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## **Agricultural Sustainability and Smart Growth: Saving Urban-Influenced Farmland**

*This paper was written by Edward Thompson, Jr., Senior Vice President, American Farmland Trust\* in collaboration with the Funderson Network for Smart Growth and Livable Communities. It is the fifth in a series of translation papers sponsored by the Funderson Network to translate the impact of sprawl upon issues of importance to America's communities and to suggest opportunities for progress that would be created by smarter growth policies and practices. Additional issues addressed in the series of translation papers include social equity, workforce development, parks and open space, civic engagement, transportation, education, aging, public health, the environment, and community and economic development.*

### **Abstract**

The sustainability of American agriculture begins with the land. Farmland closest to our cities and towns is among the nation's most productive and important for a variety of economic, environmental and aesthetic reasons. The sustainability of the nation's agriculture is being progressively compromised as this land is lost to sprawling development. The rate of farmland loss is accelerating as public policies exaggerate the competitive edge that development has over agriculture. Federal farm policy, in particular, does little to help farmers in urban-influenced areas. States and local communities are leaders in adopting innovative approaches to farmland protection as an integral smart growth strategy. But their efforts suffer from too little investment and a lack of the political will to regulate sprawl. Successful farmland protection programs exist, however, that combine substantial financial incentives to landowners with effective land use regulation.

Funders can help sustain agriculture in urban-influenced areas by encouraging more of these "hybrid" programs. Changes in national agricultural policy are also needed that both recognize the important contribution of urban-influenced farms to American agriculture and retain these lands in agriculture as a critical bulwark against the spread of urban sprawl.



*\* American Farmland Trust is a private, nonprofit organization founded in 1980 to stop the loss of productive farmland and to promote farming practices that lead to a healthy environment. AFT has regional offices throughout the country. Please visit AFT's website at [www.farmland.org](http://www.farmland.org).*

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## Introduction

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There is a growing recognition that the protection of farmland around cities and towns – urban-influenced farmland<sup>1</sup> – contributes to smart growth and the livability of our communities. Farms and farmland are valued as scenic landscapes and a part our heritage. They demand fewer public services and, therefore, cost taxpayers less than sprawling subdivisions.<sup>2</sup> If protected as part of the "green infrastructure" around metropolitan areas, they can help guide suburban growth and promote urban revitalization. For all these reasons, more and more communities, with help from the private sector, states and the federal government, are taking action to protect urban-influenced farmland.

It is equally important to recognize the interwoven relationship between smart growth and the sustainability of American agriculture. Not only does agricultural protection further smart growth, integral to smart growth is the protection of urban-influenced farmland. Sustainability begins – although

it does not end – with the land that feeds us.

This paper does not attempt to describe the many important efforts being made by nonprofit organizations and funders to promote more environmentally benign farming methods, healthier foods and diets, local and regional food systems and the survival of family farms – all components of what is generally thought of as "sustainable agriculture." Necessary as all these are, their achievement is made much more difficult – on both a regional and national scale – by the growing threat that urban sprawl poses to some of America's most productive, least environmentally problematic land and to the families who are trying to make a living on farms that are fast being surrounded by subdivisions. As long as we continue to waste fertile farmland – when it's gone, it's gone forever – it is questionable whether any American agricultural system can truly be said to be sustainable.

## The Importance of Urban-Influenced Farmland

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A case can be made that the farmland closest to our cities and suburbs – the very land threatened by sprawl – is as important to American agriculture as any land in the nation. First, urban-influenced farmland contributes a significant amount of the U.S. food supply. Fifty-eight percent of the value of the food produced in this country comes from farms in counties within or adjacent to Metropolitan Statistical Areas, not from remote rural areas.<sup>3</sup> Even more important, this includes over three-quarters of our fruits, vegetables and dairy products. A major reason is the high productivity and versatility of urban-influenced farmland. Our agrarian ancestors settled on the best land. But as their villages become sprawling cities, we squander

this land at the risk of forcing agricultural production onto more fragile lands or overseas, diminishing the prospects of a sustainable U.S. agriculture.

Second, urban-influenced farms are an economic bulwark against sprawl. This goes beyond the contribution that agricultural production makes to the local economy and the modest demand of farms for costly public services in comparison with the tax revenue they generate. Viable economic use of the open space around cities is necessary to justify effective land use regulation in a legal system that has become increasingly intolerant of "takings." Because we cannot buy land around cities fast enough to

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influence development patterns over wide areas, sustaining agricultural use of that land is perhaps the best strategy that gives smart growth a fighting chance. Thus, supporting family farms and regional food systems becomes doubly important in urban-influenced areas.

