

## **A COMPREHENSIVE VALUATION OF AGRICULTURE LANDS: A PERPETUAL INVESTMENT IN OREGON'S ECONOMY AND ENVIRONMENT**

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Between 15 million and 17 million acres of land is under farm or ranch operation in the state of Oregon. Roughly 40,000 operators manage these lands—planting and cultivating crops on approximately 5 million acres; raising livestock on pasturelands and rangelands of approximately 10 million acres; and managing forest and woodlands, wetlands, and other conservation resources on the remaining 2 million acres.

*This farmland, like other natural resources, does not exist as an unlimited supply, as it was considered at the time of westward expansion.*

Farmland is under constant pressure for development to other uses, especially the flatter croplands that have the highest production capacity. Some advocates of development argue that agriculture produces relatively low values of economic activity, and that residential, commercial, aggregate mining, or manufacturing use would benefit the community or the state more.

In the short-term, conversion of agricultural lands to other uses can, in many instances, generate substantial financial activity. But over time, it is questionable whether these other uses will equal the perpetual benefits of agricultural productivity – especially when accounting for benefits that accrue beyond simple economic gains.

***Land in any use can be converted to another use (perhaps at considerable cost) that may provide higher short-term economic gains — but such conversions are not always in the best interest of the community or the surrounding environment.***

Agricultural land use supplies many economic, ecologic, and cultural benefits to a community and a region. Most importantly, once converted to a non-farm use, it will likely never return to farm production. A rising interest in locally grown food and fiber with the assurance of quality, food security, and food safety are additional benefits. The potential to produce bio-fuels and renewable energy, along with carbon sequestration capacity, wildlife habitat, and open spaces are a few of the many other seldom measured or mentioned assets of a viable agricultural base. Oregon's current land planning system does not properly account for the value of these perpetual benefits that agriculture has to offer.

Agricultural land value cannot be measured simply or solely by a snapshot of what is growing on a parcel during any one production season, nor can it be accurately captured by a short-term comparison to other uses.

**OREGON AGRICULTURE IS ADAPTIVE, RENEWABLE, SUSTAINABLE, EFFICIENT,  
LOCALLY OWNED, PERPETUAL, AND GROWING**

**Adaptability:** The crops and commodities produced will change over time in response to market signals, technology, and consumer demand. Witness the rise in production of nursery products, wine grapes, grass seed, blueberries, and other specialty crops in the past decade even as there has been a decline in acreage devoted to vegetable crops, strawberries, hops, garlic and other specialty crops.

**Renewable:** Agricultural production provides us with a source of renewable food, fiber, fuel, and medicine — and if the land is protected and properly managed it will continue producing into perpetuity.

**Sustainability:** Agriculture is one of the most constant and stable economic engines our economy has, while also producing many ecological and community benefits:

- More than 1,800 farms in Oregon have been operated by the same families for over 100 years. There is no other industry in the state with that type of sustainable, long-term record of operation.
- Properly managed, agricultural soils can continue producing crops, livestock, fiber and other materials, and providing carbon sequestration, wildlife habitat, open spaces, and other amenities critical to human subsistence and enjoyment for generations to come.

**Agriculture efficiency** is another factor that has increased dramatically over time and will undoubtedly continue in the future, making any measure of future productivity based on a single point in time a simplistic approach. Today the average American farmer can feed as many as 130 people, compared to 27 in 1950. Developments in technology, agronomy, water conservation, hybrid seeds, and other applications make agriculture a continually evolving and effective means of generating more output (economic activity) — and in increasingly environmentally friendly ways — on existing farmland. A recent study demonstrates that productivity growth over the 1947-85 periods accounted for 82 percent of the economic growth in agriculture, compared with only 13 percent in the private non-farm economy. Moreover, the rate of productivity growth over this period in agriculture (1.58 percent) was nearly four times the corresponding rate in the private non-farm economy (0.44 percent).

*(“U.S. Agriculture, 1960-96: A Multilateral Comparison of Total Factor Productivity,” V. Eldon Ball, Jean-Pierre Butault, and Richard Nehring: Technical Bulletin 1895, May 2001, USDA/ERS)*

**Efficiency** also means the consumer in the USA spends less time earning enough money to buy food than in any other country in the world at any point in history — on average, less than 9% of disposable income goes for food in the United States. Consumers in Japan will pay nearly 21%; Germans pay out over 18% of disposable income; the French, nearly 16%; and in developing countries, nearly 50% of income goes for food. Countries that have small production bases relative to population and which import large portions of their food supply pay significantly higher prices. Loss of farmland is not without a price. Retaining a viable agriculture base is a long-term investment in food security and economic sustainability of a community and a nation.

**Locally owned:** In Oregon over 60% of agriculture land is owned and operated by local farm families. A large portion of the remaining acreage is owned by retired growers or widowed landlords who have outlived their husbands — both of whom rely on rental income from other family farmers as a significant source of their retirement proceeds.

