

To Save the Countryside

A farmer in Ohio has received calls from a half-dozen developers wanting to buy his farm land so they can build homes and a shopping mall. One developer offered \$40,000 for each of his 500 acres of crop land, which will total \$20 million if he signs the deal. In some areas of California, developers are offering \$200,000 an acre for farmland.

With the possibility that their land will soon be under asphalt, the Ohio farmer's mother grows nostalgic as she remembers walking along a trail cutting through the farm to a stream where she would sit on a bridge and fish.

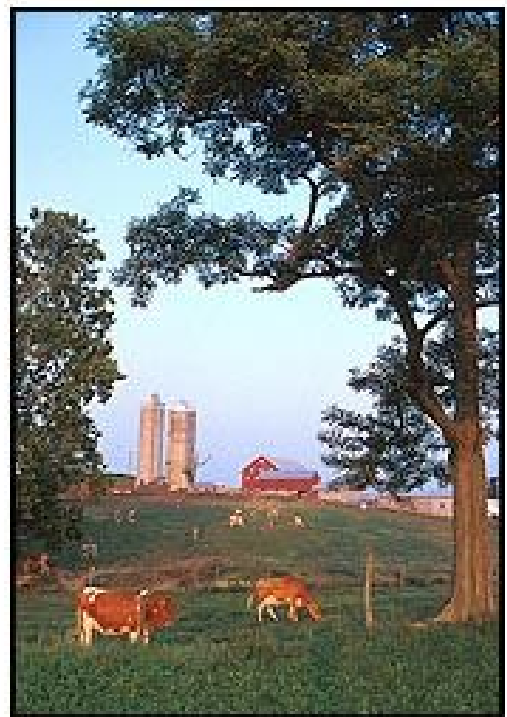


Photo Scott Bauer

A small farm in Western Maryland

Food Security

Developers are buying out farmland across the country. The farms most at risk of being lost are those near urban areas that produce 86 percent of our

fruits and vegetables and 63 percent of our dairy products, according to the American Farmland Trust. In one year in the United States, approximately three million acres of farmland are lost.

When cities have a shortage of farmland, they become more and more dependent on produce from developing countries, California and other agricultural states. But as Prince Charles of Wales told the BBC, "It would be foolish to expect to be able to import everything from somewhere else and imagine that that was going to last forever."

For instance, many developing countries are already scarred by wars fought over access to scarce resources of land and other issues.

And how long can we rely on the Great Plains, which grows one-third of the world's grain. The Ogallala Aquifer, which states in the Great Plains rely on for irrigation water, is being depleted. The amount of water returned to the aquifer each year by rainfall is 2.4 billion gallons, but the amount withdrawn for irrigation and other human uses is 20 billion gallons per year.

There is also an irrigation water crisis brewing in California and other western states that depend on snow that falls in the Sierra mountains from October to April. "When this snow melts in the spring, it fills rivers and replenishes the reservoirs and that is the water we have to depend on throughout

the summer," said Dr. Anne Ehrlich, a biologist at Stanford University in California.

If global warming causes the snow to melt too fast "there's no water to get us

through those hot summer months," she

said, adding that "all the crops that

California grows are dependent on that

snowfall."

Also significant, as oil supplies begin to dwindle, more and more farms that now grow food will begin growing corn for making ethanol, which means more farms will be needed to grow food.

Pollinators in Decline

As wild pollinators, such as butterflies, bats and hummingbirds migrate long distances, they need the nectar of wildflowers for food. But such wildflowers are rapidly disappearing as wetlands, forests, meadows and other habitats are being replaced by buildings, homes and roads. Thus populations of pollinators are in decline.

Pollinators are also endangered by pesticides and mites.

You can help save pollinators by planting nectar producing flowers and by giving up toxic lawn and garden chemicals.

It is a matter of food security that cities preserve farmland and become more self sufficient in growing their own food.

Preserving the Countryside

Many European countries and some U.S. cities use growth boundaries or other planning schemes that keep development from eating into virgin countryside.

Growth boundaries draw a ring around the city and prohibit development

from taking place outside this ring. Growth is thus directed back into the city and is kept compact and efficient rather than low density and leap frogging.

Also significant, growth rings keep developers from bidding up the price of farm land so that farming continues to be an option for the poor.

Growth boundaries also preserve water recharge areas, places of recreation and wildlife habitat. In the United States, habitat loss is the number one cause for a catastrophic decline in species where, overall, one-third of plant species and one-third of animal species are of conservation

concern--either presumed extinct, possibly extinct, threatened, endangered, critically imperiled, imperiled or vulnerable, according to the Natural Heritage Network--a network of survey programs in all 50 U.S. states, usually hosted by a state government or university.

Germany's growth boundary creates an abundance of space for wildlife habitats. The cities and towns have distinct edges where development ends and

As the Countryside is Destroyed

The unplanned, unchecked spread of cities in the United States means habitats for wildlife are radically being destroyed, simplified or altered. "Out of 126 significant ecosystems in the United States, 30 of them have been reduced by 98 percent, 58 of them have been reduced by 85 percent and 38 of them have been reduced by 75 percent or more." say Dr. Carl N. McDaniel, a professor of biology at Rensselaer Institute in Troy, New York, and Dr. John M. Gowdy, a professor of economics at Rensselaer Institute, in their book Paradise for Sale.

countryside begins. Once you pass this edge, you can drive for miles and miles and see only forests, meadows and farms.

