



Before You Improve Your Country Property



Permits, Zoning, Setbacks and Easements

Before planning an addition, ADU, barn, arena, pool, garage, fence, or other major improvement, confirm what is legally allowed on your property. Start with your parcel number and verify the zoning, required setbacks, land-use restrictions, permit requirements, and existing permit history with the appropriate county. If you have your preliminary title report from when you purchased the property, reread it—especially the exceptions section—and review the referenced maps and documents for recorded easements, utility access, shared roads, CC&Rs, maintenance agreements, or other restrictions that could affect where and what you build. Look for red flags such as an easement running through the proposed building area, an unpermitted structure, expired permits, unclear legal access, or improvements that cross a property line. County maps and online records are helpful starting points, but confirm important details directly with the Planning or Building Department before spending money on plans or construction.

Helpful links

- [Placer County zoning and permit research](#)
- [Placer County permits and zoning services](#)
- [Apply for a Placer County permit](#)
- [Placer County online document search](#)
- [Nevada County zoning and parcel information](#)
- [Nevada County permits](#)
- [Nevada County Building Department](#)
- [Nevada County community-development records](#)

Important note: If the property is located within an incorporated city rather than an unincorporated county area, check with that city's Planning and Building departments.

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Septic Capacity and Bedroom Count

Before adding a bedroom, ADU, guesthouse, or other living space, determine how many bedrooms the existing septic system was designed and approved to serve. Septic capacity is generally based on bedroom count—not simply the home's square footage or the number of bathrooms. Review the septic permit, as-built drawing, tank location, leach field, and designated replacement area before deciding where to build. An addition may require Environmental Health review, a septic modification, a separate tank, or an entirely new system. Do not build, grade, plant trees, install fencing, or drive heavy equipment over the tank, leach field, or future replacement area.

County information

- [Nevada County septic-system information](#)
- [Nevada County sewage-disposal resources](#)
- [Placer County permit and zoning research](#)

Local septic resources

- [Navo & Sons](#)
- [Urke Septic & Sewer](#)
- [Tall Boots Pumping Services](#)

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Well Production

A private well's production can change with the season, groundwater conditions, drought, pump performance, and the overall condition of the well. If you are planning an addition, ADU, substantial landscaping, livestock facility, or expanded irrigation, have a licensed well professional perform a production or yield test. Locate and save the original well log if possible, and document the well depth, static water level, sustained production rate, recovery rate, pump size, pressure system, and prior repairs. A brief flow test at a faucet does not provide the same information as a professional well-production test.

County information

- [Nevada County private residential wells](#)
- [Nevada County drinking-water wells](#)
- [Placer County drought and domestic-well planning](#)

Local well resources

- [Gary C. Tanko Well Drilling](#)
- [Diamond Well Drilling](#)
- [Peters' Drilling & Pump Service](#)

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Water Storage

Water storage can provide an important buffer when a well produces water slowly, during a power outage, or when a property has significant household, irrigation, livestock, or fire-protection needs. Storage-system planning should consider tank capacity, refill rate, household demand, elevation, pump and pressure requirements, backup power, freeze protection, access for maintenance, and whether the local fire authority has specific requirements. Confirm whether the tank, pad, plumbing, electrical work, or grading requires permits. The tank should also be positioned where leaks, overflow, or a tank failure will not damage the home, septic system, driveway, barn, or neighboring property.

Helpful resources

- [Gary C. Tanko Well Drilling—pumps, storage and controls](#)
- [Peters' Drilling—holding tanks and water systems](#)
- [Nevada County work that may be exempt from permits](#)

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Well-Water Quality

Clear water is not necessarily contaminant-free. Private-well owners are responsible for monitoring and maintaining their own water quality, so consider periodic testing through a qualified professional or state-accredited laboratory. Testing may include bacteria, nitrates, minerals, hardness, iron, manganese, arsenic, or other contaminants based on the property and surrounding land uses. Test again after flooding, wildfire, well repairs, a change in taste or odor, or a long period of nonuse. If treatment is recommended, choose the system based on actual laboratory results rather than buying a one-size-fits-all filtration system.

Helpful resources

- [Nevada County private-well testing requirements](#)
- [Peters' Drilling & Pump Service](#)
- [Gary C. Tanko water-treatment information](#)
- [Diamond Well Drilling](#)

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PCWA Irrigation Water

Some Placer County properties receive untreated irrigation water through the Placer County Water Agency. Never assume that canal or irrigation water automatically transfers with the property or that additional water is available. Confirm the account, purchased allocation, delivery season, service-box location, canal or pipeline serving the property, private conveyance system, pumps, storage, maintenance responsibilities, and any easements needed to transport water across another property. Untreated irrigation water is not drinking water and service may be interrupted for canal maintenance, emergencies, or seasonal changes. PCWA offers discounts on your purchase of a water storage tank.

