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GUEST EDITORIAL

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# Land: The new gold

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In his thoughtful column for this issue, "Running Out of Land for Food," **John Ikerd** says, "the challenge of preserving enough farmland for food production will be a defining challenge for the 21st century." I couldn't agree more. Thus it is both timely and important that JAFSCD is addressing this critical issue.

I was fortunate enough to get to meet Lester Brown, founder of the Worldwatch Institute, in 2012 when he gave a keynote address at an American Farmland Trust (AFT) board meeting. He said something then that has stuck with me since: "Food is the new oil and land is the new gold." As such we must step up efforts to protect the quality and quantity of these most essential and precious resources.

AFT works to save the land that sustains us by protecting farmland, promoting sound farming practices and keeping farmers on the land. Much of our current focus is to protect and conserve enough farmland to ensure food security today and for future generations. As for me, I have spent my career balancing these two interests — saving farmland on one hand and supporting sustainable food and farming systems on the other.

In February 2014, I will have been at AFT for 25 years. For nearly 10 years prior to AFT, I worked on several direct marketing and agricultural development projects, including a stint as the executive director of the Massachusetts Federation of Famers Markets. Over this period, I have seen many positive changes both to protect farmland and to promote a healthy and sustainable food system. But in the absence of a robust national movement to save the land that sustains us, the threats remain real, and in fact have become more

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complex and challenging. Thus it was both encouraging and sobering to review the papers for this issue — to learn more about my Canadian neighbors and consider the U.S. situation in a broader global context.

In his column Dr. Ikerd also refers to Lester Brown and Worldwatch Institute — particularly their extensive research on rising global demand for food and energy in an age of eroding soils, declining aquifers, and global climate change. I agree that these are serious environmental constraints, especially in the context of saving land for food production. In an effort to protect farmland, we must address the quality of the resource as well as the quantity, and manage that resource to improve soil health, preserve water resources, and address climate change. In addition to addressing environmental issues, however, I would add urbanization and, at least in the U.S., an aging farming population as serious threats to the future of the natural and human resources needed to ensure future food production capacity.

According to the World Health Organization, for the first time in history the majority of the world's population lives in a city (WHO, n.d.). The United Nations (UN) predicts that by 2050, this will have risen to 69 percent of the world's population (UN Economic and Social Affairs Population Division, 2010). Farming can no longer be seen as a strictly rural enterprise. The intertwined dynamics of environmental constraints, population growth, and urbanization will continue to change the context of agricultural land use and food production in the 21st century. Two papers address this dynamic. In "Farm Adaptation at the Rural-Urban Interface," **Shoshanah Inwood and Jill Clark** discuss the resiliency of agriculture in urban counties, often due to policies and market-support programs that protect farmland from development. In "Farms or Freeways? Citizen Engagement and Municipal Governance in Edmonton's Food and Agriculture Strategy Development," **Mary Beckie, Lorelei Hanson,** and **Deborah Schrader** also address this issue, illuminating the conflict between citizens' demands for sustainable urban food systems and traditional land use planning.

Beyond urbanization, in the U.S. changing demographics are presenting new challenges the future of the land base that supports domestic food production. There is a gray tsunami of aging farmers and just a trickle of young people entering agriculture to take their place. As roughly a third of the farming population, farmers over the age of 65 represent the fastest growing sector of U.S. agriculture, while farmers under the age of 35 make up the fastest shrinking (U.S. Department of Agriculture [USDA] Economic Research Service [ERS], 2013). New farmers' inability both to find and afford appropriate farmland to purchase or rent is a major barrier to entry. **Kathy Ruhf's** thoughtful essay on "Access to Farmland: A Systems Change Perspective" addresses it broadly and is an important contribution to the literature.

When AFT was founded in 1980, we were the first national organization specifically dedicated to saving farmland for farming. At the time, a handful of state and local programs were pioneering the use of agricultural conservation easements. Back in those days, we functioned largely as an agricultural land trust and also engaged in federal conservation policy.

While AFT still holds easements on farmland, to effect more significant change not only in Washington but across the U.S., over the years we have shifted our emphasis to education, technical assistance, and research-based policy development at the federal, state, and local levels. Today 28 states and 91 local governments have funded easement acquisitions. Combined with about 70 land trusts that are seriously committed to farmland protection, more than 5 million acres (2 million hectares) of agricultural land can never be developed. Importantly, easement-protected land largely remains in agricultural production (Esseks & Schilling, 2013).

It is worth noting that of the 1,700 land trusts currently operating in the U.S., only 70 have acquired at least 25 easements or protected at least 5,000 acres (2,023 hectares) (Esseks & Schilling, 2013). Most focus

on other conservation purposes, such as protecting wetlands, watersheds, or wildlife habitat. While there is potential to develop these relationships, education and better understanding of each other's requirements and motivations are needed. Fortunately, there are good examples to follow. Of the small number of land trusts that actively are engaged in farmland protection, many provide services to help farmers — including beginning farmers — gain access to land. These include assistance with succession planning, land linking, leasing, and selling protected land to farmers and ranchers, as well as provisions to protect future affordability (Dempsey, 2012).

