

OHIO FARMLAND SHRINKING

Preservation effort lacking as residential developments take over, data show

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On paper, Ohio's farmland-preservation program is a success.

In the seven years since the state began paying farmers not to sell to developers, nearly 27,000 farm acres have been saved. In a state that lost 6.9 million acres of farmland between 1950 and 2000, stemming the tide, even modestly, is viewed as a significant accomplishment.

Yet Ohio farmland is continuing to disappear, despite voter approval in 2000 of a bond initiative aimed at preserving green spaces including farms. Land, tax, farm and geologic data reviewed by the Associated Press combine to confirm the trend.

Where are the lost acres going? Primarily to residential development, state data show, a phenomenon that perplexes some observers given that Ohio's population is stagnant and predicted to remain so for the next couple of decades.

The state ranks eighth in the nation in the number of farms and 21st in the amount of farmland, behind big ranch states including Texas and Montana. Its \$79 billion food and agriculture industry dominates the state economy.

The Clean Ohio campaign, led by then-Gov. Bob Taft and former U.S. Sen. John Glenn, a Republican and Democrat, respectively, was pitched to voters as a boon for the environment. It would provide money to clean up blighted urban property, build recreational trails and preserve wildlife habitat and farms.

Voters agreed overwhelmingly to allow the state to borrow \$400 million. Half the money has gone to clean up contaminated industrial sites in cities. The other \$200 million is

aimed at preserving green spaces: \$150 million for wildlife habitat and streams; \$25 million for recreational trails; and \$25 million for farmland.

The Sierra Club, which initially opposed the bond package, recently has begun to rethink its position against the Clean Ohio program, said conservation program manager Ellen Hawkey Carmichael. Success stories on both the natural and agricultural fronts appear to be widespread, she said.

"A lot of people are really happy to see the positive effects the projects have had in their communities," she said. "If we've had a net loss of (undeveloped) land, my question would be what would the situation be like if there wasn't a Clean Ohio Fund?"

It is impossible to know, but Ohio Department of Agriculture spokeswoman LeeAnne Mizer said there is strong evidence that Ohio is ripe to preserve far more farmland than it does.

She said the state's farmland preservation office receives many more applications each year for conservation easements -- land-rights deals with the state -- than it can accept. Only about a tenth of the land submitted for preservation since 2002 through the state's agricultural easement program, 20,385 of 217,982 acres, has been preserved. That's 98 of 1,368 interested farms.

Between 2005 and 2006, Ohio lost three times that many farms overall, according to the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

Ohio's agricultural-preservation programs combined have saved 139 farms totaling 26,752 acres since the first grant was awarded in 1999, Mizer said.

"We're behind in that aspect," she said. "We haven't preserved as much as a lot of other states have, and it's something we would like to do more of. There is much more interest in the program, but we don't have the money to do that."

By contrast, preservation efforts in Pennsylvania have saved 318,350 acres -- 11 times what Ohio has, according to data collected by the American Farmland Trust. Colorado, Maryland, New Jersey and Vermont are among others that have saved five to 10 times the acreage that Ohio has, although in some cases, their programs have been around longer.

Brian Williams, the trust's Ohio director, said Ohio farmers are clamoring to participate in the state's program despite it being highly competitive and offering at times as little as \$1,000 an acre for agricultural easements, one of the lowest payouts in the country.

He said farmers often pick up 50 percent to 60 percent of the value of the easement themselves. "That just shows how interested a lot of farmers are in preserving their land. It's not just the money," he said.

But Williams said the state grant program cannot compete with the prices farmers are being offered for their land on the outskirts of major urban areas, where Ohio is losing most of its prime farmland. He said the group is not anti-development but wants to see more thoughtful land-use policies implemented across the country.

Ohio ranks among the highest in the nation for farmland acres converted to urban uses during the 1990s, even as its population growth was among the lowest. U.S. Census figures show the number of housing units in the state has continued to grow since 2000, rising more than 4 percent from 4.8 million to 5 million.

Agricultural property taxes made up 4 percent of all collections in 2005, half what they were five years earlier. By contrast, residential property taxes rose during that time from 71.1 percent of total collections to 73.8 percent.

Williams said that's an expensive trend for Ohioans. A study his organization conducted in Clark County found that for every dollar paid in residential property taxes, government spends \$1.11 in services. Commercial and industrial properties require 38 cents in services for every dollar they spend in property taxes, he said, and farms require the least of all -- 30 cents of services for every \$1 paid in property taxes.

"Agriculture is a bargain from the taxpayers' standpoint," he said.