Third, more people live near urban-influenced farms. This is stating the obvious, but there are several important implications that are easily overlooked. One is that the environmental impact of farming this land arguably affects more Americans than that of any other agricultural land. Reducing farm runoff in the Corn Belt and restoring grasslands on the Great Plains are important environmental goals, particularly to those who live and farm there. But because more people are directly affected, the public benefits of promoting sustainable farming practices that result in clean water and abundant wildlife habitat are perhaps greater on urban-influenced farms than anywhere else in the country. Agricultural practices still need improvement, but even now farm fields are almost always better for the environment than acres and acres of pavement.<sup>4</sup>

Once the land is paved, however, there is little opportunity to improve environmental quality. That is why New York City, for example, is helping upstate farmers protect the watershed from which the city draws its drinking water.<sup>5</sup> But the deterioration of environmental quality can actually begin much earlier due to what has been called the "impermanence syndrome." Farmers who are simply awaiting the developer's buy-out offer simply do not invest much in the upkeep or improvement of their operations, with results ranging from unsightly junk piles to increased pollution.

Another implication of the fact that most people live near urban-influenced farms is that the rural landscape is highly accessible as an amenity that contributes to the quality-of-life.

People tend not to travel very far to take Sunday drives in the country, to visit pumpkin patches and Christmas tree farms, and to go hunting and fishing. And more and more of them are patronizing local and regional farmers' markets on a routine basis. The urban-suburban majority is glad the amber waves of grain and purple mountains majesty are still out there, but the countryside in their own backyard is where they spend more time. Thus, Americans care deeply about the loss of local farms to development. A recent national public opinion poll, for instance, found that setting aside open space around cities for farming was among the most popular smart growth strategies.<sup>6</sup>

Finally, to many Americans urban-influenced farms appear to be symbolic of the entire agriculture industry. Modern production agriculture has more in common with large-scale manufacturing than with the Jeffersonian yeoman or Currier & Ives. Yet the public seems to be unaware of this, or at least to suspend disbelief, in expressing continued support for agriculture. Why? Conceivably, it is because the landscape around most cities is still dotted with the small family farms many people *want* to associate with American agriculture. It may be easy to dismiss this theory as sentimental. But you don't often hear agribusiness appealing for public financial support – which hit a record \$30 billion in federal tax dollars last year – on the basis of helping to save the 5,000-cow dairy or the guy farming 10,000 acres with a six-figure John Deere.

In substance and as a symbol, urban-influenced farms and farmland are far more important to the sustainability of American agriculture than is commonly acknowledged. Without them, America would be a vastly different place. And if they disappear, American agriculture will have to undergo a radical adjustment, putting true sustainability farther out of reach. Indeed, trouble-

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some changes in American agriculture are already apparent, written on the landscape by the sprawl that is con-

suming urban-influenced farms faster than ever before.

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## Context and Causes: What Is Happening to Urban-Influenced Farmland and Why

According to the latest U.S. Department of Agriculture statistics, over 2 million acres of rural land are being lost to development each year – double the rate of a decade ago.<sup>7</sup> About 60 percent of this was agricultural land and most of the balance was in forests. Moreover, *per capita* consumption of rural land appears to have increased by 50 percent in recent years,<sup>8</sup> confirming that we are not just developing more farmland, we are wasting it on inefficient, low-density sprawl. This inefficient development of farmland has an impact that goes beyond the land actually consumed. For every acre paved over, another two or three acres can become riskier and more expensive to farm because of land use conflicts with new neighbors.<sup>9</sup> Discontinuous sprawl makes the problem even worse by increasing the amount of "edge" between agriculture and residential areas.

The causes of the sprawl that consumes and fragments farmland are too complex to detail here. But several factors are particularly relevant because they help explain what must be done to protect our best farmland. Foremost among these factors is that agriculture generally cannot compete with other enterprises in the marketplace for land. Corn chips simply aren't worth as much as silicon chips. But the competitive advantage of the development industry has been greatly exaggerated by government expenditures and policies that subsidize the construction of homes, shopping malls and factories. Highways, for example, inflate the price of the land along the right-of-way far beyond the ability of farmers to afford it, creating a bonanza for speculators while literally paving

the way for sprawl.<sup>10</sup> Our national policy of allowing homeowners to deduct mortgage interest from federal taxes – regardless of the size, value or location of houses – is a massive, direct subsidy to inefficient consumption of farmland that has become totally divorced from the professed policy objective of promoting affordable housing.<sup>11</sup> In contrast to these powerful influences, local land use policies are woefully inadequate to control sprawl and, in most cases, simply reinforce the tendency of development to spread out over farmland. The "A-1" designation of most agricultural zoning ordinances in reality stands for "anything goes." Unless the playing field is leveled by changing these and other public policies, farmland will continue to be developed wastefully and indiscriminately. And the sustainability of American agriculture will continue to be compromised.

