

Farm, forest lands being protected -- but not always for farming or forestry

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More than 35 years after Oregon began one of the nation's most ambitious land use planning programs, a new study suggests it's still difficult to demonstrate that it has accomplished one of its primary goals - protecting agricultural lands and a thriving forest, farm and ranching industry.

There's some evidence that the laws have provided a "measurable degree of protection," scientists say in the report. However, there are also impacts that were little anticipated or considered four decades ago, such as the growth of "hobby farms" in which farming or forestry is not always the dominant goal.

But even if [agricultural production](#) is not maximized as had been planned, scientists say, these attractive amenity farms are part of what gives Oregon a pastoral beauty, which in turn can help attract people, industry and jobs as a mobile society seeks places with scenic attraction and a high quality of life. And many amenity owners prioritize environmental protection.

The study was published recently in the journal *Land Use Policy*.

"What we've seen, especially in the last decade or two, is that protecting farm land doesn't always protect farming," said Hannah Gosnell, an assistant professor of geosciences at Oregon State University.

"There's an increasing demand, from people who are willing and able to

pay for it, for 80-acre 'farmettes' that may involve some agricultural or forestry activities, but are as much rural estates as they are farms," Gosnell said. "In that sense, we may not be saving agriculture in the way that had been planned. But these are the social trends of the time, and we need to develop institutions that can address these challenges while taking advantage of the positive elements."

Gosnell recalled a rural appraiser in Klamath Falls telling her about a local farm equipment dealer that was still doing a good business selling tractors, but increasingly smaller ones designed for hobby farms, rather than major agricultural operations. For a time the business even added a drive-through espresso bar to accommodate upscale customers.

One early study in the 1980s found that between 1978 and 1982, farm land values increased by 53 percent, with greater increases found near urban areas. The study authors concluded that hobby farming was both a major driver of this phenomenon and a primary threat to commercial agriculture in Oregon.

"Ever since these laws were first passed in 1973, people have been trying to determine whether they are working to protect farm and forest operations," said Jeffrey Kline, a co-author on the study and researcher with the Pacific Northwest Research Station of the USDA Forest Service.

"There are things we can point to that are working, but it's complex," Kline said. "Things have changed a lot in the decades since then, and because there are so many variables, it's difficult to determine effectiveness."

Among the findings of the study:

- The land conservation effects of major land use plans are largely incremental, occur over long periods of time, and are difficult to measure.
- In addition to protecting land for agriculture, Oregon's land use planning system has had the added effect of preserving scenic views, water quality, and other environmental amenities which are important to state residents and contribute to economic growth related to migration to the state.
- One study cited in the article found that, in Hood River County, there were no significant differences in either resource use or land conversion between areas where higher numbers of dwellings were approved on resource lands, and those where fewer numbers of dwelling were approved.
- The large minimum lot sizes associated with Oregon's land use planning system may inadvertently encourage the growth of hobby farming, potentially at the expense of commercial farming. Research has not yet examined whether recent planning changes adopted by the state are addressing this phenomenon.
- Methods are inadequate to distinguish between the best agricultural and forest lands, in contrast to those of lesser quality, and research is needed to better address this.
- Some of the most effective policies to prevent farm and forest land from being developed are tax deferral incentives.
- Aside from regulation, other factors affecting land use include population and economic growth, new industries, changes in household sizes, personal income, tastes and preferences, and other issues.

Provided by Oregon State University

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