The idea of city planning and the preservation of greenbelts spread to Western Europe, Soviet Siberia and the United States due to the influence of a book called Garden Cities of Tomorrow, which was published in 1902 by a British urban planner named Ebenezer Howard.

He believed greenbelts were needed to control the size of the city as well as to provide access to natural beauty. "Town and country must be married," he wrote.

His book influenced the passage of the Town and Country Planning Act of 1947 in the U.K., one of the most successful systems of land-use planning in the world.

The act, which still survives today with only a few modifications, requires that all municipalities in the U.K. draft land use plans.

To keep development compact, U.K. planners make the decisions about where it is to be allowed and prevent the depopulation of urban cores.

Years ago, the Town and Country Planning Act made funds available to local governments for the purchase of land in areas designated for greenbelts. There are now greenbelts from five to 20 miles wide surrounding English cities.

Today, the British government continues to increase the size of the greenbelts, but it no longer purchases land - it simply forbids further development in protected areas, except in special circumstances.

About 19,000 hectares (47,000 acres) have been added to the greenbelts since the present Labor Party came to power in 1997, while another 12,000 hectares (30,000 acres) are expected to be added.

"You tend to see farms in the greenbelt areas in the U.K., whereas in Germany, you're more likely to see large areas of forest," according to Michael Hough, a Toronto-based landscape architect, author and semi-retired professor.

Andrew Mathias, an information officer with the Deputy Prime Minister's office, said, "People are very protective of the greenbelts and recognize that they are the green lungs of the British cities."

Hough said Toronto, Canada is now establishing a greenbelt area to protect aquifer recharge areas, farm land and other natural places. "We have a major aquifer recharge area in the north part of Toronto that is absolutely enormous - the source of a whole system of some 36 rivers that flow south through the city into Lake Ontario," said Hough. "It provides water for 300,000 - 400,000 people. They've been discussing this as long as I've lived here, which is 40 years. It's a bit late, but not impossible.

"The farmers are angry about the changes," he said. "They had been planning on farming until they retired and then selling their farms to developers, but there is no alternative."

The government of New York began in the 1970s purchasing mountaintops, as well as complete watersheds -- the region or area that drains into a water body.

The city of Seattle, Washington, owns 99.9 percent of the land in its watershed -- an area comprised of 91,339 acres of uninhabited land that gathers and stores rain and snowmelt. This protects not only the water supply but also habitats for salmon and other species.

Twenty five years ago, the state of Oregon began requiring its cities to draw a growth boundary.

A study comparing Oregon counties to Washington State's Clark County proves the effectiveness of the regulation. While Oregon counties increased in population by 270,000 compared to a mere 106,000 increase in Clark County, Clark County converted 40 percent more land, from rural to suburban, per capita, than Oregon counties and paved 23 percent more land per resident.

Planners come from across the country to observe Portland, Oregon, which is often called the most livable city in the country because of its easy reach to the unspoiled countryside.

In 1967, when development began nibbling away the rugged beauty of the landscape in Boulder, Co., which butts up against the Rocky Mountains, voters

passed a referendum to raise funds for land purchases by increasing sales taxes. Since then, two temporary sales taxes have been added, bringing the total to \$20 million per year. The city has purchased a total of 42,000 acres.

The growth boundary contains our city, disciplining its growth," said Bruce Band, who is on the city's Open Space Board of Trustees.

"The policy effectively encourages development that is

upward rather than outward - but the city didn't want high-rise buildings, so it imposed a height limit, discouraging structures more than four stories. ... The city is also incorporating mixed use development," he said, adding, "People are living above stores and offices. It appears to be the trend of the future." Mixed use

They Almost Lost It

Portland's growth boundary was jeopardized when voters passed Measure 37 in Nov. 2004, which required the government to pay cash to landowners if the growth boundary reduced the value of their property; if the government could not pay, the owners were to be allowed to develop the land as they saw fit.

The measure soon became known as "the hate they neighbor act" as 7,428 claims were filed to develop the land -- some by timber companies and developers planning to turn timber lands and farm lands into large subdivisions and commercial construction.

The people were saying "It's not what we voted for."

On March 11, 2007, the Oregon legislature stepped in and revised the measure by allowing people who own high value farmland, forestland or land where the ground water is restricted to build three homes—including any existing homes. If they already own three homes, they can build one extra.

development makes it possible to walk or ride a bicycle to many of the places one visits routinely.

The idea of raising taxes to buy open space is spreading in Colorado. "Some of the cities that neighbor us to the east have their own open space taxes now," said Bland. "The county is buying open space. Even the city of Colorado Springs to the south, which has been pretty anti-tax in the past, just passed a tax to buy open space. They always turn down taxes for public libraries. I think they understand how much benefit they will get out of it."