On the other hand, our nation's agriculture policies do little to help family farmers survive in urban-influenced areas (or elsewhere for that matter). In recent years, about half of the income "earned" by farmers has come from the federal government in the form of subsidized loans, crop insurance discounts, disaster relief or outright payments under a program called "Freedom to Farm."<sup>12</sup> But most of these government payments go to very large commodity producers, relatively few of whom farm in urban-influenced areas.<sup>13</sup> And while annual federal agriculture expenditures have increased five-fold since 1996 – from \$6 to \$30 billion – the share devoted to soil, water, wildlife and land conservation has declined from one-third to one-tenth. The sum Congress has appro-



priated to help states and localities protect urban-influenced farmland – \$40 million over 5 years – doesn't even amount to a rounding error in the federal agriculture budget. In short, the federal government does very little

to serve the economic and conservation needs of farmers in urban-influenced areas, despite their significant contribution to agricultural production and the quality of life of metropolitan communities.

## What Is Being Done to Protect Farmland for Agriculture?

It is against this backdrop – low economic returns to farming and a policy framework that does little to help urban-influenced farmers, but much to hasten the transformation of farmland into sprawling subdivisions – that programs designed expressly to protect farmland are offering hope that agriculture can be sustained in urban-influenced areas. For the most part, these programs have originated with local communities, states and private conservation organizations like American Farmland Trust.

### Best Practices for Farmland Protection

In the mid-1950s, Maryland became the first state to reduce property taxes on farmland to forestall its development. Every state has followed suit, reducing property taxes on farmland to a level commensurate with farm income. But many states have gone well beyond this necessary but insufficient step toward helping agriculture withstand sprawl. For example, California's landmark Williamson Act, passed in 1972, grants additional property tax relief to farmland owners who are willing to make a legal commitment not to develop their property for a decade or more. Farmers who make such a commitment by enrolling in "agricultural security areas" in Pennsylvania and elsewhere are protected against nuisance lawsuits, special tax assessments and condemnation of their land for public purposes. These protections are important because they give farmers leverage over the construction of highways and other infrastructure that promote sprawl.

Tax relief and agricultural security areas help stabilize urban-influenced agricultural use, but they neither prevent land speculation nor put the land off limits to development. Both these goals *are* achieved by conservation easements that permanently limit land development. These legal agreements are voluntarily entered into between landowners and either a government agency or private conservation organization. Farmers are compensated for giving up property rights. Payments average \$1,500 per acre but can range upwards of \$6,000. Farmers typically invest the money in more land and farm improvements, use it to build a retirement nest egg or to assure the successful intergenerational transfer of farms.<sup>14</sup> Thus, easements not only protect farmland, they also provide an infusion of capital to strengthen the agricultural economy.

At last count, 19 states are buying conservation easements on farmland specifically to keep it in agricultural use. Quite a few local governments have followed suit, supplementing state funding with their own. Collectively, these programs—known as purchase of agricultural conservation easements ("PACE") or purchase of development rights ("PDR")—have permanently protected almost 900,000 acres of farmland by investing more than a billion dollars during the past two decades.<sup>15</sup>

### Keeping Pace with Sprawl: Working Farmland or Open Space?

Last year, PACE programs set records for both the amount of farmland protected (100,000 acres) and total funding (\$160 million). But this isn't near-

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ly enough to keep pace with the loss of farmland to sprawl. And it is a fraction of what is being spent by states and localities to protect land for open space, environmental and recreational purposes. Of the estimated \$10 billion authorized by states for these purposes in the past two election cycles,<sup>16</sup> only about ten percent was dedicated to the protection of farmland for agriculture. Governor Christine Whitman's ambitious New Jersey initiative accounted for most of this. At the other extreme, the most recent land conservation bond act passed by California – the state that leads the nation in both urban-influenced agricultural production and farmland loss – earmarked only \$25 million or one percent of its latest \$2.5 billion conservation bond to protecting working agricultural land. This imbalance must be addressed if we want a truly sustainable agriculture to remain a deterrent to sprawl around our cities.

