

What is rural? The definition varies

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Growing up in the Central Valley and Sierra Nevada foot-hills, I knew what rural was. It was row crops, orchards and irrigated pasture. It was farmhouses and one-room schools. It was thousands and thousands of acres of rangeland climbing the Sierra's western slope.

It was the woodstove on which Aunt Eliza cooked and the hand-pump in Uncle Leslie's dirt-floored kitchen. It was watching cousin John kill chickens. It was hot coffee, biscuits and gravy. It was tractors and pick-ups with cattle racks. It was the calf squeeze and branding iron. It was post-hole diggers and barbed wire. It was physical and hard. It was moving and beautiful. It was a working rhythm between humans and the land upon which they relied.

Essentially, rural meant a land-based economy and lifestyle. I knew what rural was because it was inherent in my life. I didn't think to articulate or define rural, because it was all around me. My grandmother used to describe Stockton as an "overgrown farm town." It may currently have a population of 300,000, but in the 1950s, that's what Stockton was.

Now we talk about how to preserve rural character while we struggle to define what it is and, simultaneously, grapple with the academics of the urban-rural interface, foodsheds, exurbia, rural land use, and a sustainable rural economy. Rural has become difficult to define because the definition changes depending on who you ask.

There has been a great deal of discussion in Calaveras County about the preservation of rural character, particularly since the update of the General Plan began in 2006. At General Plan workshops throughout the county in 2007, residents listed community and county assets that they want to see protected.

The summary of the countywide Phase I Workshops listed the top three community assets as 1) recreation, 2) rural atmosphere, and 3) open space and history (tied). The top three county assets were 1) natural resources, 2) rural/open space, and 3) tourism/recreation and history (tied). From some of the specific assets identified such as lack of urban sprawl, natural beauty, rolling hills, oak trees, forests, lack of light pollution and no billboards or big box stores, it is evident rural aesthetics are highly prized.

Agriculture, and particularly ranching, provides much of the open space that is critical to rural aesthetics. As the draft Agriculture and Forestry Element maintains, what is often overlooked is "the role agriculture plays in providing the county and its residents with open space, wildlife habitat, watershed protection, oak woodlands, recreational opportunities and food security," all of which sounds very much like what residents want to preserve and protect. In order to maintain rural character, it is necessary to maintain agriculture.

Rancho Calaveras, for example, is a residential subdivision with 3,165 lots ranging in size from 0.5 to 3 acres near Valley Springs. The subdivision covers more than 5,000 acres that was formerly rangeland. The residents of Rancho Calaveras consider their lifestyle to be rural in the sense that they are living in a low-density subdivision that allows them to keep a horse or raise a steer. They have no sidewalks or street lights. Rancho's Special Plan prohibits commercial development and multifamily housing. Yet, if we convert all rangeland to similar ranchette development, is it really rural?

It seems abundantly clear to me that an open landscape and a limited number of people are necessary to qualify as rural. Therefore, the county and the community must actively plan to retain a rural environment. That means a General Plan that encourages community-centered development and discourages sprawl. Sprawl may be inflicted primarily on rural landscapes, but there is nothing inherently rural about it.

According to the report, Putting Smart Growth to Work in Rural Communities, which was commissioned by the Environmental Protection Agency, changing conditions have given rise to five types of rural communities alone or in combination: gateway communities adjacent to high-amenity recreational areas; resource-dependent communities that are often home to a single industry such as farming or mining; edge communities located on the fringe of larger metropolitan areas; traditional main street communities, which are compact and historically significant; and second home and retirement communities. I see elements of all these community types here in Calaveras County.

The report recommends three goals for rural counties: 1) Support the rural landscape by creating an economic climate that enhances the viability of working lands and conserves natural lands; 2) Help existing places thrive by taking care of assets and investments such as downtowns, Main Streets, existing infrastructure, and places that the community values; and 3) Create great new places by building vibrant, enduring neighborhoods and communities that people, especially young people, don't want to leave. The report provides practical suggestions for implementing these goals without "fundamentally altering the community character."

And there's the rub. How do we make progress and still keep it rural when the definition of rural is no longer intimately tied to a working relationship with land?

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