

MORE THAN AGRICULTURE:

PLANNERS USE FARMLAND PROTECTION TO PRESERVE COMMUNITY CHARACTER

Like a growing number of their counterparts across the country, Kane County, Illinois, planners are convinced that farmland protection can provide practical ways to achieve a broad range of community planning goals.

Kane County, one of three counties that composes the second “tier” of collar counties west and south of Chicago, is committed to agriculture. The bulk of its land base—approximately 70 percent—is in active agricultural use. These farms are the traditional enterprises of the heartland: cash grains and livestock.

But Kane County is also within commuting distance of the greater Chicago metropolis, where sprawl has transformed the first tier of collar counties from rural to suburban in just a few years. Folks in Kane are keenly aware that the same trend is heading their way.

“We’re experiencing severe development pressures,” says Kane County Commissioner Bill Morse, chair of the county’s development committee. “Loss of farmland is something that’s become a concern of many people.” In response, Kane recently launched Illinois’ first farmland protection program.

“By deciding what you want to protect, you help guide development where it really should occur,” says Denny Caneff, development and policy coordinator for the American Farmland Trust’s Upper Midwest regional office. AFT is helping Kane officials write a county farmland protection plan.

While farmland protection is sometimes a direct outgrowth of a community’s specific commitment to agriculture, planners also find that agricultural protection initiatives can help address other planning concerns, including water quality, traffic, open space, economic development, recreational opportunities and municipal finances.

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INNOVATIONS

PRESERVATION AND PROFIT: MISSISSIPPI FARMER LEADS EFFORTS TO STRENGTHEN SMALL FARMS

The 222 acres of southern Mississippi soil that Ben Burkett farms have belonged to his family since 1886. Now, he’s working to make sure many more generations of Burketts can make a good living farming there.

By experimenting with non-traditional crops, developing farmer-owned marketing and processing cooperatives, establishing new markets and cultivating new farmers, Burkett has strengthened his farm business and helped many other small-scale, minority farmers in the region. His success demonstrates that making sure farming is profitable can be an effective farmland protection strategy.

“Family roots form the basis of what I do,” says Burkett, 49, who raises vegetables and culinary herbs in Petal, Mississippi, about 20 miles from Hattiesburg. “I’m a fifth generation farmer. It’s been a tradition in my family to work with people, to help out in the community and bring along new ideas.”

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Commitment

LANDWORKS

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who conserve
the land*


American Farmland Trust

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Julia Freedgood
Managing Editor

Beth Holtzman
Writer/Editor

Susanne Fleek
Joan Deely
Contributing Writers

Eileen West
Program Coordinator

For subscription information and publication orders contact:

LANDWORKS
American Farmland Trust
One Short Street, Suite 2
Northampton, MA 01060
(800) 370-4879
LandWorks@farmland.org

American Farmland Trust is the only private, nonprofit conservation organization dedicated to protecting the nation's strategic agricultural resources. Founded in 1980, AFT works to stop the loss of productive farmland and to promote farming practices that lead to a healthy environment.

Basic membership is \$20 per year. For membership or general information about AFT, contact the National Office at 1200 18th Street, N.W., Suite 800, Washington, DC, 20036, (202) 331-7300, or connect to our Web page at <http://www.farmland.org>

 Printed on recycled paper

**Preservation and Profit
Contact: Edward J. Pennick
Federation of Southern
Cooperatives/Land
Assistance Fund
404-763-1385
www.federationsoutherncoop.com**

Innovations *continued from page 1*

Innovation, it seems, runs in Burkett blood. "My father and his brother bought the first tractor around here back in 1920, and they were the first to acquire registered Hereford stock."

Relying on approaches that bring farmers together to solve problems, Burkett works to expand small farmers' options. He has helped organize dozens of cooperatives and farmers' markets that enable small farmers—particularly minority and limited-resource farmers in Mississippi, Louisiana and Arkansas—to survive by pooling resources and knowledge, as well as developing niche markets, says Edward Pennick, director of the Federation of Southern Cooperatives Land Assistance Fund (FSC/LAF).

