Oregon's Verdant Willamette Valley :

Growing Crops While Growing Cities

Department of
Land Conservation
and Development

May 1999

During the presentation of the budget of the Department of Land Conservation and Development to the Joint Ways and Means Natural Resources Subcommittee, members asked questions about the effectiveness of the land use program in the Willamette Valley. Concern was expressed that Portland, Salem/Keizer, Corvallis, Albany and Eugene/Springfield and other cities would merge along the I-5 corridor and engulf valley farmland.

After hearing these concerns, the department decided to collect data from the reports submitted to LCDC and the Legislature each year by counties on the number of acres added to urban growth boundaries and the number of acres rezoned from farm zones to rural development zones. We have data from 1987 through most of 1998. The attached report contains and offers a brief analysis of that data.

May 7, 1999 Memo from Richard P. Benner, Director, Department of Land Conservation and Development, to the Joint Ways and Means Natural Resources Sub-committee and to interested parties.

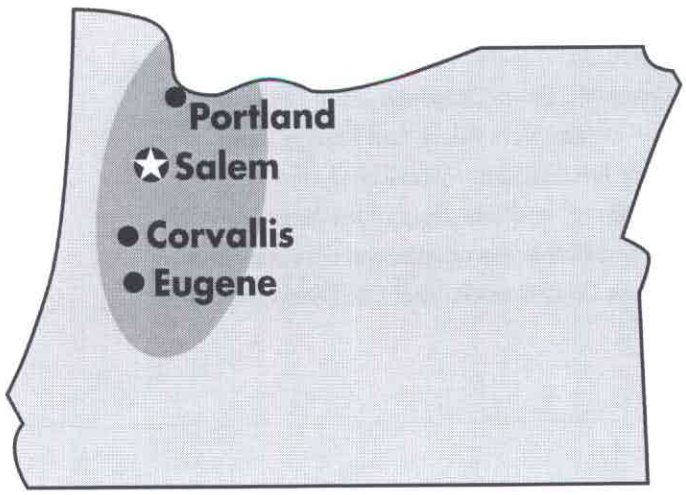

Figure I: Map of the State of Oregon with Willamette Valley indicated in darker gray.

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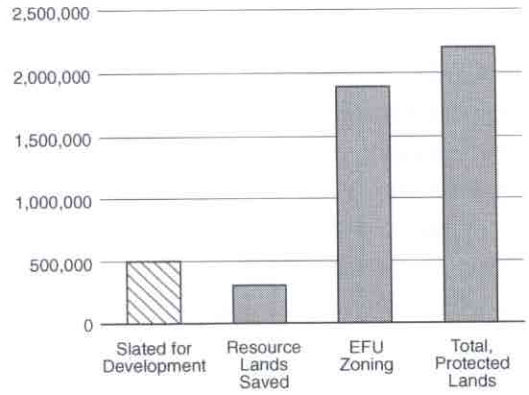
The American Farmland Trust has called farmland in Oregon's Willamette Valley among the most endangered by development in the United States.[1] Farmland in the Willamette Valley is remarkably productive: the nine counties of the Valley generate nearly $1.7 billion in farmgate receipts on 1.2 million acres of cropland from more than 250 commodities, ranging from grass seed to nursery stock.[2] But, according to the U.S. Census Bureau, the Valley has also been at the receiving end of 74 percent of Oregon's growth - much more rapid growth than the rest of the state of Oregon in every decade except the 1980's.[3] The state Office of Economic Analysis predicts continued fast-paced growth in the Valley — largely within the metropolitan-area counties.[4] The overall Oregon population has been growing at an annual average or 1.81 percent for the last 9 years — well ahead of the national average of 1.05 percent.[5] Although growth is expected to taper off for a period, the American Farmland Trust apparently had good reason to worry.

However, the American Farmland Trust did not figure the Oregon statewide planning program in its calculations. Instead, it evaluated the threat to Willamette Valley farmland as if Oregon were like other states. But, unlike other states with endangered farmland, Oregon protects its farmland by confining urban development within urban growth boundaries and limiting the use and subdivision of its farms. Statewide, Oregon protects 16 million acres of farmland and ten million acres of forest land. As required by Statewide Planning Goal 3 (agricultural land conservation), the nine counties of the Valley rezoned their land base, finishing that work in 1985. *Today, just over* ***two million acres*** *of the Willamette Valley are protected by the Statewide Land Use Planning Program. Some is land that might otherwise have been developed. See Figure II, left*[6] A total of 91 Valley communities are now contained within urban growth boundaries and have adopted comprehensive plans with various capacities for growth.

Figure II

Willamette Lands Slated for Development and Lands Protected Through Acknowledgement Review Process



[1] Farming on the Edge, American Farmland Trust, March 1997.

[2] Oregon County and State Agricultural Estimates for 1998, Special Report 790, Oregon State University Extension Service, revised April 1999.

[3] Growth and Its Impacts in Oregon - A report by the Governor's Task Force on Growth in Oregon. Spring 1999.

[4] Oregon Office of Economic Analysis, as reported in *The Oregonian*, "Willamette Valley rate outgrows state pace," March 22, 1999.

