

The Wetlands Reserve Program was authorized by the 1990 Farm Bill and is administered by the NRCS. The WRP pays for perpetual and long-term conservation easements, as well as shorter-term agreements that call for restoration and protection of formerly cultivated wetlands. Since the program began, the NRCS has spent \$274 million to restore and protect 325,833 acres of wetlands nationwide. Program rules tend to favor areas where there are extensive, low-cost wetlands such as the Mississippi Delta, but anticipated changes will make the program more attractive in the East and far West where land is more expensive and wetlands more isolated.

The federal government owns 408 million acres of forests, parks and wildlife refuges that provide substantial habitat for wildlife. Most of this federal land is located in 11 western states. Another 108 million acres are publicly owned by states, municipalities and other non-federal units of government¹⁶. Yet public agencies cannot sustain wildlife populations alone. Farmers and ranchers own more than twice the amount of land devoted to public forests, parks and wildlife refuges. Well-managed, privately owned agricultural land can provide significant wildlife habitat.

According to the USDA, it is hard to overestimate the importance of the non-market goods and services that agriculture provides. Well-managed farmland protects soil and water resources and can prevent flooding. It absorbs and filters wastewater and provides groundwater recharge. New energy crops even have the potential to replace fossil fuels. From wetland management to on-farm composting for municipalities, farmers are finding ways to improve environmental quality.

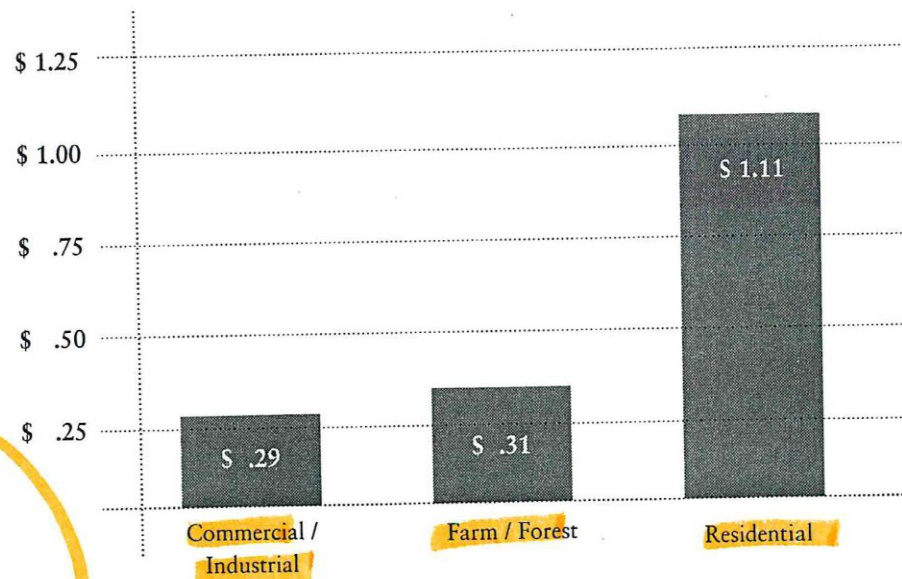
SAVING FARMLAND IS AN INVESTMENT IN COMMUNITY INFRASTRUCTURE

To many people, the most compelling reasons for saving farmland are local and personal, and much of the political support for farmland protection is driven by grassroots community efforts. Agriculture contributes to local economies directly, through sales, job creation, support services and businesses, and also by supplying lucrative secondary markets such as food processing. Distinctive agricultural landscapes may be magnets for tourism. Farmland offers a hedge against fragmented suburban development while supporting a diversified economic base. Increasingly, people view natural resources, including agricultural land, as vital for the well-being of our communities, rather than as "free" material to be disposed of at will.

Privately owned and managed farmland generates more in local tax revenues than it costs in services. In a series of Cost of Community Services studies, AFT has developed a method to analyze revenues and expenditures on a municipal land use basis. To date, AFT and others have used this method in more than 40 communities in the Northeast and Midwest. Time and time again, careful examination of local budgets has shown that farm, forest and open land more than pay for the municipal services they require, while taxes on residential uses consistently fail to cover costs. Saving farmland is an investment in community infrastructure. Figure 0.2 on page 8 summarizes the findings of 40 COCS studies. ☆

FIGURE 0.2: SUMMARY OF COST OF COMMUNITY SERVICES STUDIES

Median cost—per dollar of revenue raised—to provide public services to different land uses.



In related studies measuring the effect of all types of development on municipal tax bills, Ad Hoc Associates found that in general, as communities become more developed, tax bills go up. Even communities with the most taxable commercial and industrial properties have higher-than-average taxes¹⁷. Local governments are finding out, often too late, that they cannot afford to pay the price of sprawl.

SAVING FARMLAND SUSTAINS OUR QUALITY OF LIFE

Sometimes the most important qualities are the hardest to quantify. This is true of the role that farmland plays in contributing to a sense of place. Farm and ranch land maintains scenic, cultural and historic landscapes. It offers beautiful views and managed open space, which can provide opportunities for hunting, horseback riding, fishing and other recreational activities. Farms and ranches create identifiable and unique community character and add to our quality of life.

These qualities are appreciated by visitors as well. For example, people vacation in places as distant as the state of Vermont or Steamboat Springs, Colo., because they enjoy the scenery created by rural meadows and grazing livestock. In Lancaster, Pa., agriculture is still the leading industry, but with Amish and Old Order Mennonites working in the fields, tourism is not far behind. Napa Valley, Calif., is another place known as a destination for "agro-tourism." Tourists have become such a large part of most Napa Valley wineries that many vintners have hired hospitality staff. Both the valley and the wines have gained name recognition, and the economy is thriving.