North American Farmland Protection Strategies in Retrospect

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Abstract: The arenas in which farmland protection strategies have developed in North America vary in terms of perceptions of the farmland resource and the role of planning, and in terms of administrative structures. Administratively, farmland protection strategies have developed in a variety of structures, ranging from the very decentralized ones of many US states to the more centralized, though still mixed, ones found in some Canadian provinces. Farmland protection strategies can thus be investigated in terms of how they address a variety of fundamental issues. Difficult questions are raised by policy evaluation, e.g. are objectives coherent, how do objectives relate to goals and objectives for other land uses and what would have happened in the absence of the program? It is argued that, while it is essential to encourage more analyses of how results, e.g. farmland removal rates, relate to stated objectives, it is equally important to study the decision-making process of implementation to establish both stated and implied objectives and therefore how farmland protection strategies relate to the broader land use planning and management context for other land uses.

Since 1961 when the first real attempt at protecting agricultural land in North America was instituted in Hawaii (Myers 1976), a large variety of techniques have been developed that relate to farmland protection. Whether or not they have ever constituted a real strategy is questionable, if we accept that strategy refers to the conscious attempt at the coordination of the tools and the development of new tools, towards the attainment of well defined goals. The lack of coordination in many jurisdictions limits the effectiveness of many attempts at intervention while the lack of well defined goals limits our ability to evaluate the strategies.

Nonetheless, with the increased interest shown in North America in farmland protection in the 1970s, it is an appropriate time to reflect upon what has evolved. Our objectives are thus twofold: first, to provide a general framework within which various attempts at farmland protection in North America can be profiled in terms of goals, organizational structures and process; and second, to discuss the problems involved in measuring the effectiveness of farmland protection strategies as a preamble to the other papers in this issue.

Farmland Protection Strategies: A Framework

The problem and its perception

Farmland has moved out of agricultural production both at the intensive and extensive margins, but it is the removal of land at the intensive margin that has attracted most attention. The debate over the significance of land actually lost to urban development and of the negative externalities created by nonfarm development in adjacent agricultural areas has involved academics, politicians, interest groups and governments; in North America, the debate can be traced largely to the mid-1950s, somewhat later than the similar debate in the UK (Bryant and Russwurm 1979). The debate has never been resolved satisfactorily, partly because of the existence of the many values that are held in the agricultural land resource and partly because many of these values are inherently difficult to quantify. The values of agricultural land include a component attributable to its actual productivity — the capitalized value of net agricultural returns, another derived from the potential of the land to contribute to the economy (such as the contribution of farmland to a country's balance of payments and the
support of agricultural processing and supply industries), as well as several components related to societal values (e.g. the potential of the agricultural land resource and the amenity, or noneconomic, value of land).

This complexity of values is partially reflected in the wide array of perspectives with which the farmland resource is viewed. Five different perspectives can be identified:

1. First, there is the view of farmland as a residual after other uses have been designated. Such a view still prevails in some parts of North America with farmland being viewed simply as land available for conversion to "higher valued" economic uses.

2. A second perspective involves viewing the farmland resource as a special asset, with priority over other competing uses. This perspective recognizes the societal worth of potential in the farmland resource and the relative scarcity of land with high potential within many jurisdictions. However, since this value cannot be quantified with ease, if at all, positions and decisions must be taken based on pre-established goals for farmland.

3. A third perspective recognizes that the land resource has current agricultural value only when incorporated into a viable agricultural system involving people, capital and land. This perspective can be found in some criticisms of existing strategies (e.g. Ontario Federation of Agriculture 1974) and is important in that it represents an explicit recognition of the limitations of physical land use planning.

4. A fourth perspective, appearing very weakly in North America but more distinctly in Western Europe, involves attaching a significant value to amenity values, e.g. the historical heritage contained in the farm landscape.

5. Finally, a fifth perspective involves farmland being treated in a comprehensive way with other uses in planning deliberations in which the costs and benefits of alternative development strategies upon all land uses are assessed.

The five perspectives involve progressively more complex ways of looking at the farmland resource. The second perspective recognizes some societal values of farmland beyond immediate agricultural use values; the third recognizes the reality of farming as a business, the fourth recognizes noneconomic values of agriculturally-conditioned landscapes, while the fifth represents an ideal, comprehensive perspective in which all uses are recognized as having potentially legitimate claims on the land. At the beginning of the 1980s, farmland protection strategies seem to be dominated in North America by the first two contradictory perspectives, with some undertones of the third perspective in some jurisdictions.

Overall thrusts of land use planning and management

Farmland protection strategies are but part of broader planning concerns; just as perspectives on farmland have differed temporally and geographically, so have views of the overall thrusts of land use planning and management. These different thrusts in themselves reflect different attitudes to what is an appropriate structure and manner of handling problems, and it is important to recognize this in any appraisal of the evolution of public intervention in farmland protection.

Four basic thrusts can be identified — negative-regulatory, persuasive-regulatory, positive-regulatory and an integrated or comprehensive approach (Bryant et al. 1982). Early attempts at land use regulation generally can be regarded as negative-regulatory, being intended to protect welfare and safety and safeguard individual property. This thrust is exemplified by zoning regulations as the dominant tool of land use management. Underlying assumptions are that restrictions should be minimized and as local as possible and that the market mechanism by and large provides a fair system of land allocation between different uses. The rapid urban growth in the 1960s in North America, however, led to increasing regulations and, ultimately, increasing criticisms of this planning mode. Its frequently local nature received particular criticism because it often reflected ad hoc short term reactions, negative externalities were not effectively recognized and the many local governments created an environment in which long term policy development was difficult (Hawkins 1977).

The response to this in several jurisdictions in North America was the development of persuasive-regulatory approaches at a broader regional scale. This macro-persuasive approach can be considered appropriate in North America generally, where private property, including development rights, remains a critical cornerstone of society. In such a climate, planning modes involving persuasion and voluntary cooperation were easier to accept than the more positive-regulatory approaches that appeared with increasing strength in several West European countries pre-WW II and in the 1950s and 1960s. In North America, the epitome of the earlier attempts at regulation through persuasion is found in the various voluntary associations of adjacent municipalities, partly supported by federal, state or provincial funds, e.g. the Joint Planning Boards in Ontario and the Regional Planning Commissions in Alberta in the 1960s, and the Councils of Government in the US in the 1970s. While coordination improved considerably and more effective regulations arose, the emphasis was still placed on local and individual rights; in the farmland protection area, such persuasive-regulatory approaches are evident in the California Land Conservation Act (Williamson Act) of 1965 and in the New York Agricultural Districiting Laws of 1971.

With increasing awareness of negative externalities of development and growing acceptance in some quarters of the principle that land development rights are created by society rather than by the individual land owner (Reilly