*U.S. Farmland: Current Status - Future Trends

I am privileged as a private citizen, after over forty years of public service to Agriculture, to now be on the other side of the fence. That recent transition has opened up new challenges in soil and water conservation and farmland retention for me as Senior Advisor to the American Farmland Trust. A private, nonprofit organization with 25,000 members, AFT is committed to the protection of important farmland and of farming opportunities through public policy development and providing land use information.

I am also honored to ~~have~~ ~~become~~ a member of the governing board of my own local conservation district in Anne Arundel County, Maryland ~~in~~ since June of this year.

I have, as a career conservationist, enjoyed serving the biggest business in America -- agriculture. It is ~~basic to~~ the foundation for all other human activities. Agriculture is the basis for human survival -- a prime contributor to human comfort -- a recognized factor in human dignity. The American farmer is by far the most productive in the world. U.S. farmers begin with the world's best combination of natural resources for farming. I realize this anew every time I travel here and abroad.

For instance, only Western Europe rivals North America in growing grain for export. Bathed with gentle rains from the Gulf Stream, Europe has near-ideal climate for wheat and other small grains. But much of Europe is mountainous, so its arable soil is limited.

If soil were all, Russia rather than the U.S. might lead the world in grain exports. But Russias' climate is near to impossible.

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*Materials used for talk by Norman A. Berg, Senior Advisor, American Farmland Trust. Presented at Farmland Preservation Conference October 28, 1982, at Jackson Mill Conference Center, Weston, West Virginia. The meeting is dedicated to "Farmland is Food".

Often there is too little rain in June when it's needed, and fall forests and/or rains are more likely to come before or during harvest. The Russians have long blamed their crop failures on climate and weather. The Worldwatch Institute in a recent study now says only drastic changes in Communist philosphy and attitudes could check further declines in food production and satisfy the desires of their prople for a better standard of living.

China comes closest to matching our natural resources of soil and sunshine, but rainfall is short, crop needs must be supplemented with spring irrigation. While Chief of SCS I sent several teams of U.S.A. natural resource experts to China and they reciprocated by allowing their soil and water leaders to visit our farms and ranches. U.S. visitors to China saw that large forest areas have been denuded, lakes and streams have been polluted and substantial soil erosion and loss of arable land have occurred as China expanded and upgraded production from its farms, factories and utilities.

A professor of geography at the University of Manitoba in Winnipeg, Canada, Dr. Vaclav Smil, as consultant to the World Bank in a recent study confirms our observations that a "grain first" policy, although now producing about 70% more grain per year than in the late 1950's is causing widespread and serious dsmage to its natural environment. the most serious impact has been the reported loss of 30% of the country's farmland in the past two decades.

The world's best cropland is the foundation not only of agriculture, but of civilization itself. And as I continually emphasize, it is a national resource with the best combination of physical and chemical characteristics for producing food, feed, forage, fiber, and oil seed crops. It has the soil quality, growing season, and moisture

supply needed to economically produce sustained high yields of crops when properly managed. Although the U.S. has ample land -- over 2.2 billion acres, 1.3 billion acres as agricultural land -- less than 350 million acres meets the criteria as prime farmland, therefore, the Nation's prime, unique and important farmlands used for agriculture represent an asset of great value. It should be retained for agriculture forever. That is one good reason why I continue to champion land use and conservation for agriculture whenever I can.

I am interested in learning more about your Farmland Preservation Act that became effective June 1, 1982. This West Virginia action compliments the federal Farmland Protection Policy Act that became effective June 2, 1982.

Both actions, of great value when fully implemented, recognize that the conversion of agricultural land to non-farm uses remains a serious State and National problem.

Significant strides have been made in constructively coming to grips with the inevitable conflict between community development and farming enterprise.

I want the record to show that the findings of these two Acts are in total harmony as the several states and hundreds of counties put in place carefully tailored programs encouraging, through several means, a rational acommodation of development and farming interests.

WEST VIRGINIA FARMLAND PRESERVATION ACT
(Effective 6/1/82)

The Legislature hereby finds and declares that agriculture is a unique "life support" industry and that a need exists to assist those agricultural areas of the state which are experiencing the irreversible loss of agriculturally productive land. It is the purpose of this part of this article to provide counties with a opportunity to develope reasonable methods to safeguard the production of food and fiber and to conserve agriculturally productive soils within the counties while preserving the worth-while community values, institutions and landscapes which are inseparably associated with traditional farming.

