CLN) lands that are not yet permanently protected
- ❖ Support a policy to restore eligibility for habitat and open space protection under the next federal transportation authorization bill
- ❖ Provide incentives to local governments to enact and/or enforce land use policies that conserve the CLN

## Goal 2: Ensure Agricultural Lands Remain in Active Production

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Draft Plan Bay Area recognizes the value of working lands and Target #6 seeks to protect agricultural land by avoiding conversion to housing or commercial development. However, there are no measures to ensure the permanent protection of agricultural lands, nor policies or strategies that facilitate the growth or improved efficiency of the agriculture sector within the Bay Area. OBAG does commit limited funds to projects like farm-to-market capital projects.

**Recommended strategies to support the goal to ensure agricultural lands remain in active production include:**

- ❖ Provide adequate infrastructure for expanding the regional agricultural-based sector
- ❖ Develop a regional farmland protection plan that 1) Identifies agricultural resources that are at high risk of being converted to nonagricultural uses, 2) Assesses the adequacy of local policies to conserve these resources and recommends needed improvements 3) Identifies opportunities for enhancing the economic viability of agriculture and 4) Recommends strategic investments in permanent agricultural land conservation and regional food production to strengthen the agricultural economy

## Goal 3: Provide All Bay Area Residents with Access to Parks and Recreational Open Spaces

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Draft Plan Bay Area acknowledges the importance of having access to parks and recreational open spaces for building healthy communities and does a good job of stressing the importance of trails; however, no specific policy or program to support these goals exists. The plan could explicitly call out how it plans to increase greenspace in urban and suburban areas and improve access to and utility of open space for recreation. In addition, the Plan could identify approaches that increase residents' and visitors' ability to access parks and trails via public transportation.

**To improve access to parks and recreational open spaces, we recommend the following supportive strategies:**

- ❖ Complete the spines of the region's major multi-use regional trails
- ❖ Make trails and parks eligible for PDA funding

## Goal 4: Integrate Conservation Early in Infrastructure Decisions

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Integrating conservation early in infrastructure decision-making processes can provide benefits such as decreased costs, reduced risk, and more efficient project delivery all while protecting and investing in important natural and working lands. Draft Plan Bay Area misses this important opportunity to proactively integrate considerations for conservation early into infrastructure development.

**To improve integration of conservation into planning decisions, MTC and ABAG should include the following aspects into the final *Plan Bay Area*:**

- ❖ Factor in the impacts/benefits to natural resources, working lands and parks as a baseline for infrastructure plans, programs and project decisions
- ❖ Provide an online resource tool to land-use planners, infrastructure agencies and stakeholders
- ❖ Consider nature (or green infrastructure) as a solution to infrastructure challenges
- ❖ Pursue a regional advance mitigation program (RAMP)

## Final Word on Draft Plan Bay Area

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Draft Plan Bay Area marks a pivotal shift in integrating sustainability and land-use planning. Although it addresses conservation considerations within the draft, this is only done at a high-level and lacks the specific actions and policies needed to ensure long-term protection and investment in the stewardship of the Bay Area's valued parks, open space and working lands. With these improvements, there is a significant opportunity for Plan Bay Area to serve as a model for California and the nation by mapping out an action-based approach to regional land-use planning that truly recognizes the values of parks, open space and working lands to the region's residents and economy.

### For Additional Information:

**ABAG/MTC Discussion Paper of Conservation and Open Space:** [onebayarea.org/pdf/9-26-12\\_DRAFT\\_Conservation\\_and\\_Open\\_Space\\_Regional\\_Policy\\_Discus.pdf](http://onebayarea.org/pdf/9-26-12_DRAFT_Conservation_and_Open_Space_Regional_Policy_Discus.pdf)

**Greenbelt Mapper:** [www.greenbelt.org/greenbelt-mapper/](http://www.greenbelt.org/greenbelt-mapper/)

**Conservation Lands Network:** [www.bayarealands.org](http://www.bayarealands.org)

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