Farmland Preservation

In a Nutshell

Farmland preservation is a joint effort by local governments and non-governmental organizations to protect and preserve agricultural land. Often a part of regional planning and national historic preservation, farmland preservation includes implementing policies and programs to manage urban growth and encroaching development, prevent conversion of farmland to other uses, and to maintain the ecological integrity and environmental benefits of agricultural lands.

The “How To”

According to the Amerian Planning Association, there are nearly 1 billion acres throughout the United States devoted to agricultural use. Unmanaged development and an aging farming population are contributing to declining numbers. With 86 percent of fruit and vegetable production and 63 percent of dairy production occuring in urban counties, the increasing populations within these counties is threatening farmland and fresh food production.

Since farmland preservation is typically a matter of policy, elected officials usually have to sponsor and present a bill to the legislation. Citizens can, however, petition their elected representatives to make policy regarding farmland preservation if the governing body has not enacted such legislation already.

There are no universal methods by which farmland preservation efforts can be applied. Local focus, local knowledge, and the available resources to a certain location will need to be considered when creating a farmland preservation policy. Not every program will work for every region, so having the appropriate information tailored to the specific condition of local lands is necessary.

Planning & Zoning

Missouri and Illinois Farmland Preservation Laws

In 1982, Illinois passed the Farmland Preservation Act. This Act requires state agencies to establish agricultural land preservation policies and working agreements with the Illinois Department of Agriculture.

The Missouri Farmland Trust Act, which was passed in 2011, allows individuals and entities to donate, gift, or otherwise convey farmland to the state department of agriculture for the purpose of preserving the land as agriculture and making the land affordable for the next generation of farmers.

The Missouri Farmland Preservation Act was created by the Conservation Federation of Missouri in 2007 in an attempt to encourage state governments and other entities to create voluntary coalitions to work with farmers to protect farmland.

The National Conference of State Legislatures offers links to many state laws and statutes in support of efforts

to encourage the preservation and protection of agricultural lands.

Federal Farmland Preservation Laws

The 2002 Farm Bill made federal funds available for farmland preservation programs, while the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) has put programs in place to assist with research, education, and outreach. Most farmland preservation programs and policies are developed and implemented at the state or county level.

Dollars & Cents

Environmental Benefits

The environmental benefits of agricultural land are not typically reflected in its land value/market price, and as a result these lands are often at risk of being developed for a higher-grossing land use, such as a commercial or residential development. While opportunities for recreation and agro-tourism are more economically tangible benefits of open space, these uses are not always possible or appropriate for every farmland preservation effort. However, the importance of agricultural lands to production of a local food choice, national food security, creation of an urban buffer zone, flood control, and air & water quality cannot fall by the wayside in determining acceptable land uses and development.

Cost of Implementing Farmland Preservation Policies

The cost of actually implementing policies preserving farmland is zero dollars. Farmland preservation efforts can be written as bills which legislators are elected to create, anyway. If the legislation chooses to offer tax breaks, grants, or other monetary incentives to preservation efforts, then there will be a cost. There are no clear trends when it comes to grants and tax breaks across the United States, but many states offer some sort of financial incentive to keeping the land in the hands of farmers.

Measuring Success

Environmental Improvement

There are many ways that the success of a farmland preservation program can be measured. Water quality, available groundwater, air pollution/emissions, ozone depletion, and flood history can all serve as indicators. It is best to combine indicators of environmental improvement with statistics on the acreage and condition of local farmland to get the best picture of how farmland preservation is working in a particular region.

Quantities of Farms and Acreage Protectied

The Farmland Information Center (FIC) provides data on the number of farms, acreage, market value of agricultural products, farming legislation, development of farmland, and other vital statistics for each state. Check the status of local or state PACE (Purchase of Agricultural Conservation Easements) Programs – the FIC tracks data on 91 different programs.

Discover More

Farmland Preservation Efforts in Other States

The New Jersey Farmland Assessment Act of 1964 permitted farmland and woodland which is devoted to an agricultural or horticultural use to be assessed at its productivity value. It reduced taxes on farmland in an attempt to reduce the sale of farmland to developers for housing and commercial use.

Many state departments of agriculture recognize the importance of farmland preservation. A small sample of such states include Pennsylvania, Michigan, Ohio, Washington, and Connecticut.

Farmland Preservation in the News

The Farmland Preservation Report is an information and networking source which keeps updates and news stories related to farmland preservation, as well as resources and opportunities for networking.

In December 2013, Lancaster County, Pennsylvania surpassed 100,000 acres of preserved farmland. It is the first county in the state and nation to preserve more than 100,000 acres.

In November 2013, New York Governor Andrew Cuomo announced $4.6 million in Farmland Protection Implementation Grants to protect 2,200 acres of farmland. This is just one instance where a state government has issued grants to preserve farmland.

In November 2013, Woolwich Township, New Jersey changed its farmland preservation program to preserve more farmland than originally intended and to create a more condensed, walkable developed community.

In Grand Rapids, Michigan, the farmland preservation program is illustrating how such a program can become a political issue for county governments.