

Why Preserve Farmland?



Farms feed us and provide a host of other public benefits. However, every day, the amount of fertile farmland diminishes as development spreads.

When farmers think that the farms around them will be sold for development, which would result in the enterprises that support farming leaving and the loss of their support network, this can set off a downward spiral in a farming community: farmers leave farming or stop reinvesting in their farms because they fear the consequences of being one of the last farmers in an area. Farmland preservation programs can provide assurance to farmers that there will always be a critical mass of farms in an area, bringing stability to the local farm community and economy.

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INTRODUCTION

Farms feed us. They provide a host of economic, environmental, and socio-cultural benefits. They are also threatened.

In recent decades, residential and commercial development has decimated America’s agricultural lands. Nationwide, 24 million acres of farmland were lost between 1982 and 2012; Pennsylvania saw 706,000 acres eliminated in that timespan.¹ This loss of farmland is essentially permanent. It takes natural forces millennia to build richly productive soils; bulldozers can destroy fertile farmland in minutes.

Government farmland preservation programs and many private land trusts work to ensure that we don’t destroy the resource that feeds us. They work to keep enough fertile land available for farming so we don’t risk becoming dependent on other nations to feed our growing population. They also provide a variety of other public benefits.

This guide explores both the benefits of farms and the value of farmland preservation efforts.

FARMLAND PRESERVATION ANCHORS THE FARM ECONOMY

Farms do not stand alone. Each is an anchor of stability for other nearby farms. Each is a thread in a web of neighboring farms, farm businesses, and other human endeavors that support and rely upon each other. When one thread is lost, the negative consequences ripple through the community. When many threads are lost, there comes a point when the web fails—when farms and farm businesses no longer have the mutual support needed to keep the local farm economy viable.

A farmer nearing retirement decides to sell his land to a developer. His neighbor worries about the disruptions the development will cause to her agricultural operation and chooses to downsize.² Having already struggled with declining revenues due to the loss of other farms, the local agriculture supply store closes. It lays off its employees, and they move their families elsewhere to find new jobs. Then a few farmers decide it’s not worth the longer drive to buy supplies, and they sell. The nearby processing plant loses business and is forced to lay off workers too. Other farmers in the area

watch their options narrow and fear that others will also sell their land for development. They conclude that their farms will inevitably be lost, so they stop investing in new machinery and labor. Eventually, they leave their fields fallow in anticipation of selling for development. The downward spiral of the local farm economy becomes irreversible.

Farmland preservation aims to prevent the downward spiral. It aims to secure enough farms as permanent anchors so that people can see that their local farm economy can weather the loss of a number of non-protected farms without capsizing. Farmland preservation provides assurance that farming is there to stay in a community. And the more farms preserved, the stronger and more resilient the local farm economy can be.

PROTECTS OUR NATIONAL SECURITY

Twenty percent of the food Americans eat comes from other countries.³ The current system of food production and delivery has created a global supermarket, where all kinds of items are available to consumers year-round. While people enjoy access to products that cannot be grown in the United States or that otherwise would only be available seasonally, there are pitfalls to undue dependence on global trade networks to deliver many foods that can be grown here. Political upheaval in Asia, drought in South America, economic turmoil in Europe: any of these disruptive events could drastically affect food supplies and prices. When basic sustenance and nutrition rely upon a system prone to uncertainty and instability, food security becomes a concern.

The global population is projected to rise from today's 8 billion to 10 billion by 2050; for every four people that need to be fed today, one more will need to be fed at that time. Considering increasingly erratic weather patterns, political and economic upheavals, the ever-present possibility of war, and more mouths to feed across the planet, prudent planning for the future would prioritize locally-

grown food that is insulated from global trends and crises.⁴

If the United States retains its best farm soils—if it refrains from building over its most productive farmlands, if it keeps sufficient capacity to feed its growing population—we can greatly reduce the odds of our nation ever facing shortages, conflicts, and crises. We can guard against untold human tragedy—at least at home—and perhaps be positioned to help others as well.

This logic extends to the state and local level: if regions within America can develop their own robust agricultural systems, they are less likely to be damaged by turmoil elsewhere.

National security requires fertile farmland—lots of it. Farmland preservation helps ensure this is possible.

SUPPORTS OUR ECONOMY

The economic impact of agriculture on Pennsylvania and the nation is enormous. The output of America's farms accounts for \$165 billion of the GDP; combined with agriculture-related industries, the total is \$1.26 trillion.⁵

Creates Jobs

In America, direct on-the-farm work provides 2.6 million jobs.⁶ These positions include farm managers, machinery operators, field hands, and other workers needed for all the aspects of production. Some farming positions are highly skilled and require talented and experienced people, while other jobs are available to younger workers or those new to farming. The jobs are filled by family or local community members, or can attract people from elsewhere who relocate to the community.