Local ownership means dollars are retained and circulated more in the local economy.

***More than 98% of Oregon farms are operated by families, with 88% being sole proprietor single-family operators, 5% being family partnerships, and about 5% operated as family-held corporations. Very few non-family corporations own or operate farms in Oregon.***

***Perpetual and Growing;*** History has shown that agriculture lands can be productive year after year — and increasingly so at an accelerated pace. It would be a mistake to minimize agriculture’s future contributions to society as being of little or no value due to analysis based on a constant time value of money with a constant income stream i.e. the same amount of income year after year. Oregon agriculture is not stagnate. Land in agriculture production is renewable, perpetual and adaptive. These characteristics coupled with scientific and technological advances, increased demands and increased yields have led to annual increases in gross revenue per acre that has enabled agriculture production not only to be sustainable in perpetuity but also to continue to grow.

Oregon’s agriculture industry has a history of growth. Annual increases in productivity spurred Oregon’s agriculture total output to grow from \$428 million in 1964 to \$3.8 billion in 2004 – a 788% increase! That equates to an annual increase of 5.61% compounded annually.

It is prudent to expect agriculture to continue to grow and contribute more to the county’s economy in the future. Even while the world’s consumers (population) is continuing to grow, the amount of high value farmland is decreasing; yet, new technologies are creating increased production per acre and all of this is on top of a steady general inflation rate. It would be a mistake, however, to use this productivity increase to argue that less farmland is needed.

Even though the projection of a continued annual increase in gross production and revenue per acre is evident, such an analysis is based only on the productive value of the asset, and misses many other significant contributions that are necessary to consider in any evaluation of farmland valuation.

## **ECONOMIC MULTIPLIER**

Agriculture’s contribution does not begin or end at the farm gate. Oregon agriculture supports many local and regional businesses with millions of dollars spent on seed (\$150 million); feed (\$250 million); hired labor (over \$800 million); petroleum and chemical products (\$400 million); construction and repair for farm buildings, animal housing, and equipment (~\$30 million); machine hire and custom work (\$125 million); veterinary services; transportation services, warehousing/storage and wholesale marketing (\$225 million); business services, such as accounting, legal services, payroll services, banking and financial services; crop consultants; farm equipment repairs and parts (\$206 million); product inspection and certification services, licensing and other services (\$50 million) ... and much more. Processing adds about \$2 billion to the value of the farm products (packaging, labor, shipping, etc.). Much of Oregon’s agricultural and processed food products (over 80%) are shipped out of state, thereby generating export dollars. The high percentage of agriculture products that are exported make the concept of Traded Sector

Economics very important in evaluating the relative contribution agriculture provides to our economy. “New” dollars generated into the economy by exporting are more valuable than “old” dollars being recirculated as a result of goods and services sold locally. After considering these factors, most agricultural economists use multipliers between 1.5 and 3.0 for agriculture. The following analysis uses a multiplier of 2.2.

**CASE STUDY: WASHINGTON COUNTY AGRICULTURE METRICS**

Since Washington County is often at the heart of the debate about land use and additional agricultural lands being brought into the urban growth boundary, this analysis will examine the benefit stream from agricultural lands and production in Washington County, and the costs associated with converting the land to non-farm use. A similar analysis could be conducted for any country, or the state as a whole.

Number of Farms (Washington County):	1,900 (2002 Census of Agriculture)
Land in Farms:	130,683 acres, or 28.3% of the land in the County
Land Loss Rate:	Washington County has lost 58,000 acres of farmland in the past 28 years –1.3% per year conversion rate and increasing.
Financial Investment:	Each farm represents an average investment value of \$538,000, or a <b>total of over \$1 billion countywide in land and building assets.</b> Another \$90 million is invested in machinery and equipment.
Gross farm sales:	\$223 million (2003)
Economic Multiplier	2.2
Economic Impact:	\$491 million

One billion dollars in assets (farm land) is generating nearly half a billion dollars per year in local economic activity. Every two years this land asset is generating a perpetual, renewable economic value throughout the community nearly equivalent to the value of the land itself.

Farms in Oregon are largely single owner, proprietary, entrepreneurial operations. Individually, depending on size, they may not affect Oregon’s economy much. Collectively, farm production value, food processing, warehousing, transportation, marketing, and all other aspects of services and related functions in the industry equates to more than \$8 billion in economic value – a significant part of Oregon’s overall economy, and second only to the high tech industry.

It is critical to note that the loss of productive capacity from individual farms and associated land converted to other uses translates into loss of demand for inputs, services, equipment, processing, and related activities. The impacts ripple through the economy and affect other farming operations.

