CHAPTER 11: LEARNING BY EXAMPLE: THE FIVE I'S OF FARMLAND PROTECTION

The farmland protection experiences of counties in California, Maryland and Washington provide opportunities to examine what steps and processes worked along the way. States and communities facing similar challenges can learn from these efforts and adapt existing models and techniques to fit their own unique conditions.

INTRODUCTION

THE FIVE I'S

Although no one has established a formula for success, the case studies reveal a consistent pattern in the process of designing an effective farmland protection strategy. We have taken these steps ourselves in communities across the nation, and call them the five I's. They include:

- Identification;
- Inventory;
- Investigation;
- Integration; and
- Implementation.

The case studies provide many examples of how real people in real places have addressed the five I's. They show how important it is to engage a wide range of stakeholders in the effort to meet the challenges of farming on the edge. A strong coalition can facilitate approval of new legislation and public funding, ensure continued political support for farmland protection and secure a strong future for agriculture. Thus the additional "I" of involvement is necessary at every step.

STEP ONE: IDENTIFICATION

The first step that a community must take is identifying its problems. While the challenges of farming on the edge are similar, the nature and scope of the problems facing agriculture are different in each state, county or municipality. In Walla Walla County, the pace of non-farm development is relatively slow, but the placement of even a few dozen new houses adjacent to active farms and ranches endangers the viability of neighboring operations. In Sonoma and Solano Counties, the tremendous *rate* of growth is the biggest challenge to stabilizing the land base. For dairy farmers in Marin and King counties, low commodity prices and structural changes in the dairy industry have been at least as big a problem as loss of farmland. Low profits have created an incentive for farmers to sell land for development. In Napa and Walla Walla counties, agriculture is highly profitable, but conflicts between farmers and their neighbors still threaten farming operations. Competition for water between farmers and homeowners is an emerging issue for agriculture in many western communities, including Solano and Walla Walla counties.

Outreach and involvement are critical parts of the identification process. While the threat to agriculture and farmland may first be recognized by farmers, planners or conserva-

tionists, it is rare for one group to have the power to create a solution alone. In Sonoma County, for example, conservationists' efforts to pass the Farmland Initiative failed largely because farmers were not involved in designing the proposed program and refused to support it. In some cases, farmers and conservationists may agree that farmland should be protected from development but disagree about the proper use of the land.

The most effective farmland protection strategies typically result from stakeholder consensus as to the extent and nature of the problems that need to be addressed and agreement that something can and should be done. Constituencies often reach beyond the farming and conservation communities. Those who have a vested interest in growth and development, such as builders, realtors, bankers and business people, may also want to be involved. Since protecting farmland affects the availability of land for future development, affordable housing advocates may be interested in program development. Remember, stakeholders who are excluded from the process of identifying the problem may oppose any solutions that are proposed in the future.

Identification of the problem can take many forms, from conversations between neighbors to formal discussion groups or stakeholder surveys. These forums can generate excitement, enthusiasm and sense of community spirit for the work ahead.

STEP TWO: INVENTORY

The next step is conducting an inventory of physical infrastructure and agricultural, natural and human resources. Inventory often starts with mapping farmland and soil resources. In addition, communities need detailed information on the different types of agricultural operations in their jurisdictions, the level of investment in agriculture, the profitability of farms and the number and types of agricultural support businesses. This information can help communities estimate a critical mass of farmland and determine what types of policies and programs are needed to stabilize the land base and ensure the economic viability of farming.

People are just as important as land to the future of agriculture. If the farm community is aging and there are few young farmers and ranchers who are willing or able to take their place, farms will be sold for non-agricultural purposes. In King County, a team of consultants noted the aging of the farm population and recommended that the county develop a program to facilitate the transfer of farms between generations. Information on land tenure can be helpful, as rented farmland may be more vulnerable to conversion than owner-operated farms. Availability of skilled farm labor is also vital to agricultural viability.

