In 1981, the US Soil Conservation Service (SCS) began to develop an agricultural land evaluation and site assessment (LESA) system. The initial design of LESA was largely the responsibility of Lloyd Wright of the former Land Use Division of the SCS (Wright and others 1982, Wright 1983). The system came about as a response to potential impacts of programs of the United States government on the conversion of farmlands to nonfarm uses. Some states and local governments have adopted it for similar reasons. The system is comprised of two parts: land evaluation (LE) and site assessment (SA). When combined the system is known as LESA.

The LESA system was developed to help implement the Farmland Protection Policy Act (FPPA) of 1981. This act requires federal agencies to identify and to take into account the adverse effects of federal programs on farmland protection; to consider alternative actions, as appropriate, that could lessen such adverse effects; and to ensure that such federal programs, to the extent practical, are compatible with state, local, and private programs and policies to protect farmland. Regarding criteria for assessing farmland effects, the SCS mandated that federal agencies use LESA.

Before adopting LESA, the SCS tested the system in 12 counties nationwide (Aradas and others 1982, Dunford and others 1983, Steiner and others 1984). After conducting these tests, the SCS released a handbook to explain the LESA system to federal, state, and local officials (US Department of Agriculture 1983). According to that handbook, land evaluation rates the quality of soil for agricultural use incorporating four existing US Department of Agriculture (USDA) rating systems: land capability classification, important farmlands classification, soil productivity, and soil potential. Site assessment then involves the weighing of a number of attributes including: agricultural land use, agricultural viability factors, land-use regulations and tax concessions, options to the proposed new use, impact of the proposed use on agriculture, compatibility with local plans, and existing urban infrastructure. Local and state governments may use any or none of these attributes, as well as identify their own.

But once the LESA system was designed, the USDA delayed implementation of the FPPA. The delay was a result of disagreement within the Reagan administration about the value of farmland protection. One faction was headed by former USDA Assistant Secretary John B. Crowell, Jr. He was concerned that the FPPA was an inappropriate federal involvement in land-use planning. A second group was headed by former USDA Secretary John Block, a farmer himself, who believed that the federal government should not unnecessarily encourage the conversion of prime farmland to other uses (Little 1984). Secretary Block prevailed and the USDA published the rules implementing the FPPA in the summer of 1984, three years after the act had been signed into law by President Reagan.

A modified version of LESA is used by federal agencies to comply with the implementing rules. Federal agencies must use LESA criteria to identify and take into account the adverse effects of their programs on the protection of farmland. Agency officials use the
The total points for each alternative site are then to be used when selecting one for the proposed project.

Federal implementation of the FPPA has continued to be slow. USDA efforts have been weakened by budget reductions. In addition, the Reagan administration closed the Land Use Division of the SCS shortly