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# Agriculture and Urban Areas in Perspective

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**U**rban areas have the paradoxical distinction of being both the most important and least important land in the United States.

## **Most Yet Least Important**

Urban areas are among our most important land because the majority of us live and work in them. Another reason that urban land is important is that, once converted from rural to urban uses, land rarely reverts to a less developed use. Thus, losses of cropland or forest to urbanization constitute a permanent, irreversible loss of agricultural capacity.

The transformation of the United States from an agrarian Nation to a Nation of cities, occurring within living memory, also has magnified our perceptions of the extent and importance of such land use shifts. The paradox lies in the fact that urban areas are relatively unimportant because they are a small fraction of the Nation's total land area.

## **Proximity**

That some of our most vibrant and valuable agriculture occurs in the city's shadow also seems paradoxical. More

than one-quarter of all farms are located in our metropolitan areas and produce 29 percent of the total value of agricultural production. Urban pressures on city farmers have resulted in adaptations that distinguish their operations from those of their country cousins, making urban agriculture more fit to survive current troubles in the agricultural economy.

## **Urban Geography**

Geographers at the Bureau of the Census distinguish a variety of areas, ranging from 30,685 minor civil divisions and county census divisions up to 21 Consolidated Metropolitan Statistical Areas (CMSA's), each containing more than a million people. The two most common area delineations serve quite different purposes. An Urbanized Area includes a central city and adjacent densely settled places that together have a population of at least 50,000 persons. These areas coincide with land actually converted to urban uses as closely as possible.

On the other hand, Metropolitan Statistical Areas (MSA's) consist of counties with one or more Urbanized Areas and those outlying counties that

demonstrate a high degree of economic and social integration with and dependence on the nucleus. MSA's thus reflect the reach of the city's influence, but contain a majority of land that is in essentially rural uses.

While the MSA's overstate the extent of urbanization, Urbanized Area understates the degree to which the city's social and economic influences affect land use patterns. Correct use of these constructs helps avoid errors about the extent of farmland loss and conflicts between urbanization and agriculture.

### **Where We Live and Work**

Americans are disproportionately aware of metropolitan areas because more than three-quarters of us live in them. More than 80 percent of nonfarm jobs are located in metropolitan areas, and the same proportion of personal income accrues to people living in them. Yet only 714 counties (23 percent) are designated metropolitan, and they make up only 16 percent of total U.S. land area. Only about 10 percent of metropolitan area is actually in urban land uses, with the remaining 90 percent rural in character with substantial areas in farm and forest land.

If we focus more strictly on land actually in urban uses, about 60 percent of us live within these Urbanized Areas. Our homes, businesses, and institutions take up surprisingly little room since Urbanized Areas account for only about 1.5 percent of total land area, little more than 1 quarter of an acre a person. While we are an

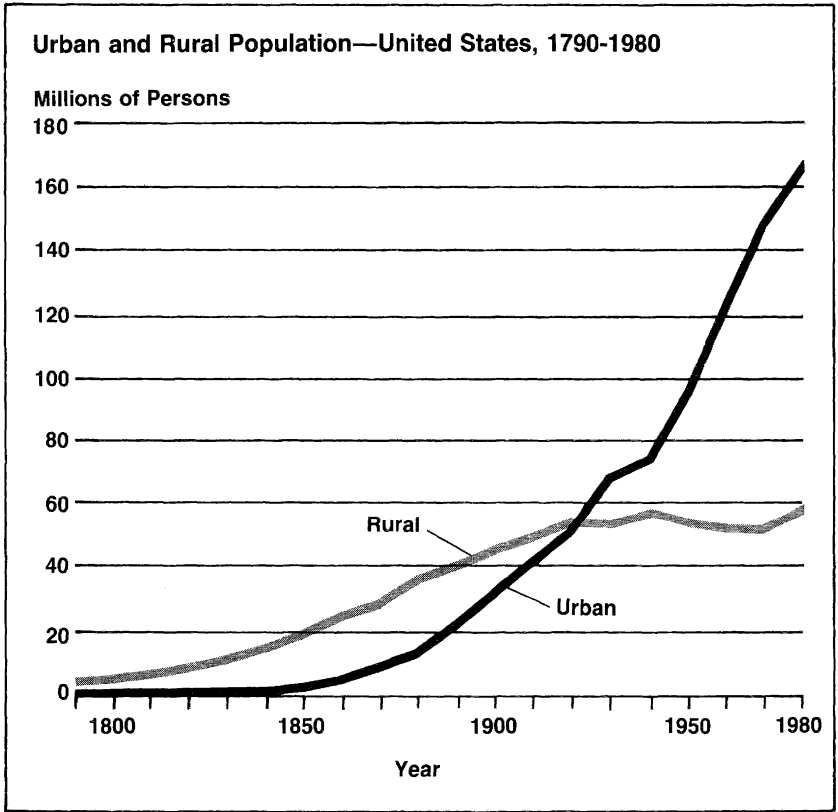
overwhelmingly urban people, fewer than 30 percent of us live in central cities, the traditional city environments. Central cities occupy less than 1 percent of our land. All our Urbanized Areas would fit comfortably in an area the size of North Carolina and the central cities occupy land area smaller than West Virginia.