[5] According to Oregon state demographer Kanhalya Vaidya, this growth rate is likely to slow down for the next several years, but not appreciably. See "Decade of growth: Settlers flock to Oregon, but steady pace slows." R. Gregory Nokes, *The Oregonian*, April 10, 1999.

[6] "Resource lands" is a term of art in Oregon's statewide planning program. It has two meanings: it is an informal description of areas outside of urban growth boundaries that are agricultural or forest lands as defined in Goals 3 or 4, and it is a formal designation for farmland, forest land, estuarine resource lands, coastal shore lands, beaches, and dunes.

Since 1985, the Valley's population has increased by 420,000 people. This growth could very well have overwhelmed efforts to protect Valley farmland. In fact, some observers expected farm zones to collapse and growth boundaries to explode under the pressure.

There are three ways farmland can be lost [7] in Oregon:

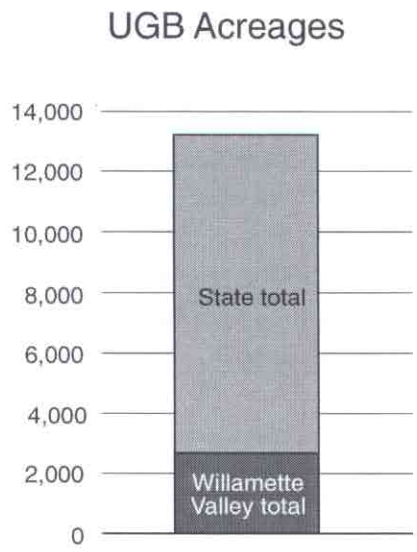
* Cities can **expand urban growth boundaries** to include farmland to accommodate growing populations.
* Counties can, in carefully defined circumstances, **rezone farmland** to rural development uses.
* Counties can allow **"non-farm uses"** in farm zones that convert farms to campgrounds, golf courses, churches, schools and a long list of other uses.

Oregon farm zoning has held the line; expansion of urban growth boundaries has been negligible. In 1987, Oregon began to keep track of all expansions of urban growth boundaries, all zone changes from farm zoning to development zoning, and all uses and land divisions approved on farmland. This data gives policy makers an excellent view of the effectiveness of Oregon's farmland protection efforts. Here is what the data show:

I. Expansion of Urban Growth Boundaries

Cities and counties established urban growth boundaries(UGBs) in the late 1970's and early 1980's. In 1987, when cities and counties began to report their expansions of UGBs to the state, there were 435,524 acres within the UGBs of the 91 cities in the Willamette Valley. Between 1987 and 1998 (the last year for which data is available), population in the Valley grew by 420,000. Nonetheless, the 91 Valley cities added only 2,671 acres to their UGBs. In 1987, the state counted 2,690,000 residents. In 1998, there were an estimated 3,281,97 residents in the state of Oregon.[8] *Population grew by .82 percent between 1987 and 1998, but UGBs expanded by only .006 percent.* One reason cities added so little land to their UGBs is that boundaries were drawn to include a 20-year supply of land. Only recently have cities begun to exhaust the supply of land within their UGBs. Another reason is that cities have been using their supplies of buildable land more efficiently than in the past.

Figure III



The number of acres added to Valley UGBs since 1987 discloses a remarkable contrast between the Willamette Valley and the rest of the state. Population growth in the Valley accounted for 74 percent of the state's growth between 1990 and 1998. Yet, of the total 13,214 acres added to UGBs statewide during those same years, Valley cities added only 2,671 acres, or 20 percent of total acres added. *See Figure III, left.*

[7] This statement invariably engenders a discussion of "lost" farmland within urban growth boundaries. On this point, DLCD Director, Dick Benner, responds:

" Are we losing some farmland in the Valley? Yes, we are losing some ground. What we are losing is farmland inside the urban growth boundaries our cities established 15 to 20 years ago. But we weren't trying to save this land. This is the land we deliberately set aside to diversify Oregon's economy, generate jobs for our people, and provide housing for our children. This is the land that has contributed toward nine years of rising median incomes. Let's ask a different question : *Are we "losing" farmland we haven't planned to save?"*

II. The Valley's Future Landscape

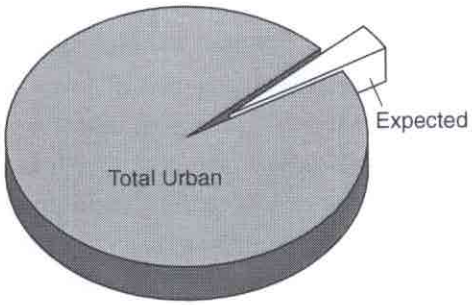
What of the foreseeable future? Will the next 20 years see large expansions of Valley UGBs, with boundaries merging along the I-5 corridor, extinguishing farms in their paths? This would be a reasonable expectation, given that the UGBs were drawn to include a 20-year supply and are nearly 20 years old.

But the answer is: No.

