

The Role of the American Farmland Trust

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Traditional concern within the conservation community for the future stewardship of our nation's "resource lands" has been formulated largely in such terms as preserving wildlife habitat and ecologic diversity; safeguarding such sensitive yet biologically productive ecosystems as coastal wetlands; protecting the integrity of human water supplies; ensuring sufficient open space and active recreational opportunities in metropolitan areas; and conserving significant historic and scenic sites. Until recently, however, relatively little attention has been paid to our seemingly vast expanse of agricultural land as a natural resource providing much needed food and fiber products both domestically and to much of the world. Indeed, where attention has been paid to the resource values provided by agricultural land, the emphasis has often been upon the open space and environmental quality benefits of preserving farmland in urban areas, rather than upon safeguarding future food supplies.

Clearly, of course, agricultural land is a category of "resource land" in every sense of that term. Moreover, under careful stewardship, such land—based upon the climatic, soil, water and even human characteristics which underlie its productivity—is a *renewable* resource of great importance. Although the United States has large reserves of land containing many natural resources, including mineral and energy deposits, perhaps in no category of resource are we as well-endowed as we are with respect to agricultural land. In fact, as even occasional air travelers can testify, agriculture in its various forms constitutes the country's predominant land use. Of a total national land base of nearly 2.3 billion acres, almost 1.4 billion acres are in agriculture—equal to fully 90 percent of the total acreage of nonfederal land and almost twice the land area under federal ownership. And, as one would expect given the vast expanses involved, this agricultural land is itself subject to many specific uses. These uses break down as follows:

Cropland	413 million acres
Rangeland	414 million acres
Forestland	376 million acres
Pastureland	133 million acres

The 413 million acres of cropland are even more diversely distributed among various types of agriculture, including row crops, close grown crops, orchards and vineyards, and hayland.

In reviewing the national inventory of agricultural lands, it is most important to realize that these various categories are not at all mutually exclusive. Owing to often subtle peculiarities of soil quality, climate, and other factors, some lands are, of course, uniquely suited to certain crops. Cranberries are perhaps one of the best examples of an exception that proves the rule. Most of

our agricultural land, however, is suited to more than one or even several agricultural uses and, therefore, in response to economic and other factors, there is a constant dynamic flux among the various use categories. The Post WWII abandonment of much New England cropland to forest, and the more recent virgin cropping of lowlands and upland forests in response to export opportunities, are notable testimonies to this phenomenon.

While the fate of other types of resource lands can have clear, if complex and long-term, implications for mankind and our economic processes, agricultural land provides perhaps the most direct and immediate linkage between land use and human welfare. It is that realization, and recent authoritative, alarming analyses of present threats to our long-term agricultural productivity, that help account for the recent rise in both public and official attention to agricultural resource issues. Much of the impetus behind this national phenomenon can be attributed to more localized movements to address agricultural land issues in such states as Oregon, Maryland, Massachusetts, New Jersey and Wisconsin. In some cases, the issues were raised on the even smaller scale of counties and municipalities, in response to dramatic loss of local farmlands to suburban sprawl. In each case, the specific concerns were various and reflective of local agricultural and political characteristics, and, therefore, the approaches taken have differed considerably from state to state. Happily, as these local and state efforts began to pick up momentum, attention to agricultural resource issues began surfacing at the national level.

Led by Vermont Representative James M. Jeffords and others, the federal government began to address both soil erosion and the irretrievable conversion of agricultural land to non-agricultural uses. One of the most significant embodiments of this new national concern was the National Agricultural Lands Study (NALS), which concluded with a report to the President in January, 1981. The NALS, an interagency undertaking managed by the US Department of Agriculture and the US Council on Environmental Quality, provided the most comprehensive assessment of both the extent and causes of farmland conversion yet attempted. Among other things, it concluded that our agricultural land base has in recent years been declining at a rate of three million acres annually. Of this loss, fully one million acres has been cropland, much of it of "prime" quality—that land best suited to the production of food and fiber. This loss is irreversible: once committed to other uses, productive farmland will never again grow crops. The NALS also found that the US is losing an additional nine million acres of "land in farms". Although this loss is not irreversible, since it involves land taken out of agricultural production in anticipation of later conversion to other uses, it is more insidious because it is not as visible and because it clearly portends irreversible losses to come. Collectively, these losses pose a significant danger to American agricultural productivity, the quality of rural life and our landscape, and to the US foreign trade balance.