Helpful links

- [Placer County Water Agency](#)
- [PCWA outage and canal-maintenance information](#)
- PCWA Customer Services: 530-823-4850

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- [PCWA outage and canal-maintenance information](#)
- PCWA Customer Services: 530-823-4850

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NID Irrigation Water

Nevada Irrigation District supplies raw irrigation water to many farms, ranches, orchards, vineyards, gardens, and rural properties in Nevada and portions of Placer County. Before relying on it for a new project, verify whether service currently exists, how much water is purchased, when it is delivered, and whether increased service is available. Some canals are already at capacity. Also identify the service box, delivery route, pumps, storage tanks, private pipes or ditches, maintenance responsibilities, and any easements needed to bring water across neighboring land. Raw NID water is seasonal and untreated; it should not be represented or used as potable drinking water without an approved treatment system.

Helpful links

- [Getting NID irrigation water](#)
- [NID customer service](#)
- [NID irrigation-water outages](#)
- NID Customer Service: 530-273-6185

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Accessory Dwelling Units

An ADU can create space for family, caregiving, guests, a home office, or rental income, but the site must work before the floor plan will. Confirm zoning, setbacks, septic or sewer capacity, well production or public-water availability, fire access, parking, utilities, grading, insurance, and impact fees. Placer County offers pre-reviewed ADU plans in several sizes and styles, which may reduce design expenses and shorten part of the review process. However, the plan still must be adapted and approved for the individual property. Nevada County also provides ADU standards, FAQs, and permitting information.

County resources

- [Placer County accessory homes and pre-reviewed plans](#)
- [Nevada County ADU information](#)

Local building resource

- [Good Life Construction—Auburn ADUs and additions](#)

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Guesthouses and Second Dwellings

An ADU can create space for family, caregiving, guests, a home office, or rental income, but the site must work before the floor plan will. Confirm zoning, setbacks, septic or sewer capacity, well production or public-water availability, fire access, parking, utilities, grading, insurance, and impact fees. Placer County offers pre-reviewed ADU plans in several sizes and styles, which may reduce design expenses and shorten part of the review process. However, the plan still must be adapted and approved for the individual property. Nevada County also provides ADU standards, FAQs, and permitting information.

Helpful links

- [Placer County accessory-home information](#)
- [Nevada County ADUs and zoning standards](#)
- [Nevada County tiny homes on wheels](#)

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Home Additions

Before adding bedrooms, bathrooms, a primary suite, office, sunroom, or expanded living area, look beyond the construction estimate. Confirm setbacks, septic capacity, well production, structural requirements, utility capacity, fire access, drainage, roof transitions, and whether the existing home was fully permitted. Ask how the addition will affect the home's layout, natural light, insurance cost, heating and cooling, and future resale. A beautifully built addition can still create problems if it blocks access, overwhelms a rural utility system, or adds space that cannot legally be represented as permitted living area.

Helpful links

- [Placer County permit applications](#)
- [Nevada County Building Department](#)
- [Good Life Construction—Auburn](#)

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Barns

A barn's location should work for the animals, the land, emergency access, and future resale. Before building, confirm setbacks, permitted use, maximum size and height, fire requirements, electrical and plumbing permits, manure management, drainage, driveway access, and separation from wells and septic systems. Consider prevailing wind, summer heat, ventilation, winter mud, trailer access, hay storage, water supply, lighting, evacuation, and whether fire equipment can reach the structure. Avoid placing the barn where runoff will flow into stalls, paddocks, neighboring properties, a pond, creek, well, or septic area.

Helpful resources

- [Placer County permits and zoning services](#)
- [Nevada County permits](#)
- [Long Run Ranch shelters and panels](#)

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Arenas and Round Pens

An arena is much more than a cleared, level rectangle. Proper construction may require soil evaluation, excavation, grading, drainage, a compacted base, carefully selected footing, and ongoing maintenance. Poor drainage or incorrect footing can make an arena unsafe, unusable in wet weather, or expensive to repair. Confirm setbacks, grading permits, dust-control requirements, lighting restrictions, water availability, access for equipment, and how runoff will be managed. For larger projects, select a contractor who understands equestrian footing and how horses move—not simply a general grading company.

