

# **Rural Smart Growth: The Role of Local Farms and Food in Advancing Livable Communities**

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## *Background*

Julia Freedgood is the managing director of the Farmlands and Communities Initiatives, part of the American Farmland Trust. The American Farmland Trust is committed to working within communities in order to protect farmland and strengthen the connection between people and their food. The trust supports local farmers, and engages farmers and ranchers in dialog in order to help conserve the land and protect vital natural resources. The American Farmland Trust is a non-profit working with national, regional, and local governments to create legislation, implement policies, and put programs in place that help conserve farmland in an environmentally-conscious manner<sup>1</sup>.

Currently throughout the United States, farmland and rural land are being developed at an alarming rate. From 1982-2007, the US developed an area the size of Illinois and New Jersey, and one out of three acres of historic farmland is developed. The driver behind this rapid loss of farmland is inefficient land use and sprawl. As a suburban lifestyle became more desirable, coupled with a low cost of importing food from other countries, farmland began to disappear. Every state has lost agricultural land, including states that grow the majority of fruits and

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<sup>1</sup> American Farmland Trust "Our Work." American Farmland Trust, accessed online 17 Mar 2011, <<http://www.farmland.org/programs/default.asp>>

vegetables for the US (Texas, California, and Florida). Overall, 38% of prime farmland has been developed, and over 44% of non-prime farmland has been lost<sup>2</sup>.

In addition to land loss, the culture of farming has changed over time. Currently 30% of US farmers are over sixty-five, and they own 21% of all US farmland. 11% of farmers are over seventy-five, and only 5% of farmers are younger than thirty-five. Thus, older farmers currently control most of the land, but there is not a young generation of farmers to replace them. Younger farmers are starting smaller farms, often specializing in organic or high-grade products, but they are especially vulnerable to land loss or bankruptcy. Small farms account for 91% of all farms in the US and 56% of farmland, but many are unable to persevere.

#### *How Does Farming Fit into Smart Growth?*

The good news is that the rate of farmland conversion has slowed, with a 29% decrease in farmland conversion from 2002-2007. Experts are starting to examine rural smart growth, in which rural areas are placed into one of five community types. These rural communities can be categorized as gateway, resource-dependent, edge, traditional main street, and second home or retirement. Gateway communities are areas that are near recreational areas, such as a national park, and may depend on seasonal money and infrastructure. Resource dependent communities are those that built-up in response to one particular industry, such as a factory or other large employer. An edge community is one in which the community has access to a more urban or suburban area and associated economic opportunities, but is still rural. Main street communities have a compact design with accessibility to transport hubs, and are often historic areas. Second home or retirement communities are areas in which most people are not working and there are not many resources.

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<sup>2</sup> American Farmland Trust: "Why Save Farmland? Fact Sheet." Jan 2003, accessed 17 Mar 2011, <[http://www.farmlandinfo.org/documents/28562/Why\\_Save\\_Farmland\\_1-03.pdf](http://www.farmlandinfo.org/documents/28562/Why_Save_Farmland_1-03.pdf)>

Clearly the challenges facing these communities are different than those in an urban or suburban area, since people and resources are more spread out. Rural smart growth is choosing to emphasize the idea of sustainable communities, in which residents have access to more transportation options, affordable housing, enhanced economic competitiveness, funds for revitalization, and increased government collaboration. Even in rural areas people must come together as a community to support change at the local level, in order to get a response from the regional or federal level. A major player in sustainable communities is food, especially for rural areas which are often associated with farming. Encouraging opportunities for local and regional agriculture, promoting sustainable production, and building infrastructure can improve community food security in vulnerable rural communities and support good nutrition and health.

Interestingly, in the last twenty years the infrastructure for small farming, such as facilities for shipping produce or livestock preparation declined, leaving small farms to transport their products over long distances which defeat the purpose of local initiatives. For example, a pig farmer in upstate New York might have to drive his pigs to southern Pennsylvania in order to have the meat prepared because there are no slaughterhouse facilities nearby.

