

Study calls for smarter land use planning to curb farmland loss

By **GEORGE PLAVERN**
Capital Press

BELLINGHAM, Wash. — The Pacific Northwest stands to lose more than half a million acres of farmland to urban sprawl by 2040 unless cities make smarter development choices, according to a new report by the American Farmland Trust.

The report, “Farms Under Threat 2040: Choosing an Abundant Future,” also highlights threats to farmland by rising sea levels due to climate change, and the accelerated expansion of solar projects needed to meet zero-carbon energy mandates.

Addie Candib, Northwest regional director for the American Farmland Trust in Oregon, Washington and Idaho, said the findings are part of a multi-year effort to come up with solutions for preserving farmland nationwide.

“In order to be effective, we needed to have good data about what was happening to farmland,” Candib said.

Other partners in the “Farms Under Threat” program include the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service, Conserva-



Sierra Dawn McClain/Capital Press, File

Barns stand on farmland with Mount Adams in the background in Washington. A new report from the American Farmland Trust argues the Pacific Northwest stands to lose more than 500,000 acres of farmland to urban sprawl by 2040.

tion Science Partners and the University of Wisconsin-Madison’s Center for Sustainability and the Global Environment.

The initiative, Candib said, is “really an effort to quantify and map where farmland loss is occurring, and provide some policy recommendations.”

Losing farmland

Between 2000 and 2016 alone, Candib said, roughly 11 million acres of farmland

has been lost or fragmented by development.

Across the Northwest, as many as 527,185 acres of additional farmland may be lost to urban and low-density residential development by 2040 — particularly around rapidly growing metro areas around the Puget Sound, Portland, Spokane and Boise.

Washington would be the hardest-hit state, losing 238,614 acres of farmland

under the worst-case scenario. That is an area roughly 4 ½ times the size of Seattle.

Oregon would lose up to 142,267 acres of farmland, while Idaho would lose up to 146,304 acres.

“What we know is that this conversion will disproportionately impact our most productive, versatile and resilient land,” Candib said.

While the expansion of highly developed urban

areas is a concern, Candib also pointed to low-density residential housing as “a big piece of the problem.” Unlike highly developed urban areas, low-density residential housing exists more on a spectrum, ranging from large-lot subdivisions to a few scattered homes encroaching on farmland.

Once an area goes from completely rural to low-density residential, Candib said it is exponentially more likely to become further developed.

“As residential development starts to populate out into rural areas in an unplanned or unchecked way, it makes it harder for farmers to farm,” she said. “Over time, it can make it difficult for farmers to see a future for themselves in that area. As folks give up ... that’s where that land becomes particularly vulnerable.”

Three scenarios

The report outlines three scenarios to envision how urban and low-density residential development may impact farmland by 2040.

The first is “business as usual,” which follows recent development trends. “Runaway sprawl” is the worst-case scenario, which

forecasts a 50% increase in low-density building.

Finally, there is what American Farmland Trust calls “better built cities,” which calls for policymakers and land use planners to target a 25% reduction in highly developed urban expansion and 50% reduction in low-density residential development.

Under the latter, Candib said Washington, Oregon and Idaho can save an estimated 280,800 combined acres of farmland, representing \$206 million in farm output and 7,382 jobs.

“We really need to invest in urban density and limit the expansion of urban growth boundaries,” Candib said.

In its policy recommendations, the American Farmland Trust calls on local, state and federal governments to create comprehensive plans that prioritize farmland protection and “smart growth” strategies condensing urban development.

States should also invest in programs to improve training and land access for new and beginning farmers, Candib said.

“The best way to protect a farm is to make sure it stays farming,” she said.

Invasive emerald ash borer found in Oregon — first sighting on West Coast

By **SIERRA DAWN MCCLAIN**
Capital Press

FOREST GROVE — The emerald ash borer, an invasive wood-boring beetle that infests and kills North American ash trees, has been found in Oregon.

The discovery was the first known sighting on the West Coast, according to Oregon Department of Agriculture.

The beetle was found June 30 by Dominic Maze, an invasive species biologist for the city of Portland.

Maze was in Forest Grove, waiting to pick his children

up from summer camp, when he noticed several unhealthy-looking ash trees. Upon closer examination, he recognized the distinctive D-shaped holes that adult emerald ash borers make as they exit an infested tree.

“When my kids arrived, I asked them to look for adult beetles,” Maze said. “My son promptly found one crawling on him. Knowing how many millions of ash trees across the country these beetles have killed, I felt like I was going to throw up.”

Maze was rightly worried.

The notorious emerald ash borer — native to Asia — has left widespread destruction



Oregon Department of Agriculture/Contributed Photo

This photo shows an adult emerald ash borer. The invasive wood-boring beetle that infests and kills North American ash trees has been found in Oregon.

in its path across the U.S., so its arrival on the West Coast concerns biologists. ODA calls the emerald ash borer the most destructive forest

pest in North America.

According to a 2022 study in the academic journal Sustainability, since it was first found near Detroit,

Michigan, in 2002, the beetle has killed more than 8 billion native ash trees.

The beetles have infested much of Canada and the U.S., spreading out from the Midwest.

Native North American ash trees are not resistant to emerald ash borers, so nearly all infested trees will prematurely die if left untreated.

Ash trees are an important part of ecosystems nationwide, and when they die, there are ripple effects.

According to the University of Illinois Extension Service, the death of ash trees reduces property values for homeowners, creates losses

in timber, reduces important wildlife habitat, increases heating and cooling costs and increases stormwater runoff.

Researchers estimate it would cost billions of dollars to replace lost ash trees in just the Midwest alone, where many trees have already died.

State officials say Maze played a crucial role in alerting the state to his discovery so that agencies can try to track and curb the beetle’s spread.

After finding the emerald ash borer in Forest Grove, Maze immediately called the Oregon Department of Forestry’s Forest Health Unit to report the sighting.

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