### **Two Centuries of Urban Growth**

Only 1 person in 20 in the United States lived in urban areas when the Constitution was signed two centuries ago, although many of the urban areas of that period would more closely resemble small towns of today than the Urbanized Areas. Urban population rose steadily until 1930, leveled off during the Depression and war years, and has risen at a rapid rate since 1950.

The exponential growth in urban population since 1920 was accomplished through immigration, natural increase, and movement off the farms. Despite massive migration from farms to the cities during and after both World Wars, rural population was higher in 1980 than at any time in the past 200 years.

Growth in urban land area has been as dramatic as growth in urban population, almost doubling since World War II. However, urban areas (including small cities) still accounted for only 2 percent of total land in 1980. Metropolitan areas more than tripled in size over the post-war period due to development of housing, shopping centers, and commercial and



industrial facilities in previously rural counties. However, the inclusion of rural areas is characteristic of growth in metropolitan land area since large portions of the county components which define MSA's are not urbanized.

Changes in urban and metropolitan definitions reflect the growing extent of urban influence on rural areas, but the growing amount of land in MSA's gives an increasingly inaccurate picture of actual growth in urban land uses. Rural land uses are being incorporated into our metropolitan areas, but not necessarily being replaced by urban land uses.

### Cropland Changes

Changing definitions of metropolitan and urban areas have had little effect on our cropland base. Cropland used for crop production declined slowly over the post-war period in response to chronic surpluses, until the short-lived agricultural export boom of the mid-1970's. Total cropland peaked in 1982 at a level reached only twice before, in 1932 and 1949, despite large increases in metropolitan and urban areas.

While metropolitan area is now almost as great as cropland used for crops, land continues to be cropped

within metropolitan areas. Because defined metropolitan areas include rural land, about one-fifth of harvested cropland is in metropolitan areas. Major shifts in the location of land used for crops have occurred over this century, but cropland lost to urban development has been made up by new cropland development.

Losses of rural land to urban uses continue and may have accelerated with the resurgence of commercial and residential construction brought about by lower interest rates since 1982. In some cases, urbanization may affect national production of specialty fruit or vegetable crops, but generally has little effect on national supplies of most agricultural products. These land use changes, however, have important local implications because of impacts on open space, water quality, urban flooding, and rural lifestyles. Urbanization creates problems for farmers in getting along with their new neighbors, getting along without key support services such as feed, seed, and supply dealers, and putting up with higher property taxes.

Concern over urbanization of farmland by both urban and rural constituencies led to farmland retention legislation as early as 1956. Preferential tax assessment for farmland has been enacted in all States, and 47 States assess farmland at its value in agricultural use. Some 46 States have "right to farm" laws, agricultural districting is authorized in 12 States, and purchase or transfer of development rights on farmland has been legislated in 6 States. Nationally, a Farmland

Protection Policy Act was passed as part of 1981 farm legislation.

### **Farming in the City's Shadow**

Agriculture is still an important land use in the nine-tenths of our metropolitan area that is not urbanized. More than one-quarter of all farms in 1982 were located in metropolitan counties, including almost 30 percent of our family farms. A majority of our horticulture specialty, fruit, tree nut, vegetable and melon, and animal specialty farms are in the metropolitan areas, as well as a full range of other farm types. Some 16 percent of U.S. farmland is metropolitan, just proportional to metropolitan land area. Metropolitan farms are used more intensively, accounting for almost one-fifth of cropland harvested.