In the last three-to-five years a cultural shift has begun in local and regional foods. A culmination of events including catastrophic weather driving up imported food prices, increased oil prices, food safety concerns, and the obesity epidemic have grasped the attention of the public. From 2002 to 2007, organic sales went up 335%, and direct to consumer sales increased 49% (like farmers markets or farmers selling direct to schools). In one year (2009-2010), farmers markets increased by 16% throughout the United States! People are getting excited about farming, excited about local foods, and at last, concerned about how our demand is higher than our current supply.

The United States currently imports 44% of fruit and 16% of veggies from other countries. Barriers to increasing domestic production of agricultural products include land access, labor, logistics, and legislation. Many people do not realize the full cost of importing produce because subsidies help to keep food prices down. In the United States, food grows in the path of development, especially fruits, nuts, and berries.

### *How can Smart Growth Be Used to Help Farmers?*

Many issues with farming and food access have to come from local initiatives. A big part of smart growth is bringing a community closer together, and encouraging more sustainable practices. Thus, local support of agricultural and community partnerships are really important, even in rural areas. Zoning and local ordinances should support local farms and food production, and everyone should have access to safe and healthy food! A new concept, called “new ruralism” is emerging from the smart growth movement. New ruralism creates a framework of principles, policies and practices by combining smart growth, sustainable agriculture, and sustainable food and agriculture systems to bridge the gap between suburban and urban areas. The interface between urban and rural areas must become common ground rather than a battleground, as rural areas (farmland) help provide local, healthy food to urban areas and urban areas provide economic resources and opportunities to rural areas.

There are several examples in which smart growth principles and new ruralism have been employed at both the local and statewide level. These include Central Ohio local food assessment, the California Agricultural Vision, the Vermont Farm to Plate program, and the Rhode Island strategic plan for agriculture. A great example at the local and regional level is “Eating Here,” part of the greater Philadelphia food system study, is a plan to build a sustainable

and resilient food system which connects rural, suburban, and urban areas around Philadelphia<sup>3</sup>. This comprehensive plan includes supporting local agriculture and growing the local food economy while improving profitability for farmers, protecting the environment, ensuring safety, security, and healthfulness of food and the food supply, improving nutrition and reduce obesity, and encouraging collaboration between individuals, organizations, and government agencies.

The plan includes many elements of smart growth, such as improving the livability of communities by integrating agriculture into urban and suburban zoning ordinances, expanding farmland preservation programs in communities, expanding programs around local foods and urban farming, and connecting experienced farmers with younger communities of successors in order to guarantee the safety of farmland in the future. This project is a great example of how concepts of smart growth can be applied across communities and throughout many sectors, like agriculture, business, and conservation. It also highlights the importance of the role local communities have in order to promote smart growth, new ruralism, and environmental stewardship.

**Additional Resources:**

American Farmland Trust. 2009. American Farmland Trust. 17 March 2011.

<<http://www.farmland.org/default.asp>>

Bray, Christopher. "Vermont's Farm to Plate Program." Vermont House Agricultural Committee. 17 March 2011.

<<http://www.ncsl.org/Portals/1/Documents/Health/bray.pdf>>

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<sup>3</sup> Delaware Valley Regional Planning Commission. "Eating Here: Cultivating a Robust Food System in Greater Philadelphia." Accessed March 17 2011, <<http://www.dvrpc.org/reports/10063A.pdf>>

California Department of Food and Agriculture. "Agvision 2030."2009. 17 March 2011.

<<http://www.cdfa.ca.gov/agvision/>>

Central Ohio Local Food Assessment and Plan. April 2010. Mid-Ohio Regional Planning Commission. 17 March 2011.

<<http://www.morpc.org/pdf/CentralOhioLocalFoodAssessmentAndPlan2010.pdf>>

Food System Planning. 17 February, 2011. Delaware Valley Regional Planning Commission. 17 March 2011. <<http://www.dvrpc.org/food/>>