Urban and Agricultural Lands 2000

This map portrays changing land use from farms and fields to homes and shopping centers. New urban development replaces 15,000 acres of California farmland each year. The best agricultural land is level, low elevation, and filled with fertile alluvial soils that wash down over thousands of years from the surrounding mountains. The sunny and warm Mediterranean climate found in most of the state is ideal for growing crops. However, since most crops require irrigation during the dry summer, a reliable water source is also necessary. Most of the moisture that nourishes crops begins as rain or snow in the mountains; it is stored in reservoirs and then transported to the fields in natural streams, aqueducts, and canals (see the Water Storage and Transport map). Water is also pumped up where it has collected deep underground.

The green areas shown here are among the most productive agricultural lands on Earth. However, this same level terrain and relative location to Pacific shipping lanes and highways has encouraged urban development [red areas]. Cities now replace the once-rich farmlands of Southern California and the greater Bay Area. Although the Central Valley is much larger, the cities of Sacramento, Stockton, Fresno, Bakersfield, and many smaller settlements in between—now linked by highways—are slowly replacing farmland.