In Washington County, each of the 1,900 farms, on average, represent an annual stimulus of \$260,000 to the County’s economy (using average farm sales and the multiplier). Employing an annual productivity growth factor increase of 5.6% projected over 50 years

(anticipating increased productivity, efficiencies, new technological developments, and adoption of renewable energy), **the total economic stream amounts to a minimum of \$19 million for each farm over this period.**

One must realize that some soils are more productive than others and therefore the actual per acre contribution from the best soils will be higher than this average and the poorer soils may be lower — but this is not a static measure, as wine grapes are now grown on what was previously considered less productive soils on hillsides and nursery crops are grown in containers on land that may not otherwise be productive for row crops. The availability of the land resource to adjust to these various uses is the critical issue, and increases in productivity will also affect the valuation.

#### **COST OF A SHRINKING INFRASTRUCTURE:**

In addition to the obvious direct cost to the economy, the loss of farmland creates a hidden cost to the remaining farm community. The efficiencies of the remaining farms may be adversely affected by the shrinking land base. It is well understood that the cumulative productivity of many farms enable volumes of products in sufficient quantities to attract processing companies, distributors, equipment dealers, service providers, suppliers, and other businesses. In addition, farmers depend on surrounding operators for custom work, machine rentals, markets for hay, plants, and seed, land trades, and land rentals. As the volume of agricultural lands is reduced, the cumulative and symbiotic reliance of this structure is undermined and precipitates the decline of general agriculture viability in an area. It goes beyond the individual farmland that is lost.

#### **SOCIETAL COST OF FARMLAND DEVELOPMENT:**

In addition to the loss of economic activity associated with agriculture use, there are also increased costs in converting land to non-farm purposes.

One way of calculating the net economic impact resulting from conversion of farmland to residential development is to compare the costs of providing community services for residential versus farmland on a per acre demand for public (tax) services. For example, new uses will likely increase demands for social programs, public health and safety, highway construction and maintenance, public works, schools, etc. Some of these already were provided to agricultural land, but with conversion to urban uses there will be an increase in support levels.

Cost-of-community-service studies have recently been developed to measure the costs of providing public services to various land uses. Costs of public services are apportioned according to demands generated by land use category. These costs are then compared to the revenues from each land use category. Residential costs typically exceed revenues while commercial/industrial and farm/open land categories generate more than they use. (The Economics of Maintaining Land in Agriculture in Fresno County, Dennis L. Nef, CATI Publication #960802, August 1996,)

This study reports: “Assuming land values represent the capitalized value of income from the land, an acre of development in the [study] area results in losses of \$3,840-\$7,900. Using a multiplier of 3.5 yields additional losses of \$13,445-\$27,670 to the county from

lost agricultural sales. Thus, total costs in terms of lost agricultural production are in the range of \$17,250 to \$35,500 per acre.”

In evaluating fiscal impacts to government and associated costs (taxes and fees), this report concludes: “The costs and returns to government agencies of developing a particular site can be quantified (Burchell and Listoken). The costs of streets, sewer, water and solid wastes systems, parks and recreation, police, fire and government must be considered. Revenues from developers’ fees, increased property taxes, other taxes and charges are also calculated. Based on community plans for adjacent areas, expected growth patterns were determined for each study site. These growth patterns were then used to estimate the needed infrastructure. Costs and revenues from developer fees were then calculated based on current fee structures... development costs exceed fees in all 3 [study] locations...”

Based on information developed by the American Farmland Trust (Cosgrove 1994), for every dollar spent in taxes for community services in New York State (schools, infrastructure, etc.), residential lands cost \$1.32, while agricultural lands cost \$0.21.

Developed lands require 6.3 times more in public tax dollars to support and maintain in public services than the same land in agricultural use.

***In other words, residential development requires more public expenditures than land in agricultural use, and places a greater burden on taxpayers.***

One might argue that increased residential development brings in more tax payers to support the higher costs. The costs, however, continue upward as urbanization brings the need for additional police, higher crime rates, social service needs, and so forth.

According to a 1997 study in Onondaga County, in New York State, the net economic impact from the sale of 100 acres of farmland for the development of twenty, 5-acre home plots was a loss of \$32,800. Maintaining the land in agriculture equaled a net gain of \$2,383 (Onondaga County Farmland Protection Board 1997).

Nef explains the unmeasured costs and benefits in this manner: “The benefits from converting agricultural land to other uses obviously outweigh the costs to developers or they would not continue to develop farmland. The losses in terms of productivity must be fully covered or the farmer would not have sold the land for development. If society finds development of farmland to be a significant loss, it must value the losses more highly than the market, which means that the market is missing something. In such a situation, developers are not paying the full costs of development. In economic terms, an externality is involved. An externality can exist if there is some unpriced aspect of the land such as amenity value. Society may value the open space (or other benefits) associated with agricultural land, but this is not fully taken into consideration in private market transactions between buyers and sellers when the property is developed. Government can overcome this problem by "internalizing" the externality. That is, the full costs of development must be apparent to those making the decisions.”