However, this is only part of the agricultural employment picture; farms indirectly support millions more jobs off the farm. Farms create and maintain jobs in secondary markets such as food processing, retail stores, insurance, veterinary care, and equipment sales. A Michigan State University study found that the employment multiplier for the agriculture industry was 1.668, meaning that for

every 1,000 full-time jobs in on-farm production there were on average 668 jobs in industries that supply or assist farms.⁷ During the decade studied, as prime farmland was swallowed by sprawling residential developments, these secondary industries were hit the hardest: while 10% of on-farm jobs disappeared, the agricultural service sector lost 43% of its jobs.⁸

Keeps Money in Local Communities

A growing number of farms—nearly 150,000 nationwide, according to the 2017 USDA census—offer food products to their local communities through farmers markets, community-supported agriculture (CSA) programs, farm stands, and other channels.⁹ The shorter the distance between the farmer's field and the customer's plate, the less transportation and fewer intermediaries required. Therefore, a local food transaction benefits both the farmer and consumer: the farmer receives a greater percentage of the sale, while the consumer enjoys fresh food produced for its taste rather than its ability to endure weeks of transportation and storage. The money spent in the community stays in the community, circulating to other businesses that offer goods and services and create jobs. One study found that every dollar in local agricultural sales generated over \$3.00 of community income (while agricultural exports generated \$1.70).¹⁰ Farmers markets, especially when located in a downtown area, can also have a spillover effect, boosting the sales of surrounding businesses.

Pennsylvania is second in the nation in direct-to-consumer sales, trailing only California, and preserving farmland ensures the continued viability of local food suppliers in communities throughout the state.¹¹ Markets for locally produced food help sustain local economies, while enhancing opportunities for farmers to make a living and for consumers to buy fresh food directly from the people who produce it.

Provides Tax Revenue; Requires Little Back

Only by considering both the local tax revenues generated by a use of the land and the local government expenditures necessitated by that land use can you identify the use's overall impact on local government finances. Farms and other open lands unambiguously provide a net fiscal benefit. Owners of agricultural lands pay more in local taxes than government spends in support of those lands and the people who live and work on them.¹²

Although agricultural land generates less tax revenue per acre than residential, commercial, or industrial property, it requires fewer public services such as schooling, road maintenance, and policing. The difference means that non-agricultural lands receive more services and pay less in taxes than they could in the absence of agricultural land.

Twenty years of *Cost of Community Service Studies* by the American Farmland Trust show that working and open lands on average receive only \$0.35 in public services for every dollar they contribute; housing developments, on the other hand, receive \$1.16 in services for every dollar they contribute.¹³ Agriculture subsidizes¹⁴ the costs of residential development.¹⁵

Supports Agritourism

The natural beauty of farmland appeals to many people. Agricultural-based tourism (known as agritourism) offers people a chance to interact with farmland in a variety of ways: they might pick their own strawberries in the summer, take a tour of a vineyard, or hold their wedding in a bucolic farm setting. This tourism provides income to the farmer and has ancillary benefits for the community. When agritourists visit a farm, they might spend money in the nearby hotels, stores, and restaurants. They might visit other local attractions. If they enjoy the experience, they might return or recommend the area to friends. While agritourism possibilities are highly variable depending on location, the financial impact can be significant. For example, in Lancaster County, agritourism accounts for half of all tourism revenues, totaling \$580 million each year.¹⁶

DELIVERS ECOSYSTEM GOODS AND SERVICES

Ecosystem goods and services are the benefits people derive from ecosystems: clean air, drinkable water, stable weather patterns, fertile soil, flood protection. Though often overlooked in discussions of fiscal resources, natural assets can be viewed as capital assets; like tractors or office buildings, they have tangible real-world economic value. And unlike other capital assets, they are renewable and self-sustaining. If managed properly, their value does not depreciate over time.

A 2014 study in Lancaster County found that lands used for agricultural purposes within that county provide an annual flow of \$483 million in ecosystem service benefits.¹⁷ These benefits include water regulation, soil retention, pollination, and biological control. This near-half billion dollars is *in addition to* the \$1.2 billion in total economic production and \$580 million in tourism-associated revenue.

