

City sprawl threatens farming's existence

By Susan Loth
National Geographic News Service
WASHINGTON, DC — "It was

my granddad's farm, and my great-granddad's before that. You want to see the old family farm?"



Signs of city life aren't far away as Willard "Dick" Forman, 73, plows his eight acres in Clive, Iowa, west of Des Moines. A national study has found that the country is losing a million acres a year of its best farmland to urban uses.

Go look at the shopping center and the townhouse projects around it. In the middle you'll find what's left: I guess Mother has around five acres."

Wallace Covington Jr. still lives and works in Fairfax County, Va., but the 200 acres where he raises cattle are in the country down the road—the road that takes him farther from Washington, D.C.'s urban sprawl.

Elsewhere in Fairfax County, homesites are for sale at the 823-acre Franklin Farm. The J.B. Franklins have sold their dairy farm, and the Maryland and Virginia Milk Producers Association Inc. soon will lose one more nearby source.

"Twenty years ago, there were 60 dairy farms in Fairfax," said Robert H. Rawlins of the milk co-op. "Now we have five." As a result, he noted, the co-op is trucking in milk from farms once thought too distant to be economical.

This loss of farmland affects more than the Covington family tradition or the price of milk in Washington. It's happening across the country, and it's something to worry about, a federal study has

warned.

As the country builds up and out from its cities, farmland is disappearing at the rate of 3 million acres every year, according to the National Agricultural Lands Study released by the U.S. Department of Agriculture and other government agencies.

The annual loss includes 1 million acres of prime farmland, with the richest, flattest soils that produce the best yields at the lowest cost. But prime farmland is also attractive for other uses.

Each day, four square miles of America's best farmland are covered over—by housing tracts, highways, airports, businesses, parking lots or man-made lakes, the NALS says. Put together, a year's loss could form a corridor from New York to California half a mile wide.

"I think the important thing Americans should be learning is that our good farmland in this country has a limit," said Robert Gray, who directed the NALS project and now is with the American Farmland Trust. "We have 540 million acres of pretty good farmland out of a land base of

2.2 billion acres, and that 540 million acres is our ace in the hole."

The study recommends the country add to the 413 million acres now in cropland, and it has identified 127 million acres of good potential cropland now mainly in forest, pasture, or rangeland.

In fact, the NALS estimates that to keep up with expected world food demand by the year 2000, U.S. farmers may have to cultivate an extra 85 to 140 million acres. Already the yield of one in every three acres harvested is shipped overseas, giving agricultural exports—some \$40 billion worth in 1980—a big role in the national balance of trade.

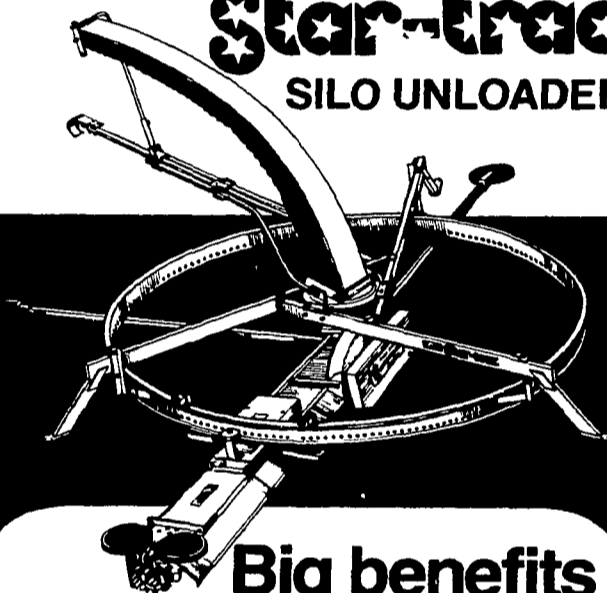
In the meantime, the land losses continue. The NALS says that if farmland conversion continues at the 1967-77 rate, Florida—producer of half the world's grapefruit and one-fourth the world's oranges—will lose nearly all its important farmland by the end of the century. Another Sun Belt state, California, would lose 15 percent of its agricultural lands.

Noting that citrus fruit, like many crops, depends on special

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