Farms in metropolitan areas tend to specialize in high-value crops, accounting for almost one-third of the market value of agricultural products sold on only a fifth of the cropland. About three-fourths of nursery and greenhouse products were produced in metropolitan counties as well as more than two-thirds of the vegetables, fruits, and nuts. Almost 60 percent of sales made directly to consumers through roadside stands and farmer's markets occur in metropolitan counties.

The combination of proximity to urbanizing areas and concentration on high-value, intensive agriculture results in high farmland values for metropolitan farmers. Farmland in urban fringe counties in 1986 averaged \$2,669 an acre, while rural farmland was valued at only \$613 an acre. Urban farmland



*A Washington, DC, farmers' market brings locally grown produce to urban dwellers. (Jay Beavers, OGPA, 0986G1027-27)*

increased 6 percent in value between 1985 and 1986 while overall farmland value dropped 8 percent.

Between 1978 and 1982, the number of farms in metropolitan areas increased by 3.5 percent, while farm numbers dropped in nonmetropolitan areas. Land in metropolitan farms decreased, but harvested cropland remained constant and the value of sales, after adjusting for inflation, increased more for metropolitan farms than for nonmetropolitan ones.

### **City Farmer and Country Farmer**

Metropolitan farming shares many of the characteristics of agriculture away from cities, but also has several attributes uniquely dependent on urban proximity. The average city farm has about half the land of the average country farm, but almost 40 percent is harvested cropland, compared with only 30 percent for nonmetropolitan farms.

A larger proportion of metropolitan farms fall in the minifarm and small farm categories than nonmetropolitan farms. Minifarms have less than \$2,500 in sales and made up 30 percent of metropolitan farms in 1982, but only 20 percent of nonmetropolitan farms. Small farms, those making between \$2,500 and \$20,000 in sales, constituted about a third of all farms in both metro and nonmetro counties. Farms earning over \$20,000 in sales were a larger proportion of farms in nonmetropolitan than in metropolitan counties. However, the very largest farms with over \$250,000

in annual sales made up 4.1 percent of metro farms, but only 3.7 percent of nonmetro farms.

A smaller proportion of metropolitan farm operators list their occupation as farming, and more spend a substantial part of their time working off the farm than in nonmetropolitan areas. More than 60 percent of metropolitan farm operators are full owners of their farms, compared with only 56 percent for nonmetropolitan farmers. While the average metropolitan farm is smaller than the nonmetropolitan farm, a higher proportion is held in partnerships or corporations than for nonmetropolitan farms.

### **Implications**

Our cities and towns are an important use of the land because most of us live in them, because they irrevocably change the landscape in ways that preclude other land uses, and because they are a relatively recent phenomenon in our predominantly agrarian history. Despite their importance, urban uses make up a small portion of our total land area. Land in metropolitan areas, even though in rural uses, is heavily influenced by urbanization.

Losses of rural land to urban uses continue to occur, with important local land use implications, prompting many States and localities to pass farmland retention legislation. With this protection and under economic pressures, agriculture in metropolitan areas has adapted to urbanization, resulting in smaller, more intensive operations growing higher value crops and livestock.

Urban farmers more often farm as a sideline, or supplement farm income with work opportunities in nearby communities. Many urban farmers have converted proximity to urban centers from a liability to an asset by focusing on consumer demands for fresher, high-quality produce grown locally using organic or reduced-chemical techniques. Such crops often command premium prices, but require development of nontraditional marketing channels.

The number of metropolitan farms, harvested cropland, and the value of agricultural production from them is more than proportional to metropolitan area, making farming in the city's shadow an unusually healthy part of our agricultural economy. Metropolitan

farmland values, buoyed by high-value production and urban demands for land, have sustained their high levels during the recent decline in overall farmland values. By retaining equity in their land and depending less on government-supported crops, urban farmers spared themselves much of the distress felt in agriculture generally in recent years.

The combination of farmland retention programs and competitive adaptation has allowed farming to continue in metropolitan areas. These influences will continue to differentiate urban farms from the rest of U.S. agriculture and will insure that agriculture continues as an important part of our metropolitan landscape.