

'Economically, it's an incredible option for farmers'

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groups and individuals have started thinking about ways to preserve it while keeping those property rights intact.

The debate in Idaho is also a microcosm of the battles that have been fought across the West to protect high-quality farmland from development.

The Treasure Valley in southwestern Idaho is home to 8,000 farms — almost one-third of Idaho's total. It's also the state's largest urban area and one of the fastest-growing regions in the nation, increasing the pressure for development.

As a result, farmland is being transformed into housing and retail developments in some parts of the valley, particularly in Ada County, Idaho's most populous. The toll on farmland in the county has accelerated over the decades. Ada County had 244,218 acres of farmland in 1974 but 144,049 acres in 2012 — a decrease of 41 percent, according to the Ada Soil and Water Conservation District.

In adjacent Canyon County, the state's second most populous county, the situation is more hopeful — for now. Total farmland in that county is holding steady and has actually increased a little in recent years, according to the county's development services division.

But with the valley's population projected to increase 62 percent, from about 650,000 now to 1.05 million by 2040, many people believe it's only a matter of time before Canyon County farmland starts to disappear as well.

"It's just sprawling right to us," said farmer Brad McIntyre, a member of the Owyhee Soil and Water Conservation District. "We've already lost huge amounts of farm ground around here. I don't want to see any more prime farm ground go away."

According to the USDA Census of Agriculture, the average market value of farmland in Ada County was \$5,728 an acre in 2012 while it was \$5,332 in Canyon County.

Some farmers have drawn a line in the dirt.

Ada County farmer Neil Durrant said his family has chosen to keep farming despite the fact that many other farmers around them are selling their land to developers for a high price.

"The development pressure around here is huge," he said. "People have asked us and we've told them we're not interested (in selling) and we won't be for a very long time."

Development worries

But other farmers are accepting the attractive offers from developers.

Farmer Janie Burns, chairwoman of the Treasure Valley Food Coalition, recently drove from Boise to nearby Nampa and was dismayed by what she saw.

"Almost every corner had a sign saying 'For Sale' or 'De-

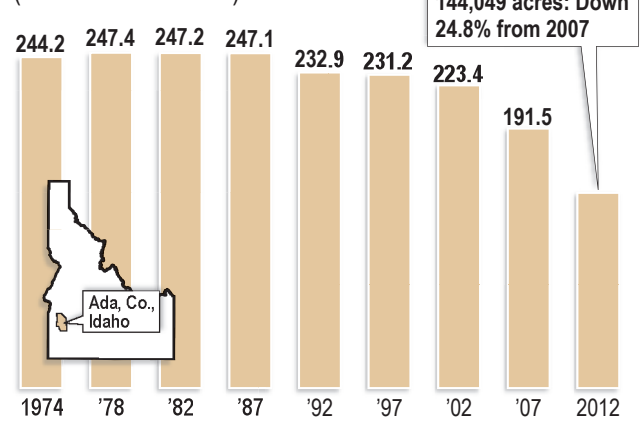


Sean Ellis/Capital Press

Neil Durrant cuts hay in a field near Kuna, Idaho, on May 26. With ag ground in some parts of the Treasure Valley disappearing at a rapid rate, several groups have recently become involved in farmland preservation efforts.

Ada Co., Idaho, land in farms

(Thousands of acres)



Source: USDA Census of Agriculture

Alan Kenaga/Capital Press

velopment Potential," she said. "That is so sad."

Several groups in recent years have undertaken efforts to educate the public about the issue. They include the Ada Soil and Water Conservation District, the Treasure Valley Food Coalition and the Coalition for Agriculture's Future, which was created by the valley's seed companies to combat what they call "un-smart growth."

The Idaho Association of Soil Conservation Districts adopted a resolution in October to "support preservation of our working farmlands and efforts that would create viable options for farmland owners to preserve their farmland permanently if they so desire."

In addition, Boise State University's School of Public Policy has conducted surveys in the past year that show overwhelming support in the Treasure Valley and across Idaho for efforts aimed at preserving farmland.

The Treasure Valley Food Coalition recently wrapped up a yearlong educational effort exploring possible solutions for preserving farmland. An idea that rose to the top during the effort was the possibility of creating a voluntary statewide farmland easement program.

This type of program would pay farmers a certain amount per acre in exchange for an easement that preserves the land as farm ground forever.

Lemhi County rancher Merrill Beyeler, a former state representative, is helping lead the

effort to approach legislators about providing state funding or resources toward such a program.

While that could mean state dollars, Beyeler said, it could also come in the form of a tax credit, which the farmer can sell to a business or any person needing one.

"That is sort of the idea we were thinking of," he said. "There is some work going on and I'm hoping it will move forward."

What other states do

Other states approach farmland preservation efforts in a variety of ways.

Washington state created a conservation easement program in 2002 to try to fight the conversion of agricultural land into commercial developments and housing. The state program matches money put up by others, such as nonprofit land trusts or local governments, to compensate farmers for keeping the land in agriculture instead of selling it to a developer.