A promising approach to achieving greater balance between farmland and other open space conservation may be found in Maryland's new Rural Legacy program. Championed by Governor Parris Glendening, it provides funding for the acquisition of easements that achieve *multiple* conservation purposes, protecting working farmland as well as environmental, open space and cultural resources. One of the motivations for this program was a project of the Chesapeake Bay Foundation and American Farmland Trust, called Future Harvest. Funded by the W. K. Kellogg, Abell and France-Merrick Foundations, this project brought together agricultural, environmental and government leaders to identify "strategic" farmland – the land most important for environmental as well as agricultural purposes – as a target for land conservation. The GIS-generated maps produced by this project are being used, not only to help guide Rural Legacy acquisitions, but also to divert public infrastructure investments away from rural areas and into already developed communi-

ties under the governor's celebrated Smart Growth initiative.

### **Private Sector Farmland Protection**

Private land trusts are also protecting farmland. The Land Trust Alliance reports that private organizations have protected an estimated 1.4 million acres of agricultural land with conservation easements, though it is not known how much of this is actively farmed or to what extent the purpose was to protect agriculture. Usually, land trusts do not pay cash for easements but instead convince landowners to donate their development rights in exchange for federal income and estate tax benefits that can enable landowners to recoup 50 percent or more of the value of the property rights they relinquish. In contrast to easement purchases, however, donations appeal more to those who have off-farm assets and do not depend on agriculture for a living, than to full-time farmers who have few assets other than their land and cannot afford to give away what amounts to their retirement savings.

Thus, those land trusts that have been most effective at protecting land for commercial agriculture have tapped into sources of public PACE funding, in effect, becoming acquisition agents for government. The value they add is their ability to act more quickly than public agencies, and their creativity in using easements along with other types of real estate transactions – for example, purchase-and-leaseback, annuities and even limited development – to fashion solutions for individual farmers. Leaders in the field, like the Marin Agricultural Land Trust in California and Lancaster Farmland Trust in Pennsylvania, differ from most land trusts in that they were established, and are run, mostly by full-time farmers. This has helped them win the trust of other farmers who are often wary of "outsiders," particularly those with an environmental agenda. Indeed, the latest trend is for agricultural organizations to form

their own land trusts. For example, with support from the David and Lucile Packard Foundation and the Great Outdoors Colorado Trust Fund, the Colorado Cattlemen's Association Agricultural Land Trust has quickly become a private sector leader in protecting ranchland.

### **Community Planning and Growth Management**

Conservation easements, agricultural security areas, tax relief and similar methods of protecting farmland are all voluntary and offer financial incentives to farmers in exchange for restrictions on land development. This explains why they are more popular in the farm community than the other basic approach to farmland protection – mandatory land use regulation – which many landowners consider an uncompensated "taking" of their private property rights.

But incentive programs have drawbacks, too: they are costly and slow to protect land. In their initial stages, they can do little more than produce a "checkerboard" pattern of protected and unprotected farmland. Thus, farmers still face the risk of land use conflicts with neighbors and uncertainty over whether enough farms will remain in an area to support businesses like farm equipment dealers that, in turn, support the farms. Except in those rural areas where there is minimal development pressure, it is unrealistic to think that agriculture can be saved simply by purchasing development rights or using other incentives. When sprawl begins to threaten, the key issue becomes how to quickly stabilize agricultural land use over a wide area.

One approach being taken by more local communities – and states – is to avoid planning and paying for roads, water and sewer systems in areas that they want to remain agricultural. This idea is central to Maryland Governor Parris Glendening's Smart Growth initiative. Another helpful approach is to facilitate development

in areas where a community *does* want growth to occur, for example, by redeveloping brownfields and adopting "smart codes" that speed up housing and commercial construction and make it less costly.

