



# Regional farmland protection: The Twin Cities experience

By Darrell Napton

**M**INNESOTA'S Metropolitan Agricultural Preserves Act may be one of the most effective farmland protection programs in the nation. A number of state-level farmland protection programs have proven quite effective (4, 5, 6, 17), but this program functions at a regional level, enabling it to meet local needs. Farmland owners have responded by enrolling more than 178,000 acres in Metropolitan Agricultural Preserves (MAP).

The Minnesota program encompasses a seven-county area that includes Minneapolis and St. Paul, their suburbs, and the surrounding countryside. This region has more than one million acres of farmland, of which nearly one-fifth (17 percent) is enrolled in the MAP program and an additional 431,000 acres are eligible if the owners choose to enroll (10). The Metropolitan Agricultural Preserves Act provides a state financial

framework and authorizes the Metropolitan Council (the Twin Cities regional planning organization) to coordinate long-term farmland protection with local governments.

MAP is part of a new class of farmland protection programs that attempt to affect the location and timing of urban-influenced, nonfarm development by linking the state, region, town, and individual landowner in a web of commitments designed to stabilize and slow land use changes in the urban development frontier. It provides a comprehensive approach to farmland protection that might be used as a model for other states that are developing or improving similar programs (17).

## Agricultural changes and responses

The Twin Cities are on the northern margin of the corn-soybean belt, the largest and most productive farming region in the nation. Agriculture is the most extensive use of land in the metropolitan area. Cash grain farming is common, and part of the region is within the Wisconsin-Minnesota Dairy Belt. The soils, climate, and economic structure also support a major commercial

vegetable industry, as well as the nurseries and truck farms normally associated with a large city. The high proportion of intensive, specialized farms in the metropolitan area has resulted in Twin Cities farms' contributing substantially more to the state's agricultural economy than the area in farms would indicate (13).

Concern for Twin Cities farmland evolved during the rapid urban growth of the 1960s and 1970s, when population increases and new highway construction thrust previously distant farmland into the urban commuting field. Migration to the Twin Cities increased the region's population to more than two million. Today the Twin Cities region accounts for half of Minnesota's population. Highway accessibility speeded up the conversion of farmland to nonfarm uses (7, 18). Easy access to the central cities seemed to be an important criterion when people searched for places to live beyond the suburbs. By 1967 the entire Twin Cities metropolitan area was easily within a one-hour drive of downtown Minneapolis (1). As the built-up area grew larger and the regional highway system became better, the quantity of farmland within easy commuting distance from the cities' outer edge increased enormously. The new highways fostered a more dispersed population distribution, and rural subdivisions and hobby farms became common within the commuting field.

Nationally, concern about premature farmland conversion peaked during the late 1970s, when excessive low-density, urban fringe growth was thought to jeopardize national food and fiber production (14, 3). In the Twin Cities region, these anxieties were exacerbated by concerns that low-density development might threaten the region's groundwater supply, impair the quality of life, and possibly bankrupt the region with excessive demands for regional service extensions, particularly sewer. The Metropolitan Council discovered that premature farmland conversion could threaten regional growth control efforts, that even scattered-to-moderate exurban growth raised land values and property taxes, and that this growth typically had a greater impact than the size of the area converted suggests. These realizations also could engender in farmers' minds a sense of uncertainty about the long-term viability of agriculture when making major planning and investment decisions.

Farmland loss was recognized as a multifaceted problem that defied a simple solution. Local planning efforts had been easily overwhelmed by the scale and rapid pace of urban growth. Local farmland protection policies could not prevent the areawide population and land use changes that led to higher

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*Darrell Napton is an assistant professor in the Department of Geography and Planning, Southwest Texas State University, San Marcos, 78666. This article is based on research sponsored by the Center for Urban and Regional Affairs, University of Minnesota, Minneapolis. The author thanks John R. Borchert and William Craig for their assistance.*