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Vanishing Farmland: How It's Destabilizing America's Food Supply

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Food security. Sounds boring, eh? It's not something talked about very often, but the fact is America's rising population is creating no small amount of peril in the food-supply chain. Farmland is disappearing at an alarming rate as farms are sold off and developed into suburban housing, shopping malls and transportation systems.

The [American Farmland Trust](#) is the only national environmental organization devoted entirely to preserving farms. On its Web site are the following statistics:

- The nation lost farm and ranch land 51 percent faster in the 1990s than in the 1980s.
- We're losing our best land -- most fertile and productive -- the fastest.
- Our food is increasingly in the path of development.
- Wasteful land use is the problem, not growth itself.

Julia Freedgood, managing director of Farmland and Communities, of the Farmland Trust, told me in an interview, "We're losing about a million acres a year, so over the course of the last 30 years since American Farmland Trust has been in existence, that's about 30 million acres."



Kiichiro Sato, AP

There's a healthy debate evolving in environmental circles about disappearing farmland and whether the loss could become so great as to threaten our ability to feed ourselves. Some environmentalists see farmland loss as largely an East Coast phenomenon.

Caroline Niemczyk, a board member of the Trust for Public Land, told me in an interview, "In the East Coast it's really a problem. We have enormous stretches of farmland in the Midwest and the far West, and that's of all types ranching, and citrus production in California, vegetables. We've got a lot of mixed use in the Mississippi Valley, but we are finding in the East Coast that it's harder and harder to maintain what really have become small family farms."

Other environmentalists say farmland supply in the West is also on the decline. They agree that while vacant land is still more widely available in the West, it is not prime farmland. Farms are being paved over in California more quickly than in most eastern states. In California, which used to host an abundance of prime farmland, [one of every six acres developed in California](#) since the Gold Rush was paved over between 1990 and 2004.

Most environmentalists see something called smart growth as the solution, which Freedgood describes as smarter urban planning: "What we need is to actually to have better cities, more livable cities, tighter-knit communities, more compact development, make more land available for farming so that we can feed more people."

The concept of smart growth became trendy in the 1970s. In the intervening 40 years, Americans have done nothing but tear up farmland for development in ever larger chunks to feed our voracious appetite for housing first, and worry about food production later. We're gluttons for suburban sprawl. On the other hand, our political will for smart growth is nonexistent. A large percentage of what has been developed, never to be

reclaimed, was built close to or on prime farmland. The reason was early American farmers needed to quickly transport fresh crops from farms to markets in more heavily populated areas. As cities grew over time, they expanded and consumed the best farmland.

This trend is exacerbating even today. In the 1990s, according to the Farmland Trust, prime land was developed 30 percent faster, proportionally, than the rate for non-prime rural land. Marginal farmland depletes a greater percentage of natural resources than prime land when it is farmed. It requires more water and irrigation to grow crops and produces a lower yield.

The Farmland Trust also reports some 86 percent of U.S. fruits and vegetables and 63 percent of dairy products are produced on prime farmland in urban-influenced areas, or near cities. That means much of that land will soon be consumed by development, too, if present trends continue. According to Freedgood, we're already short of what we need to meet America's appetite for fresh produce: "There's new data from the economic research service that shows that we're 13 million acres short of fruit and vegetable production to meet everybody's daily requirements."

As the supply of prime farmland and fresh produce dwindle, Americans in turn grow more and more dependent on imported foods. According to the [U.S. Department of Agriculture](#), we now import 79 percent of fish and shell fish, 32 percent of fruits and nuts and 13 percent of vegetables.

When we import more food, we increase our trade balance deficit, we spend much more food money on fuel for transportation, and we rely more heavily on other countries -- so disruptions in those markets affect our food prices and supply chain. We are not yet at the point where we are so dependent on foreign foods we could starve if we suddenly lost access to overseas markets. But as Freedgood points out, there's one problem few people consider when the topic of imported food is raised:

"There's a high correlation between . . . lack of food access and obesity, and if you're not producing enough fruits and vegetables and the price of fruits and vegetables is expensive, then those aren't the foods that people are choosing to eat. They're choosing to eat the cheap foods that tend to be really high in calories and salt and sugar and so on."

Any Volvo-driving, Brie-eating yuppie can tell you urban farmer's markets are all the rage and there seem to be more of them than in prior decades. But locally grown food still comprises a very small percentage of fresh foods sold on a national scale. So with dependence on foreign foods rising and development of prime farmland growing ever more rapidly, what else can be done to prevent over-development of farmland? The sad answer is, nothing the American populace seems to want to stomach right now.

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- **tjstieg**

11:26 PM May 29, 2010

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The face of agriculture has changed drastically in just the last 30 years. Many fewer family farms, more vertical integration of livestock production, large corporate conglomerates, use of food crops for synfuel. Diversity in animal and plant genetics has been and will continue to be sacrificed for per acre/per animal yield. Don't expect anything different as the world's population nears and passes 7 billion. Pray that the ag business can keep pace.

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- **cookroader**

10:56 PM May 29, 2010

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Protecting farmland is important but check the average age of an american farmer. He's getting older every year, not enough young people want to work that hard to commit to a life and a lifestyle.

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- **Jerry Small**

10:50 PM May 29, 2010

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The article doesn't mention that the imported food is also more subject to contaminants than our own food supply which we have enough trouble with because of slack inspection by the USDA.

