



FACT SHEET

WHY SAVE

FARMLAND?

AMERICA'S AGRICULTURAL LAND IS AT RISK

Fertile soils take thousands of years to develop. Creating them takes a combination of climate, geology, biology and good luck. So far, no one has found a way to manufacture them. Thus, productive agricultural land is a finite and irreplaceable natural resource.

America's agricultural land provides the nation—and world—with an unparalleled abundance of food and fiber products. The dominant role of U.S. agriculture in the global economy has been likened to OPEC's in the field of energy. The food and farming system is important to the balance of trade and the employment of nearly 23 million people. Across the country, farmland supports the economic base of many rural and suburban communities.

Agricultural land also supplies products with little market value, but enormous cultural and ecological importance. Some are more immediate, such as social heritage, scenic views, open space and community character. Long-range environmental benefits include wildlife habitat, clean air and water, flood control, ground-water recharge and carbon sequestration.

Yet despite its importance to individual communities, the nation and the world, American farmland is at risk. It is imperiled by poorly planned development, especially in urban-influenced areas, and by the complex forces driving conversion. USDA's Economic Research Service (ERS) developed "urban influence" codes to classify each of the nation's 3,141 counties and county equivalents into groups that describe the degree of urban influence.¹ AFT found that in 1997, farms in the 1,210 most urban-influenced counties produced 63 percent of dairy products, 86 percent of fruits and 86 percent of vegetables.²

According to USDA's National Resources Inventory (NRI), from 1992 to 1997 more than 11 million acres of rural land were converted to developed use—and more than half of that conversion was agricultural land. In that period, an average of more than 1 million

agricultural acres were developed each year. And the rate is increasing—up 51 percent from the rate reported in the previous decade.

Agricultural land is desirable for building because it tends to be flat, well drained and generally is more affordable to developers than to farmers and ranchers. Far more farmland is being converted than is necessary to provide housing for a growing population. Over the past 20 years, the acreage per person for new housing almost doubled.³ Most of this land is outside of existing urban areas. Since 1994, lots of 10 to 22 acres accounted for 55 percent of the growth in housing area.⁴ The NRI shows that the best agricultural soils are being developed fastest.

THE FOOD AND FARMING SYSTEM

The U.S. food and farming system contributes nearly \$1 trillion to the national economy—or more than 13 percent of the gross domestic product—and employs 17 percent of the labor force.⁵ With a rapidly increasing world population and expanding global markets, saving American farmland is a prudent investment in world food supply and economic opportunity.

Asian and Latin American countries are the most significant consumers of U.S. agricultural exports. Latin America, including Mexico, purchases an average of about \$10.6 billion of U.S. agricultural exports each year. Asian countries purchase an average of \$23.6 billion/year, with Japan alone accounting for about \$10 billion/year.⁶ Even as worldwide demand for a more diverse diet increases, many countries are paving their arable land to support rapidly expanding economies. Important customers today, they are expected to purchase more agricultural products in the future.

While domestic food shortages are unlikely in the short term, the U.S. Census predicts the population will grow by 42 percent in the next 50 years. Many developing nations already are concerned about food security.

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January 2003

Of the 78 million people currently added to the world each year, 95 percent live in less developed regions.⁷ The productivity and diversity of American agriculture can ensure food supplies and continuing preeminence in world markets. But this depends upon an investment strategy that preserves valuable assets, including agricultural land, to supply rapidly changing global demand.

FISCAL AND ECONOMIC STABILITY

Saving farmland is an investment in community infrastructure and economic development. It supports local government budgets and the ability to create wealth locally. In addition, distinctive agricultural landscapes are often magnets for tourism.

People vacation in the state of Vermont or Steamboat Springs, Colo., because they enjoy the scenery created by rural meadows and grazing livestock. In Lancaster, Pa., agriculture is still the leading industry, but with Amish and Mennonites working in the fields, tourism is not far behind. Napa Valley, Calif., is another place known as a destination for “agro tourism.” Tourists have become such a large part of most Napa Valley wineries that many vintners have hired hospitality staff. Both the valley and the wines have gained name recognition, and the economy is thriving.

Agriculture contributes to local economies directly through sales, job creation, support services and businesses, and also by supplying lucrative secondary markets such as food processing. Planning for agriculture and protecting farmland provide flexibility for growth and development, offering a hedge against fragmented suburban development while supporting a diversified economic base.

Development imposes direct costs to communities, as well as indirect costs associated with the loss of rural lands and open space.⁸ Privately owned and managed agricultural land generates more in local tax revenues than it costs in services. Carefully examining local budgets in cost of community services (COCS)

studies shows that nationwide farm, forest and open lands more than pay for the municipal services they require, while taxes on residential uses consistently fail to cover costs.⁹ (See COCS fact sheet.) Related studies measuring the effect of all types of development on municipal tax bills find that tax bills generally go up as communities become more developed. Even those communities with the most taxable commercial and industrial properties have higher-than-average taxes.¹⁰

Local governments are discovering that they cannot afford to pay the price of unplanned development. Converting productive agricultural land to developed uses creates negative economic and environmental impacts. For example, from the mid-1980s to the mid-1990s, the population of Atlanta, Ga., grew at about the same rate as that of Portland, Ore. Due to its strong growth management law, the size of Portland increased by only 2 percent while Atlanta doubled in size. To accommodate its sprawling growth, Atlanta raised property taxes 22 percent while Portland lowered property taxes by 29 percent. Vehicle miles traveled (and related impacts) increased 17 percent in Atlanta but only 2 percent in Portland.¹¹

ENVIRONMENTAL QUALITY

Well-managed agricultural land supplies important non-market goods and services. Farm and ranch lands provide food and cover for wildlife, help control flooding, protect wetlands and watersheds, and maintain air quality. They can absorb and filter wastewater and provide groundwater recharge. New energy crops even have the potential to replace fossil fuels.