"He has become one of the most sought-after resources in the area of family farm-related issues," says Pennick.

Burkett works part-time with the Mississippi office of FSC/LAF, which was established in 1967 to address land loss among African-American farm families. Many factors have contributed to African-American land loss, according to FSC. They include lack of access to credit and appropriate technical assistance; lack of funding for black colleges and community-based organizations; inadequate legal representation; financial problems that lead to tax, foreclosure and voluntary sales; and discriminatory malfeasance on the part of local officials. The number of African-American farmers declined from about 218,000 in 1910 to about 18,000 active farmers today, the FSC says.

Pennick credits the kind of organizing and educational work Burkett does with stemming that trend. He estimates that Burkett's efforts to launch and strengthen cooperatives help protect as much as 5,000 acres of black-owned farmland a year. Burkett has helped organize 25 other cooperatives around the country, including five in Mississippi.

"In counties where we've got co-ops, we're holding our own," Burkett says. "We haven't lost anything, and maybe we're gaining a little."

Combining harvests to offer larger volumes of produce, and cooperatively processing crops and livestock gives farmers more muscle in the marketplace. "Pooling resources helps small farmers market their crops more successfully than if they were trying to reach markets individually," says Melbah Smith, project director of the Mississippi Association of Cooperatives. "Farmers can increase their return, making it more feasible to stay on their land."

For example, the 44-member Indian Springs Farmers Association in Petal, cures, washes and packs market-bound crops. It recently began custom-processing and vacuum-packing vegetables to commercial customers' specifications, and it plans to develop freezing capabilities at the facility in the near future.

By paying close attention to emerging niche markets, Burkett and the farmers he works with are receiving higher prices at the market. Sweet potatoes, watermelons, bell peppers, eggplant, southern peas, pecans, okra and leafy greens all command higher prices than traditional row crops. Although not a certified organic organization, the cooperative promotes low-input farming practices that both reduce production costs and help build healthy soils and farm ecosystems.

Co-op members also capture a greater share of the consumer food dollar by direct marketing these higher-value crops. Burkett coordinates biweekly shipments of vegetables to the farmers' markets throughout the South and beyond.

One of a handful of farmers under 50 in his community, Burkett is concerned about the aging of African-American farmers. "There's no one to take over when these people retire," he says. "That land just goes to development."

Outreach and education is a cornerstone to Burkett's efforts to keep those farms in production. Indian Springs Association has six teen-aged members, and Burkett works with youth programs in three cooperative associations. He believes that community education helps teenagers and their parents appreciate the economic importance of agriculture.



Photo by David Shaw

Still, attracting young African-Americans to farming is not easy. “They have seen us struggling so hard they don’t want to go into it,” Burkett says.

Burkett’s work on behalf of small farmers has brought him international recognition. He’s worked with farmers in Africa, Central America and the Middle East. He enjoys his travels, but stresses, “My heart is in Mississippi.” 🚜

USING RESOURCES WISELY

HOW MUCH IS ENOUGH?

“Critical mass”, in the lexicon of farmland protection, is generally defined as the minimum amount of farms and farmland needed to sustain a viable, agricultural industry over the long term.

The concept is embedded in agricultural zoning and purchase of development rights (PDR) programs across the country. The notion is that a minimum amount of land and farming activity is necessary to support and maintain a local agricultural infrastructure—from feed, seed and machinery dealers, to skilled labor, to processing facilities. When farm activity falls below that critical level, according to the conventional wisdom, support services and suppliers diminish as well, making it that much more difficult—and expensive—for the remaining farmers to profitably operate farm businesses.

But, in dollar and acre terms, how much is critical mass? How much do individual production systems and local conditions influence it?

The answers depend on whom you ask.

Some farmland protection professionals believe there are reasonably reliable acre and dollar benchmarks, and that those benchmarks are helpful in terms of prioritizing farmland protection funds. Others suggest that a broader, more flexible definition of critical mass may be needed—one that incorporates overall economic viability and community support as well as acres, dollars and infrastructure.

