



SAVING OPEN SPACES

PUBLIC SUPPORT FOR FARMLAND PROTECTION

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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American Farmland Trust

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In urban areas across the nation, those who wish to protect farmland and other open spaces from scatter development have waged battle against the forces that create urban sprawl. This study attempts to discern precisely what it is that residents living on the fringe of suburbia value about the farmland and open space they are trying to protect. It also seeks to determine how much they would be willing to spend to achieve their goals.

The study was conducted in the Chicago collar counties of Kane, McHenry and DeKalb - counties where large tracts of prime farmland are under intense pressure from development. The study determined that residents in those areas view the loss of open space as a threat to the quality of life they presently enjoy. Since most open space in the three counties is farmland, residents view protecting that resource as a viable and acceptable means of slowing the advance of sprawl.

Residents of these counties also appeared willing to pay a substantial amount to protect farmland from development. On average, households who responded to the survey were willing to pay \$484 per year for five years to permanently protect about 20,000 acres of farmland in their county from development. However, publicly funded purchase of development rights programs are more often financed over a 30-year period. The equivalent annual value over a 30-year time span is \$57 per year per household. Respondents' concern for the issue was so great that when asked to rank public spending priorities they ranked protecting farmland and open space on a par with spending to reduce crime and improve schools, two issues that are historically paramount in the region.

To reach these conclusions the study used both qualitative and quantitative research methods. An extensive series of focus groups explored general attitudes toward protecting farmland and open space. The focus groups also identified key non-market amenities participants associated with farmland and open space. A comprehensive mail survey of 4,000 households in the three counties collected the information necessary to estimate how much households would pay to protect farmland.

The remainder of this summary reviews study procedures and results. It first provides some background on existing research on farmland protection, reviews the study area and describes research procedures. Two separate sections present an overview of study findings. The first draws primarily from the focus groups to identify the amenities participants associated with farmland and open space. The second presents the quantitative results including estimates of how much households would pay to protect farmland. A final section reviews implications of the study.

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Residents in the Chicago collar counties of Kane, McHenry and DeKalb view the loss of open space as a threat to the quality of life they presently enjoy. Since most open space in the three counties is farmland, they view protecting that resource as a viable and acceptable means of slowing the advance of sprawl.

“It’s so sad to see such excellent farmland covered with asphalt. Every time a new parking lot goes in I think of that. And I think, what are we going to do for farmland. Because this is prime farmland and we’re paving it over. How foolish can we be?”

- Resident of Naperville, Ill. - comment made during focus group discussion.

“Well, we only own farmland and open space for a short time and then we’re giving it to our children. I think we have to be able to give them something. If we destroy it, it’s not replaceable.”

- Resident of Harvard, Ill. - comment made during focus group discussion.

Background

Several recent studies document the conversion of farmland to urban uses across the nation. Researchers disagree, however, about whether farmland conversion is cause for concern and whether public programs to protect farmland are justified. Some contend that the amount of farmland lost to urban expansion does not threaten future production of food and fiber. Others argue that urban expansion often threatens highly productive or unique farmland which is replaced by bringing less productive land into production - a practice that may eventually be unsustainable.

Several studies suggest that programs to preserve farmland are not necessary because existing markets will efficiently allocate land among alternative uses. These researchers conclude that the only rationale for publicly funded farmland protection programs is that existing markets do not take into account the non-market amenities associated with farmland - amenities such as aesthetics that do not have well-established economic values. Despite the pivotal role non-market amenities play in the debate over farmland protection, few studies have attempted to define or quantify them. Estimates of the economic value of these amenities would aid not only in deciding whether protection is justified but also in targeting protection programs to lands that provide the most valuable of the amenities. This study addresses this gap in knowledge about public preferences for protection of farmland and open space.

Study Area and Research Procedures

All three counties in the study area contain large tracts of prime farmland. At the time of the 1992 agricultural census, 61 percent of Kane County, 64 percent of McHenry County and 93 percent of DeKalb County was in agricultural use. Kane and McHenry counties are currently experiencing relatively rapid population growth with the subsequent conversion of agricultural land. The U.S. Census Bureau estimated that the population of Kane and McHenry counties grew by 14 percent and 28 percent respectively between 1990 and 1997. Between the agricultural census years of 1982 and 1992, 15 percent and 8 percent respectively of the existing agricultural land base in Kane and McHenry counties was converted to other uses. DeKalb County is not yet experiencing such rapid growth. Over the same time period, DeKalb County experienced a population growth of 8 percent and the conversion of 5 percent of its agricultural land base.

