

Changing Rural Landscape

Twenty years ago, if you drove down a country road in Indiana, you might have seen a farmstead every half-mile surrounded by acres and acres of prime farmland. If you take that same drive today, those farmsteads are most likely torn down, and the acreage has been converted into residential developments or golf courses. If the country road is next to an urban area, the farmland has, in all likelihood, been replaced by retail centers, business complexes, or industrial parks, and the country road is probably a heavily traveled thoroughfare.

The fact is, more people are moving to the country. A 1998 *Time Magazine* cover article reported that during the 1990's, rural areas had a net inflow of 2 million Americans. That is, 2 million more people have moved from metropolitan centers to rural areas than have gone the traditional small-town-to-city route. Thanks to the newcomers, 75% of the nation's rural counties are growing again after years of decline.

Reasons People Move to the Country

According to Rick Chase, Purdue Extension Ag & Natural Resources Educator, the reasons for this influx of people into rural areas and the resulting loss of prime farmland are many.

Some are looking to "escape" the crime, noise, and pollution of the city and lead a quieter lifestyle. Others are looking for the scenic landscape and the "sense of place" that rural living provides. Housing costs and the cost of living also tend to be less in rural areas.

"With new technology, many more Americans are working at home," Chase adds. "Where workers do their job doesn't matter as much today as it did 20 years ago." Technology is decentralizing America for industry, too. "Industries once tied to urban areas can now settle in the countryside, creating jobs for skilled workers almost anywhere," he says.

Farmers' Role

People's desire for country life is not the only reason for the changing rural landscape. Farmers and the government also play a role.

Chase says, "Farming is a risky business subject to the fluctuations of nature and government policies." Farmers' inability to set prices for their products further aggravates the situation. Over time, the land owned by farmers becomes their insurance against unplanned events. "Land is often used as a hedge against future economic demands," he says.

Government's Role

Chase says that local zoning policies may also contribute to the loss of farmland. In order to discourage homebuilders, many local communities in Indiana require large lot minimums ranging from 5 to 40 acres for residential development. However, the result is usually the opposite of what is intended. "People's desires to build homes in the country outweigh the cost of large tracts of land," he says.

Chase adds, "Other government policies, such as tax abatements for industry, capital gains taxes, and income tax deductions for homeowners, contribute to conversion of farmland to non-farm uses."

Highway construction policies can also contribute to farmland depletion. Chase says, "The construction of new highways contributes to much loss of prime farmland because it is more desirable to build roads on flat, productive land than on rocky hills with little topsoil." Highways also make it more convenient for workers to live far away from their places of work.

Last, development approval processes are often more expensive in urban areas, causing developers to look to rural areas, where there are fewer regulations.

Nobody can turn back time and undo the changes that have already taken place, but many see a need to protect the Indiana farmland that remains. One reason is that, if these forces changing the rural landscape are left unchecked, the very features of rural Indiana that have drawn new residents will be lost.