Sec. 1539. This subtitle may be cited as the "Farmland Protection Policy Act"

FINDINGS, PURPOSE, AND DEFINITIONS

Sec. 1540. (a) Congress finds that-

(1) The Nation's farmland is a unique natural resource and provides food and fiber necessary for the continued welfare of the people of the United States;
(2) each year, a large amount of the Nation's farmland is irrevocably converted from actual or potential agricultural use to nonagricultural use;
(3) continued decrease in the Nation's farmland base may threaten the ability of the United States to produce food and fiber in sufficient quantities to meet domestic needs and the demands of our export markets;
(4) the extensive use of farmland for nonagricultural purposes undermines the economic base of many rural areas;
(5) Federal actions, in many cases, result in the conversion of farmland to nonagricultural uses where alternative actions would be preferred;
(6) the Department of Agriculture is the agency primarily responsible for the implementation of Federal policy with respect to United States farmland, assuring the maintenance of the agricultural production capacity of the United States, and has the personnel and other resources needed to implement national farmland protection policy; and
(7) the Department of Agriculture and other Federal agencies should take steps to assure that the actions of the Federal Government do not cause United States farmland to be irreversibly converted to nonagricultural uses in cases in which other national interests do not override the importance of the protection of farmland nor otherwise outweigh the benefits of maintaining farmland resources.

58% -- 1.3 billion acres of the Nation's land is privately owned. 413,000,000 acres in the U.S. is used for cropland. We know a great deal about this land. West Virginia's total land area of 15.4 million acres has only 5 million acres as prime farmland with 3 million acres of that in cropland use. The agricultural land converted to other uses for the decade 1967-1977 in W. Va. was nearly 5 million acres. Only Maine,

Kansas, Nevada, Wyoming and Alaska were not effected during that period when total U.S. agricultural land conversion exceeded 30,000,000 acres. Therefore, you join many others throughout the Nation who are also concerned. However, not all that concern is in sympathy with the data and study that, in part, led to the two Acts cited earlier. At the recent National Soil Conservation Service Study Conference in Huntington, West Virginia an administrative officials were quoted as saying:

"We certainly cannot deny the existence of these critical areas around many major cities. But we have to look at the whole national problem before we conclude that these localized phenomena are going to spell a national threat to our agricultural productivy,

The most publicized and controversial statistic to emerge from the NALS was that during the period 1967- 1976, about 3 million acres of agricultural land were converted each year to urban and built-up uses. Of that acreage, about 675,000 acres were said to be cropland or potential cropland.

A number of economists have disputed the figures, contending they were much too high. But for the sake of argument, let's accept them and in perspective.

The total U.S. land in farms and ranches comes to more than one billion acres. Assuming the 3 million acre annual loss figue is correct. This amounts to only three-tenths of 1% of our total farm and ranchland. This is not a very large percentage, since that 3 million acres included land never used in agriculture.

When we focus on cropland alone, the losses cause even less concern. Cropland and potential cropland in the U.S. Total 540 million acres. A loss of 675,000 acres represents less than 2/10's of 1% of our cropland base.

Even if the rates of farmland conversion which occurred in the 60's and early 70's were not overstated by the National Agricultural Lands Study, there is good reason to believe that the rates of conversion have slowed. There is even more justification for assuming that long before the conversion of prime farmland is likely to have adverse consequences for the productivity of American agriculture, the trend would cease. Workings of the laws of economics would assure that.

However, Representative George E. Brown, Jr. of California, who chairs the Agriculture Committee for Oversight of U.S.D.A. programs says:

"It is becoming increasingly clear that the administration opposes a meaningful Federal role in agricultural land protection efforts because, they argue, an unfettered marketplace in agricultural land would more efficiently allocate farmland to competing uses. He cites the speech referred to as containing some disturbing errors of omission. The total annual conversion is 200,000 acres more than stated. Also, apparently the loss of grazing and forestry uses of agricultural land do not constitute agricultural uses and hence loss of such lands are of little or no significance to the Administration."

Lost in this discussion of data, that I helped to obtain through I & M, and which is the best we have until new pending appraisals are available, is the impact "buckshot urbanization" has on agriculture.

