

AGRICULTURE-RURAL LAND PRESERVATION

Good morning everyone. Mr. Chairman, my presentation is from the perspective of my knowledge and experience--within the general context of the topic for the panel. It will not exceed 18 minutes! I do sincerely thank you for providing me the opportunity to be a part of this Western Region District Conference. NACPD's resolution on Agricultural Land is a good indication of the interest in this knotty issue. It's a darn sight easier to agree that it's a problem than propose a reasonable solution.

The Department of Agriculture has been working for several years on issues involving prime farmland, prime timberland, and prime rangeland. For the past 3 years or so, our emphasis has been on prime farmland. We may not have learned all the answers, but we sure are learning the questions!

1. Do we need to preserve agricultural and rural lands?
2. Will the Important Farmlands Inventory help counties in Western States?
3. What is prime, unique, and other important farmland?
Is the criteria used appropriate for arid regions.

Material for talk by Norman A. Berg, Associate Administrator, USDA, Soil Conservation Service, at a panel discussion of the Western Region District Conference of the National Association of County Planning Directors, Palm Springs, California, February 9, 1978.

4. Is it a useful tool when lands that are "potentially" prime are not mapped?
5. What is the relationship between retention of certain lands for farming, guiding growth and local land use regulation?
6. What role should governments play in retaining certain lands for farming? Who bears the cost?
7. What impact do other issues, i.e., water, energy, and climate have on the success of a program of land retention for farming?

Decisions concerning the use of land arising from efforts to:

- stimulate economic development,
- provide community services and living space,
- maintain natural space,
- preserve environmental values, and
- produce needed food and fiber

are matters of concern to the Department of Agriculture.

Each use may be essential, yet all uses are highly interdependent, and each competes with the others for the limited supply of suitable land. The continued conversion to other uses of lands suitable for the production of food, forage, fiber, and timber and the associated degradation of the environment resulting from those losses from the productive land base must be considered to be matters of great concern to the Nation.

Decisions are made daily that commit land irreversibly to new uses without sufficient concern for the future. Our economic and social systems require natural life support systems. Land use decisions must take into account the necessity to preserve the integrity and diversity of these support systems. Land use decision will receive increasing attention as the cumulative adverse consequences of unplanned growth become more obvious, but delayed attention will be costly. The land resources of our Nation must be managed, beginning immediately, with more knowledge, prudence, wisdom and foresight than has been used in the past.

The Department recognizes and respects the traditional rights and responsibilities of landowners and users in making land use decisions. The major responsibility for developing public policy regarding land use, and the necessary associated responsibility for the planning and regulation of private land use, rests with State and local governments. Within this framework, based on local decisionmaking, the Department's programs can help landowners and officials make these sound land use decisions.

The Department's research, educational, technical assistance and financial assistance program personnel located in every county and State are encouraged to assist individuals and officials at all levels of government with land use planning which promotes the best use of our land and other natural resources.

What is prime farmland?

In general, we define prime farmlands as those best suited for producing food, feed, fiber, and oilseed crops with the least damage to the environment.

Other kinds of farmland, though not necessarily "prime," are also important. They include unique farmlands--those most adaptable for growing specialty crops that require specific soil and climate conditions, and agricultural lands of statewide or local importance.

On August 16, 1977, we entered in the Federal Register SCS rule-making for a national program of inventorying prime and unique farmland, as well as other farmlands of statewide or local importance. We also set out the criteria for the prime definition.

The first 53 county maps are published--another 67 are scheduled for completion soon. Field work is already done for another 155 counties. We plan on coverage of about 1200 counties within a few years.

In California for example:

Inventories for Sonoma, San Diego, and Yolo Counties are underway but not yet completed. Contractors work now being reviewed by California state office.

-- Unique farmlands

Lands other than prime used for growing avacados, grapes, citrus, fruits and nuts, flowers and ornamentals.

-- Farmlands of statewide importance

Lands other than prime or unique that lack adequate moisture (non-irrigated), are clayey, or are moderate to strongly sloping.

They produce barley, wheat, hay, potatoes, cotton (non-irrigated), almonds, and apricots.

-- Farmlands of local importance

California has not used this class of farmland as yet.

Basic Assumptions

On basic assumptions, we find the status of soil and water resources somewhat paradoxical. Because of price increases and world demands, many acres of fragile lands have been returned to cultivation, and are subject to serious erosion damage. Extremes of drought, wind, and unusual rains have contributed to degradation of soil and water resources in many areas. Yet, because of improved conservation practices, fertility, and equipment, the overall quality of cropland has improved slightly in recent years.

The loss of agricultural land to other uses is the major factor currently reducing the Nation's productive capacity. Between 1967 and 1975, more than 23 million acres of farmland - 8 million acres of which are prime farmland, were converted to urban, and built up land and water uses.

Of our 1,417 million acres, excluding urban, water, and Federal land not cropped, an estimated 623 million acres (44 percent) was in Land Capability Classes I, II, or III (our best land for crops). In 1975, 36 percent of this land was used for crops. Of this cropland, 250 million acres are estimated to be prime farmland. About 10 percent of the cropland is on soils in Capability Class IV, and 4 percent on soils in Classes V to VIII.