The state doesn't just consider food production in allocating money. Applicants also are judged on whether the land will preserve wildlife, fish, scenery and agritourism. Still, the land has to be kept in shape for farming, Office of Farmland Preservation coordinator Josh Giuntoli said.

"You can't just let the land go. You have to do something to keep it available for agriculture," he said.

During the current two-year

budget cycle, the state received 24 applications and approved \$4 million for six conservation easements.

"There's just not enough money to purchase development rights on all the property," Giuntoli said.

California also uses conservation easements and farming advocates are trying to regain state funding for the Williamson Act, a program under which the state compensated counties for much of the property tax revenue lost when they gave farmers and ranchers lower tax assessments in exchange for pledges to keep the land in agriculture for at least the next 10 years.

The state had been spending nearly \$38 million a year to protect about 16 million acres, but that funding was eliminated in 2009 amid a state budget crisis and was never restored.

However, the Williamson Act's effect on keeping land in agriculture has been limited, said Edward Thompson, the California director of the American Farmland Trust. That's because the money that can be made from selling land to developers is sometimes greater than the tax savings, he said.

Still, California has been losing roughly 40,000 acres of farmland to development every year for more than a decade, meaning that "tax policy will only get you so far," Thompson said.

Another tool for preserving farmland is conservation easements, in which property owners are paid for voluntarily designating all of part of their land to remain permanently in open space, which could include farming. The payments are meant to reimburse landowners for the loss of property value because of the restricted uses.

In California, as of last year, 57,631 acres were protected in easements through the state Farmland Conservancy Program, which has spent nearly \$87.7 million on them since the 1980s, according to the AFT. In addition, \$500,400 has been spent to protect 1,588 acres through the Sustainable Agricultural Lands Conservation Program, which is funded by

the state's carbon emission cap-and-trade proceeds.

That state money has been matched with nearly \$68 million in other funds, including bonds, fees and private contributions, according to the AFT.

Oregon's farmland preservation efforts center on statewide land use planning, which was adopted in 1973. The law limits development on the highest quality farmland zoned Exclusive Farm Use. In return for giving up development rights, farmland is taxed at a reduced rate compared to residential or industrial property.

Mary Kyle McCurdy, deputy director of the watchdog group 1000 Friends of Oregon, said the state's land-use laws are consistent across county lines. That gives farmers the certainty they need to make long-term investments in land and equipment.

A key provision of the system is that every city establishes an urban growth boundary that determines where growth will occur. Development happens within the boundary; farming, forestry and recreation happen outside it. An orchard, berry farm or grass seed field in the middle of other farmland can't be developed into a subdivision.

Growth boundaries can be expanded by local governments, but the process is not simple and gives the public — plus business and activist groups — the opportunity to challenge or modify decisions.

Idaho's options

In Idaho, the conversation has centered around voluntary farmland easements.

Two Idaho legislators who are also farmers told Capital Press they thought the idea of a voluntary farmland easement program was a good one but they also said it's going to be tough to convince legislators to fund such a program.

Rep. Clark Kauffman, a Republican farmer from Filer and former president of the Idaho Grain Producers Association, was at a meeting last winter where the idea was discussed.

"If you have a willing buyer and a willing seller of an easement, I think it's great," he said. But every legislator at the meeting had the same question, he added: "How are you going to fund it?"

Sen. Jim Patrick, a Republican farmer from Twin Falls and chairman of the Senate Commerce and Human Resources Committee, said he would support an easement program if it was crafted right.

But he also said it would be a tough sell to convince legislators to appropriate the millions of dollars it would take to make such a program viable.

The issue of preserving farmland isn't new, at least for farmers, said Burns, of the Treasure Valley Food Coalition. But she believes the rapid disappearance of farm ground in the region has recently awakened many members of the public and policy-makers

to the problem.

"You don't have to drive very far to see a bunch of 'For Sale' signs on some really good farmland," she said. "Just driving around, it's pretty obvious to members of the public that things are changing."

She believes the Boise State surveys have tapped into a growing interest in preserving farmland. "Those surveys are really very interesting," she said. "There seems to be something happening."

Edwards, the Ada County farmer, is a big supporter of farmland preservation but he's also frustrated that nothing is being done to accomplish it.

"Farmland preservation is a hot topic right now but nobody seems to be putting together any type of plan to compensate farmers so they can retire," he said.

The question

Leaders in Idaho's agricultural industry who have been involved in farmland preservation discussions say the issue always seems to get stuck on how to accomplish it while preserving the private property rights of landowners.

"That's really the million-dollar question," said Roger Batt, executive director of the Idaho-Eastern Oregon Seed Association and a consultant and lobbyist for several agricultural groups and commissions.

"The bottom line is we have private property rights. You don't want to infringe upon those by telling somebody they can't sell their land to development if that's their end goal or their retirement."

Rather than taking away a farmer's private property rights, a voluntary preservation easement gives them options, said Ada County farmer Josie Erskine, who manages the Ada Soil and Water Conservation District, a group that is spearheading the farmland preservation discussion.

Because a farmer receives a certain amount of money per acre for putting land in an easement, he could use that money to update the farm and diversify, she said.

Plus, he still owns it and can rent it or sell it if he chooses, just not for development.