The "right to farm" legislation thus is real because between a quarter and a third of all U.S. farmland is in an area of urban influence. The so-called "impermanence syndrome" has led to a decline of land in farms of a staggering 88 million acres over the past 10 years. Also for the first time in more than 160 years, the population growth rate -- 1970 to 1980 -- in the U.S. was higher in rural and small town communities than in metro-areas.

This continued growth in total population and the widespread renewal of population growth in rural America adds to the pressure on retaining important farmlands for agriculture here and elsewhere.

At the same time, we have a continued loss from soil erosion equivalent to over 3 million acres each year of cropland. A U.S.D.A. study projects erosion losses over the next 50 years equivalent to the production from 23 million acres.

At a recent conference sponsored by the Accokeek and the Wallace Genetic Foundations on the future of agriculture in the Northeast, the 16 rural leaders assembled said that farmland preservation advocates were too often "people talking to themselves". A call was voiced to join with others concerned if land retention goals were to be realized. You are doing this here today.

In an effort to assure the future of the farms, Maryland, in 1956, became the first state to enact a lower tax rate for agricultural land -- a practice since adopted by 45 states. The farm assessment failed, however, to prevent the suburban sprawl that spilled over the countryside through the 1960's and into the 1970's. Restrictive zoning adopted later has helped.

The fight for government actions on behalf of farm preservation often was led by professional planners and by rural newcomers whose economic lifelines were to the cities but who wanted to preserve the pastoral scenes that, in part, attracted them to their new homes.

With all the right rhetoric but no money, the 1974 Maryland General Assembly created the Maryland Agricultural Land Preservation Foundation to acquire easements "by purchase or gift". Only a single 58-acre farm was donated. Three years later, the legislature funded the program, one of only 4 such state efforts in the country.

70,000 Ac - Dist

Purchases began in 1979. So far, development rights have been acquired on 94 farms, totaling 14,819 acres and $15.6 million has been appropriated by the state. Counties have committed $11 million more to the farm preservation fund. All but a handful of counties have created agricultural advisory boards, a prerequisite for participation in the state program.

"At first, I felt like I was beating my head against the wall, especially when I crossed the Chesapeake Bay Bridge," said Alan Musselman, who gave up his job as a Frederick County planner in 1978 to run the state program. "Now there's a rather clear change in the level of understanding."

"A lot of this farm preservation is just growth management," said Thomas L. Osbourne, an Anne Arundel County Planner.

In recent years, Massachusetts has taken important steps to retain a significant farmland base. Their farmland Assessment Act of 1973 removed some of the pressure to sell farmland, but it was a stop-gap action. The Agricultural Preservation Restriction Act (APR) of 1977 allows a farmer to realize the equity "locked up" in the land without destroying the farm.

The New Jersey story is known throughout the Nation. The program for the Garden State embraced actions to -- get soil conservation and farmland preservation programs in place; call attention to farm income situations; and deal with legislative problems. Especially to make agriculature more profitable; re-establish better balance in agriculture; retrieve much that has been lost; and strengthen economic development, especially of agriculture infrastructure.

I could give you other examples from nearly every state, many counties throughout the U.S. and several other nations.

Oregon
Wisconsin

We ~~were~~ are encouraged that the long historical decline in eastern states agriculture has been slowed. The regional population continues to grow, and in some states has become more diversified. This is a reflection of the intensively urbanized nature of the region and the mobility of its people. The new countryside is composed of a wide variety of elements -- part-time farmers, small farmers, rural-supporting services, people engaged in processing and transporting the products of the land, operators of woodlots and fisheries, among others. A large and growing non-farm population in villages and towns strongly identify with farm population. Many vacation homes and recreation uses of the area contribute to this mixture of activities. The land and waters of the area are important habitats for wildlife and other natural resources.

However, ~~agriculture~~ rural areas still lags far behind urban areas, industry and other sectors of the national life, and is weakly equipped to deal with the problems it faces.

A very recent story in the Wall Street Journal is an example from the viewpoint of people representing other interests that are also impacted by growth.

70.10

Utah County Gets Skeptical About Growth

By CARRIE DOLAN
Staff Reporter of THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

EMERY COUNTY, Utah—About a decade ago, this rocky patch of eastern Utah was home to just 5,000 or so Mormon farmers who scratched out a living on its barren flats. With its young people forced to leave to find work, the area was "dying on the vine," a resident recalls.