“I think it may be even harder to discuss what critical mass is now than it was 10 or 15 years ago,” says Bob Wagner, AFT’s assistant vice president for field programs. Wagner cites influences as varied as changes in the structure of agriculture, changes in farmer attitudes, and even the Internet.

In contrast, Tom Daniels, author of *Holding Our Ground: Protecting America’s Farms and Farmland*, (1997, Island Press) and a frequent consultant on farmland protection strategies, *continued on page 4*

“Pooling resources helps small farmers market their crops more successfully than if they were trying to reach markets individually. Farmers can increase their return, making it more feasible to stay on their land.”

**—Melbah Smith,
project director of the
Mississippi Association
of Cooperatives**

Using Resources Wisely *continued from page 3*

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**—Bob Wagner,
AFT’s assistant vice
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field programs**

says critical mass can be defined, and is relatively consistent from place to place. “At a county level, critical mass is generally at least \$50 million in gross farm output and about 100,000 acres in active farm use,” he says.

In terms of making best use of farmland protection funds, Daniels suggests that preserving farmland in blocks of at least 1,000 contiguous acres can stave off development from the larger pool of agriculturally active land.

At the county level, he says, “if you get into the range of about 20,000 preserved acres, you’re really going to start influencing the growth patterns in the county.” In practice, however, it’s been rare. Daniels estimates that nationwide approximately 20 counties have been able to achieve that level of protection.

In Fayette County, Kentucky, where thoroughbred horses, cattle, tobacco and corn are the primary agricultural enterprises, the goal is to acquire conservation easements on about 50,000 acres of about 125,000 acres of farmland, says Margaret Graves, executive director of the Bluegrass Conservancy. “That’s how we have initially tried to define what is a critical mass of farmland,” she says. “It’s a working definition. It’s not cast in stone.”

Graves believes that the exact amount of farmland and the dollar value of farm output needed to achieve a critical mass will likely vary depending on local conditions, the type of acreage and the agricultural enterprise. “The average farm in Fayette County is 160 acres. Perhaps we can have a smaller total acreage because tobacco and certain equine operations have very high per-acre income,” she says.

Skagit County, Washington, currently has a total of about 80,000 acres in agricultural use. Farmgate value, however, is about \$200 million a year, says Bob Rose, of Skagitonians to Preserve Farmland. Skagit farmers grow about 80 different crops, ranging from dairy, apples, small fruit and peas, to vegetable seed, daffodils and tulips.

Rose says a critical mass of farmland and farmers still exist in Skagit. But he emphasizes that protecting farmland isn’t sufficient to save farming in the Skagit Valley. Profitability is equally important.

“What good is farmland if the farmers can’t make a living?” he asks, suggesting that in addition to acreage and infrastructure, a critical mass of community support and profitability is crucial to sustaining agriculture for the long term.

Another approach to critical mass focuses on the minimum size of agricultural parcels. In Delaware, for example, a parcel must be at least 200 acres to be accepted as an Agricultural Preservation District and to qualify for protection.

In California, due to the Williamson Act, which provides tax relief for landowners who agree to forego development for at least 10 years, the focus has also been on individual parcels. But the definition of the minimum size for an agricultural parcel varies tremendously within the state.

LAY OF THE LAND

Amount spent last year on farm programs that provide direct payments to farmers and ranchers
Source: USDA

\$32 billion

Proportion of farmers—including small-scale producers located near metropolitan and suburban areas that do not receive federal assistance
Source: Environmental Defense

2/3

Amount spent last year on USDA conservation programs
Source: Soil and Water Conservation Society

\$3 billion

Percentage of farm spending allocated to USDA conservation programs in 1995
Source: Congressional Research Service

30%

Percentage of farm spending allocated to conservation programs in 2000
Source: Congressional Research Service

9%

Attrition

“Some counties require higher amounts—80 acres of prime agricultural land and 160 acres of non-cultivated land. Others less—10 acres for prime land or 40 acres for non-prime or cultivated land,” says Erik Vink, director of the California Department of Conservation’s Division of Land Resource Protection.

