

POLICY NOTE

Farmland preservation laws do more harm than good for farm families

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Key Findings

1. Natural declines in farmland are used to justify excessive, unnecessary land-use regulations that are harmful to local economies and farm families.
2. Pierce County and other areas of Washington cite disappearing farmland as evidence to support restrictive policies like the Growth Management Act. However, land-use regulations like GMA are not effective or necessary.
3. Land-use regulations prioritize acreage over farmers, encouraging policies that save land without understanding the implications of excessive regulatory burdens on farm viability.
4. Land ownership is the primary risk management tool available to farm families in managing their farm operations. Land-use planning laws remove the land's value from farm families.
5. From 2007-2012, cropland experienced a net increase of four million acres, with the majority converted from the federal government's Conservation Reserve Program. The majority of acreage removed from cropland was converted to pasture, not development.
6. Land-use controls in Oregon, Kentucky, and Florida illustrate the excessiveness and pointless existence of such programs. Local solutions with local input can do more to effectively protect community interests.

Introduction

As concerns over farmland escalate, and state regulatory pressure builds, adoption of additional land-use planning laws and regulations may be the straw that breaks the camel's back, actually making it more difficult for local farmers. This Policy Note covers the background behind land-use planning, Pierce County's farmland situation, statistics and trends regarding disappearing farmland, best – and worst – management practices from other states, and policy recommendations to protect Washington's agricultural land. A more comprehensive Policy Brief describing this research is available at www.washingtonpolicy.org.

An understandable desire exists in many people to protect open space and farmland and the public places *an inherent value* in the protection of these lands. The value of open space, however, is impossible to quantify because much of it is subjective. To prevent development of these spaces, politicians turn to land-use planning laws.

Pierce County's farmland situation

On August 8, 2016, KING 5 TV (NBC) aired a report on "Protecting Pierce County Farmland." Reporters focused on the development of prime agricultural farmland and the risk that poses to "food security."

Those pushing for more aggressive land-use laws in Pierce County justify increased regulation on the notion of food security. This is not the first time such an argument has been made. But as Washington Policy Center's Environmental Director Todd Myers said, "It's better to grow food efficiently and ship it to the consumer than to grow food inefficiently where the consumer lives."

Instead of recognizing the Growth Management Act's failure to protect farmers, Pierce County Council members voted unanimously to expand the criteria of GMA's agricultural resource lands (ARL) within Pierce County. The expanded classification continues to make mistakes which threaten agricultural viability in Pierce County including:

- Land classification ignores the expertise of local farmers, substituting central planning to dictate classification of ARL parcels.
- Instead of focusing on the primary threat posed by the increasing regulatory burden to the agricultural industry, Pierce County is addressing the superficial aspect of farm acreage.
- Prioritizing acreage over farmers, GMA zones miniscule parcels into ARL, which are of little agricultural value.



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Much of Washington's 15.1 million farmed acres are not zoned explicitly for agricultural use. This illustrates the lack of influence GMA has on the protection of productive and commercially viable farmland. In the end, these regulatory attempts to protect farmland have become an empty symbol which are more likely to destroy the farmer in Pierce County.

Logic behind land conversion decisions

For farm families, land ownership is the primary risk management tool available to their operations. Land-use planning laws, like GMA, reduce the value of their agricultural lands, by precluding other uses for the land, removing much of its value. Allowing markets to function freely would retain the ability for land owners to transfer their land to the most valuable purpose.

Farmland statistics

Washington state is not alone in its concern for disappearing agricultural land. Urban sprawl trends of the 1970s warranted a federal study called the National Agricultural Lands Study (NALS) published in 1981. NALS concluded that within 20 years Florida, New Hampshire, and Rhode Island would lose all its prime farmland.

Thirty years later none of these predictions have come true. In fact, Florida and Rhode Island were ranked 3rd and 4th nationally in farmland increases from 2007 to 2012. These states exemplify the unfounded exaggeration which often accompanies the land-use planning discussion.

Farmland loss is often an example of healthy markets promoting sustainable choices. Acres removed from agricultural production are frequently low-production lands transferred out of operation, while cropland is increased in other regions or converted to timber land. Markets, not government programs, influence how land is ultimately used.

Best (Worst) Management Practices in Land-Use Policy

Despite evidence supporting the sustainability of free markets in land purchases, 47 states have various methods of land-use planning. Washington's Growth Management Act, Oregon's Farmland Protection Program, Kentucky's farmland preservation tax, and Florida's Growth Management Act are all examples of land-use protections whose costs far exceed the limited benefits.

Conclusion

Decades of farmland preservation regulations have increased burdensome policies with no direct benefit to agriculture, but they have created a high cost to residents and farmers themselves. The few examples used to justify land-use regulation constitute a handful of acres scattered aimlessly throughout urban regions with minimal impact on agricultural production. The high costs of such regulation, however, are frequently overlooked.

Free-markets and local jurisdiction can do more to protect efficient and viable farmland than bureaucratic oversight. Pierce County and all of Washington should allow economies to develop and prosper, and farm families to benefit from the work and risk they take every day by scaling back land-use regulation.