This study used both qualitative and quantitative research methods. The qualitative phase consisted of a series of eight focus group discussions with residents of Kane, McHenry and DeKalb counties. The focus groups were conducted as informal discussions with seven to 15 adult participants led by an experienced moderator. The discussions addressed participants’ perceptions of farmland and open space, their experiences with open space, the impacts of open space and development on their lifestyles and activities, and the perceived importance of maintaining nearby farmland and open space. The focus groups identified definitions of open space, the types of amenities associated with farmland and open space, and unique characteristics of farmland that distinguished it from other types of open space.

The quantitative phase of the research involved a mail survey of 4,000 randomly selected households in Kane, McHenry and DeKalb counties. The survey achieved a response rate of 45 percent. The questionnaire used in the survey drew on the qualitative findings to ensure that questionnaire language was familiar, that questions were clear and meaningful, and that the questionnaire addressed issues of importance to respondents. Because the survey was administered to a large, random sample of households, the quantitative results statistically represented the population of the study area. Survey results thus provided quantitative support for some of the general impressions from the qualitative work. A key quantitative result was the amount households would be willing to pay to protect a given amount of farmland in the county in which they lived.

Impacts of Farmland and Open Space

The most important aspect of open space to focus group participants appeared to be its role in slowing growth and reducing sprawl development. They viewed protection of open space as a way to block sprawl and keep at bay the negative impacts associated with such development. They seemed most concerned with the impacts of sprawl on their quality of life. Quality of life issues included their experiences with increased congestion, a more hectic pace of life, increased crime and a lost sense of community that they attributed to sprawl. Focus group participants also equated sprawl with a loss of scenic beauty, increased air and water pollution, and loss of wildlife habitat.

Focus group participants associated the term “open space” with a variety of land uses. These included private farmland as well as forest preserves, parks, conservation district lands, wildlife and natural areas, wetlands, lakes, bicycling and hiking trails, golf courses and planned open areas set aside as part of a developed land use. The discussions suggested that open spaces figured prominently in participants’ daily activities and contributed substantially to their quality of life. Many participants spoke of actively using nearby open spaces for recreational activities.

The survey confirmed the importance of recreational use of open space. Over 90 percent of respondents reported visiting at least one type of open space during the six months prior to the survey. Most respondents reported visits to public open spaces such as park district parks, forest preserves, hiking and bicycling trails, state parks and nature preserves. Surprisingly, more than 30 percent also reported recent visits to private farmland.

To many focus group participants, protecting farmland was synonymous with protecting other kinds of open space. Protecting either one was consistent with maintaining their quality of life. Farmland, however, did have some unique characteristics that set it apart from other kinds of open space. To some participants, particularly farmers and those with farm backgrounds, farmland represented a productive resource and a way of life. Many participants also referred to the high quality of farmland in the region and spoke of a duty of stewardship to conserve a valuable, non-replaceable resource for the benefit of future generations.

I can't use the word community, it's just a place to live. Community was when you knew everybody and said hello to them ... I work out of town and come here to sleep. That's about what it amounts to.

resident of Leavitt, Ill. - comment made during focus group discussion

What we rate as part of that better lifestyle is the open space, is the quiet, is the ability to look at wildlife instead of taking people to cities, to a zoo.”

resident of St. Charles, Ill. - comment made during focus group discussion

Focus group participants also spoke of negative impacts associated with farms and farming practices. These included objectionable odors from hog farms, dust and noise from field work, potential groundwater pollution and health concerns related to the use of agricultural chemicals

and manure disposal, and the negative impact of local farming practices on wildlife habitat. In general, however, few participants voiced these concerns unless directly prompted for negative impacts. This suggests that these impacts were relatively unimportant in participants' overall view of the impacts of farming and farmland on their lives and activities.