But communities are finding that even these additional incentives are not enough; that they must also resort to land use regulation to limit development of farmland. Some have opted for agricultural protection zoning that permits non-farm development only at a very low density so it will not conflict with commercial agricultural operations. The ability of local governments to adopt this kind of regulation depends on state enabling authority, which varies widely. Oregon, California and Maryland, for example, have been very supportive of local land use regulation, while Virginia and Texas severely limit local land use powers due to a much stronger tradition of private property rights. Attitudes change, however, and as sprawl causes more and more problems for cities and suburbs as well as rural areas, political and judicial support for effective local land use regulation seems to be on the rise. Though most mainstream agricultural institutions continue to resist regulation of any kind, many farmers appear to support regulation that protects their interests. For example, a recent American Farmland Trust survey showed that 58 percent of the nation's agricultural landowners would support restrictive zoning if it protects their "right to farm" against conflicts with encroaching development.<sup>17</sup>

### **"Hybrid" Approaches to Farmland Protection**

A handful of localities have overcome landowner resistance to effective agricultural protection zoning by linking it with the purchase of agricultural conservation easements as a way to compensate farmers and invest in the local farm economy. These "hybrid" programs<sup>18</sup> combine incentives and regulations in such a way that the strengths of each counteract the weak-

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nesses of the other. Zoning regulations are quick and comprehensive, but they are temporary and, to many landowners, confiscatory. However, effective regulations buy time for the community to raise money for easement purchases which, while slow and piecemeal, are also fairer to landowners and result in permanent protection of the land.

The local communities that have taken this deliberate, balanced approach have been among the nation's most successful at protecting farmland and

supporting a healthy agriculture in the face of sprawl. (See chart) Not coincidentally, these communities also tend to be pioneers in what is now being called smart growth. Their objective, in most cases, was not just to protect a green, open landscape and the opportunity to farm, but also to help facilitate efficient, sustainable urban and suburban development. Both their vision and success confirm the importance of farmland protection as an integral goal of, and strategy for achieving, smart growth.

### Successful "Hybrid" Farmland Protection Programs<sup>19</sup>

| County         | Permitted Housing Density | Acres in Agricultural Zone | Acres Under Easement | Total Investments in Easements |
|----------------|---------------------------|----------------------------|----------------------|--------------------------------|
| Montgomery, MD | 1:25 acres                | 90,000                     | 50,000               | \$80 million@                  |
| Carroll, MD    | 1:20 acres                | 191,000                    | 39,400               | \$30 million                   |
| Lancaster, PA  | 1:25 acres                | 270,000                    | 32,000               | \$43 million                   |
| Marin, CA      | 1:60 acres                | 118,600                    | 20,700               | \$17 million                   |
| Sonoma, CA     | 1:320 acres*              | 80,770#                    | 19,800               | \$25 million                   |
| Baltimore, MD  | 1:50 acres                | 139,000                    | 13,600               | \$36 million                   |

### Strategic Opportunities for Funders:

#### What More Could Be Done to Sustain Urban-Influenced Agriculture?

Obviously, protecting farmland and sustaining agriculture around sprawling cities is not a simple task. There are many public and private institutions engaged in its pursuit, and even more ways in which funders could help them be more effective. So, it is risky to suggest only a few strategies as worthy of consideration. Nevertheless, it may be helpful to think of the agenda for the future in terms of four broad challenges. These frame the opportunity of funders to help farmers, communities, nonprofits and policymakers make a real difference by making strategic investments.

#### Empower Communities

Farmland protection is a community affair. Unless people at the local level exercise their power to determine the fate of the land, everything else is just window dressing. The leading "hybrid" communities have shown how a balanced approach, using incentives and regulations, can produce results that are both effective and fair. But more communities need the motivation and skill to adapt this approach to their own circumstances. They need to understand the importance of farmland, both as an irreplaceable resource and as an ingredient of smart growth, so public awareness



campaigns are critical. They need the practical tools to influence whether and how the land is developed. Foundations need to support better understanding and awareness of effective planning and fair land use regulatory approaches. Another important role is to advance strategies that raise public funds for PACE programs that assure nobody bears an unfair burden.

Above all, communities need the political will to take the steps that are truly necessary, not only to prevent sprawl, but also to protect agricultural land for the long run. This kind of political will comes from a broad local consensus among those with most at stake. Fresno County, California, the nation's leading farm county, is a good example. There, with the support of The James Irvine Foundation, influential local groups like the Farm Bureau, Chamber of Commerce and Building Industry Association came together and agreed upon a set of guidelines for future community growth that included, among other things, urban growth boundaries and investment in the purchase of agricultural conservation easements.<sup>20</sup> This blueprint is now being implemented by the county and its municipalities and offers a model for foundations interested in effective consensus-building on growth management issues.