First, even if growth over the next 20 years continues at its predicted rate, the 91 cities of the Willamette Valley would need to add only 15,000 acres to their respective UGBs to accommodate it.[9] *See Figure IV, left.*

Figure IV

Projected Urban Acreage in the Willamatte Valley (20 years)



Second, it is estimated that no more than half that amount will be farmland (7,500 acres, or .004 percent of the approximately 2 million acres of lands zoned for exclusive farm use) because most of the land to be added to UGBs will be land already affected by development, not in farm zones today. [10] The amount of new urban land needed is so small that a keen observer would be hard-pressed to find it by comparing a map of today's UGBs with a map of UGBs in 2020. *See GIS Map insert.*

Cities are accommodating growth more efficiently today than in the past. Salem-Keizer, for example, estimates that its existing land supply will accommodate 25 to 35 more years of growth based on efficient development under the existing comprehensive plan.[11]

III. Rezoned Farmland

In 1975, counties in the Valley began to rezone farmland to protect it for farm use in accordance with the Land Conservation and Development Commission's Goal 3 (Agricultural Land).[12] By 1987, when counties began to report farm zone changes to the state, there were approximately two million acres in farm zones in the nine Willamette Valley counties. *Since 1987, counties have redesignated only 1,429 acres from farm zones to rural development zones. The 1,429 acres represents only .0007 percent of the two million acres in farm zones.*

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[8] U.S. Bureau of the Census

[9] DLCD planning staff evaluation.

[10] DLCD estimate, based upon interviews and city reports.

[11] DLCD planning staff analysis.

[12] Valley counties also designated some 265,000 acres for rural development. Some of this land met the definition of "agricultural

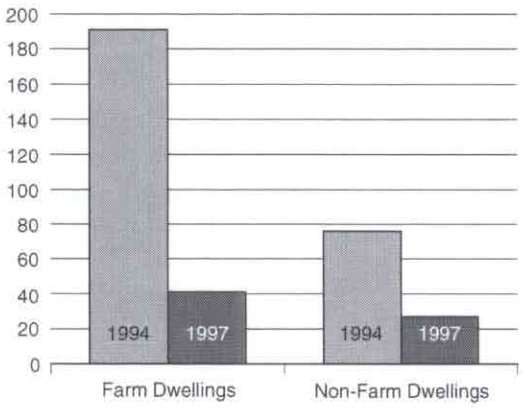
IV. Non-farm Uses

Until 1993, there was steady erosion of Willamette Valley farmland within farm zones (but outside of urban growth boundaries) due to a variety of factors. Counties approved an assortment of golf courses, churches, schools, campgrounds and dwellings not related to farming. In response, the 1993 legislature struck a new balance between the Willamette Valley and the rest of the state: non-farm development became more difficult in the Willamette Valley and less difficult in the rest of the state[13]. The Land Conservation and Development Commission (LCDC) followed suit in rulemaking one year later (1994).

In the period before the effective date of the changes in state statute and Commission rules, there was an upsurge in local approvals of non-farm uses. Counties approved 9 Valley golf courses, totaling 1,187 acres.[14] For comparison purposes, this is nearly half the amount of land added to all of the Valley's UGBs between 1987 and 1998. Since the statewide land use planning program recommended legislative changes, nonfarm uses have declined significantly. Among 36 counties there were 373 new farm dwellings approved as opposed to 149 in the first year that the current standards became effective. Non-farm dwellings, in this same period, declined from an average of 345 to 252. Among the nine Willamette Valley counties, farm dwelling approvals on Exclusive Farm Use (EFU) land totaled 191 by 1994 accounts. By 1997, that number had dropped to 41 farm dwellings. In 1994 in the Willamette Valley, non-farm dwelling approvals on EFU land totaled 76. By 1997, the number was 27 non-farm dwellings. *See Figure V, left.* No new golf courses have been allowed on Valley farmland since the change in the law.[15]

Figure V

Farm and Non-Farm Dwellings Approved in the Willamette Valley



In short, since the Legislature and LCDC changed farmland protection laws in 1993 and 1994, there has been a downward trend in approval numbers for most categories of farm dwellings statewide, and a sharp decline in approvals of farm dwellings and non-farm dwellings in the Willamette Valley.

V. Conclusion

Since comprehensive plans were drawn to protect Willamette Valley farmland in the late 1970's and early 1980's, there has been little loss of the farmland that the state of Oregon set out to protect. If Valley cities grow in efficient development patterns, they will not engulf Valley agriculture.

But this should lead no one to complacency. The state Office of Economic Analysis forecasts a population of just over four million at the end of the period 2015-2020. The nine Willamette Valley counties are estimated to account for just over three million of that total.[16] Only scrupulous application of state and local land use laws will prevent significant losses of farmland in the next 20 years.

land." But it was designated for rural development because it was already affected by development that made agriculture impracticable.

[13] See HB 3661.

[14] LCDC Exclusive Farm Use Report for the Years 1992/93, adopted May 1994, and EFU Report for the years 1993/94, adopted October 1995.

[15] State of Oregon, LCDC, Exclusive Farm Use Reports for 1993/1994 and 1996/1997.

[16] Office of Economic Analysis, "County Population Forecast," updated 8/19/97.