

# The Geographical Review

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## SPECIALTY CROPLAND IN CALIFORNIA\*

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**ABSTRACT.** Census data do not support the widespread popular perception that urban encroachment on cropland in California is serious enough to justify programs of farmland preservation. Between 1949 and 1997 the acreage of harvested cropland declined near Los Angeles, in the San Francisco Bay area, and near Sacramento, but the high-value specialty agricultural production displaced from these areas has been relocated to more distant areas, where it has replaced lower-value field crops, and specialized agricultural production has increased steadily in the state. Vegetable production in the Salinas Valley and dairying near Los Angeles illustrate the twin processes of relocation and replacement. Urban encroachment actually has been a boon to California agriculture, because it has transferred massive amounts of urban capital to cash-strapped farmers and enabled them to develop efficient modern operations. Much of the concern about loss of farmland really is concern about loss of open space and amenities, and urban demand for water probably will be a greater constraint on California agriculture than will urban demand for land. *Keywords:* California, dairy farming, farmland preservation, specialty crops, urban encroachment.

California leads the nation in agricultural production and in lamentations about urban encroachment on agricultural land. The agricultural preeminence of the state is indisputable. It has only 4.4 percent of the total land area in the United States, but it ranks first in production of forty-eight crops. Farmers in California grow more than 40 percent of our peaches, spinach, and asparagus; more than half of our strawberries and cantaloupes; more than 60 percent of our carrots; more than 70 percent of our lemons, lettuce, tomatoes, and celery; more than 80 percent of our melons, broccoli, cauliflower, garlic, and grapes; more than 90 percent of our avocados, apricots, and plums/prunes; and more than 98 percent of our artichokes, walnuts, almonds, and olives.

Anguish about urban encroachment on agricultural land in California is equally indisputable. To cite but one of the more temperate examples, *California Agriculture*, the official publication of the Division of Agriculture and Natural Resources

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