

Pa. Farmland

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a finite resource to be husbanded rather than as a commodity to be consumed or expended. It fact nearly one-half of Pennsylvania's farmland has gone out of production since the turn of the century including 420,000 acres of prime agricultural land which has largely fallen to "urban sprawl" or strip development (Editor's note: 420,000 acres is slightly greater than the amount of farm land presently in Lancaster County.)

Pennsylvania has experienced a high rate of urban sprawl during the past decade despite a slow population growth compared to other states. We have seen a thinning out of population in urban centers while our suburban population, including that of our smaller municipalities not listed as metropolitan, is estimated to have increased by 400,000 households. The population changes for the three urban centers shown below are typical of the kind which have occurred in the rural-urban fringes of major metropolitan areas throughout the State.

Most of this growth has gone into level, high-quality farmlands, for it rarely takes place in flood plains, mountainsides, or in swamps or wastelands. Although development is not intrinsically bad in itself, a critical need exists to channel the forces of expansion so that top-grade farmland located between centers of development can be preserved in its natural state.

One of the burdens to agriculture is that urban sprawl requires larger public expenditures for service facilities than in more compact areas. Consequently, real estate taxation appears to be a "pivotal" factor in farmland conversion since as the growth of our cities moves into surrounding rural areas it causes farm properties to increase in value. Their inflated market value potential for urban development results in increased assessments and in increased taxes. When his taxes exceed the income received from farming, the farmer usually decides to sell his property to get out from under the tax burden. And of course pressures of this kind are greatest around the rural-urban fringes where open space is most needed and generally in the shortest supply.

The major reasons for preserving farmland can be grouped into economic, environmental, and sociological considerations which will be discussed next.

Economic reasons—

Spiraling food costs have made consumers increasingly aware of the need to produce locally an adequate supply of food in close proximity to urban markets. The value of cash receipts in 1971 from Pennsylvania's 71,000 farms was \$1,040,000,000 - and this is just a partial assessment of the economic impact of the State's second largest industry

Of this amount \$777 million came from livestock and livestock products, \$258 million from field crops, fruit, vegetables, mushrooms, greenhouse products, maple syrup and sugar. Pennsylvania ranked second nationally in hardwood lumber production with an additional \$10 million worth of pulpwood and forest products harvested. The market value of land and buildings devoted to agriculture was \$5,491,004,758.

These figures tell only part of the economic story in that agriculture provides a livelihood for many non-farm residents by creating employment and business opportunities. More than 2.1 million people receive wages of \$9.5 billion from agriculture and agribusiness. Food processing alone is a \$4 billion industry employing 8 per cent of the State's manufacturing force. The payroll of forest products manufacturing companies is \$475 million.

Environmental reasons — Less easy to measure but no less important are environmental effects. Rare indeed is the individual who has divorced himself of all relationships with the soil, accordingly, productive farmland surrounding metropolitan centers can fill a variety of open space needs. In addition to having a powerful cleansing effect on our atmosphere, its value is incalculable in protecting watersheds, in augmenting urban water supplies, and in reducing flood and sewage pollution hazards. Retained in private ownership it is a means of providing scenic visual relief from the congestion of urban living and of preserving the countryside for recreation.

With limited public access rights recreation on farms could be profitable to the farmer and to urban residents. Farm ponds can produce 100 to 200 pounds of fish per acre each year, and farmers could augment their income by charging the public a small fee for the right to fish. Fishing on streams, swimming, ice skating, and boating on ponds are other

water-oriented sports possible on farms. Farm marshes can produce waterfowl, muskrats, and mink. And proper cropping and fence planting can encourage wildlife and provide a habitat for game birds.

Sociological reasons — As important as they are, agribusiness economics and environmental considerations do not stand alone in defense of farmland. Agriculture has undergone dramatic changes in the past 45 years, including changes in technology and mechanization. But the most profound of these changes, having both sociological and economic implications, involves the size of Pennsylvania's farms. In 1930 there were 186,000 farms averaging 82 acres. Today the average size has increased to

147 acres for the State's 71,000 remaining farms.

Agriculture was founded on the basis of the family farm which traditionally has been a way of life as well as a business. As production costs skyrocketed,

however, a smaller net family farm income resulted and increased numbers of rural youth left the state or departed for urban centers where they have found employment. Some far-

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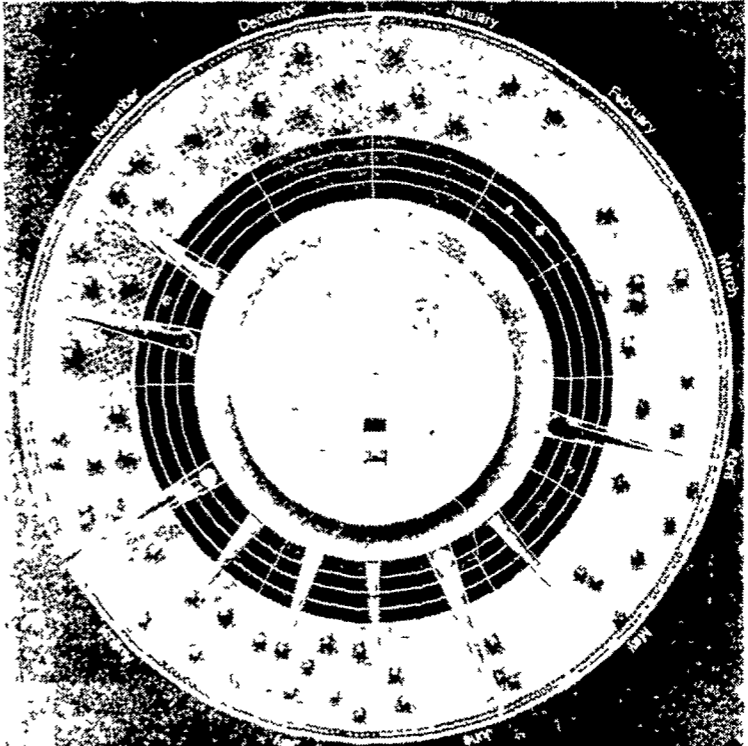
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