



WORKING LANDS WORKGROUP
Minutes of February 21, 2017 Meeting

Attendance

Present:

Workgroup Co-Chairs: Mike Carlson, Anna Haines

Facilitator: Margaret Krome

Workgroup Members: Margaret Burlingham, Coreen Fallat, Brian Haase, Chris Holman, Pat Leavenworth, Dick Okray, Aaron Thompson

Staff: Jennifer Thieme

Absent: Dan Bahr, Bill Berry, Ed Brooks, Dick Cates, Mike Engelson, David Gruzinski, Rob Gottschalk, Lance Gurney, Steve Guthrie, Steve Hilger, Jim Holperin, Ed Huck, Bruce Jones, Mike Koles, Deb Nemeth, Tom Quinn, John Torinus Jr., Robin Wagner, Curt Witynski, Ben Wojhan

Opening Comments: Facilitator and Co-Chairs

This Workgroup's process is based on impact mapping. In previous meetings, the team identified enabling conditions. We are now thinking about core strategies to meet those conditions. Our objective today is to gain clarity and focus on the strategies that were proposed at the last Workgroup meeting. Strategies will be fleshed out in more detail during our final meeting.

The Workgroup reviewed several of the strategies listed from last time, emphasizing a few 'higher level' ones where there seemed to be more group consensus last time. These included supporting sustainable farms and farm transitions, prioritizing important farmland, promoting conservation stewardship, and educating the public about environmental and social threats posed by farmland loss. Note that we're addressing working lands in a broader sense than the Farmland Preservation Program (FPP).

Minutes

Minutes from Nov. 10, 2016 meeting were reviewed and accepted without change.

Expert Presentation

Anna Haines and Aaron Thompson (University of Wisconsin Stevens Point) Agricultural Land, Farms, and Other Statistics

Workgroup members Anna and Aaron presented an overview of trends in farmland acreage and ownership in the last few decades. Some key points:

1. Forested land is not included as agricultural in the numbers evaluated in this presentation.
2. In 2012, 42% of WI acreage (14.5 million acres) was in farms.
3. From 2007 to 2012, the number of farms in WI decreased by 8,709 farms.
4. There is known noise in this data; it's self-reporting for this census. Here, a farm is if you gross or have the potential to gross \$1,000 from farming, or have \$1,000 in federal funding.
5. Average farm size was 194 acres in 2007, and 209 acres in 2012.
6. There are a greater number of full-time owners, but full-time owners farm less acreage than part-time owners.
7. From 2003 to 2005, ~12,000 acres per year were annexed across the state.
8. Annexation has decreased since 2009 recession and has not increased to those levels again.
9. Annexation account for ~6,551 acres of farmland loss/yr; the additional loss of ~117,000 acres/yr may be attributed to reforestation, farmers retiring, beginning farmers with low acreage, houses built in rural areas, and noise in the data.
10. Development agencies often get their way to build on open land regardless of the town's preferences.
11. Data from two main data sources, Census of Agriculture by USDA (self-reporting) and NRCS natural resource inventory (aerial photos), seem to conflict.
12. GIS spatial analysis of landcover suggests WI lost 22,000 acres/yr to urban development from 1992 to 2010, primarily around Green Bay/Appleton, Madison, and Milwaukee.
13. UW-Stevens Point students conducted surveys in central WI grasslands, ruffed grouse habitat.
 - a. Big Eau Pleine Farmer Survey – Surveyed all landowners in western Marathon County with 40+ acres of land that was at least 1/3 active production
 - b. Nearly 60% were landlords only
 - c. In general, people split into two groups: environmentally motivated and non-environmentally motivated
 - d. Environmentally motivated landowners were more likely to work with NRCS and DNR
 - e. WI River Alliance and local land conservation departments were ranked highly by both groups
14. Individual-based approach is best, and difficult to reconcile with broad approaches taken by federal government; best to work from neighbor to neighbor to build a landscape of conservation.

Comments by Workgroup Members

Data shows that while individual number of farms is decreasing, the acreage in farms has been recently stable. For instance, in Jefferson County, conversion to parks and increasing DNR ownership of land has contributed to farmland loss. American Farmland Trust will be releasing a comprehensive study of the state of farming nationwide in September, but cannot release any information beforehand.

The Workgroup considered the importance of rented land, and how that landscape may be changing. This data is not available through the sources reviewed for today's presentations. Counties may have the best data on rented land, though collecting it would be a major undertaking; a subset of data would not be representative of statewide trends. The Workgroup concluded they can move forward without this data, though landlords will be considered in our strategies.

