

Agricultural Outlook Forum 1999

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AN OVERVIEW OF NATIONAL TRENDS AND POLICY DIRECTIONS

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The recent surge in local and state efforts to protect farmland suggests rapidly rising concern over the loss of farmland and its impacts. In last November's elections over 70% of more than 200 initiatives to protect farmland and open space were approved by voters across the nation. In recent years Governors Engler, Voinovich, Jones, Pataki, Wilson, Whitman, Bayh, Glendenning and others have supported or initiated farmland protection efforts to address this problem. Nearly every day this year major newspapers have carried articles about sprawl and "smart growth", frequently citing farmland protection as one of the key components of the latter. And the President highlighted the need to help communities protect "farmland and open space" in his State of the Union speech.

All of this activity begs the questions: Why save farmland? What are the factors driving public interest in farmland protection?

The answers have little to do with food security.

Twenty-five years ago, the issue of farmland loss was first raised by northeastern states over a concern for food security in the region. Escalating commodity prices and a truckers strike had exposed the vulnerability of the northeast to its dependence on long distance transportation of food. An aggressive farmland protection program was quickly developed in Massachusetts, following the lead of Suffolk County, New York's purchase of development rights program in 1973. Other states followed in short order. When the National Agricultural Lands Study (NALS) was released in 1980, it was the first major study to document the insidious problem of the loss of farmland to urban sprawl over the decades since WWII. The outward migration from city to suburb was taking a toll on this nation's best land.

While NALS' claim, that more than 3 million acres per year were being lost to development, was disputed by its critics, there was little doubt that large amounts of the nation's best land had been paved over, and that the problem was continuing. One of the shortcomings of NALS was that it did not take a closer look at which land was being lost. Critics argued then (and some still do) that the US has more than enough land to fill its needs for the foreseeable future, citing the vast acreage that has been in government sponsored set-aside programs as an example; but the simple truth is that not all land is created equally. The marginal, erosion-prone lands of the Plains, for example, cannot replace the highly productive land of the Salinas or Central Valleys of California, the deep fertile soils of Illinois, or the rich bottomland of the Connecticut River Valley. Recent studies by American Farmland Trust have documented that more than 80% of this nation's fruits, vegetables and dairy products are grown in metropolitan area counties or fast growing adjacent counties – in the path of sprawling development. And a 1997 AFT study found that over the past decade more than 400 thousand acres of prime and unique farmland were lost to urban uses each year.

But one should not get caught up in the "numbers game". The fact is that every year we continue to squander some of this nation's most valuable farmland with the expectation that this land can be replaced with other land in this country or abroad, or with new technologies that promise to help maintain the productivity gains of the past half century. The reality is that we

don't know whether new technologies will keep pace. What we do know is that whatever those technologies will be, it is likely that they will be more efficiently applied on productive land than on marginal land where higher levels of energy, fertilizer, chemicals and labor per unit of output are required. Simply put, **It is in the nation's best interest to keep the best land for farming as an insurance policy against the challenge of feeding an expanding population in the 21st century.**

Community Values

Long term food security is one reason to protect this nation's best farmland, but there are more immediate impacts of farmland loss that are just as compelling – because farmland produces a lot more than food and fiber. Here are some of the reasons why state and local communities across the country are demanding more tools to protect farmland.

I. Important element of the local economy.

In many regions of the nation, enough farmland is being paved over to place the remaining farms at risk, due to the lack of a critical mass of land and services to support agriculture - farm machinery, supplies, marketing outlets, etc. Too often, while local leaders work to bring new business to a community they overlook agriculture as a true “wealth generator” – an industry that brings value to the community from renewable natural resources. In many traditional farm communities citizens are awakening to the prospect that this important, consistent economic base is at risk; and they recognize that one of the solutions is to ensure that the land base is protected. This calculus has little to do with the global food supply and everything to do with the value of farming to local economies.

II. Local supply of fresh produce.

Likewise, few consumers are concerned about food security, but an increasing number would like the option to buy locally grown produce. A resurgent interest in farmers' markets and the demand for locally grown produce by major supermarket chains, fine restaurants and upscale consumers is evidence that the consuming public is increasingly convinced that locally grown produce is fresher and healthier. While this demand is still a very small segment of the marketplace, it can represent a politically potent basis for farmland protection

III. Aesthetic / environmental values important to an increasingly suburban population.

Ironically, the suburban sprawl that threatens so many historically farm communities may be the basis for its salvation. Residents increasingly frustrated with long commutes, deteriorating public services and a loss of the scenic views, watershed protection and wildlife habitat, that is so much a part of their quality of life, are among the strongest advocates for farmland protection. The working landscape around our cities adds value to the life and property of all the residents of a given community. And in some cases, farms that are far from the city add critical values; for example, the protection of farms hundreds of miles from New York City is helping improve the water quality and reduce water treatment costs for the residents of Manhattan.

Increasingly, farmland protection is seen as an inexpensive way to protect scenic vistas that enhance the community for both residents and visitors while keeping the land in productive use on local tax roles. Farmers are “producing” a valuable product for their new suburban neighbors – environmental quality; and farmland protection programs such as purchase of development rights and the use of conservation easements have become mechanisms to compensate them for these “products”.

IV. A Component of “Smart Growth”

Containing growth within reasonable urban growth areas makes sense for both environmental and fiscal reasons. Numerous studies show that more compact development is more cost effective in the delivery of a wide range of publicly funded services from police and fire to sewer, water and transit. As more communities struggle with the problems of suburban sprawl, farmland and open space protection is emerging as a key strategy of smart growth. Again, techniques such as purchase of conservation easements add an element of fairness to the difficult challenge of achieving public goals while balancing private property rights by providing a means of compensation for value received by the community at large. They are also seen as a reasonable balance to the regulation needed to implement growth management strategies – the fairness often lacking when zoning alone is applied.

V. Community Structure

In many traditional farming areas threatened by sprawling development, farming is a key cultural component that represents important but difficult to quantify values to the community. To these communities the issue of farmland protection is best captured in the simple question: “What would we like our community to look like in the future?” If the answer includes agriculture, then steps need to be taken to ensure that the land base needed for its survival is secured. In that way the “family farm” values that our society feels so strongly about can be maintained along with the character of the region. In short, farmland protection is seen as an antidote to the “geography of nowhere”.

The notion of protecting farms for anything other than its agricultural value makes some in agriculture uneasy; but as the values associated with farming are more clearly identified (and quantified) by this increasingly suburban society, the farm community is becoming more comfortable with the prospect of marketing “non-food” products. The challenge before us is to develop more efficient channels for distribution and remuneration. This is the process that is evolving as we speak.