

FARMLAND PRESERVATION IN NORTH AMERICA

One of the most critical North American resources is arable land, and one of the biggest challenges in agriculture today is slowing the encroachment of urban land uses into the heart of farm country. The notion that the US is a nation of family farmers has long since evaporated. While the overall trend in American agriculture is toward fewer family farms and larger corporate farms, there is a growing movement supporting farmland preservation. To take a look at some examples of issues surrounding farmland preservation in the face of increasing conversion of rural land and urban land uses, you can visit the American Farmland Trust web site, www.farmland.org. Click on some of the header links for specific articles.

An AFT report states that the US is losing two acres of mostly prime farmland every minute to development, the fastest such decline in the country's history. That loss has been on the edge of outer suburbs, where some of the country's best fruit farms are being replaced by houses on large lots, linked by new roads, highways and malls. Sprawl, not development itself, is the problem, the report said.

"We are consuming more land per person than at any time, in the most wasteful way," said Ralph Grossi, president of AFT in 2002. (NY Times, Oct. 4, 2002) The US Legislators have recognized the issue and have approved the 2014 Farm Bill to transform U.S. Farm Policy for the 21st Century, <http://www.usda.gov/wps/portal/usda/usdahome?navid=farmbill>

At the AFT site, under the "Issues and Programs" heading, you will find articles on "farming on the edge," the scenario of cities sprawling outward and taking over farmland, placing the remaining farms on the "edge" of the city. In some instances, developers purchase open land and build a new subdivision on it, with the subdivision now being sited in the midst of other farms. This creates the problem of the new subdivision inhabitants complaining of farming activities, and lobbying for their cessation.

About one-half of our 50 states have some sort of farmland preservation program in place, including Colorado. Such a program may include state funds being used to purchase the farmland from the farmer, with the stipulation that the land may never be used for the building of non-agricultural buildings. The farmer may stay on the land and continue farming it, or may sell it to a new owner, who also must continue farming it.

Questions:

1. Given the pressures being placed on farmers and farm land, and the sky rocketing prices for fertilizers, pesticides, and water for irrigation, is it more feasible to outsource the growing of our food to other nations? Give the pros and cons in your posting.
2. Now think about the difference between "family farming" and "corporate farming" – especially as it applies to land use practices. Explore whether family farming may produce less environmental degradation than corporate farming. You might want to research some specific types of corporate farming, such as factory farming, especially hog farming, and sugar cane farming. Click on the links below for some information.

<http://www.yesmagazine.org/article.asp?ID=707>

<http://www.worldwatch.org/food-agriculture>

3. After reading through the above sites, and the Zero Population Growth article pasted below these questions, what do you think is the future of agricultural land in the US and around the world? Find something in the readings for this discussion – not mentioned in the questions – that you found to be surprising and summarize your findings.

This article on population explores the exponential growth of the human race through history.
World population: the growing numbers

- We entered the 20th century with a population of less than 2 billion people. We started 21st century with more than 6 billion.
- We are now adding one billion people every 14 years. At this rate of growth, world population will double in just over 50 years.

Human impacts can damage the environment.

Increasing population growth puts enormous pressure on the environment. Every day, we use more resources, damage more of the earth, and generate more waste. This makes it increasingly difficult to meet people's needs and improve our quality of life.

- Six million acres of prime farmland – an area the size of Vermont – were lost in the U.S. alone between 1982 and 1992. Four of those six million acres were lost to urban and suburban expansion.

The other 2 million acres were lost through erosion caused by deforestation, unsustainable farming practices, and animal over-grazing.

- Fresh water is essential to health, economic development, and life itself. With increasing numbers of people, the amount of fresh water available to each person decreases. Only 0.3% of the water on the planet is available for human use. Due to mismanagement, over 40% of the groundwater in the U.S. is contaminated by industrial, agricultural, and household pollution, making it extremely difficult and costly to purify.
- As human population increases, the diversity and number of plants and animals decreases. We lose one or more entire species of animal or plant life every 20 minutes – some 27,000 species a year. This is a rate and scale of extinction that has not occurred in 65 million years.
- The global emission of carbon dioxide has quadrupled since 1950, largely from deforestation and the burning of fossil fuels. Researchers say this “greenhouse gas” causes global warming and disruption in weather patterns. Five storms over the span of five years have cost the insurance industry in the United States \$25.7 billion.
- 1.8 billion people live in 40 countries with critically low levels of forest cover. By 2025, this number could nearly triple to 4.6 billion. Women often bear the burden of forest scarcity, walking farther for wood, carrying loads long distances, or suffering a variety of ills associated with cooking where wood is scarce.

Reducing consumption is critical.

Unsustainable patterns of consumption are magnifying the impact of humans on the environment.

- One U.S. citizen consumes about 30 times as much as a citizen of India. If everyone on Earth lived like the average North American, it would require four more earths to provide all the material and energy she or he currently uses.
- It takes 23 times more water to produce 1 ton of beef than it does to produce 1 ton of grain. Only about 2.5 billion people could be fed on a diet comparable to a developed country diet, in which approximately 35% of calories are derived from animal sources.

Increased consumption does not lead to a parallel increase in happiness.

- Although personal consumption has more than doubled since 1957, a University of Chicago survey found that the proportion of Americans who say they are “very happy” has remained the same. Millions of people report feeling exhausted, pressured, and hungry for more balanced lives – lives with greater purpose and psychological stability.
- Our growing dependency on automobiles results in traffic congestion, increased pollution, and sprawl. Study after study verifies that even the biggest of highway expansion projects can’t outrun sprawl and traffic jams.

Environmental health is the foundation for a healthy, stable society. We must recognize our limits if we want to preserve our planet and ensure sustenance for future generations.

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