

Reversing the Trends

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In 1980, the then Secretary of Agriculture published a report entitled, *A Time to Choose*, in which he wrote, “unless present policies and programs are changed so that they counter, instead of reinforce or accelerate the trends towards ever-larger farming operations, the result will be a few large farms controlling food production in only a few years.”

Since publication of that report, instead of making choices to favor small family farms, tax policies, subsidies, labor law exemptions and a host of other laws have rewarded the concentration of assets and wealth in fewer, larger farms and agribusinesses. For example, today four firms control over 80% of the beef production in the U.S. Since 1997, over 300,000 farmers have given up farming in this country.

Here in Ohio, these trends exceed national trends. From 1974 to 1992, Ohio lost 1.4 million acres of farmland, a third of which was lost to urban development. And nearly 60% of those acres were farmland with prime or unique soils. In the ten years between 1987 and 1997 Ohio lost over 8,500 farmers. Of course, there are many reasons for farmers to give up farming, including retirement and death. But there can be no doubt that the primary reason farmers give up farming is that they can't make a living farming.

Governor Voinovich appointed the Farmland Preservation Taskforce by Executive Order in 1996 to study the loss of farmland and the “urban sprawl” issues in Ohio. That Taskforce documented Ohio's urban land growth rate to be five times faster than population growth. It explored the true costs of not preserving farmland. And it raised questions about the long-term costs of moving people and activities out of urban spaces onto exurban land.

Recommendations made by the Taskforce ultimately led to the passage of Senate Bill 223 and authorization of \$400 million to be used to purchase development rights from farmers who wanted to continue farming. The American Farmland Trust has taken the lead in this effort nationally.

Other organizations have responded to the alarming trends by thinking “outside the box” and finding their own ways to reverse the trends. In addition to the work of the American Farmland Trust, the Cuyahoga Valley Countryside Conservancy, and the Ecological Design Innovation Center at Oberlin College have exciting programs to describe. And our local public radio/television station WCPN/WVIZ is supporting and encouraging a whole array of efforts by groups seeking to find solutions to urban sprawl in the Western Reserve.

The efforts of these organizations are described in the papers that follow. They challenge us to think “outside the box” as well. Loss of farmland to urban sprawl is a serious threat to our health and well being as a state. The concentration of land and factors of food production into fewer corporate entities is a serious threat to our national health and security.