

## **Why is Measure J bad for our local, multi-generational farms of all sizes?**

Measure J poses significant risks to local, multi-generational farms of all sizes in Sonoma County, particularly in how it could exacerbate the already fragile economic landscape. Here's why it's especially damaging for these family-run farms:

Sonoma County farms are small when compared to the broader industry. When our larger farming operations close or scale back, it sends shockwaves through the entire local agricultural ecosystem. The supply chain built around these larger operations often collapses, leading to less access to affordable feed, seeds, equipment, and processing facilities for smaller farms due to economies of scale. This reduces the availability of key resources and raises costs for smaller operations already working on thin margins.

Even if more small farms began operating or expanded in size within the measure's boundaries to compensate for the loss of the other operations, the rapid growth necessary to maintain the economy of scale would not be economically viable for these smaller producers. This would result in a rapid expansion and potential further collapse if additional financial burdens could not be met.

Furthermore, farms in Sonoma County are already limited in growth based on topography and surface water. With water quality regulations and current zoning regulations, a farm would need to purchase more property and/or construct more infrastructure to be compliant. Organic dairies are limited in size based on pasture rule regulations. Poultry farms are limited in size based on California's minimum sizes of living space. Sonoma County farms and dairies struggle to stay competitive with the rest of the market so they must find a niche, either in production or management, usually both!

The National Organic Program has specific standards that must be followed to be certified. For dairy and livestock products, this includes consuming a minimum amount of grass from pasture. Sonoma County dairy producers and livestock ranchers rely on pasture for feed to reduce input costs and care for the land. Sonoma County is steeped with rolling pastures and is one of the few counties in the state that can produce organic dairy and livestock products.

California's Prop 12, passed in 2018, set living condition standards for egg-laying hens mandating they all be cage-free and provide at least one square-foot of living space per hen. Sonoma County egg farms meet and, in most cases, exceed this standard.

Over the last decade, local farms have been closing at an alarming rate. Farms of all sizes have closed for various reasons, including the rising costs of doing business. The remaining farms are negatively affected due to the trickle-down effects of these closing operations. Smaller operations rely on shared resources and local infrastructure and are left stranded without affordable feed, seed, processing, or transportation options. The closure of farms, in general, causes a domino effect, where the fixed costs are now

distributed over fewer producers, making it more expensive for those who remain. As a result, smaller farms can't keep up with price competition, often forcing them to sell or close.

The situation mirrors what's been happening in San Francisco's Financial District due to the rise in remote work. When large companies sent their workers home permanently, it wasn't just the office buildings that suffered; the entire ecosystem around those workplaces collapsed. Small businesses, cafes, dry cleaners, and retail shops that depended on the foot traffic from these workers closed. Similarly, in agriculture, when farms shut down, it doesn't just affect the owners of those farms; it disrupts the entire local economy built around the farming community.

Farmers, particularly those running smaller and multi-generational farms, must navigate a complex web of certifications and governmental oversight. Whether it's securing third-party animal welfare certifications, meeting the stringent standards of organic and market certifications, and food safety regulations, or complying with a host of regulatory bodies from the USDA, to CDFA, to the County, to local water quality control boards, these farms are already subject to rigorous oversight. Many of them voluntarily go beyond the minimum requirements to ensure the welfare of their animals, the health of their land, and the sustainability of their operations.

Some of the most common forms of voluntary oversight include participation in programs like Certified Humane overseen by Humane Farm Animal Care (HFAC). This certification ensures that animals are treated with care and respect throughout their lives, including providing proper shelter, resting areas, and access to sufficient space, food, and water. Global Animal Partnership (GAP) is another common program, which is a tiered animal welfare certification with different levels indicating varying degrees of animal welfare and husbandry practices. The auditors are trained professionals in animal husbandry and welfare of farms, ranches, and dairies.

Many of our local producers also carry organic certifications -which are governed by the National Organic Program (NOP) under the USDA. It ensures that farms follow strict guidelines regarding soil quality, pest and weed control, animal welfare, and the use of additives. For livestock, the NOP certification mandates that animals are fed 100% organic feed, are not given antibiotics or growth hormones, and have access to the outdoors, including quantifiable pasture for grazing animals.

Additionally, other third-party and market certifications exist for producers who provide goods for specific retailers like Whole Foods. Whole Foods has developed its own rating system for farm products called Responsibly Grown. These ratings consider sustainability, environmental impact, pesticide use, worker welfare, and water conservation. The goal is to support farms that prioritize environmental health and worker welfare.

Aside from all the voluntary and required certification programs, producers must also comply with many regulatory oversight layers. The California Department of Food and

Agriculture (CDFA) regulates animal health, food safety, and environmental stewardship in California. Our local County Agricultural Department regulates farming practices through permits, land use zoning, and environmental health standards. The Regional Water Quality Control Boards, under the authority of the State Water Resources Control Board, regulate water quality related to agricultural practices.

The irony is that Sonoma County's local, multi-generational farms are already leaders in best animal welfare and environmental stewardship practices. They have a deep-rooted knowledge of the land, employ sustainable practices, and are committed to reducing environmental impact. Many already implement rotational grazing, organic farming methods, and climate-smart projects, and are actively working to reduce water and energy use. Animal welfare standards are often above and beyond what is legally required, not out of obligation, but because these farmers see their livestock as integral to the future of their land and community.

Instead of imposing further restrictions through Measure J, we should support all of our agriculture operations with incentives for their already sustainable practices. They are the backbone of our local food system. Without them, we risk losing a vital part of our agricultural heritage and our ability to produce food locally and sustainably.

In summary, Measure J does indeed threaten our multi-generational farms of all sizes, which are already struggling with the fallout from rising costs and a lack of access to resources. Much like how remote work has devastated small businesses in San Francisco's Financial District, the closure of larger farms has a cascading effect on the smaller farms that depend on a healthy agricultural ecosystem. Without support, we risk losing the farms that embody best practices for animal welfare and environmental stewardship and, with them, the future of Sonoma County agriculture and our local food supply.