SUSTAINS A TRADITION

In the popular imagination, farming is synonymous with rural life. That perception isn't far from reality. Agriculture has occupied a prominent place in this country's history since its inception; Thomas Jefferson wrote that "cultivators of the Earth are the most virtuous and independent citizens" and envisioned an entire nation of farmers growing food on their own plots of land.¹⁸ In the centuries since, however, Jefferson's vision has not come to fruition. The number of farms peaked at 6.8 million in 1935; by 2021, this number had dropped to 2.01 million.¹⁹

Despite the fact that most people are now disconnected from agriculture, farming remains a primary element of rural heritage in the United States. This is due in large part to the economic ties between farms and communities, but it is also a result of the multi-generational nature of family farms, which encourage the establishment of deep connections to land and place. The relationship between farms

and other pillars of rural culture—clubs like 4 H and FFA, seasonal celebrations like fall harvest festivals, and community events like tractor pulls and rodeos—is important as well.

Farms are the lifeblood of this cultural lineage. As the stewards of these places, farmers can be tremendous teachers, passing along a wealth of valuable skills and advice. Those who benefit most from their experience and insight are future farmers—people considering farming as a career choice, or who are eager to begin but lack the necessary skills or money to start their own operations.

Farms and farmers link Americans to a collective past, to a time when more people lived closer to the land and followed the contours of the seasons. As technology drives a modern, industrialized society where most people live in urban areas and work indoors, preserving this agricultural legacy is valuable.

FARMLAND PRESERVATION TOOLS

Across the United States, [land trusts and governments](#) work in various ways to protect our nation's productive farmland.

Conservation easements, which permanently limit the development of land, are a highly effective tool in this work. In Pennsylvania, the state and county-sponsored [Agriculture Conservation Easement Purchase Program](#) has supported the protection of thousands of farms and many hundreds of thousands of acres of farmland since it began in 1988. [Land trusts](#) too have preserved substantial farming acreage. [WeConservePA's website](#) hosts a wealth of information about conservation easements and their application to protecting farmland.

When land use planning aims to ensure the efficient use of space and resources, farmland can be protected while allowing room for communities to grow and thrive.

Community planning and land use regulation offer tools that, depending on their specific design and the local political will, can protect farmland with varying degrees of efficacy. Land use regulations ranging from Agriculture

Protection Zoning to [Transfer of Development Rights](#) have seen varying degrees of implementation success in communities. These regulatory tools are also described in [WeConservePA's various guides](#).



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¹ “2012 National Resources Inventory” (United States Department of Agriculture, 2012)

² This disinvestment in the face of looming development and uncertainty about the future is sometimes called “impermanence syndrome,” a term coined by D. Berry in 1978. It becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy as declining investments in farming result in decreased productivity and competitiveness in the market.

³ “U.S Food Imports” (United States Department of Agriculture, 2015)

⁴ The White House is aware of these issues, releasing a paper titled “The National Security Implications of a Changing Climate” in 2015. The CIA and Pentagon have also committed resources to studying and preparing for the security risks posed by climate change.

⁵ [“Ag and Food Sectors of the Economy”](#) (United States Department of Agriculture, information last updated on 1/26/2023).

⁶ Ibid

⁷ Gerhardus Schultink, “Land Use Planning and Open Space Preservation: Economic Impacts of Low-Density Urbanization and Urban Sprawl,” *Journal of Civil, Environmental, and Architectural Engineering* 3, no. 1 (2009)

⁸ Ibid

⁹ [“Agriculture Census”](#) (United States Department of Agriculture, 2017)

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¹⁰ Viki Sonntag, “Why Local Linkages Matter,” *Sustainable Seattle* (2008)

¹¹ “Agriculture Census” (United States Department of Agriculture, 2012)

¹² “Cost of Community Services Studies: Fact Sheet” (Farmland Information Center, 2010)

¹³ Ibid

¹⁴ Likewise for industrial and commercial uses.

¹⁵ Local governments typically find residential development attractive because of the initial injection of new tax dollars into their coffers and few demands on government services. However, over time, a development’s infrastructure will age and require increasing amounts of municipal maintenance, children will grow up and require schooling, and residents will demand higher levels of services. Ultimately, the development begins receiving more in public service benefits than it is contributing through tax dollars.

¹⁶ Aaron Schwartz and Maya Kocian, “Beyond Food: The Environmental Benefits of Agriculture in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania,” *Earth Economics* (2014)

¹⁷ Ibid

¹⁸ Thomas Jefferson, *Notes on the State of Virginia* (London: Stockdale, 1787)

¹⁹ [“Farming and Farm Income”](#) (United States Department of Agriculture), retrieved on 2/7/2023.