Local resources

- [Crowton's Excavation & Grading—equestrian arenas](#)
- [Long Run Ranch—panels, gates and round pens](#)

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Fencing and Gates

Choose fencing based on its purpose: horses, livestock, dogs, privacy, perimeter security, or decorative use. Before installation, confirm the property lines rather than relying on an old fence, landscaping, or a neighbor's recollection. Review recorded easements, road-maintenance areas, setbacks, gate placement, emergency access, and any height or permit requirements. For horse fencing, consider visibility, spacing, sharp edges, entrapment risks, gate width, trailer access, and whether the material is appropriate for the horses using it. Call 811 before digging postholes near underground utilities.

Helpful resources

- [Long Run Ranch fencing panels and gates](#)
- [California 811](#)
- [Nevada County work exempt from permits](#)

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Sheds

Small storage sheds may be exempt from a building permit under limited circumstances, but exemption from a building permit does not mean exemption from zoning, setbacks, easements, fire rules, septic restrictions, or electrical and plumbing permits. Confirm the current size and height limits before ordering or constructing the shed. Choose a location that will not block emergency access, interfere with drainage, encroach on a property line, or occupy the septic replacement area. If the structure may later become an office, workshop, tack room, or living space, discuss that intended use with the county before building.

Helpful links

- [Nevada County work exempt from permits](#)
- [Placer County permit and zoning research](#)

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Other Outbuildings

Garages, workshops, equipment buildings, greenhouses, animal shelters, tack rooms, and storage buildings can have different requirements based on their size, construction, utilities, and intended use. Confirm zoning, setbacks, height limits, lot coverage, fire access, and whether plumbing, electrical service, grading, or mechanical equipment will require separate permits. Be honest about the intended use from the beginning. A permitted storage building generally cannot be converted into legal living space merely by adding insulation, flooring, plumbing, or a kitchenette.

Helpful links

- [Placer County permit information](#)
- [Nevada County permits](#)

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Grading

Grading can change how water moves across the entire property, so even a seemingly simple pad, pasture, barn site, or yard-leveling project can affect slopes, roads, wells, septic systems, trees, neighboring parcels, and natural drainage. Confirm whether an engineered grading plan, erosion-control measures, drainage calculations, or permits are required. The contractor should understand foothill soils, seasonal runoff, unstable slopes, and access for heavy equipment. Obtain a written scope identifying how much material will be cut, filled, imported, compacted, or removed.

Local companies to review

- [LP Earthworks](#)
- [Crowton's Excavation & Grading](#)
- [Olenders Excavating](#)
- [Davidson Excavating](#)
- [Pina Excavating](#)

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Drainage

Drainage problems rarely improve on their own—and sending water onto a neighbor's property is not a solution. Watch the property during heavy rain to identify runoff paths, ponding, erosion, overflowing gutters, blocked culverts, wet crawl spaces, barn flooding, and water moving toward the well or septic system. A qualified contractor may recommend swales, culverts, French drains, catch basins, grading corrections, erosion control, or a combination of solutions. Do not install a drain without knowing where the water will safely discharge.

Local companies to review

- [LP Earthworks](#)
- [Olenders Excavating](#)
- [Agua Fria Landscape](#)
- [The Yard Guy](#)

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Retaining Walls

A retaining wall must be designed for the soil, slope, drainage, surcharge, and structures above it—not just for appearance. Even a relatively short wall may require engineering or a permit when it supports a driveway, building, steep slope, fence, or other load. Proper footing, drainage, backfill, reinforcement, and water management are essential. Before replacing or adding a wall, determine why the soil is moving or water is collecting; otherwise, the new wall may eventually develop the same problem.

Helpful resources

- [Nevada County permit-exemption information](#)
- [LP Earthworks](#)
- [The Yard Guy](#)
- [Agua Fria Landscape](#)

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Driveway Access

A rural driveway must accommodate more than everyday vehicles. Consider fire engines, ambulances, moving trucks, horse trailers, propane deliveries, septic trucks, construction equipment, and evacuation traffic. Evaluate width, slope, turning radius, overhead clearance, road base, drainage, culverts, gates, bridges, and year-round access. Changes near a public or private road may require an encroachment permit or approval from a road association. Before paving, correct drainage and base failures first; asphalt over a poor foundation is simply an expensive cover-up.

Local companies to review

- Andrew's Paving & Excavating
- Crowton's Excavation & Grading
- LP Earthworks
- Davidson Excavating

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