Meeting the Needs of Urban-Influenced Agriculture

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What would the federal government do if an epidemic were slowly but surely, farm by farm, rendering the land in Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, Iowa, Missouri, Kansas, Nebraska and the Dakotas permanently unsuitable for agricultural production?

How would USDA respond if so many people were moving to these states that farmers were having a hard time doing the routine things necessary to produce a crop without getting sued by their neighbors?

How would Farm Bureau react if all those people building houses amidst the farms started demanding strict environmental regulation of agriculture to protect their health and private property?

Is it an exaggeration to say that alarm bells would be going off? That the agricultural establishment would be up in arms? That Congress would be scrambling to find solutions?

So, why aren’t they?

Because all this is happening right now to a large segment of American agriculture.

The equivalent of the total agricultural production of all the states I just listed is at risk to an epidemic called urban sprawl. That’s how much of the nation’s farm output – about 30 percent – comes from the nation’s Metropolitan Statistical Area (or MSA) counties. Or, to look at it another way, it’s equivalent to the total value of all agricultural exports.

Throw in Texas, Mississippi and the rest of the South (except Florida, where the count is not yet final) and the total output still would not equal the production of a larger group of urban-influenced counties that includes those adjacent to MSAs – in other words, the next targets of sprawl.

More than half the nation’s agricultural production occurs within commuting distance of our rapidly expanding cities. So, urban-influenced farms are not just “boutique” agriculture. Yet, federal farm policy does not recognize either their importance or their special challenges and needs. Today, I want to talk about these issues in the hope that, when we fix the next farm bill, urban-influenced agriculture will receive the attention it deserves.

What distinguishes urban-influenced agriculture to such an extent that farm policy should treat it differently? What are the unique challenges it faces?

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1 American Farmland Trust, Farming on the Edge: A New Look at the Importance and Vulnerability of Agriculture Near Cities (1994). Unless otherwise indicated, all data relied on by this report are from U.S. Census of Agriculture.
First, it’s very diverse. It produces 30 percent of our grain and 45 percent of our livestock. But, it also accounts for more than 80 percent of our domestic fruit, vegetables and dairy products. So, a policy based only on a few major commodities isn’t necessarily going to serve its interests.

Second, its diversity is based on geography as much as on its soils. A lot of so-called “unique” farmland, where most fruit and vegetable production occurs, is found in urban-influenced areas because both crops and people thrive in moderate, year-round climates, particularly on the coasts. So, a farm policy heavily weighted toward the interior of our country does not serve the interests of urban-influenced agriculture.

Third, more people live near urban-influenced farms. That’s stating the obvious, but it has a number of implications that tend to be overlooked by farm policy makers. First, the environmental impact of urban-influenced agriculture directly affects far more Americans than any other segment of agriculture. Ninety-percent of the U.S. population lives downstream from urban-influenced farms. Yet, federal conservation programs like CREP and EQIP don’t come close to providing for the needs of the producers who are most likely to face stricter environmental regulation.

On the other hand, urban-influenced farms provide a rural landscape that is highly accessible to the majority of Americans. People don’t go far to take Sunday drives in the country, to visit pumpkin patches and Christmas tree farms, and even to go hunting and fishing. So, naturally, they care more about the farms right around them than about those that are far away. This is quite apparent in the public opinion polls that show people take food for granted, but think protecting farmland and open space is one of the best ways to prevent urban sprawl.

Thus far, agriculture has been able to trade on the Currier & Ives image that most Americans still associate with farming – largely because many farms in their backyard still fit this description. But, as those farms continue to disappear, voters are more likely to ask, “What do we get for the $20 to $30 billion tax dollars we spend each year on farm programs?” And, if little of that money actually helps urban-influenced farmers stay in business and protect the environment, how much longer can we count on the public to foot the farm bill?

And those urban-influenced farms are disappearing. The 1997 National Resources Inventory (NRI) showed a loss of 1.2 million acres of cropland, pasture and rangeland a year – a rate 50 percent higher than in 1992. The amount of topsoil we are paving over each year is roughly equivalent to what we are saving with all federal soil conservation programs, CRP included. And what the NRI doesn’t show is that the land is also being fragmented, broken up like a checkerboard. For every acre paved, an AFT study estimated, an additional two to three acres become harder to farm because of conflicts with neighbors over noise, odors, dust and chemical drift. You may not be sympathetic to the farmer who makes a bundle selling his or her land for development. But what about the guy who now has to farm next to a subdivision full of kids and dogs and people having cocktail parties? There’s something fundamentally wrong when one farmer’s “safety net” – for I suspect that is how many farm leaders think of subdivision – becomes a tangled web of risk and stress for other farmers.