“California agriculture is incredibly varied,” Vink explains. “So what is true in San Diego County, which is the very southern part of the state where agriculture is concentrated on very small parcels, would not be the case in Sutter County, which is primarily rice, and where the average farm size is upwards of 1,000 acres.”

And what happens when the agricultural land base dips below the critical mass? Are farmers facing an inevitable cycle of attrition and decline?

“I used to worry a lot more about whether there’s going to be that agricultural infrastructure,” says Lorraine Merrill, a New Hampshire dairy farmer. “But as somebody who farms in a rapidly developing area, I think it’s been over-rated in terms of how important it is in this day and age.”

Merrill, whose farm has been protected for more than 20 years through conservation easements, lives in New England’s most rapidly developing county. To make up for lost local agricultural services, she and husband John have learned to do more for themselves, and use the telephone and Internet to purchase supplies.

“There is still a lot of agriculture here, and there are new farms that are starting up. People think that agriculture’s vanished because they don’t see a lot of cows. It’s just that the character and types of enterprises change,” she says. “There are more nurseries, and fruit and vegetable operations. When you look at how agriculture tends to evolve in fast-developing areas, you see that farms tend to get smaller in size and more numerous. Theoretically they’re doing higher-value crops and getting better prices, because that’s where the market is.”

AFT’s Wagner, however, describes what happens when the agricultural land base falls well below critical mass. A handful of farms find themselves surrounded by residential and commercial development, accompanied by noise, odor and other ordinances that effectively restrict farm activity. “It may be easier to say what critical mass is not,” he says. 🚜

POLICY REPORT

THE FARM BILL AND URBAN-INFLUENCED AGRICULTURE

What would you do with \$32 billion?

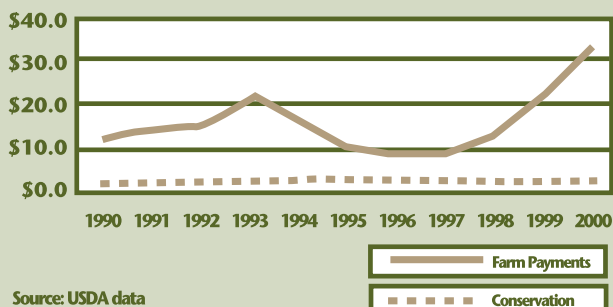
That’s a question members of Congress will be asking themselves over the next 18 months while writing the 2002 Farm Bill. Every five years, Congress updates the farm bill, essentially the blueprint for US farm policy. It authorizes and funds commodity, rural development, conservation, research and food programs.

This time, however, with farm payments alone reaching a record \$32 billion, Congress faces the challenge of justifying more spending on agriculture to a public that is increasingly divorced from agriculture and wary of its impact on the environment.

Since 1985, the farm bill has authorized a growing number of initiatives that encourage stewardship. Dollar-wise, these programs constitute a small fraction of overall farm spending—roughly 8 percent of all farm payments in 2000. Yet they represent an important shift from the farm bill’s historical emphasis on price and supply controls.

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FARM PAYMENTS vs. CONSERVATION FUNDING
(FY 1990 — 2000 in Billions)



“Farmland protection is part of a comprehensive strategy to conserve the natural resources that need to be conserved, and also to focus development in existing communities. It’s really the flip side of downtown revitalization.”

**—Jeff Soule,
policy director for the
American Planning Assoc.**

“Farmland protection is part of a comprehensive strategy to conserve the natural resources that need to be conserved, and also to focus development in existing communities,” observes Jeff Soule, policy director for the 30,000-member American Planning Association (APA). “It’s really the flip side of downtown revitalization.”

APA President Joanne Garnett, county planner in rural Sublette County, Wyoming, concurs. Even in sparsely settled rangeland, farmland protection issues are an integral part of land use planning, she says.

“When people ask me why on earth there needs to be a planner in rural counties, I ask them do they like to eat, do they like to recreate, do they like to retreat from the hustle and bustle of city living?” Garnett says. “Inevitably, they answer yes.”