The NALS, in contrast to many government studies destined to wither from disuse, has helped build further momentum for agricultural land conservation. One of the Study's principal products, the *Reference Guidebook for State and Local Governments*, provides a highly useful compendium and analysis of previous state and local farmland protection efforts and suggested considerations for the development of new programs elsewhere. At the federal level, the energy and understanding engendered by NALS helped lead to the recent passage of the Farmland Protection Policy Act, a much overlooked subtitle of the 1981 Farm Bill. Introduced by Representative Jeffords, this first-ever provision addresses a specific conclusion of the NALS, namely that some 90 federal agency programs—involving construction, grants, loans, and loan guarantees—have been principal contributors to the loss of prime agricultural land through the stimulus they provide to unwisely located development. The new policy directs federal agencies, under USDA leadership, to begin changing its ways so as to minimize these effects on "prime" and "unique" farmlands as well as farmlands of "local or state importance". Also of considerable importance, the act directs federal agencies to adjust their program decisions to respect existing state and local public farmland programs as well as the protection efforts of private groups.

In addition to the NALS and these 1981 Farm Bill provisions, national attention to agricultural resource issues has been inspired by recent works by Neil Sampson, president of the National Association of Conservation Districts; Lester Brown of Worldwatch; Kentucky's farmer-poet-philosopher Wendell Berry; the American Land Forum; and the Rodale Press, and others. Predictably, the NALS and these other treatments have drawn a response, often ill-tempered, from those who make a living attempting to "debunk" conservation and environmental concerns. The arguments from this camp are largely rooted in the tradition of laissez faire economics and have often come from professional agricultural economists. Their arguments emphasize, with some justification, our past history of technological progress and resulting increases in agricultural productivity that have in recent decades transformed agriculture from a labor- and land-intensive to an increasingly science-intensive industry. With disturbing frequency, however, the economists close their scholarly eyes to the long-term possibilities implied by the trends documented by the NALS and others.

However overly optimistic in certain respects, these critics have done at least one public service, namely to force a more careful and reasoned analysis of why farmland preservation should be an object of national attention. In attempting to lump together all who make the case for preservation as "Chicken Littles" and "crisis mongers", they may have created a more receptive public climate for those who claim not that there is a present crisis with respect to our agricultural land resources, but rather that a crisis may overtake us in the not-too-distant future if we continue ignoring our collective stewardship responsibilities.

The case to be made for the conservation of our agricultural land resources rests principally upon one word: *uncertainty*. The NALS and its various reports discuss the many factors which will determine whether we will be able to meet domestic and world food and fiber needs in the coming decades. These factors include: population and income growth; agricultural productivity trends; farm commodity and input prices; demands for other products from the land, like timber and biomass; climatic trends; and water supply trends; just to name a few. These factors are, in the words of another, "extremely variable variables". However variable, each of these factors is important to consider. The critics may be right in claiming that the yearly loss of three million acres is not significant in comparison with the reservoir of agricultural land, the vastness of which has been mentioned here already. However, it is these other factors that suggest a more cautious approach.

There has, for example, been a phenomenal recent growth in the demand for US farm exports. The dollar value of our exports increased five-fold from \$7 billion in 1970 to over \$40 billion in 1980. Due in part to increasing world population and rising incomes, as well as continuing limitations upon food and fiber self-sufficiency in the less-developed countries, this increase in export demand is expected to continue. At present, one-third of US agricultural acres are devoted to export; the NALS projects that the proportion will increase to one-half by 2000. Rising population and income also mean that we can expect rising world demands for energy, wood, and other non-food products and, therefore, increasing competitive pressures upon the reserve of so-called "potential cropland". Rising energy and transport costs, the vulnerability inherent in the monoculture that increasingly characterizes US agriculture, and other related threats further emphasize the importance of planning for future uncertainty by conserving our remaining agricultural land resources now.