Good farmland exists in limited supply. Our own inventory shows only 111 million acres with good potential for conversion to cropland, and 20 million acres to have medium potential for such conversion. Should the need arise, the cropland acreage on soils in these capability classes could be increased 16 to 21 percent.

More than half of our 400 million acres of cropland is on soils susceptible to moderate to high risk damage by water or wind erosion. The average annual soil loss from all cropland is estimated to be 9 tons per acre. Total annual soil loss exceeds 2.5 billion tons.

Another assumption is that we shall not be able to irrigate or drain significant additional acreages so as to convert them to good cropland in the future. Also, we assume that improvements in plant breeding and crop and soil management will not produce spectacular increases in production in the foreseeable future.

Finally, we assume that our population will continue to grow and that our balance-of-trade requirements will mandate continued high production, in fact, increasing production of food and fiber, which in turn will require more farmland, not less.

What will the national "prime agricultural lands" inventory program mean to counties, particularly those in the Western States?

The Important Farmlands Inventory will give the national, State, and county levels facts with respect to kind, amount, and location of good crop-producing land. It is important at the county level for planning and regulating the allocation of lands to meet local objectives now and in the future.

They will help USDA give explicit attention, in its agencies' actions and programs, to the local, state, and national concern for the retention of prime lands, and take steps to avoid conversion of such lands to other uses whenever possible.

USDA agencies' activities that result in the conversion of prime land to other uses will not be initiated unless there are no suitable alternative sites and the action is in response to overriding public need. The long-term implications of significant proposed land use conversions will be evaluated and made known to the public, normally within an environmental impact statement on the proposed action.

The Inventory will also help assure that review processes, including environmental impact statement procedures, consider and evaluate the impact of all major Federal actions on prime farm, range, and forest lands. Not only must USDA projects avoid prime land conversion whenever possible, but USDA reviewers of other agencies' environmental statements must point out in their comments any adverse impacts on prime lands associated with the other agencies' proposed action.

Are the criteria being used to classify farm lands appropriate, particularly in the arid regions of the West?

We also believe that the prime farmland definition needs to be uniform nationwide so as to have a basis for a national inventory and so as to be able to compare one area with another. Designation of other farmland and unique lands important to the State and the county can be based on appropriate criteria developed within the State and the county.

What are its chances of becoming a useful tool to counties in making land use decisions, when "potentially" prime agricultural lands are excluded from the inventory?

"Potential" prime farmland is easily defined at State or county levels as desired. In fact, some of the other farmland that is important at State or county level is exactly that-- potential prime farmland. In other words, if the State or the county wants to initiate actions to preserve potential farmland, there is every opportunity to do so.

What is the relationship between preservation of rural agricultural lands from urban encroachment and local regulation of land use?

There is a close tie and its a good question. As you know, under the Constitution, States reserve the authority to regulate private land use. In many States, that authority has been delegated to counties. Past experience shows that zoning and other kinds of land-use regulations are not very effective in preventing the conversion of farmland to urban uses. As you know, there are a variety of mechanisms being tested for preservation of rural farmland. Most counties will not have the money to purchase farmland or development rights on farmland, so I think they will have to turn to one or the other mechanisms to achieve the desirable preservation. A good deal of public support will have to be generated before any substantial preservation is possible.

Who is to implement a rural lands preservation program?

Several Federal land use bills have been debated in the Congress in recent years. They passed the Senate, but failed in the House. Some people saw the bills as proposing more government regulation. This does not rule out, at some future time, another call for national action.

There are several approaches to better land use management that the Federal Government can propose. National policy can be established to help Federal agencies do a better land use job when they administer their own projects and programs.

USDA has adopted a policy advocating the protection of prime farmlands from premature or unnecessary conversion to other uses. This policy also commits the Department to work with other agencies and with governments at the local and State level to assure that farmland interests are considered in land use decisions. Our policy is now being reviewed in each State and will be strengthened by our Secretary.

One way that government can help is by assessing more carefully the impact of public works proposals on prime farmland. The Iowa Highway Department recently studied some projects that were approved for construction, but not yet started. They found that several thousand acres of prime farmland could be saved by simple design alterations without compromising transportation or safety goals.

Who is to bear the costs?

The benefits of prime farmland preservation accrue to the Nation, the State, and the county. It is, therefore, appropriate, I think, that the costs be distributed. I would prefer to see implementation at the county level, but with State guidelines for uniformity.

The question of cost is associated with the kind of approach to prime farmland preservation needed.

In some communities, urbanization and other development reached an advanced stage before community leaders could acquire the information and expertise necessary to deal with the situation. Thousands of other communities still have time to act, but they need basic data and technical assistance to identify and evaluate their options. Still other communities have initiated programs--many of them very creative and innovative--with varying degrees of success.