Assessing the location, quantity and quality of natural resources is another important step in the inventory process. Most agricultural operations need a reliable source of water to remain viable. Competition for water can be as big a threat to farms as competition for land. This is particularly true in areas where crops depend on irrigation, such as Sonoma, Solano, Napa and Walla Walla counties. In wet climates, too much water can be a problem. King County targeted large blocks of its most fertile agricultural land for protection, but failed to predict the impact that development of environmentally sensitive areas might have on the farms. As a result, new construction has caused mudslides and flooding on protected farmland, making some of it virtually useless for agriculture.

Agricultural land often encompasses rich natural, ecological and scenic resources. Mapping lakes, rivers, and streams, wetlands, wildlife habitat, unique ecosystems and scenic vistas can help communities develop strategies that protect both farmland and natural resources. In Thurston County, the inventory process led to a decision to purchase easements in the Nisqually Valley. The PACE program there is expected to prevent development adjacent to a wildlife refuge and maintain scenic views along the interstate highway, in addition to protecting more than 1,000 acres of high-quality agricultural land.

Finally, the presence of non-agricultural development and physical infrastructure such as roads, sewers and water lines can have a critical impact on the fate of agricultural land. When Montgomery County established its Agricultural Reserve, it excluded areas with public water and sewers, creating a buffer between urban and rural sections of the county.

Many communities have found the Land Evaluation and Site Assessment system to be a useful tool in the inventory process. LESA is a numerical rating system for farmland that measures both soil quality and site factors that make land more or less suitable for agriculture. Site factors can include everything from the size of a parcel and surrounding land uses to the existence of agricultural support services and public investment in water and sewer systems and public transportation. Some jurisdictions have used LESA to determine where agriculture is likely to be viable in the future. Others use LESA scores to delineate agricultural protection zones or determine whether specific parcels of land should be included in an agricultural district. Baltimore, Howard, Harford and Walla Walla counties have all used LESA systems as part of their farmland protection programs.*

Maps are one of the most useful products created in the inventory process. If a geographic information system is available, maps can be automatically layered to show the locations where areas with fertile soils, active farms, adequate water supplies, important ecological resources and few public services overlap. These areas can then be targeted for protection. The 1996 King County Farm and Forest Report included a series of maps that showed zoning, parcel size, urbanization, new subdivisions, land value and improvements, and enrollment in the state's current use assessment program in rural areas of the county. These types of map can serve as a visual representation of the need for action, and can help farmland protection advocates explain their strategy to policymakers and the public.

STEP THREE: INVESTIGATION

Investigation is the process of looking for solutions to the problems identified in step one. Investigation and inventory often occur simultaneously, as the inventory process informs the search for solutions. Conversely, the range of possible solutions to be investigated may dictate the type and extent of inventory work to be done.

A task force, working group or local planning department generally takes the lead on investigation. These groups focus the excitement and concern generated by agreement on the set of problems to be addressed and the need for solutions. Task forces can serve as forums to refine the issues, set goals, and resolve remaining disagreements between stakeholders.

* Frederick R. Steiner, James R. Pease and Robert E. Coughlin, *A Decade with LESA: The Evolution of Land Evaluation and Site Assessment* (Ankeny, Iowa: Soil and Water Conservation Society, 1994), p. 60.

Generally, the first job of the task force is to determine its scope. This may include setting targets for the amount of farmland to protect and the extent of non-farm development to permit, building support for implementation of farmland protection techniques, securing funding if necessary and identifying agencies and organizations to administer the program.

It is important to ensure that a wide range of interests are represented on the task force. A Howard County task force involved farmers, conservationists, urban and rural residents and newcomers to the county as well as long-time natives. The comprehensive membership of the Work Force for the Preservation of Howard County Farmland helped the group get a state grant to support its activities, and was a key ingredient in the successful campaign to approve a PACE program for the county.

Every community faces unique challenges, and coming up with a set of solutions sometimes seems like an overwhelming task. Fortunately, there are plenty of places to go for help. The experiences of established state and local farmland protection programs can be very useful to new task forces. The case studies provide some good examples, and talking to local and state government agency officials who have managed farmland protection programs may be especially helpful. Farmers who have protected their own land are a good source of information on the benefits and drawbacks of different farmland protection strategies. Exploring, researching and analyzing the literature on farmland protection also can help communities narrow their options.