Note: Anna Haines and Aaron Thompson's Powerpoint presentation can be viewed at <http://wisconsinlandwater.org/programs/food-land-water-project>

Discussion of Questions Posed by the FLW Steering Committee

1. Why are we seeing steady conversion, rezoning, and loss of agricultural lands? Why are local governments reducing agricultural land? Are agricultural industries being heard in that process?
 - a. These questions may include assumptions. While areas zoned as exclusively agricultural may be reduced, it may not be the complete removal of this land use. Some counties are choosing not to plan, and have varying local motivations.
2. Why is there a low rate of farmer participation in agricultural enterprise areas?
 - a. DATCP would like funding to conduct a social science survey to see if what they *hear* as a driving cause for low participation (heavy paperwork, low net return) resonates across the landscape.
 - b. Enrolling in some of these conservation programs would remove a landlord's options for other land uses.
 - c. It is possible to lock in a city's growth with Agricultural Enterprise Areas (AEAs), which could be an unintended consequence.
 - i. Note, however, that backfilling (i.e., filling a city's existing housing stock) is possible; Stevens Point is an example. Encouraging backfilling of cities could help retain farmland.
 - ii. Do this Workgroup's goals conflict with the American Dream? i.e., by local land use protections seeming to impede an individual's ability to build businesses in places near to but not within jurisdictional boundaries, where they can expand?
3. What would be the long-term impact of farmland loss?
 - a. American Farmland Trust: we need to support a long-term commitment to agriculture as an industry, retain business and young people in rural communities, and develop pride in rural culture.

- b. Loss of high quality farmlands, which are often lost to suburban sprawl, removes our most productive land from the system – i.e., food security.

General Discussion

We are on a trajectory toward the majority of farmland in very large farms. We may lose small-farm production, but retain small hobby farms and “mega” farms. We may consider diversifying this scale so it is not so centralized. This may occur organically: sellers are collaborating to increase their impact, and producers may have to follow suit so they can reach a scale that allows them to continue. The Workgroup also recognized the difficulties facing new farmers; it is not competitive to have a small farm, and they want to maintain a point of entry for new farmers. Note that new farmers will be more diverse, with more women and minorities.

Is preserving “farmland” the real goal here, or are we talking about preserving crop diversity, farm type, and farm ownership (i.e., economic and social goals)?

Farmland protection also connects to drinking water. Consider how Waukesha County allowed vast suburbanization, and they currently have drinking water concerns. Jefferson County doesn’t allow subdivision development in areas without existing infrastructure and are acting as the recharge zone for other counties’ groundwater.

There was some concern that this Workgroup's focus only addresses the margins of a much greater issue. When subdividing and development bring greater income to a town than the agricultural use of the property, town boards inevitably approve development of land. Consider setting principles and providing tools to empower local communities to make decisions best for the long-term.

Zoning, first established 100 years ago, and FPP are processes subject to change. FPP was first established in the 1970s and its latest incarnation is about 10 years old. More mature programs around the country show greater success. Designating areas to agriculture for the long term can attract agricultural business to the area.

The Working Lands Workgroup has established a structure to frame their ideas: an Ultimate Goal, Existing Conditions, and Strategies toward achieving the Ultimate Goal. The Workgroup conversation continued with additional refinements:

Challenges/Constraints:

- Farmers’ price instability over the long term
- State vs. local power struggle
- WI FPP not well-targeted
- WI FPP misunderstood
- Purchase of Agricultural Conservation Easement (PACE) program \$ ended
- Land conversion fee discontinued

- One size does **not** fit all
- Can't fight the American Dream

Enabling Conditions (to be added to those previously defined)

- Strong urban communities that attract and retain people

Strategies (Modification of previous strategies with changes noted in ~~strikeout~~ and italics)

1. Support economically and environmentally sustainable farms, including farms in and near urban areas.
2. Support new farmers, and successful farm transitions to the next generation
3. Support effective, long-term protection of important farmland. Identify priority areas for protection *and target resources and actions there.*
4. Support conservation stewardship.
5. ~~Support clear farmland preservation policies and programs.~~
6. Improve public understanding of the economic, environmental and social threats posed by farmland loss. Support information, education and training related to farming, food production, farmland preservation, soil and water conservation, and the food needs of an urban society. *Systematically collect and publish clear information on farmland conversion and related trends, including demographic, housing, urban expansion and infrastructure trends. Help the public and policy makers understand key issues and trends.*
7. Support farmland preservation as a way to protect watersheds, and reduce storm runoff.
8. Collaborate with a broad array of stakeholders.
9. Enhance funding for farmland preservation and conservation compliance.
10. ~~Identify priorities, and target available resources to achieve those priorities.~~
11. Strengthen the current FPP.
12. Balance preservation with property rights, and provide reasonable predictability to farmers, developers and other landowners.
13. Support sound land use planning and development.
14. ~~Systematically collect and publish clear information on farmland conversion and related trends, including demographic, housing, urban expansion and infrastructure trends. Help the public and policy makers understand key issues and trends.~~
15. Tie broad farm tax benefits, such as "use value" property tax assessment and Manufacturing and Agriculture Tax Credit (MAC), to farmland preservation and soil and water conservation.
16. Align *and clarify* federal, state and local laws, programs and policies to achieve farmland preservation and conservation objectives.
17. Develop regional, community and "grass roots" farmland preservation strategies *in priority areas.*

