

# FARMING ON THE EDGE

SPRAWLING DEVELOPMENT THREATENS AMERICA'S BEST FARMLAND



## AMERICAN FARMLAND TRUST'S RESEARCH FINDS:

Loss of farmland to  
development is accelerating

Our highest quality  
farmland is threatened

Our food and open space are in  
the path of development

  
*American Farmland Trust*



# WHAT'S HAPPENING TO OUR FARMLAND?

**E**ach year you have to drive a little farther out to find it. Slowed by traffic, through tangled intersections, past rows of houses that seem to have sprouted from the field, finally, you can see the bountiful farmland. It wasn't always like this. But for the past two decades we've paved over our farmland for roads, houses and malls. Wasteful land use puts America's farmland at risk, especially our most fertile and productive—our most valuable—farmland.



We're needlessly wasting one of the world's most important resources. Less than one-fifth of U.S. land is high quality and we are losing this finest land to development at an accelerating rate. U.S. agricultural land provides the nation—and the world—with an unparalleled abundance of food. But farmland means much more than food. Well-managed farmland shelters wildlife, supplies scenic open space, and helps filter impurities from our air and water. These working lands keep our taxes down and maintain the legacy of our agricultural heritage. It makes no sense to develop our best land. Instead, we have a responsibility to protect this most valuable resource for future generations.



## Findings:

✦ **Every single minute of every day, America loses two acres of farmland.**

From 1992–1997 we converted to developed use more than 6 million acres of agricultural land—an area the size of Maryland.

✦ **We lost farm and ranch land 51 percent faster in the 90s than in the 80s.**

The rate of loss for 1992–1997, 1.2 million acres per year, was 51 percent higher than from 1982–1992.

✦ **We're losing our best land—most fertile and productive—the fastest.**

The rate of conversion of prime land was 30 percent faster, proportionally, than the rate for non-prime rural land from 1992–1997. This results in marginal land, which requires more resources like water, being put into production.

✦ **Our food is increasingly in the path of development.**

86 percent of U.S. fruits and vegetables, and 63 percent of our dairy products, are produced in urban-influenced areas.

✦ **Wasteful land use is the problem, not growth itself.**

From 1982–1997, U.S. population grew by 17 percent, while urbanized land grew by 47 percent. Over the past 20 years, the acreage per person for new housing almost doubled and since 1994, 10+ acre housing lots have accounted for 55 percent of the land developed.

✦ **Every state is losing some of its best farmland.**

Texas leads the nation in high-quality acres lost, followed by Ohio, Georgia, North Carolina and Illinois. And for each of the top 20 states the problem is getting worse. (See chart inside.)



## STATES LOSING THE MOST PRIME FARMLAND 1992-1997

State	Prime Acres Lost	Increase in Rate of Loss Over Previous 5 Years
TX	332,800	42%
OH	212,200	45%
GA	184,000	66%
NC	168,300	1%
IL	160,900	137%
PA	134,900	23%
IN	124,200	65%
TN	124,000	42%
MI	121,400	67%
AL	113,800	127%
VA	105,000	76%
WI	91,900	70%
NY	89,100	141%
SC	86,200	64%
CA	85,200	15%
MS	84,800	117%
LA	83,700	13%
KY	80,000	58%
AR	71,600	254%
MN	71,600	32%

Source: 1997 National Resources Inventory

The map of the U.S. to the right identifies our best—most fertile and productive—land threatened by development. The red areas represent the high-quality acres in the path of development, the green areas the high-quality acres less threatened. Every state in the nation lost some of its very best land to sprawling development. While this loss is regrettable, it is not inevitable. We know how to save our farmland; we simply must do more. Communities, states and now the federal government are working to protect this irreplaceable resource by:

- ✦ **Stopping the loss of our best farmland through effective planning and smart growth that directs development to less productive land;**
- ✦ **Permanently saving farms through publicly funded agricultural conservation easement programs;**
- ✦ **Supporting farming practices that enhance the environmental benefits of farmland; and**
- ✦ **Expanding efforts to increase the profitability of urban-edge farming.**

### IN EVERY STATE WE ARE LOSING SPECIAL PLACES

**Texas** is the nation's number two agricultural state after California, with over \$13.7 billion in sales. Texas is home to the fertile Rio Grande Valley, which produces grapefruit and vegetables, and the scenic and productive Blackland Prairie. Texas' vast ranchland, which also serves as important wildlife habitat, is threatened by fragmentation from development.