The investigation process may include:

- Contacting other jurisdictions with successful farmland protection programs;
- Inviting experts on farmland protection to address the task force and public meetings;
- Taking field trips to locations with successful farmland protection programs;
- Conducting surveys of local residents to assess their support for different techniques;
- Conducting library research; and
- Searching electronic databases, such the Farmland Information Center at http://www.farmlandinfo.org.

American Farmland Trust is the only national organization expressly committed to stopping the loss of productive farmland. We offer a variety of products and services to assist individuals, organizations and community and government agencies. In addition, our Farmland Information Center, developed in cooperation with the NRCS and the National Agricultural Library, provides materials, technical assistance, referrals and other information services on farmland protection.

Thurston County hired consulting firms to conduct studies of the feasibility and cost of implementing PACE and TDR programs. The consultants based their research on the experiences of other communities that have used these techniques.

Even established farmland protection programs can benefit from some ongoing investigation. When its Farmland Preservation Program failed to stop the decline of agriculture, King County went back to the drawing board and hired a consulting team to investigate other options for protecting farmland and ensuring the future of farming. The consultants surveyed and interviewed farmers and landowners, and held public meetings for a wide range of stakeholders. The Farm and Forest Report recommended more than 25 different strategies to protect farmland and revitalize the county's agricultural sector.

STEP FOUR: INTEGRATION

The next step after inventory and investigation is to set goals and develop a strategy to protect farmland and ensure the future of agriculture. The proposed program should be based on the nature and scope of the problem and targeted to protect the most important agricultural lands. It should respond to the concerns of stakeholders and reflect the lessons learned by other communities. While the proposed strategy may resemble other farmland protection programs on paper, it should be the result of a unique, locally driven process.

The planning department in Carroll County based its proposal for agricultural protection zoning on several studies that documented the threat that non-agricultural land uses presented to working farms. The original proposal was modified after discussions with farmers revealed strong concerns about the new regulations. In addition, the county agreed to promote growth in residential areas to take some of the pressure off farmland. The result has been enthusiastic farmer support for county farmland protection programs.

The Solano County Farmland and Open Space Foundation is another example of integration, compromise and creative use of local resources, although the program resulted from settlement of a lawsuit rather than a consensus-building process. In exchange for the approval of the annexation of 2,400 acres for residential development, the city of Fairfield agreed to create and fund a private, nonprofit organization to purchase conservation easements. The organization is funded by special taxes levied on land within the annexed property.

Marin County implemented agricultural protection zoning in the early 1970s over the objections of the farming community. To address farmers' concerns, private citizens investigated other farmland protection options. They proposed the creation of a private, nonprofit land trust that would purchase agricultural conservation easements. This program was particularly well-suited to the political climate in the county. Farmers who had lost land as a result of the federal government's eminent domain proceedings were very suspicious of any scheme to give government agencies more control over private land. Farmers who might not have participated in a public PACE program were more willing to sell easements to the private Marin Agricultural Land Trust.

STEP FIVE: IMPLEMENTATION

Implementation is the culmination and test of the whole process of creating a farmland protection program. The best task force or working group report is of little value if the proposals are not put into place. Implementation includes the approval, funding and administration of a program to protect farmland. Some programs are enacted by a state legislature or a county board; other programs are implemented by public vote.

The first part of implementation is building public support among key constituencies, including farmers and other residents and politicians. The more these people have been involved in the process of creating a program, the more likely they will be to support its implementation. Typically, building public support involves mailings, meetings and media campaigns. Any documents that have been created during the first four steps of the process, such as maps and reports, can be useful in the effort to promote the program.

The Agricultural Advisory Committee in Thurston County helped the regional planning council investigate the feasibility of a TDR program to protect farmland. When the study was complete, the council began to doubt that the public would support the program. But the farmers on the advisory committee, who understood TDR and believed it could work in the county, became the program's strongest advocates. They explained and promoted the proposal to their peers and other stakeholders and won support for its approval. Thurston County's experience is an excellent example of how involving the public early in the process of creating a farmland protection program can pay off in the end.