### Level the Playing Field

Communities do not exist in a vacuum. While local initiative to protect farmland is necessary, it is not enough. As this paper has discussed, state and federal government policies and spending priorities have a significant influence on land use, often favoring sprawl at the expense of urban-influenced agriculture and efficient development. They define the playing field. Not that local government is blameless, but, too often, communities – and individual farmers – do not have a real choice between developing and protecting farmland or, in the broader context, between smart

and dumb growth. The playing field is simply too uneven.

Thus, state and federal policies must change to give the protection of our best farmland, and efficient urban development, a fighting chance against sprawl. To achieve this goal, there must be better documentation of the impact of policies on land markets and development patterns. For example, much attention has been paid to the "taking" of private property by government rules designed to manage growth and protect the environment; but policy research has largely neglected "givings" – government actions that reward and indeed, encourage landowners to contribute to sprawl.<sup>21</sup> Funders should underwrite this kind of research with a long-term view toward eliminating the subsidies to low-density, scattered development that are deeply engrained in the American economy and politics.

At the same time, public investment in urban-influenced agriculture and in the protection of our best farmland needs to be dramatically increased. A priority should be reorienting federal farm policy so that it pays much more attention, and devotes a larger percentage of agricultural spending, to farms in urban-influenced areas. These farms make a far greater contribution to U.S. agriculture – and to the quality of our communities – than they get credit for. They face the same economic and environmental challenges as agriculture everywhere else. But farms near cities are also subject to the unique risks associated with encroaching development. These include everything from higher production costs and taxes to conflicts with suburban land uses. Arguably, they also face greater public demand to minimize environmental impacts than farms more remote from population centers. And, right now, the only "safety net" many urban-influenced farms have is to sell out to developers – contributing to the next round of sprawl. Funders can play an impor-

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tant role in ameliorating this situation by helping nonprofits better document the needs of urban-influenced agriculture, and educating policymakers about its importance to the sustainability of agriculture as a whole.<sup>22</sup>

States, too, need to increase their investment in the protection of farmland and the economic health of urban-influenced agriculture. Today, protecting land for agriculture remains a stepchild of open space preservation, almost always receiving less money than the acquisition of parks and wild lands. Certainly, the recent crop of state bond referenda illustrates this. Perhaps this is because the movement to preserve natural areas started much earlier and is better organized, or because the agriculture community has yet to become fully engaged in land conservation. Maybe it is because many take food for granted or believe that farmers alone can maintain land for food production. Regardless, the average state investment in purchase of agricultural conservation easement (PACE) programs is less than one dollar *per capita* per year – barely enough to buy a small bag of fries at the fast food restaurant that just went up on the farm across the road.

### **Promote Shared Responsibility**

The importance of PACE programs to farmland protection and smart growth cannot be overstated. Purchasing agricultural conservation easements is not simply a budget line item that competes with other open space priorities. It represents a commitment by society to share with farmers the cost of – and responsibility for – the protection and good stewardship of farmland, not only for food production, but also as scenic open space, unpaved watersheds and wildlife habitat. Without such a commitment, it is understandable that farmers resist the kind of effective land use regulation that is necessary in many cases to forestall scattershot development of the countryside and to protect the environment.

With such a commitment to shared responsibility, the property rights movement would be much less justified in pressing the claim that regulation creates hardship for farmers and ranchers.

The doctrine of shared responsibility is a new way of looking at the property rights issue that has polarized our society and stalemated so many needed environmental and land use reforms, not least smart growth. In that debate, both sides, those who favor regulation and those who demand compensation, are, in effect, saying, "We – on one hand society, on the other landowners – cannot afford to protect land from sprawl and clean up the environment." And, by inference, "It is *your* responsibility to pay for it." No wonder there is a stalemate. Instead, we must ask, "How can we *share* the responsibility and the cost of the result we both desire?"

The leading "hybrid" farmland protection programs have all applied the doctrine of shared responsibility, combining incentives and regulation with synergistic results. So, in effect, have federal agricultural programs aimed at saving topsoil and protecting wetlands. The "sodbuster" provisions of the Food Security Act of 1985, for example, prohibit recipients of federal farm income support from plowing up highly-erodible land, while the Conservation Reserve Program provides incentives to farmers who agree to set aside such land from cultivation. Similarly, the "swampbuster" prohibition of the same law applies to wetlands drainage, while the Wetlands Reserve Program compensates landowners for restoring and maintaining wetlands that once were cropped. Significantly, these programs were all the result of concerted research, education and policy advocacy by nonprofit organizations supported by major foundations like Joyce, McKnight, Kellogg and the Rockefeller Brothers Fund.

