

Rural areas are growing

LANCASTER — Rolling hills, acres of farmland and clean air were once the portrait of rural America. But that picture is changing.

For the first time since 1820, rural and small communities are growing at a faster rate than the nation's cities, according to the U.S. Census. Accompanying the trend is concern over how to plan for growth while fostering conservation.

"There is a concern today with losing land once used for agriculture," according to Richard M. Thomas, professor of community development and higher education at Southern Illinois University at Carbondale.

Much of the nation's pristine land is becoming urbanized added Thomas, who lectured at four community development workshops across the nation last month sponsored by the Future Farmers of America.

"Urbanization is not all bad, but some of the bad aspects — such as pollution and congestion — are cropping up in formerly unspoiled places."

Although agriculture is the nation's largest industry, one million acres of farmland is lost each year to urban and other uses, reports the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

Nearly 100 agriculture professors attended the workshops, designed to teach community development methods as used in the FFA's program, Building Our American Communities.

BOAC, sponsored by R.J. Reynolds Industries, Inc., seeks to identify and solve community needs while building youth leadership.

"Community development projects in the BOAC program address an emerging national issue of how to manage growth and development while protecting our natural resources," said J. Paul Sticht, chairman and chief executive officer of R.J. Reynolds Industries, Inc., a company with substantial interests in agriculture through its tobacco and foods

businesses.

"Based on current trends, community development in small and rural communities will become even more important," Sticht said.

Each year, thousands of FFA members, mostly high school students, conduct BOAC projects, such as FFA members in Franklin, La., when they constructed a classroom the local school board couldn't afford; or when FFA members in Elma, Wash., developed a reforestation project, investing in that area's largest industry.

Remarked Ted Amick, the FFA's BOAC program specialist, "Farming today rarely offers the independent lifestyle it once did. Today, the farmer is an agribusinessman who must work in a complex environment with shrinking resources to be successful — or even to survive."

Thomas said planning can help rural areas achieve some of the best parts of urban living while maintaining the best of rural life. Industry, for example, may be the key to a community's survival. "But what matters is the kind of industry that gets in. So often, except for creating new jobs, a bad industry actually drains off community dollars in resources, while the land becomes spoiled."

Still, added Lee Cary, another workshop instructor, the issues are not impossible to face. "There are things people can do."

Cary, professor of regional and community affairs at the University of Missouri, said, "Most national or state decisions are implemented at the local level, where there is a possibility of influencing implementation. In addition, it is at the local level where national policy is tested out, where word begins to go back up the ladder as to how a policy works or doesn't work."

"Farm problems do not occur in isolation," Cary said. "They eventually affect the national community."

The key, he said, "is to get organized."

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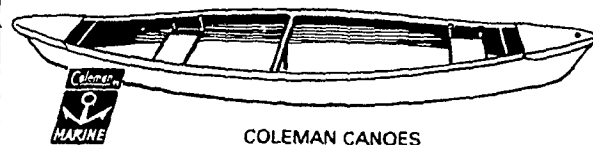
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