Yet she believes that farmland protection is about far more than just “open space.”

“I hate the implication that agricultural land is simply ‘land in waiting’ for development as housing, commercial or industrial uses,” Garnett says. “Agriculture is a land use. Too often, I think, ag land gets sort of a second-class status that isn’t appropriate.”

Sometimes, farmland preservation programs, particularly those involving voluntary transfer or purchase of development rights (PDR) can offer planners an effective tool for managing growth, particularly in places where the political will to restrict growth is weak, and whatever land use controls exist are outmatched by the development pressure. Delaware’s 10-year-old farmland protection program provides a leading example.

“In lieu of any real growth management policies, it became a way to manage growth without regulation,” offers Stewart MacKenzie, a planner with Delaware’s Agricultural Lands Preservation Program. “It became de-facto agricultural zoning.”

Traditionally an agricultural state, Delaware is rife with the conflicts and development pressures that can erode an agricultural economy. Sussex County, for example, is the nation’s largest poultry producing county. But it is also home to Rehoboth Beach, one of the most popular, and growing, beach resorts on the East Coast.

“Delaware is popular for banking, credit cards and chemicals. And yet it’s a big agricultural state,” MacKenzie says, listing poultry, grains and vegetable production as the state’s chief commodities. “If we were to lose that land base, especially in the southern part of the state, there would be some serious economic ripples.”

The Delaware farmland protection program, launched in 1991, aims to preserve an adequate land base to sustain farms in the face of both declining commodity prices and escalating development pressure. In just over a decade, landowners have voluntarily placed 125,655 acres—nearly a fifth of the state’s total acreage—into Agricultural Preservation Districts.

By placing land in an Agricultural Preservation District, landowners agree not to develop their property for at least 10 years and to devote the land to agriculture and related uses. In return, the owners receive tax benefits, right-to-farm protection and an opportunity to sell a preservation easement to the state. To date, the state has purchased easements on almost 54,000 acres, protecting that land permanently, and applications for an additional round of purchases was slated for early 2001.

“We’ve enjoyed more success than we thought possible,” MacKenzie says. “We knew there was a strong desire by landowners to protect their farms, but it wasn’t until funding was readily available that they really started stepping forward.”

In Saratoga Springs, New York, AFT’s Northeast Director Jerry Cosgrove, encourages planners to consider farmland protection issues in a broader, more holistic framework that incorporates economic considerations.

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**More Than Agriculture
Contact:
Jennifer Dempsey
413-586-9330**

Long-supported by coalitions of farmers and ranchers, environmentalists, and farmland protection organizations, agricultural conservation incentives are now also gaining support beyond the traditional agricultural and conservation communities. Consumers, community planners and policy-makers increasingly recognize that farm policy must address agriculture's contributions—and impacts—beyond food and fiber production.

These groups argue that helping farmers, ranchers and foresters maintain clean water and air, productive farmland, open space and wildlife habitat while producing affordable, safe and fresh food becomes the basis for renewing the public's commitment to and support of agriculture.

"Because farmland and ranchland covers 55 percent of the landscape, the way it is managed can have a dramatic impact on the natural resources and open spaces so important to all Americans," said American Farmland Trust President Ralph Grossi, calling for resources to improve land stewardship. To be effective, some say, the farm bill must provide more support for small-scale farmers and ranchers, particularly those located in or near metropolitan areas.

These farms and ranches—sometimes referred to as urban-influenced agriculture—have the greatest impact on the environment and quality of life for the non-farming public. They receive little to no federal assistance from farm bill programs, yet they now produce most of our fruits, vegetables and dairy products. In fact, in almost every region of the country, urban-influenced agriculture produces the majority of U.S. agricultural value. Nationally, these producers account for more than a third of total agriculture value and a third of farm assets.

How can federal farm programs address the needs of urban-influenced agriculture? Following are farm bill priorities supported by AFT and a number of other conservation, environmental, and farmer and rancher groups:

- Protect the land.