Other types of open space also provided amenities not associated with farmland. Farmland, for instance, is private and not generally accessible for public use. Few participants

voiced concerns about public access, however. Many seemed to believe there was adequate publicly accessible open space in the area for the time being.

Perceived Impacts of Sprawl

- **Increased congestion (traffic, people, buildings)**
- **Increased crime/unsafe for families**
- **Lost sense of community**
- **Loss of natural scenic beauty**
- **Increased air and water pollution**
- **Loss of wildlife habitat**

"I've worked in Crystal Lake all of my life. Three years ago I used to love to drive home from Crystal Lake on the back roads, ... it was wonderful. Now it's one house after another all the way up. And that's only in three and a half years time."

- Resident of Huntley, Ill. - comment made during focus group discussion.

Survey results supported impressions from the focus groups. Respondents chose "slowing down and controlling development" as the single most important reason for protecting open space. They also chose it as the third most important reason for preserving farmland, just after ensuring the future supply of food and preserving family farms. Other important reasons for protecting open space included protecting wildlife habitat, preserving the rural quality of the county, preserving scenic beauty and controlling flooding. They also listed each of these reasons, except protecting wildlife habitat, as important reasons for protecting farmland.

What is Protecting Farmland Worth?

The mail survey focused on characterizing public support for farmland protection and quantifying the amount households would pay to actually protect farmland. The results indicate that the average household is willing to pay \$57 per year for 30 years to protect farmland from development. At a discount rate of 2 percent, the present value of these annual tax payments would be \$2,327.

Respondents viewed protecting open space from development as an important public spending priority. When asked what level of public spending they would support for a variety of public programs, they ranked spending to protect open space from development on a par with additional spending to reduce crime and improve education. They expressed a somewhat lower preference for spending to improve roads and placed an even lower priority on additional spending on public libraries and public recreational facilities.

The study used the contingent valuation method to estimate how much study area residents would be willing to pay to permanently protect

How Much is Protecting Farmland Worth?

The average household in Kane, McHenry and DeKalb counties was willing to pay an additional \$484 in taxes each year for five years to permanently protect 20,300 acres of farmland in the county from development. However, publicly funded PDR programs are more often financed over a 30-year period. The equivalent annual value over a 30-year time span is \$57 per year per household.

“... there’s conflict about an owner’s attitude towards land between personal ownership and stewardship ... in the prospect of our horizon in time, the land will be around a lot longer than we will. And I think most people don’t appreciate it, but their very existence depends on the agricultural productivity of farmland in particular.”

*- Resident of Elgin, Ill. -
comment made during focus
group discussion.*

Implications

The study found substantial support for protecting farmland in the study area. This support existed in spite of widespread objections to increased taxes among focus group participants and survey respondents. While the study did not address other methods of protecting farmland, the results suggest that many area respondents viewed a PDR program, funded by county taxes, as an acceptable tool for farmland protection.

The strong support for farmland protection seems derived primarily from a desire to protect quality of life. The qualitative and quantitative results suggested that farmland and other types of open space contributed about equally to quality of life. Respondents believed that protecting farmland helps ensure adequate food production in the future and preserves family farms. They believed that other types of open space provide better wildlife habitat than farmland and are more suited to public access. Overall, respondents seemed content with the current mix of farmland and other types of open space in the study area. The question of whether public monies are best spent to protect farmland or other types of open space will depend on the relative value of the unique amenities associated with each. Additional research will be needed to address this issue.

Relative preferences for protecting farmland versus other types of open space are likely to exhibit substantial regional variation. The preferences of Rhode Island residents, for instance, appear quite different from those of residents of the study area. These differences suggest that results from one region cannot be easily transferred to other regions. Regional differences in preferences also imply that open space protection programs will need to be tailored to meet specific regional preferences.

American Farmland Trust is a private, nonprofit, membership organization founded in 1980 to protect our nation's agricultural resources. AFT works to stop the loss of productive farmland and to promote farming practices that lead to a healthy environment. Its action-oriented programs include public education, technical assistance in policy development and direct farmland protection projects. Basic annual membership is \$20. For membership information, contact the National Office.

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Working paper and supporting documents are available online via the Farmland Information Library at www.farmlandinfo.org. To order a copy of the working paper, please contact our Publications Department at (800) 370-4879.

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