**Georgia's** agriculture is more than peaches and Vidalia onions. But Georgia's 40,000 farms, which lead the nation in production of peanuts, pecans and poultry, are threatened by the state's infamous urban sprawl and its interstates. The beautiful and productive coastal plain, land of farming, fishing and wildlife, can't compete with the movement toward the coast for second homes.

**Michigan's** position between four Great Lakes helps make it the leading producer of dry beans, blueberries, tart cherries, cucumbers and many flowering plants. Yet low-density development across the state challenges Michigan's 46,000 farms. The Little Traverse Bay area has a unique agricultural microclimate, but its beauty creates a tug-of-war between farming and residential development.

**Virginia's** long agricultural history continues today. Agriculture is its top industry, with 41,000 farms covering 34 percent of the state. But all this is threatened by the ever-expanding urban areas of Washington, D.C. and Richmond. Even the farms of the bucolic Shenandoah Valley, rich in American history and in agricultural productivity, are vulnerable to the insatiable demand for land.

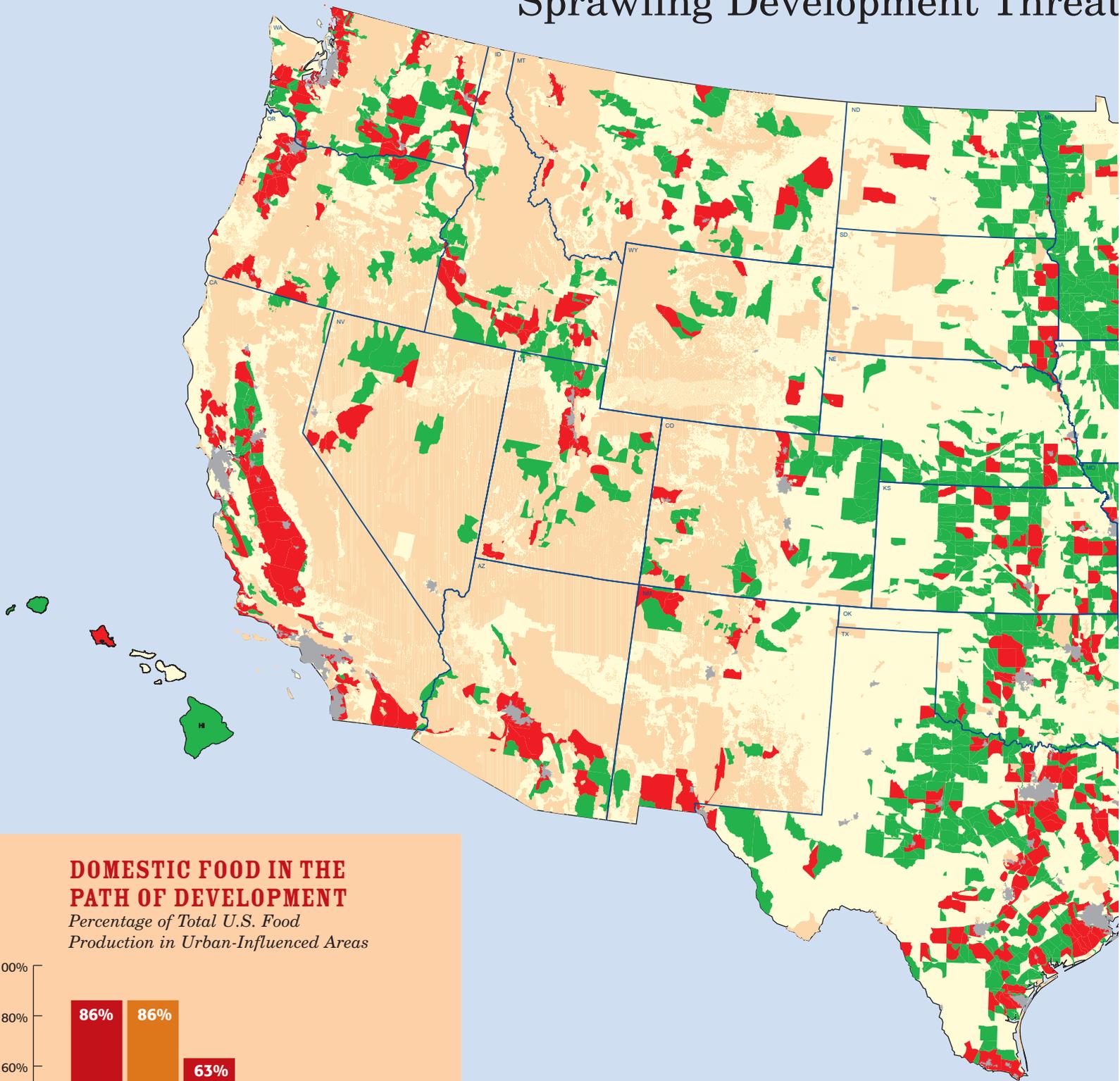
**New York** agriculture is integral to the state's economy and culture. New York is among the nation's leaders in producing milk, apples, grapes, sweet corn, cauliflower and cabbage. Sprawl or large-lot development threatens the Hudson River Valley, one of the most famous landscapes in America; western New York, agricultural engine of the state; and Long Island's North Fork, where farmland protection efforts launched 30 years ago still struggle to succeed.