Finally, a handful of states and hundreds of communities have used planning, zoning, and smart growth to promote compact development and reduce conversion of farmland to the development of things like highways, houses and shopping malls. This also has paid off. Between 2002 and 2007, at the height of the building boom, annual conversion rates dropped 29 percent from the 1992 to 1997, the most intense period of sprawling development which led to unprecedented farmland conversion.[1]

Yet despite these achievements and the construction slow-down from the Great Recession, farmland remains at risk. Recent U.S. government data show permits for future home construction back up to pre-recession levels and housing completions up 21.6 percent in just the past year. Inevitably, much of this new construction is and will continue to take place on farmland, which is ideal for development because it is generally cleared, well drained, flat, and cheaper than suburban or urban land. But farmland also is at risk because most people are unaware of the consequences of its loss and unconcerned with food security.

Other countries are making significant investments in land to ensure future food supplies. As **Elizabeth Starr** points out in her paper, "Rethinking Investment Dynamics," the food-price crisis of 2008 spurred a global land grab in Africa, Asia, Latin America, and the former Soviet Union. While North America remains blessed with some of the world's most precious agricultural resources, policy-makers and the public would be wise to heed these trends, recognize the value of land for food, protect our agricultural resources, and prepare for a global population of nearly 10 billion people by 2050 (UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs Population Division, 2013).

Since 1982, the U.S. has developed more than 41 million acres (16.6 million hectares) of rural land — 1 out of 3 acres ever developed. Driven by superhighways, shopping malls, and suburban sprawl, development increased 57 percent while our population only grew 30 percent (U.S. Census Bureau, 2012; USDA, National Agricultural Statistics Service, 2007), consuming a land area as large as the states of Illinois and New Jersey combined (Dempsey, 2010). More than half of that land — 23 million acres (9.3 million hectares) — was devoted to agriculture, and equally concerning, much of this development took place on crop land and our best-quality soils, including about 14 million acres (5.7 million hectares) of prime farmland. Much of it also took place in urban-influenced areas, which support significant food production: 91 percent of the market value of fruits, 78 percent of vegetables, 67 percent of dairy, and 54 percent of poultry and eggs are produced in urban-influenced counties.[2]

According to ERS, the U.S. already needs another 13 million acres (5.3 million hectares) of fruit and vegetable production to meet recommended dietary requirements (Buzby, Wells, & Vocke, 2006). While most people may not eat their daily requirements, the gap is widening between supply and demand: U.S.

[1] American Farmland Trust's Farmland Information Center 2009 analysis based on 2007 National Resources Inventory data from the *Summary Report: 2007 National Resources Inventory,* by the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Natural Resources Conservation Service, Washington, D.C., and the Center for Survey Statistics and Methodology, Iowa State University, Ames, Iowa. Retrieved from http://www.nrcs.usda.gov/Internet/FSE_DOCUMENTS/stelprdb1041379.pdf

[2] Based on an analysis by American Farmland Trust's Farmland Information Center using the market value of agricultural products from the 2007 Census of Agriculture and the USDA Economic Research Service's 2003 Urban Influence Codes.

fruit and vegetable imports effectively tripled between 1990–92 and 2004–06 (Huang & Huang, 2007), and the United States has become a net importer of fruits and vegetables for the first time in its history (Johnson, 2012).

This should be cause for concern but not for alarm. While we still must protect our most valuable farmland, it is possible to reclaim land for agriculture and support community-based food production. In their paper "Beyond Protection: Delineating the Economic and Food Production Potential of Underutilized, Small-parcel Farmland in Metropolitan Surrey, British Columbia," **Kent Mullinix and colleagues** find that by bringing underutilized land into small-scale, human-intensive, direct-market production, these lands could easily satisfy Surrey's seasonal consumption of regionally appropriate crop and animal products, while also creating new jobs and economic activity.

As a rule, land is worth more for development than for agriculture, so Ikerd's historical perspective on the limitations of the free market gives us more than food for thought: "The market economy will neither provide food for the hungry of current generations nor preserve enough farmland to provide food for generations of the future." While it is worth considering a return to the commons, Starr's "Rethinking Investment Dynamics" on global land grabbing points to the potentially "devastating consequences on the local communities that live off land not formally belonging to them."

Ultimately, research, education, and policy interventions are needed to help farmers and ranchers adapt to the environmental constraints of soil erosion, declining aquifers, and climate change — as well as to urbanization and the fragmentation of the agricultural landscape. These must be premised on the fundamental needs to maintain well managed agricultural land for food production, and to ensure that it remains available and affordable to the next generation. To achieve this, we must build a larger constituency — not only in North America, but around the world. This issue of JAFSCD is an important step in that direction.

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