

How The Responsible Growth Initiative Protects Colorado's Elise Jones, Executive Director, Colorado Environmental Coalition

The Responsible Growth Initiative — Amendment 24 on the November ballot — is a bottom-up, local control proposal to better manage Colorado's growth. The goal of this measure is to limit the uncontrolled, sprawling development that is paving over Colorado's farm and ranch lands and open space at a rate of ten acres per hour. By decreasing development pressures on these lands, the initiative helps promote continued agricultural production in Colorado.

Here's how it works. The initiative requires larger cities and counties to draw maps of where they want new development to occur, and then to submit these maps to local voters for approval. Localities must also tell voters how they will pay for this new development and what its impacts will be on things like water supply, traffic, schools, affordable housing, and the like. New growth areas are limited to the lands that a local government can provide roads and central water and sewer within a ten-year period, and, for cities, must be contiguous to the existing community. Development within already urbanized areas, for which a valid development application has been submitted, or that has the proper subdivision and zoning in place and only requires a building permit may go forward without voter approval.

So how will the Responsible Growth Initiative affect agriculture? For starters, it will not affect any existing development, including any farming and ranching operations. Secondly, while the initiative requires voter approval for new residential, industrial and commercial development, it does NOT affect activities defined by counties as "agricultural." In other words, if a county defines new housing for ranch employees or a new confined animal feedlot operation such as a dairy farm as agricultural uses, then they would not be covered by the requirements for voter approval. If, however, the county viewed them as commercial or industrial uses, then they would be subject to the initiative's requirements.

Additionally, the measure recognizes the special needs of agricultural land users by exempting rural counties and small towns, and by making special allowances for farm family residences and businesses. Counties with fewer than 10,000 residents and towns with less than 1,000 residents are not covered by the initiative, and counties with populations of between 10,000 and 25,000 can vote to exempt themselves (and the cities within their boundaries) for up to four years at a time indefinitely. Agricultural land users can also create as many as 3 residences on their farms for immediate family members (or more if the local county defines them as an agricultural use). New commercial or industrial facilities to support nearby agricultural operations in an area where there are no other such facilities within a mile are also exempt from voter approval.

While the initiative focuses most new development in or near existing urban areas rather than allowing it to sprawl across farm and ranch lands, agricultural landowners still may subdivide their land into lots of 35 acres or more (17.5 acres for clustered development) and sell it for non-agricultural development if they choose.

Farmers and ranchers who want to protect the state's agri-cultural economy from the devastating impacts of sprawl should vote for Amendment 24 on November 7th. By guiding new development to where it has the least fiscal and environmental impacts, Amendment 24 will allow our state to continue enjoying the economic benefits of growth while at the same time preserving Colorado's farming and ranching heritage.

Elise Jones of CEC may be reached at (303) 534-7066.