Strategies (New)

18. Educate local government on how to make appropriate land use decisions
19. Use Tax Incremental Finance (TIF) and create other incentives to infill

20. Create loan program to support residential upgrades
21. Identify especially important, targeted areas to preserve farmland
22. Target development in areas with current infrastructure (e.g., existing sewer, water)

The strategies listed above tend to cluster into five broad groups:

1. Education, promoting, marketing – non-mandated approach – The group recognized that education about farmland (and loss), and local government decision-making are critical to farmland preservation and success of farming. In addition, the group recognized the need for data of all sorts that influence farmland and farming.
 - a. Improve public understanding of the economic, environmental and social threats posed by farmland loss.
 - b. Support information, education and training related to farming, food production, farmland preservation, soil and water conservation, and the food needs of an urban society.
 - c. Systematically collect and publish clear information on farmland conversion and related trends, including demographic, housing, urban expansion and infrastructure trends.
 - d. Help the public and policy makers understand key issues and trends.
 - e. Educate local government on how to make appropriate land use decisions.
2. Local land use policy/development & enforcement – For this strategy, the group recognized that strong and vibrant cities and villages are important at a regional scale. Working lands and farming exist within a broader context that includes urban areas.
 - a. Support sound land use planning and development.
 - b. Use Tax Incremental Finance (TIF) and create other incentives to infill.
 - c. Create loan program to support residential upgrades.
 - d. Target development in areas with current infrastructure (e.g., existing sewer, water).
3. Conservation easements
 - a. Support effective, long-term protection of important farmland. Identify priority areas for protection and target resources and actions there.
4. Conservation of farmland & stewardship
 - a. Identify especially important, targeted areas to preserve farmland.
 - b. Develop regional, community and “grass roots” farmland preservation strategies *in priority areas*.
 - c. Support conservation stewardship.
 - d. Support clear farmland preservation policies and programs.
 - e. Enhance funding for farmland preservation and conservation compliance.
 - f. Identify priorities, and target available resources to achieve those priorities.
 - g. Strengthen the current FPP.
 - h. Tie broad farm tax benefits, such as “use value” property tax assessment and MAC income tax credits, to farmland preservation and soil and water conservation.

- i. Support farmland preservation as a way to protect watersheds, and reduce storm runoff.
 - j. Align and clarify federal, state and local laws, programs and policies to achieve farmland preservation and conservation objectives.
5. Next generation land access & farm transition
- a. Support new farmers, and successful farm transitions to the next generation.
 - b. (idea – farm incubator and condominium ownership)
 - c. Support economically and environmentally sustainable farms, including farms in and near urban areas.

Guiding concepts to keep in mind

- Maintain flexibility in whatever we do.
- Keep ideas regionally tailored.
- Collaborate with a broad array of stakeholders.
- Balance preservation with property rights, and provide reasonable predictability to farmers, developers and other landowners.

Assignments

- Chris H
 - Share information on Right to Farm law – what’s in it and how can we use it to work for us? (Strategy 1?)
 - Share information on beginning/next generation farmers (Strategy 5)
- Margaret K
 - Ask Joy Kirkpatrick to inform us on farming transitions
 - Check in with Anna, Mike and Jen on March 7. Send reminder and objectives for discussion.
- Coreen – Share the webinar on farm transitions (Strategy 5)
- Anna – Share information on local planning, infill, TIFs and related policies. Include basic structure of who makes decisions and how (Strategy 2)
- Margaret B – Look at what other places are doing in terms of outreach, education and branding, what level of government is doing it, and how it’s funded (Strategy 1)
- Mike C – Share information on conservation easements (Strategy 3)
- Aaron – Share information on conservation easements (Strategy 3)
- Brian – Look at what strategies other states are pursuing for conservation compliance and stewardship (Strategy 4)
- Pat – Look at what strategies other states are pursuing for conservation compliance and stewardship (Strategy 4)

Adjournment

By unanimous consent, the meeting was adjourned.