At least six approaches have been tested across the country:

(1) Agricultural zoning by local government, districts exclusively for agricultural uses or agricultural preservation by State policy (Oregon, Hawaii) so that agricultural land can be used only for agricultural purposes. Many farmers are not happy with such a restriction, particularly if they see some future chance to sell their land for development. Though not widespread, agricultural zoning has been used with some success in parts of Minnesota, Iowa, Wisconsin, Oregon, California, and Hawaii.

(2) Property tax reduction, assessing on farm value rather than market value (authorized in 42 States).

(3) Purchase of development rights (Suffolk County) -- Another approach is public purchase of development rights or the land itself from the owner. In effect, this would compensate him for the difference between the value of his land for agriculture and for urban development. Suffolk County, New York, uses this technique, and New Jersey is testing it. Massachusetts enacted legislation for the same purpose, but has not yet funded it. Obviously, the idea would not work everywhere. It seems most popular in the Northeast, where the very limited remaining farmland is under intense pressure from urban growth.

(4) Transfer of development rights -- Still another approach is TDR. Under this concept, local governments would restrict use of certain lands to agriculture. In compensation, the governments would issue the farmer certificates for development rights on his land and then establish a market for buying and selling these certificates. Intensive development would be permitted in certain areas, provided a builder first acquired a given number of development certificates from the farmer at their market value. A variation of this concept has been used by Chicago and New York City to preserve historic buildings.

(5) Voluntary agricultural districts (California and New York)

(6) Wisconsin combination - State income tax credits for farmers conditioned upon locally adopted farm preservation plans or regulations. -- Wisconsin came up with yet another promising approach. Under the State Farmland Preservation Act, signed last year, a farmer gets credit on his state income tax if he signs a contract with the State agreeing to keep his land in agriculture. All initial contracts expire in 1982. For a farmer to remain eligible for tax credits after that, the county must adopt some form of policy or regulation to preserve farmland. Counties are not required to act, but continued tax credits are dependent on county action.

Some financial support may become available to counties and States that are trying to guide land use, manage growth, and protect valuable farmland. In recent Congressional hearings on an Agricultural Land Policy Act sponsored by Representative Jeffords of Vermont and others, many counties and State agencies testified to that need.

What impacts will climate have on a successful preservation program? Water resources? Water laws? Energy costs?

If adverse weather conditions continue to plague substantial parts of our agricultural industry, this simply means that more land will be needed to produce the food and fiber we need. This, of course, makes more urgent and critical the need for preservation

of our good productive land base. Similarly, shortages of water and increasing costs (energy, equipment, credit, transport, etc.) make the preservation of our best and most productive farmland more and more important. As costs go up, farmers will abandon the cultivation of marginal and lower producing land. Inasmuch as the reserve of high quality potential cropland is small, anything that accelerates the conversion of those lands brings us closer to the day when we run out of good farmland and face the inevitable consequences of higher food costs and poorer environmental quality.

In the next few years, USDA conservation programs will get a new impetus. The opportunity arose with passage of the Soil Water Resources Conservation Act of 1977. 95-192

This new law requires USDA to make an appraisal of the condition and quality of America's soil, water, and related resources--and to present this data to Congress by January 1980. In addition, USDA must develop a 5-year program for soil and water conservation and make a yearly evaluation of progress and effectiveness, with a look at needs for new laws or regulations.

I think this Act will become one of the strongest of our basic conservation laws.

In conclusion, urban growth is a phenomenon that in some parts of the U. S. goes back about two centuries. Over the last three or four decades it has taken a different and sharply accelerated development. There has been a much greater consumption of land, very often of prime land and a considerable increase of the areas where the city encroaches on the countryside. This has led to an increasing awareness of all the problems attached to this type of area, i.e., the rural-urban fringe covering a radius of varying width, ranging from a few miles to many depending on the size, growth rate and accessibility of the urban center.

These rural-urban interface areas and the agriculture therein come in very varied forms including forestry. Even though they lack homogeneity, nevertheless their particular characteristics call for specific policies both in the short and long-term. It becomes evident that when discussing the notion of rural-urban agriculture purely sectoral planning considerations are not sufficient and a comprehensive policy approach is necessary. A complex mix of agricultural, environmental, demographic, overall well-being and other factors enter into play. The first step in tackling these various aspects is to look at the role and functions of the growing urban area as a whole. Once this is defined and agreed upon, the important place of agriculture within the suburban sector can then be determined.

In attempting to define a proper role for the suburban area, the main functions designated to it can be summarized as:

- the location of agricultural production; - residence of agricultural and non-agricultural populations in specific locations;
- environmental purposes including recreation, protection of landscape and overall welfare; - location for decentralized small-scale industries, handicrafts and services, especially those related to agriculture.

Agriculture--and not only as the main supplier of land--is called upon to make positive contributions to the urbanizing area. The key issues in this overall context is the decision-making process regarding the proper use of land for all purposes.

Full consideration must be given to the role and place of suburban agriculture in areawide planning, taking into account the part of SMSA type agriculture within nationwide agriculture.