The conversion and fragmentation of farmland is the most significant, defining characteristic of urban-influenced agriculture. Development pressure is the overwhelming influence. And it’s a debilitating one, not just for the farmers who see the suburbs coming over the hill, but, for the reasons I described earlier, for American agriculture as a whole.

However, the response of national farm policy to the debilitating effects of sprawl has been slow and meager. In the last farm bill, only $35 million – not even a rounding error in the USDA budget – was devoted to helping farmers withstand development pressure. Only a couple of weeks ago, the new Administration, with help from the Hill, took away two-thirds of a $20 million supplemental appropriation that had been earmarked by the previous Administration for USDA’s Farmland Protection Program.

This program offers farmers the opportunity to sell conservation easements as an alternative to sprawl. It has been responsible for saving 125,000 acres of urban-influenced farmland in only three years. It has leveraged federal dollars three-to-one with state and local money, resulting in a federal cost of only $275 per acre for permanent protection of some of the nation’s best farmland. Compare that to the roughly $500 per acre we are spending to “rent” CRP land for only 10 years; or to the $70 per acre farm programs handed out for each and every acre of cropland last year alone ... with no strings attached. When the American people ask – “What did we get for that money?” – which sounds like a better deal?

If development pressure is the definitive challenge of urban-influenced agriculture, farmland protection is the definitive need. It is an answer to the voters’ question that they can experience first hand; that returns tangible benefits in an era when “don’t complain with your mouth full” just doesn’t cut it anymore. Helping to protect the urban-influenced farmland that provides so much of our food, that comprises the watersheds and wildlife habitat and scenic landscapes valued by the majority of Americans, and that supports so many of our farm families, is good farm policy. And good farm politics.

How, specifically, should farm policy respond?

First, funding of the Farmland Protection Program should be increased to $500 million a year. That would amount to only five percent of a $20 billion farm bill. Is that too much to devote to what is arguably the most troublesome problem affecting such a huge segment of U.S. agriculture ... and to a solution that the public clearly understands and favors?

This program is a very good deal for taxpayers, and the need and demand are there. The federal program has demonstrably stimulated additional state and local investment. Federal dollars have been leveraged three-to-one. And farmers themselves contribute by discounting their asking price. Yet, despite an investment of $160 million last year, states and localities can purchase easements from only one in six farmers who apply to their programs. And seven times as many applications have been received by USDA as its $17.5 million current budget can accommodate. That must change.
Second, significantly more of all USDA conservation program spending should be targeted at urban-influenced agriculture. It faces the greatest risk of environmental regulation because more people are directly affected. This trend has already begun with WRP and CREP, and it needs to continue to achieve the most environmental benefit for the taxpayers’ conservation dollar.

Third, to accomplish the first two objectives without shortchanging existing programs, we are going to need a dramatic increase in the overall USDA conservation budget. Conservation funding has remained flat since 1985, declining from one-third of the total federal farm budget to one-tenth in 2000. This is going exactly in the wrong direction.

Shifting more farm spending into the conservation account would be a good for agriculture. It has too many eggs in the same old commodity basket, leaving it vulnerable, not only to increasing taxpayer skepticism about “farm bailouts,” but also to WTO free trade rules. Agriculture desperately needs to diversify its portfolio. The public is eager to support conservation and, if there is one thing American farmers can diversify into without fear of unfair foreign competition, it is the “production” of clean water, wildlife habitat and scenic open space right here in the U.S. of A.

But to make this happen, I suspect we will have to get over a hurdle higher even than our failure to recognize the significance of urban-influenced agriculture. This obstacle was perhaps best described by Britain’s Prince Charles, who may be an unlikely authority on agriculture, but in this case, absolutely nailed it:

“ Farmers have ensured that people are well fed,” he said in a lecture to the Royal Agricultural Society a decade ago. “Now that they are successful, they are being blamed for the surpluses. But I believe we have to face up to the fact that there is a separate crisis – a cultural crisis – facing us. It concerns the very identity of farming itself, and has arisen largely because we have not made clear our dual role of providing food and looking after the countryside. What makes farming different is the element of long-term stewardship of a precious natural resource. And I don’t think there is anything soft, romantic or otherwise unrealistic about such an interpretation.”

I submit that the only way American agriculture can eliminate the environment as something it considers a threat, is to embrace it as an opportunity. And there is no better way to start than to make it a priority of farm policy to save productive farmland and improve the environment in those areas of the country where the American people most often encounter agriculture and are most concerned about its demise.