In Sonoma County, county supervisors appointed a board to study a proposal for an open space district that would purchase easements on farmland. The supervisors intentionally appointed to the board the people who would be most likely to oppose the plan. Business leaders and farmers worked together to refine the proposal, and supported the campaign to approve a 0.25-percent sales tax to fund the program. County residents voted in favor of the program and the tax.

Several of the case study counties have used their comprehensive plans as a blueprint to implement farmland protection strategies. The 1980 general plan for Solano County created new categories of farmland. These categories were used to amend the zoning ordinance. Sonoma County used its comprehensive plan to facilitate construction of housing for farm employees. The *Plan for the Preservation of Agricultural Land and Open Space* built a foundation for the approval of agricultural protection zoning and a TDR program in Montgomery County.

Implementation is an ongoing process that includes administration, assessment of success, program modification and reauthorization. The state of Maryland has greatly increased funding for farmland protection. Napa County has increased minimum lot sizes in its agricultural zones, and voters have approved several ballot initiatives that limit development. Walla Walla County enacted a right-to-farm ordinance to address conflicts between farmers and their neighbors. Montgomery County created a PACE program to improve the private market for development rights. The most successful farmland protection programs responded to changing conditions by improving and expanding over time.

NOW IS THE TIME FOR ACTION

All across the country, people are working with state and local governments to meet the challenges facing agriculture in developing communities. Local governments are protecting farmland by planning and zoning for agriculture and implementing PACE and TDR programs. State governments are setting the ground rules for planning, providing tax incentives for keeping land in agriculture, enacting right-to-farm and agricultural district laws, and appropriating funding for PACE. The most successful efforts generally result from cooperation between different types of people with different vested interests in land use issues. The tools in the farmland protection toolbox are being used to build an infrastructure to support the farms of the future.

We have learned that simply preserving farmland is not enough. For agriculture to thrive in the new millennium, we must contain sprawl and promote farming in increasingly diverse communities. Traditional tools, especially if they are used individually, may not be enough to keep agriculture profitable in developing areas. The most innovative farmland protection programs are helping producers add value to traditional commodities and market to urban consumers. Some communities have realized that agriculture can be an engine for economic development that benefits farmers and non-farmers alike.

Competition for land and other natural resources is a growing challenge for farmers in developing communities. Disagreements about the proper use of water and ecologically sensitive land are increasingly common. Fortunately, protecting farmland can benefit both agriculture and the environment. State and local governments need to educate citizens about the environmental benefits of agriculture and provide incentives for farmers and ranchers to adopt practices that conserve water, soil and wildlife habitat.

When all is told, farmland is a productive asset. Saving it is an investment for our children, our communities and our country. We must be strategic in our approach to protecting farmland, and understand its many values so American agriculture can continue to provide a source of renewable wealth that no nation can challenge. We must recognize the forces that lead to farmland conversion and address the challenges communities face to their resource bases. So far, we have achieved a lot acting primarily at the state and local levels, policy by policy, plan by plan, farm by farm. But as the competition for land and resources intensifies, we also need a more systematic national effort. This will take vision, planning, private initiative, policy development and dedicated community action.

We at American Farmland Trust hope this book will serve as a seed for new state and local farmland protection programs and for creative thinking about new approaches. Establishing those programs is up to you: farmers and ranchers, conservationists, public officials, planners, developers, and all the other people who care about local land use issues and the future of agriculture in their communities. We hope this book will help.

We will continue to do everything we can to provide information, assistance and services to people working to ensure a future for farmland in their communities. We hope we have helped convince you of the economic importance of American agriculture and the role farming can have in enhancing environmental quality. We hope we have helped you appreciate that farmland makes an important contribution to local fiscal stability and how much a working landscape can add to our quality of life. Finally, we hope this book has provided a deeper

understanding of farmland protection techniques and that the case studies have given you ideas and inspiration to apply in your own community.

We monitor federal, state and local activities on a regular basis. Let us know about your efforts so we can continue to serve as the nation's primary source of information on farmland protection. Visit the Farmland Information Center at http:\\www.farmlandinfo.org, or call (413) 586-4593 for technical assistance. Together we can save American's farmland and secure a future for agriculture in the 21st Century.

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