The federal government owns 402 million acres of forests, parks and wildlife refuges that provide substantial habitat for wildlife. Most of this land is located in 11 western states. States, municipalities and other non-federal units of government also own land. Yet public agencies alone cannot sustain wildlife populations. Well-managed, privately

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owned agricultural land is a critical resource for wildlife habitat.

With nearly 1 billion acres of land in farms, agriculture is America's dominant land use. So it is not surprising that farming has a significant ecological impact. Ever since the publication of Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring*, environmentalists have called attention to the negative impacts of industrial agricultural practices. However, converting farmland to development has detrimental long-term impacts on environmental quality.

Water pollution from urban development is well documented. Development increases pollution of rivers and streams, as well as the risk of flooding. Paved roads and roofs collect and pass storm water directly into drains instead of filtering it naturally through the soil.¹² Septic systems for low-density subdivisions can add untreated wastes to surface water and groundwater—potentially yielding higher nutrient loads than livestock operations.¹³ Development often produces more sediment and heavy metal contamination than farming does and increases pollutants—such as road salt, oil leaks from automobiles and runoff from lawn chemicals—that lead to groundwater contamination.¹⁴ It also decreases recharge of aquifers, lowers drinking-water quality and reduces biodiversity in streams.

Urban development is a significant cause of wetland loss.¹⁵ Between 1992 and 1997, NRI showed that development was responsible for 49 percent of the total loss. Increased use of automobiles leads to traffic congestion and air pollution. Development fragments and often destroys wildlife habitat, and fragmentation is considered a principal threat to biodiversity.¹⁶

Keeping land available for agriculture while improving farm management practices offers the greatest potential to produce or regain environmental and social benefits while minimizing negative impacts. From wetland management to on-farm composting for

municipalities, farmers are finding ways to improve environmental quality.

HERITAGE AND COMMUNITY CHARACTER

To many people, the most compelling reasons for saving farmland are local and personal, and much of the political support for farmland protection is driven by grassroots community efforts. Sometimes the most important qualities are the hardest to quantify—such as local heritage and sense of place. Farm and ranch land maintain scenic, cultural and historic landscapes. Their managed open spaces provide beautiful views and opportunities for hunting and fishing, horseback riding, skiing, dirt-biking and other recreational activities. Farms and ranches create identifiable and unique community character and add to the quality of life. Perhaps it is for these reasons that the contingent valuation studies typically find that people are willing to pay to protect agricultural land from development.

Finally, farming is an integral part of our heritage and our identity as a people. American democracy is rooted in an agricultural past and founded on the principle that all people can own property and earn a living from the land. The ongoing relationship with the agricultural landscape connects Americans to history and to the natural world. Our land is our legacy, both as we look back to the past and as we consider what we have of value to pass on to future generations.

Public awareness of the multiple benefits of working lands has led to greater community appreciation of the importance of keeping land open for fiscal, economic and environmental reasons. As a result, people increasingly are challenging the perspective that new development is necessarily the most desirable use of agricultural land—especially in rural communities and communities undergoing transition from rural to suburban.

ENDNOTES

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- ⁴ Development at the Urban Fringe and Beyond: Impacts on Agriculture and Rural Land. Ralph E. Heimlich and William D. Anderson. Economic Research Service, USDA. Agricultural Economic Report No. 803. p.14.
- ⁵ The Food and Fiber System: Contributing to U.S. and World Economies. Kathryn Lipton, William Edmondson and Alden Manchester. ERS, USDA. Agriculture Information Bulletin No. 742. July 1998.
- ⁶ U.S. Census Bureau, Statistical Abstract of the United States 2001. p.535.
- ⁷ The World at Six Billion; United Nations Population Division; p.3.
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- ⁹ Making the Case for Land Conservation: Fifteen Years of Cost of Community Services Studies. Freedgood, Julia. American Farmland Trust. Northampton, Mass., 2002.
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- ¹² The Costs of Sprawl: Environmental and Economic Costs of Alternative Development Patterns at the Urban Fringe. Real Estate Research Corporation. U.S. Government Printing Office. Washington D.C. 1974. Development on the Urban Fringe and Beyond, op cit. Impact Assessment of New Jersey Interim State Development and Redevelopment Plan, Report II. Robert W. Burchell. N.J. Office of State Planning. Trenton, N.J. 1992.
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- ¹⁴ Nitrate-Nitrogen Losses to Ground Water from Rural and Suburban Land Uses. A. J. Gold, et al. *Journal of Soil and Water Conservation*. March April 1990. Results of the Nationwide Urban Runoff Program, Volume 1 - Final Report. U.S. Environmental Protection Agency. Washington, D.C. 1983.
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- ¹⁶ Development on the Urban Fringe and Beyond, op cit. Preserving Communities and Corridors. G. Mackintosh, ed. Defenders of Wildlife. Washington, D.C. 1989. Saving Nature's Legacy. R.F. Noss and A.Y. Cooperrider. Island Press. Washington, D.C. 1994.