"Really, it opens doors," she said. "Economically, it's an incredible option for farmers."

Erskine said the region is in an awakening phase when it comes to farm land preservation.

What the fledgling effort needs now is a champion — a legislator who is also a farmer or an agricultural group — to take up the issue, Erskine said.

"You don't get to save ag land by doing nothing," she said. "We can kick the can down the road but ag land is not going to save itself. If we really want to save it, we'll have to make some hard choices."

Reporters Tim Hearden, Eric Mortenson and Don Jenkins contributed to this story.

Jefferson County is preparing for a peak crowd of 30,000 to 100,000

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"This will be a nice supplemental income this year to give us a little bit of flexibility to pay some debts and loans," said Zitlau, whose nightly camping rate will be \$150.

Zitlau's Granite Creek Ranch, located about 8 miles west of Swan Valley, encompasses roughly 3,300 acres of range and 700 acres of

farm ground. Zitlau started planning for his temporary campground about 10 months ago, in time to book garbage bins and portable toilets. He'll accommodate at least 30 tent campers in pasture sites along a stream and fir-covered hills. He'll also have space for 30 recreational vehicles within a wheat field, in which he planted a 100-foot-wide

strip of forage that he'll cut once before using regrowth as turf.

He already runs a bed and breakfast, which has simplified the process of getting temporary insurance. He plans to sell eclipse T-shirts of his own design.

Rebecca Squires, Jefferson County emergency management coordinator, is currently vetting about 30 temporary

campground permits, which are required to aid in public safety planning. Most applicants will offer self-contained camping — for RVs that have their own toilets and water. Squires said the county is preparing for a peak crowd of 30,000 to 100,000 visitors. She said emergency responders will be focused on the heightened fire risk, the likelihood that cell phone towers will be overwhelmed and

traffic challenges on Interstate 15 and U.S. Highway 20.

Betty Brown, with Brown's Meadow Creek Ranch in Ririe, plans to offer at least 80 self-contained RV sites in pasture along the Snake River, charging \$150 per night with a two-night minimum. Brown is used to hosting large crowds for "jackpot" rodeos and intends to schedule a special rodeo in conjunction with

eclipse camping.

Scott Lyman, a small-acreage farmer in Rigby, plans to offer 25 campsites in his pasture — at \$200 per night with a three-night minimum. He's purchased special glasses to provide guests for viewing the eclipse.

"If you can get even 25 campers at \$200 a piece, that's \$15,000 in three days," Lyman said.

'There's no doubt state management of wolves has been a success in Idaho'

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Idaho has an estimated 800 wolves — probably more — and has actively managed them since federal officials took wolves off the endangered species list statewide in 2011.

Compared to Oregon, which documented 112 wolves at the end of 2016, Idaho's numbers are staggering.

In 2015, hunters and trappers legally killed 256 wolves in Idaho, the same number as in 2014. Another 75 wolves were "lethally controlled." Of those, 54 were killed in response to

livestock depredations or by producers protecting herds. Another 21 wolves were taken out to protect deer and elk populations in Northern Idaho.

In all, Idaho documented 358 wolf deaths in 2015; two fewer than in 2014. Figures for 2016 were not available.

According to Idaho Fish and Game, the number of sheep and cattle killed by wolves has been "stable to declining" since the state began allowing hunting in 2009. In 2015, wolves killed 44 cattle, 134 sheep, three dogs and a horse.

Fish and Game Director Vir-

gil Moore has described Idaho's wolf population as healthy and sustainable.

Department spokesman Mike Keckler said the state has proven it can manage wolves in balance with livestock and prey species.

"There's no doubt state management of wolves has been a success in Idaho," Keckler said. "We remove wolves when they cause problems, we're not afraid to do that. We move quickly when problems occur."

The thought of Oregon adopting such an attitude

doesn't sit well with conservation groups.

"This is not Idaho," Cascadia Wildlands legal director Nick Cady said pointedly during ODFW's May 19 hearing in Portland.

Cascadia Wildlands and Oregon Wild warn the state shouldn't loosen its wolf management rules. Rob Klavins, Oregon Wild's field coordinator in Northeast Oregon, said Oregon's adherence to its adopted plan was one of the reasons there wasn't more of an outcry when the department shot four members of the Im-

naha Pack in 2016.

During the Klamath Falls and Portland ODFW hearings, representatives from the Oregon Cattlemen's Association, Oregon Hunters Association and Oregon Farm Bureau urged changes.

Among other things, producers say ODFW staff is spread too thin and sometimes can't respond quickly to wolf attacks. They favor allowing Wildlife Services to investigate livestock attacks as well, and make the call on whether wolves were responsible. They oppose a draft plan proposal to

change the lethal control standard to three confirmed depredations or one confirmed and four "probable" attacks within a 12 month period. The current standard is two confirmed depredations or one confirmed and three attempted attacks, with no time period set.

Todd Nash, a Walla Walla County commissioner and the Cattlemen's Association wolf chair, said a neighbor has eight cows. If wolves kill three in one night, he asked during the Portland hearing, does the producer have to endure two more attacks before lethal control is taken?