

Where Are We In Farmland Preservation?

I am pleased as a private citizen, after over forty years of public service to Agriculture, to be on your side of the fence. That transition has opened up new challenges in soil and water conservation and farmland retention for me as a Senior Advisor to the American Farmland Trust -- a private, nonprofit organization. AFT is committed to the protection of farmland and farming opportunities through public education, policy development and land conservancy. I am also extremely honored to have become a member of the governing board of my own local conservation district in Anne Arundel County, Maryland. (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 "people talking to themselves". A call was voiced to join with others concerned if land retention goals were to be realized.

(1) Several examples were cited: In an effort to assure the future of the <sup>ir</sup> 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 1960s and into the 1970s. 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.

especially to make agriculture more profitable; re-establish better balance in agriculture, retrieve much that has been lost; and strengthen economic development, especially of agriculture infrastructure

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I could give you other examples from every state represented here. In the Southern New England industrial areas, many of them obsolete, the possibility is raised that new "post-industrial" uses could be found for sites and buildings that have become available. The same potential was found in New Jersey and other parts of the region.

The over-production of some categories of <sup>crops</sup> ~~foods~~ and resulting surpluses has raised the question of how much land is really needed for the region's agriculture. Criteria is needed as to how land more in demand for recreation, environmental protection and other uses can be identified. This is a question of special concern to subregions (coastal, piedmont, mountain areas) and to specific lands defined by location, soil or other factors. Little land use planning responsive to these factors is being done at regional, state or local levels, but a beginning has been made in a recent Massachusetts statewide survey, as well as in other states of the region.

Although conventional farming continues to dominate this region's agriculture the burgeoning of small farms, responsive to expressed desires for continuity and independence, family-owned, many of them part-time operations, often both diversified and intensive in production represent something both new and significant. They appear to be the main factor that has reversed the decline in the number of farms in the region as well as an important key to its future. However, the big conventional farms are

getting bigger and are also significant theaters of change, as witness Maine's Aroostook County potato farms, the Connecticut Valley's tobacco farms, the changing agriculture of southern New Jersey, or the suburban areas of the Baltimore-Washington metropolis. Dairy farming can be especially noted as a sector of market-oriented change.

*Amne pala*

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

Commercial agriculture in the Northeastern states region is especially menaced by competition with other commercial agriculture nationwide, and with the rising land prices, labor and other regional factors. In response to these conditions, efforts have been made to increase the scale of farming (often in cooperative forms), both by farmland consolidation through purchase and by leasing to assemble large management units that are planned to absorb and by leasing to assemble large management units that are planned to absorb heavy investments in machinery for production. In consequence, heavy burdens of debt have been assumed that are reflected in farm foreclosures. The problems associated with tenancy also remain, especially the short-term nature of land improvements and the uncertain future of contractual arrangements. Further, the need to sustain the agricultural service structure, and social and cultural institutions related to agriculture that are as important for large-scale farming enterprises as well as for small farms.

We were 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. 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.

What is the Federal Government doing to address this problem?  
gram? *of retaining prime & imp. farmlands for a viable Agr. #1*  
Congress passed the Farmland Protection Policy Act last year. It is part of the Agriculture and Food Act of 1981. This legislation *effective in time* essentially, does three things - *if implemented*

- 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

*which may be... consistent with local...*

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.

The bottom line on land use is that little is likely to affect current trends in farmland conversion until it commands action at the level of local government. Farmers do not believe they should shoulder the entire burden.

In a series of interviews with representative Maryland farmers it was found that farmers are suspicious of farmland preservation programs. Those programs which have succeeded have been led by farmers. The way farmers view their land - both as a commodity and a means of production, and as their principal

equity in the farm - was seen as fundamental to any realistic effort to enlist farm support for programs greatly desired by many other interests.

The pioneering role of New England and Eastern states region in farmland preservation is viewed of particular importance 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 as 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.

Farmland preservation is most likely to be accomplished by some method of *compensating either direct or indirect* paying farmers. The question is who should be paid, how much, and how? British experience has turned up new forms of "payment" where farmers are paid to plant trees, create new landscapes and amenities, preserve wildlife and otherwise contribute to the regeneration of the countryside. Similar programs are used in the Netherlands and elsewhere.

The lacking element is rural development policy that sets the stage for land use decisions, and presents a convincing picture of future developments, that will guide investment, settlement and land use decisions. Such definition 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 mutuality of interests.



In addition to current erosion-control practices that may lack acceptance because it's generally not in the economic interests of farmers to adopt them, we urge more effective conservation practices be stressed, such as reduced or conservation tillage including, no-till. National policies for natural resource protection, commodity supports and exports need to be compatible.

The longer we delay, the more difficult the solutions will become. Half of the national farm debt is secured by the land's value, yet soil erosion and farmland conversion continue to eat slowly but inexorably into that value. What will be gained if farmers default and the land ends up in the hands of banks, holding corporations, insurance companies or government agencies? Who will farm it then? Will we end up with a new class of peasant farmers in America, working the land for major institutions or governments? How much good land will be left after this period of waste is finished? Enough surely to meet our needs for survival, but what about our ability to rebuild a strong national economy?

A final thought ~~is what kind of~~ <sup>the</sup> heritage each generation treasures and passes on for the future. Thus, if the public truly wants to retain land in agriculture, and to conserve soil resources, then it should be prepared to pay. The true legacy we leave is the capacity to produce. Our obligation to the future is not simply to conserve, but also to progress.

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Material used for remarks by Norman A. Berg, Senior Advisor,  
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