American Farmland Trust
SAVING THE LAND THAT SUSTAINS US

Environmental Benefits of Agricultural Lands

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Summary: *The loss of agricultural lands destroys key values that are critically important to the environment. Farmland loss is damaging both for fish and wildlife and for environmental qualities needed for human health and safety.*

1. **Farmland is disappearing at an alarming rate:** Nationwide 1.2 million acres fall to development every year. This is happening at an accelerating rate. It is happening at a rate that is 2-3 times the rate of growth in population. And it is not just any farmland that we are losing; it is our most productive, most valuable land, the prime land that produces our most valuable crops. It is today estimated that over half the value of American agricultural production comes from land in "urban influenced" areas. Yet this is not just an urban edge phenomenon; it is also happening in areas far removed from our urban areas. We are seeing ranchette, retirement, recreational, and long-distance commute development increasingly fragmenting agriculture far out in the heart of traditional farm country.

2. **The environmental benefits of agricultural lands:** When farms disappear, they are generally replaced by development, not by wilderness. When this happens, critical environmental values are destroyed. Opportunities for environmental restoration and protection disappear. And the environmental cost of investments in new public service infrastructure and of providing community services to new and to existing development dramatically increases.

   Water quality protection: Farmlands enhance both surface and ground water through natural filtration of pollution. Chemicals, sediments, and pollutants are settled out and taken up as nutrients by farm crops and other vegetation. Farms not only remove their own sources of pollution, but they also help clean non-point pollution from surface waters flowing off adjacent lands. Once lands develop, these benefits disappear and non-point pollution becomes an increasingly expensive and intractable public dilemma.

   Aquifer recharge: Public and private water supplies, seepage of clean, cold water into streams and rivers, the health of important natural wildlife habitat, and other critical environmental values depend upon the constant recharge of aquifers. Rain and irrigation waters falling on agricultural land seeps into the ground, recharges our aquifers, and continues these natural processes. The roofs, paving, and other impervious surfaces associated with most development destroy this important environmental cycle.

   Floodwater detention: Farms serve as giant, natural sponges, slowing down and soaking up excess water from high rainfall events. As farms disappear, the frequency and severity of flood events increases with incident downstream property loss, harmful scouring of natural salmon spawning beds, washing-away of vulnerable riverbanks, sedimentation,

and other environmental harms. New requirements for engineered floodwater detention, while helpful, have not proven adequate to ameliorate these harmful effects.

Riparian and upland habitat – connectivity with public lands: Farmland provides critical habitat for a multitude of wildlife species, some of which are currently threatened or endangered. Farms often lie along critical wildlife migration corridors adjoining or connecting with adjacent or nearby public lands. The disappearance of farms reduces available habitat and can often critically impair this important habitat connectivity. Farms also provide riparian and wetland wildlife habitat along with a concerned and knowledgeable landowner capable of providing habitat stewardship at very low public expense,

3. **Public cost impacts of farm loss:** As each of these environmental advantages is destroyed, the public must absorb increasing costs to mitigate for the negative impacts of new and of existing development. Dramatically increased costs for public services and for new investments in transportation systems, water supply, waste disposal, electric power generation, and other public infrastructure are visited upon existing ratepayers and taxpayers. A recent study, for example, reported that the average new public investment in public service infrastructure for each new home now being built in the state of Washington is $83,000.

4. **Lost opportunities for wildlife habitat restoration and protection:** As farmland disappears our opportunities to protect and restore wildlife habitat also disappear. The Northwest salmon crisis has already demonstrated the expense and impracticability of meaningful habitat restoration in highly developed areas. And habitat protection in such areas is obviously impossible. Lands that remain in agriculture, however, still hold promise. With public financial help, damaged habitat can be restored and areas of particular value can be protected. The loss of these disappearing opportunities is one of the most tragic consequences of unplanned farmland loss.

For further information:

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