



COUNTY OF SAN DIEGO

BOARD OF SUPERVISORS

1600 PACIFIC HIGHWAY, ROOM 335, SAN DIEGO, CALIFORNIA 92101-2470

AGENDA ITEM

DATE: March 15, 2022

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TO: Board of Supervisors

SUBJECT

EXPLORING THE FEASIBILITY OF ESTABLISHING AN AG PASS PROGRAM IN THE COUNTY OF SAN DIEGO (DISTRICTS: ALL)

OVERVIEW

Last fall, AB-1103, legislation creating a standardized training and framework for obtaining an Ag Pass was signed into law by Governor Newsom. The author(s) of this bill recognized the need for ranchers to have timely access to their ranch during a wildfire or other emergency incidents that could be devastating to livestock. An Ag Pass program could prevent occurrences similar to the 2020 incident involving a rancher who lost hundreds of cattle during the Bear Fire (part of the North Complex Fire) as he struggled to gain access to his rangelands.

Many ranchers and farmers have ignored evacuation orders, knowing that once they leave, they may not be able to return to their property to care for their animals and crops. Others have been evacuated only to eventually make the difficult choice to bypass roadblocks to access their farm or ranch, risking their safety and a misdemeanor charge to ensure the welfare of their animals.

Several California counties have created a county-based "Ag Pass" program. Ag Pass cards are an opportunity to identify vetted commercial farm and ranch owner-operators and their employees to firefighting personnel, California Highway Patrol officers, Sheriff deputies, other law enforcement officers, and emergency personnel during an emergency.

The Ag Pass can provide cardholders limited access during a wildfire or emergency, or similar disaster to restricted areas, allowing them to protect or care for agricultural assets, such as irrigating crops, feeding, watering, and transporting livestock. It also enables them to provide support information to emergency personnel, such as identifying access roads and water points.

Ag Pass cards are obtained through an application process prior to an emergency. This process is designed to confirm that the cardholder is a bona fide agricultural owner-operator or employee whose services are essential to providing protection or care to agricultural assets. Ag Pass cardholders must also participate in trainings to educate them on emergency procedures and their

role in providing limited protection and or care to the agricultural operation, not to fight fire or act as first responders during emergencies.

If there is imminent danger, front-line emergency personnel are empowered to use discretion when it comes to protecting emergency crews and the public from unnecessary exposure to risk. However, in cases when the boundaries of the closure area include agricultural land not deemed to be at imminent risk, cardholders may be allowed access to agricultural property, at the discretion of the emergency personnel. Additionally, all Ag Pass cardholders are required to indemnify the County of San Diego from any potential liability.

In other counties, stakeholders were consulted to develop the program and establish sound policy. In San Diego County, the departments, agencies and stakeholders who should provide input include following:

Agriculture, Weights and Measures / Agricultural Commissioner
Sheriff's Department
San Diego County Fire Protection District
Animal Services
Office of Emergency Services
San Diego County Farm Bureau
San Diego County Fire Chiefs Association
CAL FIRE
California Highway Patrol
Cattlemen's Association
U.S. Forest Service
San Diego County Flower and Plant Association
University of California Cooperative Extension

Today's action would begin the process necessary to establish a San Diego Ag Pass program in the County of San Diego.

RECOMMENDATION(S)

SUPERVISOR DESMOND AND SUPERVISOR ANDERSON

Direct the Chief Administrative Officer to explore the feasibility of developing an Ag Pass program, receive input from the departments, agencies and stakeholders identified in this action and others as appropriate, and report back in 180 days with a plan to implement this program if feasible.

EQUITY IMPACT STATEMENT

California is known for its volatile Fire Season, a time when wildfires tend to rage across the state. Since the beginning of 2021, over 2 million acres have burned in California. Establishing an Ag Pass program will allow ranchers and farmers in our most vulnerable communities to protect animals and crops while preserving their livelihoods and 12,000 agriculture jobs in San Diego County. The requested action supports the safety of our County as a whole, as when evacuations are ordered, more ranchers and farmers will be more likely to follow safety orders, knowing they may be allowed to return when imminent danger has subsided. The recommendation will help

ensure an added measure of protection and provide a sense of security to our communities during an unpredictable time.

FISCAL IMPACT

There is no fiscal impact on exploring the feasibility of establishing an Ag Pass program. Staff will return to the Board for any related future recommendations with fiscal impacts.

BUSINESS IMPACT STATEMENT

N/A

ADVISORY BOARD STATEMENT

N/A

BACKGROUND

San Diego's Mediterranean-like climate makes it an ideal place to grow agricultural crops and raise livestock. Over 3 million people live in San Diego County, and more than 5,000 farmers call it home making their living on 250,000 acres. The high cost of water and land make farming here expensive. Consequently, San Diego farmers have specialized in integrating agricultural activity and urban living by growing crops that optimize limited acres.

San Diego far surpasses its fellow top producing urbanized counties in average dollar value per acre with agricultural production more valuable than that of San Francisco, Orange County, and Los Angeles counties combined. In San Diego County, the 2020 direct economic output from agriculture production totaled \$1,810,326,411, which increased during the global pandemic.

Agriculture provides jobs to over 12,000 workers who work throughout San Diego County, which is number one in the nation for limes and number two in the nation for nursery stock, avocados, guavas, and macadamia nuts, and number six in pomegranate. The San Diego region has the fourth highest number of women serving as the principal operator on farms in the nation, and is number one in California. In the State of California, San Diego County is the sixteenth largest employer of part time farm workers, is the thirteenth largest in poultry and eggs production, and the fourth largest producer of lemons.

Agriculture in San Diego feeds and beautifies the county, state and nation and developing an Ag Pass can potentially help protect crops and livestock from succumbing to a wildfire or a similar disaster and support agricultural viability and food security.

Possession of an Ag Pass card does not automatically grant any rights or privileges and does not necessarily mean the cardholder will be able to pass through road closures to get to their farm or ranch without authorization from the appropriate officials.,

Santa Barbara, Napa, Shasta, Tulare, Butte, Sonoma, Mendocino, and Monterey Counties have created an Ag Pass program through collaborative efforts involving their county boards of supervisors, county agriculture commissioners and organizations representing agriculture.

We believe it is time to explore Ag Pass opportunities in San Diego County.

LINKAGE TO THE COUNTY OF SAN DIEGO STRATEGIC PLAN

Today's proposed actions to direct the Chief Administrative Officer to explore the feasibility of establishing an Ag Pass program supports the Community initiative of the County of San Diego's 2022-2027 Strategic Plan by promoting safety in communities throughout San Diego County.

Respectfully submitted,



JIM DESMOND
Supervisor, District 5



JOEL ANDERSON
Supervisor, District 2

ATTACHMENT(S)
N/A