<http://www.cati.csufresno.edu/Cab/rese/96/960802/>

Studies have been conducted to document the value that the public places on farmland preservation, giving some indication of the non-market price for the entire “package of

amenities and benefits” that occur with operating farms and ranches. Many states, and recently the federal government, have directed public resources at farmland preservation, purchasing easement or development rights that will enable agriculture land to operate without development pressures.

#### **ENVIRONMENTAL COSTS OF FARMLAND DEVELOPMENT:**

Conversion of farmland to developed uses also presents many environmental costs.

Land that generated oxygen and sequestered carbon (CO<sub>2</sub>) through plant/crop production, farm forest, pasture, or other agricultural use is paved over or covered with buildings. This creates more runoff into waterways, carrying pollutants from cars, trucks, and industrial wastes over these impervious surfaces that previously absorbed rainfall. Development also generates more traffic, resulting in more air degradation, less open space, and reduction in wildlife habitat.

Of course all human activity impacts the environment in some manner — this is a matter of course in order to survive as humans as we obtain materials used to house, feed, and clothe ourselves, and to develop products that we use every day for business, home life, and entertainment.

But the bigger the footprint of development (urban, residential, commercial, etc.), the more impacts and costs to the environment. As much as 75% of Oregon wildlife spends part of its life on a farm or ranch. With habitat loss due to urban encroachment, these harbors of open spaces for wildlife are reduced. Wildlife is crowded on to the remaining farms and forests, which can result in damage to crops and natural environments, even in urban settings.

Based on a \$20-per-ton “price” (\$3 to 4 dollars per acre) for storing carbon to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, the farmland acreage in Washington County (130,000) represents over \$400,000 in annual value of sequestered carbon that is benefiting the region.

*Farmland also provides a sense of local heritage and history, open space, and scenic beauty — all non-market or “unpriced” amenities derived from this resource.*

#### **ALTERNATIVE TO AGRICULTURAL LAND CONVERSION:**

Most land uses competing for farmland have viable alternatives. When the farmland is gone, agriculture will be gone. Planners and policy makers would be assisted greatly by conducting a needs analysis that calculates the costs to society that will result from the additional conversion of farmland and compare this costs to the marginal cost of alternative locations for other land uses. Careful analysis of alternative sites likely will show there is only a small additional cost associated with avoiding farmland conversion. Because competing land uses have alternatives only the additional cost of moving to another site should be balanced against the total loss resulting from farmland conversion.

Planners can assist in protecting the high value farm soils by locating competing use on less productive soils or within commercial or urban zones that are underutilized. The result of this option will be for both the farms and the competing use to contribute to society into perpetuity. Society gets the benefits of both uses in exchange for only the additional cost of locating the competing use elsewhere.

*Planners and policy makers should make every effort to evaluate alternatives to farmland conversion.* Such alternatives might include;

1. The increase of urban densities by expanding vertically instead of horizontally.
2. Directing new developments onto in-fill and non-productive soils.
3. The use of quarry rock instead of using gravel from under high value farmland soils.
4. Utilities, such as sewage treatment facilities, using minimal acreage by building compact structures instead of large man-made natural treatment wetlands on high value farmland soils.
5. Utilities being routed to avoid high value farmland soils.
6. Parks and golf courses being located off high value farmland soils.

In some cases it might be advantageous for policy makers and society to provide economic incentives for business and industry to locate off high value farmland soils, or to create a system development charge to compensate for the “externalities” which are lost as a result of the conversion of farmland. In other cases it will be important to make investments in transportation systems and networks that facilitate movement of agriculture and other goods while minimizing impacts on farmland.

Seldom will the short-term development cost savings that attract developers to high value farmland soils offset the value to society of the economic, ecologic, and cultural benefits that agriculture offers.

## **CONCLUSION:**

This analysis is not an argument against development. Rather, it attempts to itemize the total costs to society resulting from the conversion of farm lands, amounting to the sum of the loss from agricultural production and surrounding support businesses, the weakening of the infrastructure and potential loss of processors, the “extra” cost sink of urban or commercial development, the increased impacts to the environment, and loss of scenic beauty and tourism value. *All these costs should be fully calculated and evaluated by public officials and business interests when considering where to focus development, and all other options must be considered prior to identifying productive farmland as a site for development.*

Public officials, city and county leaders, economists, home builders, aggregate miners, business leaders, farmers, and others involved in economic development and decisions related to land use need to recognize the broad benefits to society through farmland preservation and efforts to minimize development impacts on agricultural lands.

Agricultural lands – even in urban areas – are critical drivers that contribute substantially to the region and the State’s economic engine. They represent perpetual, renewable, adaptable, and sustainable economic and ecological value.