

Ag economists review land use planning

CHICAGO, IL. — More than 2700 acres of U.S. prime farmland are taken out of production on an average day for houses, shopping centers, roads and other uses.

Several agricultural economists said that workable land-use policies must be established to preserve the future of farming.

University of Wisconsin agricultural economist Richard Barrows points out that existing land-use

policies by themselves have been largely ineffective in protecting farmland.

"Land-use planning has often been criticized as too weak to protect farmland. However, land-use planning is not always weak, as illustrated by the planning program in Walworth County (Lake Geneva) Wisconsin," Barrows said.

"Instead of viewing the plan as a document showing where urban growth should occur, Walworth County farmers and rural citizens used planning as a process of

building a consensus about rural problems and solutions.

"More than 550 public meetings were held over an eight-year period resulting in new local laws to control subdivisions, a new zoning ordinance, and plan for housing, transportation and other local concerns. Walworth County's efforts have preserved farmland by guiding development to poorer agricultural soils in areas where farm operations will not be disrupted.

"The key for success was the involvement of local people in deciding the future of the county. The plan itself was not as important as the public participation that built the community consensus to preserve farmland," Barrows said.

Other policies mentioned by Barrows included agricultural zoning, farmland tax policies and purchase of development rights.

Zoning has a poor track record in preserving farmland, but Barrows explains that the reason is because the zoning was not designed to protect farmland.

"A few counties in the U.S. have successfully used zoning to protect agricultural land. The zoning was designed by rural people to protect their farm operations."

Some states have adopted a use-value assessment law which assesses farmland for tax purposes according to its value in producing agricultural commodities.

Assessing farmland at market value resulted in taxes so high that many farmers were forced to sell land to speculators and developers.

This farmland taxation system has not been successful in states like Maryland and has been only moderately successful in other areas of the country.

According to University of Illinois agricultural economist Harold Guither, government policies have a strong influence on land-use decisions.

"The right of eminent domain allows government to acquire land for public purposes, such as highways, airports and parks, provided the owners are justly compensated," he said.

"Regulatory devices include zoning, subdivision regulation, health, housing, plumbing and electrical codes and various nuisance ordinances," according to Guither.

He said "Federal income taxes probably have a much greater impact on land use than property tax. Deductions for real estate loans and property taxes lower the effective cost of land and provide incentives for owning more than if the deductions were not allowed. As a consequence, the demand for land and housing has increased.

"Government decisions can result in subsidies in housing and community development activities or in incentives to remove land from agricultural uses.

Lower interest rates and guaranteed credit encourage developers to build housing projects often on agricultural land instead of in the decaying areas of large cities," Guither said.

Other methods of encouraging development include selling tax-exempt bonds, providing property tax exemptions for industry and providing housing subsidies which all contribute to

the disappearance of agricultural land, according to Guither.

He concluded that "most land-use decisions depend on people and where they decide to live and work. Government's role, then, is to direct those decisions by guiding the placement of work places and homes so that we use land carefully and do not destroy productive agricultural land."

Delaware offers bulletin of direct marketing laws

DOVER, Del. — Roadside markets and pick-your-own ventures have become a popular way to sell locally grown produce in Delaware.

There's even interest in re-establishing a farmers' market or two in the state.

Regardless of the method of direct marketing you choose, there are laws and regulations governing the sale of fresh fruits and vegetables in Delaware.

The Extension Service, in cooperation with the state Department of Agriculture, has prepared a bulletin which explains these regulations. Though not all-inclusive, the booklet "Laws and Regulations Affecting Direct Marketing in Delaware" provides a workable guide to the various legal aspects of direct marketing produce in the state.

The bulletin is broken

down into 11 sections covering the following subjects: entrance-exit requirements and parking at roadside markets and pick-your-own establishments, zoning, advertising, public health standards, weights and measures, pesticide uses, labor, taxes, licenses, cooperative marketing associations, and reducing risks of accidents.

There is also a list of references which cover these topics in greater depth.

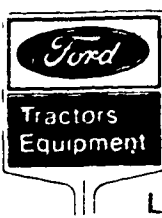
Each section contains a descriptive review of the specific laws or regulations in question and then refers the reader to agencies that can be contacted for further assistance.

Copies are available from University of Delaware extension crops marketing specialist Carl German 302/738-2511.

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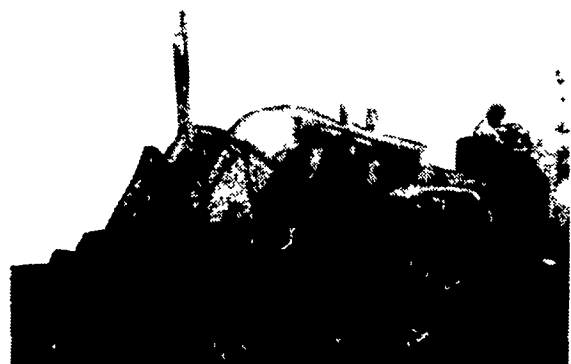
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