So when Utah Power & Light Co. decided in the early 1970s to spend more than $1 billion to build two coal-generated power plants here, bringing thousands of jobs and a lot of tax dollars, it looked like a blessing. Now county officials say they should have looked twice.

"The bottom line here is that it doesn't pay to be developed," says County Attorney Scott Johansen. Though initially the tax money allowed Emery to build libraries, buy ambulances and afford other things it had never had, county officials say the long-range view is grim.

Other sparsely populated, resource-rich areas face similar problems when they seek to accommodate energy development, says Randall Swisher, director of the energy policy project of the National Association of Counties in Washington, D.C. "It's a major concern for a lot of people in the West," he says. "Revenue is added with the first boom, but then the county can be left holding the bag for all the added infrastructure costs."

Residents Made Few Demands

"We've opened our hearts, souls and pocketbooks to these people, and now we're $60 million in debt," says county administrator Dan Hunter.

Emery officials trace their problems to naivete and state tax laws that favor corporations. Emery has lots of coal, but that hasn't meant lots of tax money. Utah state law says land with coal on it has an assessed value of $10 an acre, and the state doesn't have a severance or a reserve tax on coal.

Because of the tax structure, Emery says it should have demanded that Utah Power & Light give the county money up front to pay for services. But residents, grateful to have industry, made few demands.

"We were so eager to change our economy and create jobs so our children could stay here, that we were quite easily dealt with," says A.O. Kinder, superintendent of Emery schools. "We were very inexperienced, and things hit us before we knew what was happening."

There are several Realities to be faced early
They include:

First, growth is usually good for the economy, for when people who need and want better shelter, have jobs, can buy new homes and the appliances, furniture, rugs and draperies for those homes many industries benefit along with the builders, the bankers and the brokers of real estate. Growth, of course, will need land and water.

During this time of recession for many, especially home builders, developers and cash grain farmers, we can work together to help solve mutual problems. We have a littel time. Therefore, when there is talk about retention of important farmlands for agricultural use, it cannot come on as "anti-growth, anti-development". We would turn off many potential friends, including those landowners who are now in farming, ranching or forestry as their business. It too is a high risk business. and they need $ to live

Second, the main objective of programs aimed at farmland retention must continue to focus on helping farmers, ranchers and foresters to make and keep that way of life attractive and that includes income that exceeds costs on the balance sheet.

Third, farmland protection must be cast in the general context of overall local growth management and resource development programs. Appropriate recognition for community, commercial and industrial development, housing (including low and moderate income needs) and other environmental concerns, as well as agriculture, will increase the chance of success for all activities. The real world is that no program can be enacted nor continue to be effective without needed broad political support. It was amazing that the national legislation survived, that ~~Dick talked about at noon.~~ I'll finish with

Finally, the conversion of important farmlands to non-farm uses is a result of over at least a decade of time of complex factors that include:

-- Urban growth needs

-- Government programs and incentives

-- Regulations (zoning)

-- Land values and taxes

-- Agricultural productivity, profitability and the land conversion that results from landowners personal decision about work, family and retirement.

Therefore, because the loss of farmland to other uses is the result of many factors over an extended period of time, farmland retention programs should and will be many faceted. The NALS work documented this in detail.

Better definitions of the farmland problem could lead to more generally agreed on goals and unity among many separate local programs.

Political strength for agriculture can be mobilized by forming a new concert of interests, based on a common view of the future as well as matuality of interests.

As action has shifted from the Federal to the state and local levels, farmland preservation is a unique area where the private sector is finding opportunities. The growing popularity of development rights acquisition and transfer is an illustration, especially in a situation where individual landowners are going to make decisions one at a time about land use, and regulation is in the hands of local government.

There is no general or right answer to the proper distribution of government roles in planning or governing land use. The environmental movement has shifted responsibility for land use planning above the local level on some issues, i.e., air and water quality,

hazardous waste disposal, radioactive emissions, even water and wind erosion of topsoil where they do not fit within governmental boundaries.

This creep upward has been strongly resisted. The further away from home the planners and regulators live, the more offensive their standards become to the home folks. Moreover, the land owners and enterprises affected by the plans have much greater influence on the local levels of government. There is a constant tug of war that is most consistent with our democracy as the levels of government sort out what works and what doesn't.

In my own experience, local and state governments do not usually adopt land use policies because of fear of some potential global food problems. There are usually much more immediate and locally visible problems that prompt action.