Go to [www.farmland.org](http://www.farmland.org) to see your state's threatened farmland.

Source: 1997 U.S. Census of Agriculture and state published profile figures

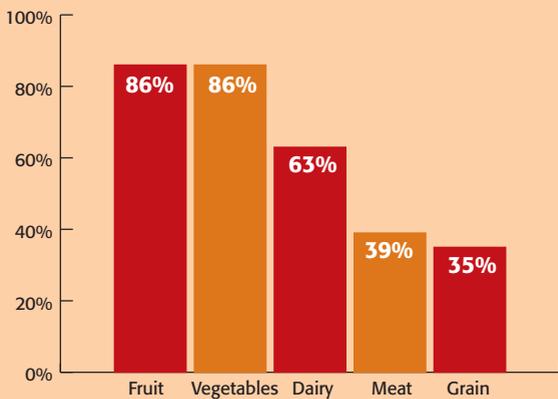
# FARMING ON

## Sprawling Development Threat



### DOMESTIC FOOD IN THE PATH OF DEVELOPMENT

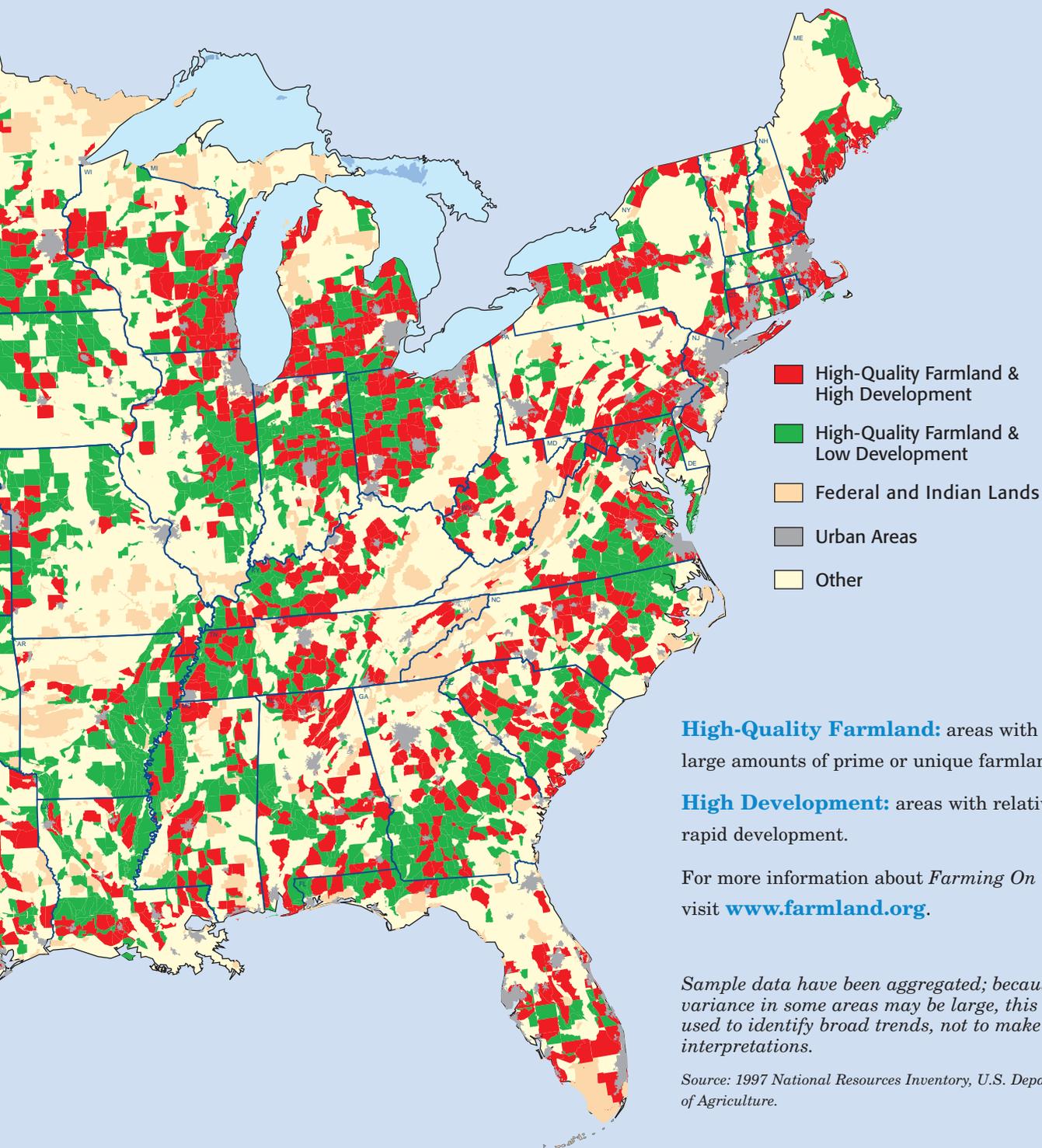
Percentage of Total U.S. Food  
Production in Urban-Influenced Areas



