

Rural Development Issues

Farmland Protection

Prime farmland throughout the South is under threat of development. In Oklahoma, we must recognize that healthy and productive farmland

must be protected from the challenges of encroaching development. Within the past decade, population increases in the Midwest and mid-South were the norm. Ten to fifteen years ago, Oklahoma had no reason to suspect that urban sprawl and loss of prime farmland were lurking dangers. Now, public education efforts about farmland preservation are needed.

Recent statistics indicate that Oklahoma has several areas of high-quality farmland under threat from development. Two of the largest contiguous areas are those immediately south, north, and west of Oklahoma City and immediately south and east of Tulsa. High residential and commercial development is occurring in those areas. Virtually the entire state of Oklahoma is contained within a threatened major land resource area. The state is thought of as rural in nature, and Oklahomans still do not consider the loss of farmland an issue. However, these attitudes are dangerous to the future of the state's agricultural economy.

Now is the time to accomplish essential public education on the issues of farmland protection and to pass legislation dedicating funds to protection efforts. Several within the state have begun the process of public and private education for an effective and successful farmland preservation and protection program. The Trust for Public Lands (TPL) has been involved in such efforts, and the Kerr Center has joined them. The Kerr Center's Public Policy Institute, in concert with TPL and American Farmland Trust (AFT), conducted a training program in May 2002 designed to begin developing leadership and knowledge within the state on farmland protection issues.

In 2002, the Kerr Center was awarded a grant by the USDA's Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education program to conduct professional development training across the South to increase knowledge of farmland protection issues among agricultural education personnel. Voluntary federal farmland protection programs help farmers keep their land in agricultural production instead of converting it to other uses. We are also working to assist other Oklahoma agricultural organizations in their own endeavors to develop land trusts to hold conservation easements as farmland protection measures.

Building on these beginning steps, Oklahoma policymakers should engage with willing participants to cosponsor educational efforts and to create a statewide council to provide advisory guidance to the Oklahoma Department of Agriculture, Food, and Forestry and the Oklahoma legislature on the types of comprehensive legislation and training programs most suited to Oklahoma land tenure and culture and to prepare a short and long-range plan for Oklahoma farmland protection. The state should determine which comprehensive farmland protection policy tools are appropriate for Oklahoma, including purchase of development rights programs, conservation easement legislation, land trust legislation, and creation of agricultural areas protected from development.



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Creating Vibrant Rural Communities

Oklahoma has long struggled to provide support and encouragement to its rural areas. Job development and the pursuit of nonagricultural enterprises have long been the major thrust of rural development efforts. Oklahoma must acknowledge the critical role agriculture plays in the economic health and well-being of our rural communities.

A strong rural economic development policy must incorporate a strong agricultural development policy. The state legislature can promote greater access to funding for grants and lending programs to small-scale producers. Trained agricultural personnel should be incorporated into all state and regional economic development agencies and offices, and federally funded offices such as the Small Business Administration should be encouraged to take similar steps.

Pockets of poverty exist within Oklahoma farming and rural communities. Groups traditionally underserved by the agricultural credit and educational system, such as Native American, African American, women, and Hispanic farmers, are often located within those pockets of poverty. Special efforts and programs need to be directed to these populations and areas.

Economic development teams in rural communities must be educated about what information they should request from businesses interested in moving into their communities. Teams should use checklists to help them determine if an enterprise will actually benefit a community. These checklists would make clear both the positive and negative impacts those businesses could have on their communities, including infrastructure needs and potential effects on the area tax base. Teams should ask questions like the following: Will the jobs created be mostly low-paying, attracting a new work force to the area and thereby necessitating more community assets for schools, police, fire departments, and other community services? Will the profits from the enterprise stay in the community or be exported to an out-of-state company? Economic development teams must consider these and other factors to ensure the long-term health of rural communities.

Most of all, Oklahomans must understand that community matters, because if rural communities diminish, our quality of life also diminishes. The value of a rural community is not measured by the per capita income of its citizens. As the population of our rural landscape decreases, we must develop policies that encourage a new generation to join the agricultural force that powers our nation. Other states have

implemented programs designed to bring new farmers back to the land and production. In Nebraska, the state offers tax credits and forgives student loans as incentives for its citizens to choose the profession of farming. We must study effective measures used by other states and then adopt the measures suitable to Oklahoma so that we can develop rural policy to ensure the stability of our state.



Oklahoma Producer Grant Program field day crowd.