

AGRICULTURE IN URBANIZING COMMUNITIES

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1. FARMERS AND URBAN NEIGHBORS: TOWARDS A PEACEFUL COEXISTENCE

The urbanization of once-rural and resource-dependent communities is not a new pattern in the United States. But the geographical divisions between agriculture (and forestry) and urban development are more blurred than ever before, as residential and commercial growth penetrates more extensively the rural landscape in many parts of the nation. Many American farms today operate in the midst of urban or suburban populations, with both negative and positive consequences for both farmers and their urban neighbors. The public policy challenge, especially at the state and local levels, is to minimize the negative interactions and create the conditions for a long-term and mutually beneficial coexistence between farms and urban residents.

2. ISSUE #1–INCOMPATIBLE LAND USES

Agricultural areas are desirable locations for new houses, both because farmland is relatively inexpensive and it has visual and other open space amenities. Yet agriculture—especially in intensely-farmed regions such as California’s Central Valley and coastal valleys—is also an industrial activity, one that generates chemical drift, dust, odor and other sources of discomfort and even health risk for urban neighbors. The negative impacts also flow in the other direction, as adjacent or nearby residential development burdens working farms with pilferage, vandalism, trespassing, marauding dogs, and other intrusions—forcing changes in practices and making it difficult to continue farming in such edge situations.

To minimize edge conflicts, adjustments are required on both sides of the agriculture-urban edge-- in both farm practices and in the life styles and tolerance of urban neighbors. In California and some other states, agricultural practices in urbanized areas are already tightly constrained through the regulation of chemical applications, other public health regulations, and nuisance laws. Adjustments on the urban side of the line are less substantial, although right-to-farm ordinances convey a limited message to homeowners about the consequences of locating next to agricultural operations. The most promising policy answers lie in making the planning policies and land use practices of local governments and private developers more sensitive to farm activity. In specific terms, this means emphasizing compact and high density development in place of scattered and inefficient growth, farm-sensitive design of residential subdivisions, and using landscaping and other techniques to buffer urban development from farms.

3. ISSUE #2–ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITIES FOR LOCAL AGRICULTURE

The negative effects of farming in an urbanizing environment can be offset for some operators

by the economic advantages of close proximity to urban populations. With such proximity comes the potential for direct marketing of certain commodities and the possibilities of agri-tourism. Certainly there is added value for both farmers and urban neighbors in reducing the distance between producers and consumers. The opportunities, however, are limited and vary according to the population size of nearby urban markets and by the skills and interests of individual farmers. Local governments, nonprofit organizations, and grower associations can expand such opportunities for area farmers in several ways. They can facilitate direct marketing and agri-tourism by providing education, technical assistance, facilities, and public promotion.

4. ISSUE #3—URBANIZATION AND LOCAL ATTITUDES AND ECONOMIES

More broadly, the urbanization of communities once dependent on farming or other extractive industries changes local attitudes, life styles, and economic realities. Especially in rural places that experience an influx of newcomers who maintain jobs and social connections elsewhere in the region, attachments to local traditions quickly diminish. Community support for farming is one victim. Newcomers are less likely to value the role of agriculture in the local economy, preferring to see the new jobs, shopping opportunities, public amenities, and tax base growth that the economic expansion and diversification of urbanization can provide. Yet newcomers still want to retain the rural or small-town ambience usually associated with an agricultural landscape. The key public policy challenge thus for many such communities is to how to balance the two, to profit from urban growth without destroying the traditional environment and quality of life. Urbanizing communities can figure this out only through a meaningful deliberative process participated in by both newcomers and old-timers. Protecting local farming and farmland, in the land use and economic dimensions suggested above, is a major part of the policy answer.

5. THE FEDERAL ROLE—LIMITED BUT INFLUENTIAL

The major responsibility for preserving agriculture in the face of urbanization clearly resides in the affected communities. Here is where such problems are appropriately identified and tackled, using the interest and activity of local governments, other community institutions, and mobilized farmers and urban neighbors. State governments also have considerable impacts on these matters, primarily through their empowerment of local governments with land use and revenue powers (*see attachment*) and through state infrastructure projects.

Only indirectly is there a role for USDA and other federal programs in this arena. But they can be very influential in stimulating local activity in the following areas:

- *Expand fiscal support for state and local farmland protection efforts.* The Farmland Protection Program administered by the NRCS has helped fund conservation easement acquisitions on farmland since the early 1990s. A modest increase in the funding level (only \$35 million authorized in the 1996 farm bill) would leverage much larger amounts of state and local money. Another desirable change is to target a portion of the funds to agricultural-urban edge locations.
- *Expand the knowledge base—land use and farming practices at the edge.* USDA should support research and information dissemination on ways of protecting agriculture in urbanizing localities, particularly techniques for minimizing agricultural-urban conflicts. The objective is to produce “best practices” guides for the design of farm-sensitive urban

development and for farm operations in urban environments. A model for such work is the LESA (Land Evaluation and Site Assessment) system developed by NRCS a decade ago and now used by a number of local jurisdictions to assess quantitatively the merits of converting individual farm parcels to urban use or retaining them in agricultural use.

- *Expand the knowledge base—economic opportunities for agriculture in urban areas.* USDA also should support research and information dissemination on the potential and techniques of direct marketing and agri-tourism for urban-impacted farmers. Many written accounts of “success” stories in both areas already exist. But the search for useful information requires going beyond anecdotal or case study evidence to generate such products as (1) guidelines for evaluating the economic prospects of projects, and (2) advice on the entrepreneurial and other skills appropriate for farm operators interested in new ventures.
- *Review and improve existing USDA data programs.* We depend on USDA data programs to convey an accurate account of the condition of American agriculture. But the information generated by two of these programs may depict erroneously the impacts of urbanization on agriculture. One appears to exaggerate the rate of farmland conversion to urban uses, while the other seems to downplay the extent of urban-agricultural edge problems:

(1) Administered by the NRCS, the National Resource Inventory shows at five-year intervals changes in land use for the nation and for individual states, including urban conversions of farmland. If California trends are representative of the nation, NRI data significantly overestimate the actual extent of conversion, judging from an analysis of the numbers reported for this state for 1992-97. While the NRI estimated that about 139,000 California acres were converted annually from farm to urban uses during this period, data from the state government’s Farmland Mapping and Monitoring Program identified a much more modest total of about 27,000 acres annually converted during a similar period.¹ The difference is more than 5:1, a ratio that cannot be attributed to sampling error or small methodological differences. Since NRI numbers are widely disseminated and used, an evaluation of the accuracy of this data system is highly desirable.

(2) My criticism of the second USDA program is more a matter of interpretation than data accuracy. Using county-level data, the ERS periodically examines the geographical relationship of farms and urban populations². In noting that much of the nation’s farm output is produced in counties with metropolitan or rapidly growing populations, ERS reports imply that urbanization is not a major threat to agriculture. This is misleading, however, because county-level data typically cover territories that are too large to accurately portray actual edge conditions. (As an illustration, Fresno County, California—the nation’s leading agricultural county—has a metropolitan population of about 600,000, but because its territory is so large most of its prime agricultural acres are located some miles from the nearest urban edges.)

¹“Loss of farmland increasing,” *Davis (Ca.) Enterprise*, March 21,2000; Natural Resource Conservation Service, USDA, “California NRI”, online data source; California Department of Conservation, *Farmland Conversion Report*, 1994-96, 1992-94, 1990-92.

²Economic Research Service, USDA, *Urbanization of Rural Land in the United States*, 1994.