

# FARM MANAGEMENT



## HOW TO PRESERVE FARMLAND?

(The first of a 7-part series.)

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Many farmers wish to continue to till the best soils in Pennsylvania. The majority of the state's voters in 1987 agreed that something should be done to enable them to do just that. So they authorized the commonwealth to float a \$100 mil-

lion bond issue. We now have county boards being formed to administer the new farmland preservation program which the legislature authorized.

With all the emotion and political activity going on, it seems prudent that farm managers examine the facts and understand the issues. In a series of articles in this column, we shall attempt to cover the major concerns that are facing farmers who consider applying for a conservation easement.

Why is prime land lost? Pressures on land spreads out through our rural areas from the New York-Washington megalopolis. This tideswell for change meets little resistance because of the economic and political circumstances of our rural communities, where:

a. The returns from crop production are low. In a normal crop rotation, we are lucky if we can earn \$50 per acre per year as return to land.

b. Farmers can get a very attractive gain when they sell land to the highest bidder. There is a strong demand for prime agricultural land, which is also the easiest to develop.

c. Landowners have a great deal of liberty and the rights to do as they wish with the land they own. Pennsylvania has been very careful to protect these rights.

d. Development in the form of home building faces very little challenge in most communities. Even industrial construction is

normally controlled by the lowest level of local government — the township.

Under these circumstances, it is perhaps surprising that we are not seeing a faster pace of farmland loss.

How do other countries preserve farmland? In Europe, where people have starved in this century, national policies dictates some self-sufficiency in food. It is a false assumption to say that it is achieved through subsidized agriculture.

In Australia, there is very little agricultural subsidy and a population not much greater than Pennsylvania's. Yet on that continent, which is the size of mainland U.S.A., construction is restricted by law to designated areas of towns, suburbs, and cities.

Countries which preserve farmland also require that property owners maintain, preserve, and restore the inner city and the suburban and the small town environments. Failure to do this leads to the flight to the country.

### Earlier Pennsylvania laws

Farmland preservation is not a new idea. In 1968, Act 247 as amended gave authority for agricultural zoning. In the same year,

Act 442 provided for the purchase of development rights.

In 1974, Act 319 — the so-called "Clean and Green Act" — gave landowners the option to use an agricultural value and thus reduce real estate taxes. This is being used extensively where reassessment raised taxes on farmland.

Act 43 of 1981 — the Agricultural Area Security Act — enabled farmers to join together to form "Agricultural Security Areas."

The 1982, Act 133 — "Right-to-Farm" — was designed to protect farmers from "nuisance" suits.

These laws have prepared the way for the new program of selling conservation easements. How this process works and how it might impact farm families who sell easements will be covered in this series.

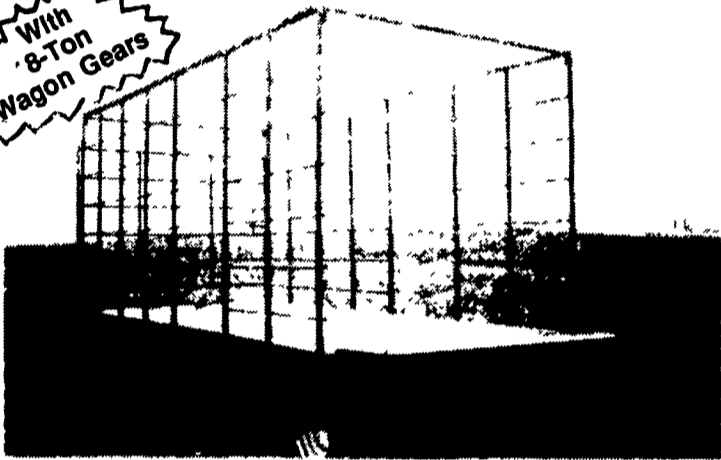
Subjects to be covered in future articles include:

- Agricultural security areas.
- Conservation easements.
- Farm-use value.
- Family considerations.
- Tax implications.
- Long-term financial impact.

Watch for these articles and contact your local cooperative extension office for more information on farmland preservation.

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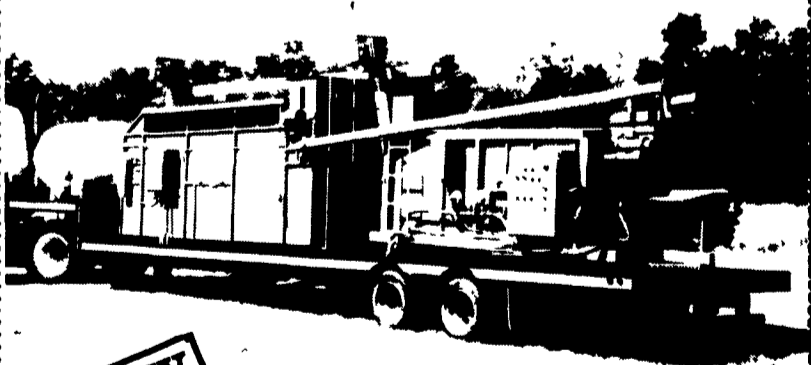
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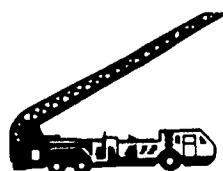
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