Finally, uncertainties about future increases in per-acre productivity underlie concern for the ongoing loss of our agricultural resource base. Although the history of American agriculture is one of consistent, rapid productivity growth, recent trends in per-acre production have been more problematic. From 1939 to 1960, total productivity increased by 2 percent annually; between 1960 and 1970, however, the rate of increase slowed to only 0.9 percent. The uneven trend since 1970 has given rise to considerable debate among agricultural scientists. One thing is known: public investment growth in farm productivity has declined from a real annual rise in the research budget of 3 percent in the period 1929-1972 to a corresponding rise of only 1 percent since 1972. Moreover, increasing budget constraints at all levels of government do not augur well for a reversal of the more recent trend. In light of these developments, Norm Berg, Chief of the Soil Conservation Service, has concluded: "Evidence indicates that we have reached the point where decreases in land in production may no longer be balanced by increases in productivity."

In response to these supporting concerns, the critics fall back on their underlying, possibly blind, faith in technology. They now point to the 127 million acres of land identified by the NALS as having "high" or "medium" potential for use in food and fiber production. This "reserve" of "potential farmland", however, is somewhat chimeric in nature. It is based largely upon assumptions concerning future farm commodity prices and the costs of conversion to agriculture. As such, it is more of an economic assessment than a biologic or agricultural determination. Counting on the "creation" of new farmland implicitly ignores the fact that farmers are not stupid, which is another way of saying that the best croplands already have been plowed. Moreover, those who rely on this "safety valve" ignore much of what the NALS concluded with respect to these lands, namely that they are also presently being committed to non-agricultural uses and are subject to soil erosion. Moreover, these potential farmlands also are being coveted as potential commercial forestlands by foresters and for other uses by those who foresee a rising world demand for products of the land.

A final word about those who claim there is not present or likely future farmland "crisis"—that the free market will "adjust" to whatever problems arise. Admittedly, there is cause for faith in the market if we simply look back upon the history of American agriculture. However, we are entering a new phase of our agricultural history, facing a new and complex international interplay of many factors that will determine the adequacy of our agricultural land resources. To assume that technological cleverness will save the day this time, simply because it has historically been helpful, is to engage in a variety of that very dangerous straight-line extrapolation of which conservationists are so often accused. Moreover, the agricultural economist's elegant use of the word "adjust" blithely ignores the fact that any adjustment to agricultural land constraints will come by way of considerably higher food prices: translation—unnecessary human suffering both here and abroad, since the world has no real substitute for the quantity or quality of US agriculture. Certainly, there is a distinct temptation to draw an analogy from the "adjustments" that have resulted from recent energy supply constraints.

In recognition of these uncertainties calling into question the long-term adequacy of our agricultural resource base, the American Farmland Trust was founded in August, 1980, as a nonprofit organization dedicated to the conservation of our nation's best agricultural land and to the promotion of farming opportunities. Now, only eighteen months later, AFT stands as an increasingly vital force in the growing public and private sector farmland preservation movement. With a growing membership base of over 21,000, and with the generous assistance and counsel of a Board of Directors representing a cross-section of agricultural, business, and conservation interests, AFT has come a considerable distance toward long-range solvency and success. The work of the small, but highly professional, AFT staff and our Board is supplemented by

a similarly diverse and talented Advisory Committee, whose Chairman, Patrick F. Noonan, is immediate past president of The Nature Conservancy.