Source: 1997 U.S. Census of Agriculture; USDA's Economic Research Service.

# IN THE EDGE

## Protects America's Best Farmland



**High-Quality Farmland:** areas with relatively large amounts of prime or unique farmland.

**High Development:** areas with relatively rapid development.

For more information about *Farming On The Edge*, visit [www.farmland.org](http://www.farmland.org).

*Sample data have been aggregated; because statistical variance in some areas may be large, this map should be used to identify broad trends, not to make highly localized interpretations.*

*Source: 1997 National Resources Inventory, U.S. Department of Agriculture.*



# HELP PROTECT OUR BEST FARMLAND

**T**o save our best farmland we must build upon the successful work of state and local farmland protection programs—like those in Vermont, Pennsylvania and California. These programs across the country have protected more than one million acres of farmland. **But much more must be done.** Here's what is needed:

## 1. INCREASE FUNDING FOR AGRICULTURAL CONSERVATION EASEMENTS

Currently, more than 5,000 farmers are awaiting funding to permanently protect their land. The federal Farmland Protection Program (FPP) must be fully funded and every state should develop or expand its own purchase of agricultural conservation easements (PACE) program. In addition, we should expand federal and state tax incentives for land conservation.

## 2. EXPAND CONSERVATION PROGRAMS THAT SHARE THE COSTS WITH FARMERS FOR PROVIDING ENVIRONMENTAL BENEFITS

Farms and ranches produce a wide range of ecological goods and services, from wildlife habitat to water recharge to scenic open space. But there is no compensation for them. Conservation programs, like the Wildlife Habitat Incentive Program and Conservation Security Program, help share the costs of “growing” these valuable benefits.

## 3. TARGET CONSERVATION FUNDS TO THE MOST VALUABLE, MOST THREATENED AREAS

FPP and other conservation programs should target their funds to the nation's most valuable, most threatened farmland, as identified by states and their conservation partners. To help identify those areas, we must continue improving systems to track and inventory farmland loss, environmental attributes and development threats.

## 4. SUPPORT EFFECTIVE PLANNING AND SMART GROWTH TO STEER DEVELOPMENT AWAY FROM OUR BEST FARMLAND

Communities need to adopt land use plans that designate specific farmland protection areas where development is discouraged. We also must eliminate subsidies that promote sprawl—and expand policies that promote smart growth.

## 5. GET INVOLVED AND MAKE A DIFFERENCE

We can't protect our farmland without **you**. Buy local farm products. Support your local farmers' market. Contact your elected officials, zoning board, planning commission—make sure they know you support local agriculture and want your farmland protected. Live near where you work, in an established community. If you own land, protect it with a conservation easement. Vote for officials who will support farmland conservation. For more information, visit American Farmland Trust's Web site at **[www.farmland.org](http://www.farmland.org)**.

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American Farmland Trust works to stop the loss of productive farmland and to promote farming practices that lead to a healthy environment.

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For more information, or to see a map of your state's threatened farmland, go to **[www.farmland.org](http://www.farmland.org)**.

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