

Del. proposes tax incentives to preserve farmland

DOVER, Del. — Agriculture is Delaware's leading industry. But the Governor's Advisory Committee on Farmland Preservation predicts that farmland will decline from the current 53 percent of Delaware's total land area down to 35 percent by the year 2000 unless action is taken.

Since March, representatives from farm groups, real estate, government, and the Delaware Extension Service who make up the Governor's Advisory Committee have been studying the causes of farmland loss. They have developed a package of recommendations designed to preserve the state's dwindling farmland.

Under the plan, the state government would set up a system of exclusive agricultural zoning acceptable to Delawareans. The plan would include financial and other incentives to landowners for keeping land in agriculture within these zones. The public would have a say in the location of the zones.

A farmer would receive a state income tax credit for each acre of farmland owned in an exclusive agricultural zone.

For example, if these tax credits were set at \$5 per acre, a farmer with 500 acres would receive a \$2500 state income tax credit every year.

The loss of revenues to the state for such a program would amount to about \$3 million annually (since approximately 600,000 acres of farmland might be placed in exclusive agricultural zones). The income tax credit would be a substantial incentive, yet a relatively small proportion of the state's budget.

Farmland within the

exclusive agricultural zones would be exempted from all general property and school taxes, except those that directly benefit agriculture such as farm drainage taxes.

Farm residences, however, would still be subject to the same property taxes as neighboring non-farm residences.

This provision of the plan would result in possibly a \$2 million annual loss of revenues to local governments and school districts. The state would compensate the affected jurisdictions in a declining way for three years, to give them time to develop alternative revenue sources.

Delaware's inheritance tax law would also be revised under the plan. Under the committee's proposal, the Delaware inheritance tax on farms in exclusive agricultural zones could be deferred and later paid in installments at low interest. This would give the heirs a chance to build up their farm businesses before having to make large outlays of cash.

The state capital gains tax schedules would be revised to allow either deferral of the gain, spreading the gain over an extended period, or an exemption of part of the gain when transferred farmland within the zone is kept in agriculture.

The real property transfer tax would be revised to place a ceiling on the tax when farmland in the zone is kept in agriculture.

Another proposal would consolidate, eliminate, and simplify the system of permits, approvals and certifications applicable to agricultural operations within the exclusive agricultural zones.

Farmlands in the path of urban development, such as those zoned for

nonagricultural uses or served by sewer, would not be part of exclusive agricultural zones. The Governor's Advisory Committee recognizes the likelihood that such farms would eventually succumb to pressures to develop.

However, the committee

realizes that these farms are important to the state's economy and quality of life, so a proposal is designed to keep these lands in agriculture as long as possible, if not indefinitely.

Farmers who own land outside of exclusive agricultural zones could

participate voluntarily in one part of the farmland preservation program.

To do so they would sign a five-year contract, subject to yearly renewals, agreeing to

keep the land in agriculture. In return the farmer would receive the state income tax credits each year.

Landowners who par-

(Turn to Page C37)

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