These programs demonstrate that we need not choose between incentives

and regulation; that we must deliberately and carefully employ both to arrive at fair, effective solutions to land use challenges like urban sprawl and environmental improvement. Promoting more programs and policies that reflect this "hybrid" approach is one of the most important things funders can do to help achieve, not just the sustainability of urban-influenced agriculture, but smart growth and environmental protection more broadly.

### Bring Us Together

As a practical matter, the doctrine of shared responsibility will not achieve widespread acceptance, let alone on-the-ground results, unless the people and institutions on opposing sides of land use and environmental issues are brought together. There are deep cultural, economic and political divisions between rural and urban interests that must be bridged. The tendency of both "camps" to keep their own counsel, to mistrust and even to demonize the other must be overcome. As former EPA Administrator William K. Reilly has put it, "The moment cries out for a new reconcilia-

tion."<sup>23</sup> This will be quite a challenge, but it is one that must be successfully met if we are to sustain agriculture – for the benefit of all – in the urban-influenced areas of America.

There are promising signs that the process of reconciliation is beginning. With the encouragement of funders, new institutions and collaborations are emerging that unite respect for private property and its profitable economic use with an honest determination to conserve land resources, protect the environment and end sprawl. The agricultural land trusts certainly represent this trend. So do joint projects between farm and environmental groups to reduce agricultural runoff, like Future Harvest in the Chesapeake Bay region, the New York City watershed coalition, and the consortium known as AFW (Agriculture, Fish & Wildlife) in the Pacific Northwest.<sup>24</sup> The National Cattlemen's Beef Association, Trust for Public Land and Western Governors Association are partnering to conserve rangelands. American Farmland Trust has combined with a number of state Farm Bureaus to promote PACE programs.

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## Conclusion

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Sustainable agriculture is most often thought of as farming that is both economically and environmentally healthy, benefiting both food producers and consumers. But the significant part of U.S. agriculture located within commuting – and now telecommuting – distance of our expanding population centers is becoming debilitated in both respects. Within a generation, some of the nation's most productive, spectacular, historic farming areas could be fragmented and destroyed by urban growth: The Hudson, Connecticut and Champlain Valleys in New England. The Chesapeake Bay watershed in the Mid-Atlantic. The Carolina Low Country. The Bluegrass in Kentucky. The fruit belt on the shores of the Great Lakes. Mountain valleys

throughout the Rockies. The Willamette Valley and Puget Sound littoral in the Northwest. And California's incomparable Salinas and Central Valleys. The entire country would be the loser.

If there is a single most important cause of this tragedy in the making, perhaps it is that urban-influenced agriculture seems to exist in a "no man's land." As a rural land use in an urban context, it is of only secondary interest both to those who concern themselves with the problems of cities and to those preoccupied with rural issues. More than anything else, this must change. Funders of both sustainable agriculture and smart growth can lead the way.