The USDA Economic Research Service estimates that 164 million acres of farmland are threatened by sprawling development. To protect even 10 percent with purchase of development rights programs, the federal government must commit at least \$500 million annually to the Farmland Protection Program.

- Help farmers and ranchers adopt conservation practices to reduce runoff, restore wildlife habitat, protect open space and slow soil erosion by putting conservation programs on equal footing with commodity programs.

At current funding levels, three out of four farmers are left waiting in line to enroll in the Wetlands Reserve Program, Environmental Quality Incentives Program and the Wildlife Habitat Incentives Program.

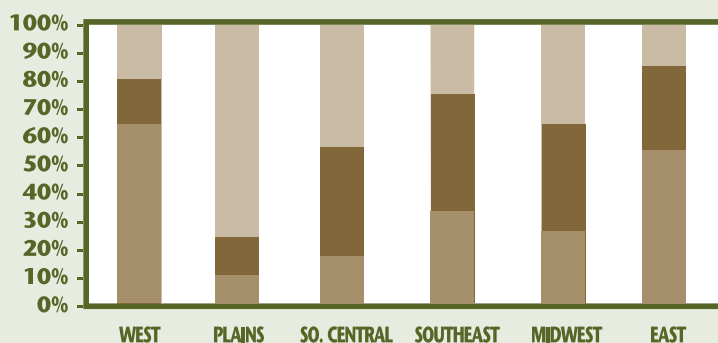
- Help farmers improve the economic viability of their operations.

AFT is part of a coalition supporting the proposed Conservation Security Act (CSA) as one way to address the needs of the producer and the needs of the community. CSA would pay producers up to \$50,000 to adopt conservation practices, making it the first program to reward farmers and ranchers for the environmental practices they already undertake and compensate them for adding new practices.

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Protection

MOST PRODUCTION COMES FROM URBAN -INFLUENCED AREAS



Source: NRCS


■ Metro ■ Near Metro ■ Rural

**Policy Report
Contact:
Suzanne Fleek
202-331-7300**

More Than Agriculture *continued from page 6*

"Farmers get frustrated when the issue of land use is not linked with the issue of profitability," Cosgrove says. "Farmland is the basis for a farm business. Many land use plans don't factor that in. They're just looking at the land base."

The APA's Garnett concurs. She offers her own experience in Wyoming as an example.

"I'm living in cattle country, and I've learned a lot about that industry since coming here. Without a lot of land, we won't have cattle ranches, and we won't have the rancher lifestyle in evidence. Our ranchers face tough battles over the loss of the family ranch, the lack of interest of the young people to take over the ranch, grazing issues on public lands and so on," Garnett says. "What does a planner have to do with all of that? I think it involves understanding the local culture of a place, what makes it unique and what makes it tick. Both AFT and APA recognize that planners must respect the values of the communities they live and work in." 

SAVE THE DATE!

Farming on the Edge: Conservation, Community and Commerce American Farmland Trust's national farmland protection conference will be held **November 12-14, 2001, in St. Charles, Illinois.** Visit www.farmland.org for more information.

Policy Report *continued from page 7*

The Massachusetts Agriculture Viability Program is another good model for how USDA can help urban-influenced agriculture capitalize on growing markets for fresh, local agriculture products and adjust to changing consumer demands.

As this issue of *Connection* goes to press, Congress is debating funding levels for agriculture conservation programs for Fiscal Year 2002. The President's budget request zeroes out funding for the Farmland Protection Program, Wetlands Reserve Program and the Wildlife Habitat Incentives Program. Hopefully, these cuts are not an indication of how USDA will treat conservation programs in the next farm bill. The House Agriculture Committee will finally hold a hearing on conservation programs in late May which is the first positive sign for including conservation programs in any farm bill that moves through the House this year.

You can make a difference. Help push Congress to address urban-influenced agriculture in the farm bill. Ask your senators and representative to:

- 1) Join the Farmland Protection Caucus;
- 2) Co-sponsor the Farmland Protection Act of 2001;
- 3) Support tax incentives for conservation easements. 

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American Farmland Trust
One Short Street
Northampton, MA 01060

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