During the first phase of its operation, AFT has made progress in each of the three aspects of its national program—private land conservancy, public policy development, and public education. In its *private land conservancy* efforts, AFT utilizes the same private market land-saving techniques, typically involving the donation or bargain sale of conservation easements, traditionally used by The Nature Conservancy and others to preserve endangered species habitat, environmentally-sensitive lands and other resources. The difference in AFT's use of these techniques lies in the fact that the land subject to easement restrictions remains in active agricultural production. Indeed, this is the purpose of our conservancy activity, namely to guarantee the long-term productivity of important farmland threatened by removal from agriculture. We have directly received several such easements to date, have assisted several other local organizations in doing so, and are presently working on the establishment of easements on more than 40,000 acres of farmland nationwide. These properties range from a 50-acre cornfield in Pennsylvania to a 10,000-acre Wyoming ranch.

The *public policy development* element of our program recognizes the powerful influence that official policies and programs of government agencies at all levels can have on the market for agricultural land. AFT furnishes technical advice and assistance to public agencies that wish to develop farmland protection policies and to conserve soil and water for agricultural purposes. AFT testifies at the request of public bodies on important policy issues bearing on the fate of farmland, and assists other private organizations and local citizens in developing innovative new policy initiatives for a secure agricultural future. AFT's Director of Policy Development, Robert J. Gray, was formerly Executive Director of the National Agricultural Lands Study and lends his unique expertise to this effort. In recognition of our growing reputation for professional expertise, AFT has on several occasions been asked to provide Congressional committees and individual members with technical assistance and advice on matters relating both to farmland conversion and soil erosion. At the state level, we have been very active in Minnesota, Colorado, New Jersey, Vermont, Kentucky, Alaska, and California in working with public agencies and legislatures, as well as with other private groups to further the cause of sound farmland protection policies. Altogether, during 1981, AFT staff visited and consulted with state and local officials, soil conservation districts, civic groups and farm leaders in 30 states, from Florida to Alaska. Our interest throughout has been to help state and local citizens and officials design farmland protection programs expressly tailored to local needs.

The third and perhaps most fundamental element of the AFT national program is our *public education* function. It is fundamental

simply because much of the loss of farmland recently suffered can be traced to a clear failure by the general public to recognize the problem and to understand its implications. AFT is working to inform farmers and non-farmers alike about the seriousness of both farmland conversion and soil erosion, their effects on agricultural productivity, farming opportunities, and food prices, and the ways they can be halted or ameliorated. Our large membership is an active one, serving in effect as our "eyes and ears" throughout the country, both apprising us of agricultural land issues in their own localities and asking us for more information on actions they can take to effectively meet rising challenges.

Our membership newsletter *Farmland* has achieved wide circulation throughout the agricultural and conservation communities. We also have initiated a series of booklets on specific aspects of the agricultural land issue. In addition, we have played a major rôle in distributing the educational material of the NALS. Most recently, AFT sponsored an educational exhibit at the annual convention of the Future Farmers of America, and is working with FFA to develop cooperatively a school curriculum on farmland protection to help prepare the next generation of farmers as stewards of their heritage.

Based on expressions of interest from numerous state- and local-level private conservation organizations, we have begun to reach informal agreements with those that share our commitment to farmland preservation to provide the kinds of technical and financial assistance we can offer, and which such groups can put to good use in their own farmland protection efforts. One of these organizations will soon be the Pennsylvania Farmland Trust, an independent nonprofit conservancy that AFT itself is in the process of establishing in cooperation with the Pennsylvania Farmers' Association, an affiliate of the American Farm Bureau Federation.

Support for the programs of AFT comes entirely from private contributions. More specifically, we rely on a mix of membership contributions, foundation grants, and individual philanthropic gifts. In order to broaden our support base, we have just inaugurated our new Corporate Associates program and are seeking to raise our endowment, in the form of a revolving capital fund, to supplement our present lines of credit at commercial banks and to be used to increase our private market land saving efforts.

In summary, the multiple threats to our nation's agricultural land resources pose a substantial challenge to both farmers and conservationists alike. We feel confident, however, that the formation of the American Farmland Trust, and its degree of success in its early stages of development, constitute a hopeful sign on the natural resources horizon. Moreover, AFT looks forward to one of its principal challenges, and one of the preconditions of the successful achievement of its program objectives, namely the building of an institutional bridge between the worlds of conservation and agriculture.