## Endnotes

1. For purposes of this paper, "urban-influenced" farmland is defined as that which is close enough to metropolitan areas, resorts or other attractions to be affected by development pressure, but not so close or fragmented that farming the land is no longer economically viable. The latter may still be valuable as open space, but it cannot really be considered "farmland."
2. See, e.g., *The Cost of Community Services in Frederick County, Maryland* (American Farmland Trust, 1997). This is one of dozens of local AFT studies finding that farmland typically uses only about 30 cents worth of services for every dollar it contributes in local taxes, while housing developments cost \$1.25 for every tax dollars their residents pay.
3. *Farming on the Edge: A New Look at the Importance and Vulnerability of Agriculture Near Cities* (American Farmland Trust, 1994)
4. For example, parking lots generate almost 16 times more nonpoint source runoff than a meadow of comparable land area. *The State of the Cities 2000* (U.S. Department of Housing & Urban Development), at 66.
5. Policy Group Recommendations (Ad Hoc Task Force on Agriculture and New York City Watershed Regulations, 1991).
6. Beldon, Russonello & Stewart, as reported in *Americans Want Smarter Growth: Here's How to Get There* (Smart Growth America, 2000), at 2.
7. *1997 National Resources Inventory* (U.S. Department of Agriculture, Natural Resources Conservation Service, 2000) [www.nhq.nrcs.usda.gov/CCS/NRIr1se.html](http://www.nhq.nrcs.usda.gov/CCS/NRIr1se.html).
8. An unscientific, but nonetheless probative calculation of the density of new development can be made by dividing population increase by acres developed during a given period. Between 1982 and 1992, approximately 13.8 million acres of rural land were developed, while the U.S. population grew by 23.4 million. The average density of new development, obtained by dividing these figures, was 1.70 people per acre. Between 1992 and 1997, the comparable figures were 11.2 million acres and 12.8 million people, resulting in an average density of only 1.14 people per acre. Land use data from USDA National Resource Inventory; population data from U.S. Bureau of Census.
9. *Alternatives for Future Urban Growth in California's Central Valley: The Bottom Line for Agriculture and Taxpayers* (American Farmland Trust, 1995), at 8.
10. For example, construction of Georgia Highway 316 between Atlanta and Athens increased the value of the farmland within a mile of the right-of-way by 350 percent. J. Bergstrom, et al., *An Uneven Playing Field: How Public Policies Favor Suburban Sprawl over Downtown Development in Metropolitan Atlanta* (American Farmland Trust, 1999) at 11.
11. R. Kling and E. Sparling, *The Last Roundup? How Public Policies Facilitate Rural Sprawl and the Decline of Ranching in Colorado's Mountain Valleys* (American Farmland Trust, 1999), at 9.
12. In 2000, federal farm support payments accounted for \$22.1 million (48.6%) of the \$45.4 million net farm income. U.S. Department of Agriculture, Economic Research Service, [www.usda.gov/briefing/FarmIncome/fore.htm](http://www.usda.gov/briefing/FarmIncome/fore.htm).
13. In 1997, 43% of farm support payments went to the largest 6% of U.S. farms. These 114,000 farms produced about three-quarters of the gross value of all agricultural products. 1997 Census of Agriculture. (U.S. Department of Agriculture)
14. *Investing in the Future of Agriculture: The Massachusetts Farmland Protection Program and the Permanence Syndrome* (American Farmland Trust, 1997)
15. For statistics on individual states and localities, see Farmland Information Center, [www.farmlandinfo.org/fic/tas/index.htm#fs](http://www.farmlandinfo.org/fic/tas/index.htm#fs). Throughout its evolution, foundations have played an important role in PACE. For example, the Pew Charitable Trust supported early efforts by the state farm bureau to educate farmers in Pennsylvania about conservation easements, thus providing an impetus for a PACE program that has become one of the nation's leaders. In Ohio, the George Gund Foundation played a similar role, as did the Irvine, Hewlett and Packard Foundations in California. Foundations have also supported efforts to improve existing PACE programs. The Sudbury, Cricket and Dunn Foundations in Massachusetts and the Jane B. Cook Charitable Trust and Vermont Community Foundation in Vermont all supported American Farmland Trust surveys to determine farmer opinions about those states' PACE programs.
16. See, e.g., *Voters Invest in Parks and Open Space: 1998 Referenda Results* (Land Trust Alliance, 1999)
17. E. Thompson, Jr., *Sharing the Responsibility: What Agricultural Landowners Think about Property Rights, Government and the Environment* (American Farmland Trust, 1998), at 9.
18. E. Thompson, Jr., "Hybrid" Farmland Protection Programs: A New Paradigm for Growth Management?, 23 *William & Mary Environmental Law & Policy Review* 831 (1999).
19. All figures through 1999. \*Varies with type of agriculture. # Cropland only. Additional rangeland also included in agricultural zone. @ Includes \$60 million in private investment by developers under "transferable development rights" program. See Thompson, n. 18 *infra*.
20. See *A Landscape of Choice: Strategies for Improving Patterns of Community Growth*, Fresno Growth Alternatives Alliance (1998).
21. But see E. Thompson, Jr., "The Government Giveth," 11 *Environmental Forum* 22 (Environmental Law Institute, 1994).
22. The Joyce Foundation, for example, has recently funded two opinion surveys by American Farmland Trust. One will ask agricultural producers in urban-influenced areas about the extent to which current federal farm policies are serving their needs. The other will investigate what the general public believes should be farm policy priorities.
23. "Across the Barricades," in H. Diamond and P. Noonan, *Land Use in America* (Island Press, 1996), at 190.
24. An in-depth analysis of successful and unsuccessful agriculture-environmental collaborations can be found in *Engaging Agriculture: A Review of Processes of Engaging Agriculture to Protect the Environment by Protecting Farmland* (American Farmland Trust, 2000), a study funded by the Bullitt Foundation.

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## *Funders' Network for Smart Growth and Livable Communities*

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