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- **mjmcf45**

10:28 PM May 29, 2010

- [\(0\) vote this comment up](#)
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Duh...many have been saying this for decades...they are called farmers...the ignorance of a foolish nation is bringing about a dire situation...already has. It fits right in with the habits of an increasingly obese nation. Remember, obesity is more than a physical disease.

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- **melianthus**

10:05 PM May 29, 2010

- [\(1\) vote this comment up](#)
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I clicked on this article's link, which didn't mention farmland, thinking, "Finally! Someone outside of Louisiana is taking note of the fact that the BP oil disaster has the potential to remove 30% of the seafood consumed by Americans every year. But, no. Where's the outrage over the disaster actually taking place at this moment. Signed, Another Louisianian who is sick of being on the butt end of BP's joke and everyone else's ignorance about what is actually going on down here!

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- **katme2006**

9:35 PM May 29, 2010

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The measure of a nation's wealth and well being has always been measured by it's food supply. Dependency on foreign food sources is foolish and dangerous. We need to grow our own food unless we want to be dependent on a not so trust worthy world to feed us.

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- **ssdwyer115**

6:26 PM May 29, 2010

- [\(3\) vote this comment up](#)
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Just a thought, all the liberals for years have been harassing the farmers, with what do with the land, to not giving enough credit to farmers (with their I am so much smarter, than the average farmer). What did liberals expect? Ms. Erbe is a good example, urban chic, means I know more than anyone.

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- **conservgirl8**

6:24 PM May 29, 2010

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Come to California'a heartland. Everywhere along I-5 South, signs, "Congress Wasteland". So sad.

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- **Karen**

5:21 PM May 29, 2010

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instead of going out into the farm territory go back into the cities and redevelop all the empty and burned out areas that they have. Leave the farm areas alone with its dark nites and quietness for a person to think with and the irresponsible people who think its their right to make others conform to their ways.

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- **Chuck**

11:41 AM May 29, 2010

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Don't we need more farmland for ethanol production?

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- **Jerry Small**

10:59 PM May 29, 2010

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Ethanol production is a joke it costs almost as much in energy to produce as it creates, plus it drives up the cost of other farm products, and helps to drive inflation up.

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- **jklapper**

10:37 AM May 29, 2010

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You missed the fact that what is really killing prime farm land is that it is also the soil types that pass "perc" test, thus making it so they can be developed most easily.

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- **caddopecan**

10:20 AM May 29, 2010

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Obviously, the problem is that the land is not owned by the government. Only the government has the power to make the correct choices as to the best way to use the land. And, since the government should control the land, they need to control how much space you need. Take a look at the houses in the background behind the big tractor. The government could put 20 people in one of those houses. And that would stop the need to build houses on farm land. And, if 20 people lived in one house, they would only need about 2 cars. They could car pool, and that would save on highways, gasoline. So, the way to solve our problems is for Obama and the democrats to just take control of the land.

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- **cherokeesister**

1:43 PM May 29, 2010

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They are trying that already with 'imminent domain', but plenty are pressing for laws to prevent 'land grabs' by the State. 20 people in a house sounds like a slum nightmare, the kind that was torn down in NYC at the turn of the century...are you really suggesting we go back to that? incredible thought process you got there.

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- **ssdwyer115**

6:28 PM May 29, 2010

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They tried that in Russia and it didn't work, remember?

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- **Domingo Garcia**

10:51 PM May 29, 2010

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I think he's being sarcastic, but the overdevelopment is a problem. Around here due to the bad loans there are tons of vacancies throughout the subdivisions in Fort Wayne and the shopping centers as well. Yet, people still want to build. It comes down to greed. So we got a lot of overdevelopment without the economy to fill the homes and storefronts we have. A big joke.

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- **pacrowderholyo**

11:15 PM May 29, 2010

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It's obvious that you prefer the socialist and communist way of life, where the gov't OWNS everything, and CONTROLS everything. You wanna live in a slum house with 20 strangers? Be my guest. But count me OUT.

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- **Steven**

7:40 AM May 29, 2010

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My father-in law who farmed nearly all his life used to comment on all the land here in Iowa that could be used for farming that wasn't. Drive down any road and look at all of the land in the ditches that could be used to grow something. Now some of these ditches would be very hard to try and run machinery in or could wash out in heavy rain but there must be millions of acres across the country that could be used for something. Grow vegetables or plant apple or pear trees. you could make hay for livestock if nothing else. Just a thought.

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- **Don**

11:05 PM May 28, 2010

- [\(8\) vote this comment up](#)
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I know for sure in Ohio, a farm owner can keep the farm land out of hands from developers if that farmer passes and his kids do not want to farm. The property the house sits on can be sold but not the actual crop fields. Colorado has similar law I believe but they also have lots of undeveloped grounds that is not suitable for farming that should be used for development of housing. I do see some developments that existed on former farmlands but you have to blame the farmers for selling out. They want to retire and kids dont want the responsibilities so

they sell out to developers. What a shame.

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• **tistolaugh**

10:12 PM May 28, 2010

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The government continues to steal private land using 'eminent domain' and until a stop is put to that archaic robbery, farmland and other private land will continue to diminish at an alarming rate. Don't count on any changes with the current pro-big-gov't Congress and administration, however.

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• **janef**

5:34 PM May 29, 2010

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It's developers who are the ones doing the most damage. The government tends to try to preserve open land.

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