What is the Federal Government Doing? Congress passed the Farmland Protection P0licy Act last year. It is part of the Agriculture and Food Act of 1981. This legislation, essentially, does three things:

-- It requires that agencies of the Federal Government refrain from converting farmland to nonagricultural uses whenever there are practicable alternatives for meeting their needs for Federal facilities.

-- It prohibits the use of Federal Government financial or technical assistance by private developers or investors on projects that would convert farmland to other uses whenever there are practicable alternatives to meet legitimate growth and development needs.

-- It requires that agencies of the Federal Government assure that any projects they wish to construct or for which they are providing financial or technical assistance are being undertaken consistent with locally or state approved plans, programs, or policies for retaining farmland.

The legislation does not apply to projects undertaken for national defense, and it recognizes, up front, that it is the prerogative of state and local governments to regulate land uses in the public interest. The legislation specifically forbids any agency of the Federal Government from regulating the use of land except that which is owned or held in trust by the Federal Government.

I think these are the appropriate things for the Federal Government to do in addressing the issue. We must retain an adequate supply of cropland on which to produce food and fiber for domestic consumption and foreign trade and for production of strategic and essential industrial materials that are agriculturally produced. In doing this, we must be looking 50 years or more into the future. Future generations have a large stake in what we do today.

Most forecasters overlook the reality that the federal establishment usually adopts the policy that allow the difficult consequences to be manifested often the next election.

WEST VIRGINIA FARMLAND PRESERVATION ACT
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ARTICLE 24: PLANNING AND ZONING PART XX: Farmland Preservation Programs.

24-72 Legislative findings and purpose.

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24-73 County farmland preservation programs authorized; farmland advisory committees.

The county commission of each county may adopt and implement a farmland preservation program within the county. The county commission of each county which decides to adopt and implement a farmland preservation program shall appoint a farmland advisory committee to act in an administrative and advisory capacity on behalf of the county commission in all matters concerning farmland preservation.

The farmland advisory committee shall be composed of six members, each serving without compensation for a term of two years, except the initial appointment of two voting committee members shall be for a term of one year. Membership on the farmland advisory committee shall consist of the following: One county commissioner, one county planning commissioner; one farmer who is a county resident and board member of a recognized local farm organization, such as a county farm bureau or a soil conservation district; two farmers who are county residents; and one county resident who is not a farmer and who is not engaged in any agriculturally related business. All members of the farmland advisory committee shall be voting members, except the county commissioner who shall serve in an advisory capacity as a nonvoting member.

The farmland advisory committee shall adopt bylaws prescribing committee officers meeting dates, record-keeping procedures and other internal operational procedures. The member of the farmland advisory committee who is a county commissioner shall serve as temporary chairman of the committee until committee bylaws are adopted and until committee officers are selected as prescribed by those bylaws. The farmland advisory committee shall prepare a document proposing a farmland preservation program which is consistant with the county comprehensive plan.

24-74 Relationship to county comprehensive plan.

The farmland preservation program adopted shall be consistent with any existing county comprehensive plan and shall be included in any revision of this plan or in the development of any new county comprehensive plan.

24-75 Content and requirements of farmland preservation programs.

A farmland preservation program adopted shall include only those qualifying properties which are voluntarily offered into the program by the landowners thereof.

An adopted farmland preservation program muct meet the following minimum requirements.
(A) The program shall be developed and administered by the farmland advisory committee, subject to the approval and direction of the county commission;
(B) The program shall be directed toward areas of the county containing agriculturally productive soil as determined by appropriate soil surveys;
(C) The program shall establish uniform standards and guidelines for the eligibility of properties for the program. Such standards and guidelines shall take into consideration the following: Current and past uses of the property, existing property improvements, natural soil capabilities, drainage, slope, property tract size and shape; location of the property tract in relation to other potential agricultural property tracts impending threat of conversion of the property to nonagricultural uses, property ownership and existing deed covenants and restrictions with respect to the property.

(6)

However, not all of that concern is in sympathy with the ~~two~~ data and study that in part led to the two Acts cited earlier. At the recent National SCS conference in Huntington, West Virginia an Administration official was quoted as saying,

> We certainly cannot deny the existence of these critical areas around many major cities. But we have to look at the whole national picture before we conclude that these localized phenomena are going to spell a national threat to our agricultural productivity.

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