PEACE PRESIDENT UNITED / NATIONAL RESEARCH & POLICY

Our American Farmland Is Diminishing

A national report and proposal for the preservation of America's agricultural land and food independence

NOVEMBER 2026 | INDEPENDENT RESEARCH & POLICY PROPOSAL

PREFACE

America has long treated agricultural land as property to be bought, sold, and developed. Perhaps it is time to recognize that the land upon which our nation's food security depends deserves a different standing—a permanent national commitment to its preservation, accompanied by an equally enduring commitment to those who cultivate and care for it.

Executive Summary

The national question is simple: America continues losing productive agricultural land while population growth, investment, and development place continuing demands on a finite resource. This report brings together federal land-use records and a proposal for a different long-term national priority.

165 million acres Decline in U.S. land in farms, approximately 1980–2025. [8, 9]	**28.2 million acres** Cropland and grazing land converted directly to developed use, 1982–2022. [7]
+47.6 million acres Increase in developed land, 1982–2022, in the USDA NRI coverage area. [7]	**59%** Fresh fruit availability supplied by imports in 2023; up from 50% in 2007. [11]

What the evidence establishes. Federal records show a long-term reduction in agricultural acreage and significant direct conversion to developed uses. The pace varies by decade; the latest measured five-year period shows an increase from the previous period but not a continuous acceleration. These are observed historical findings.

Why it matters. Productive soil is difficult to replace once developed, and farming livelihoods face competing economic pressures. America also relies increasingly on imports for certain fresh foods; imports have multiple causes and cannot be attributed solely to farmland conversion. [7, 11]

The proposed national response. Peace President United invites serious consideration of a perpetual freeze on sales of designated agricultural land, while preserving ownership transfers—including family inheritance—and its agricultural purpose across generations. This proposal is paired with fair, dependable economic support for farmers and ranchers. It is a proposed policy choice, not a legal power established by existing federal law.

The guiding principle: preserve the land that feeds the nation, and honor the people whose work keeps it productive.

Research Methods & Scope

This is an **independent research and policy proposal**, not a federal report, peer-reviewed study, legal opinion, or fiscal feasibility analysis. It synthesizes published statistics and cited studies rather than collecting new land-use measurements.

Different measures answer different questions. USDA NASS "land in farms" estimates acreage operated by farms and ranches. USDA NRCS National Resources Inventory (NRI) tracks physical land-cover and land-use changes within its survey geography. USDA ERS Major Land Uses uses additional categories and coverage. These figures are kept separate rather than treated as interchangeable. [7, 8, 10]

Evidence and limitations. NRI conversions describe observed estimated changes from 1982 to 2022; AFT 2040 findings are modeled scenarios, and population, wealth and real estate figures are contextual indicators. Rising food-import shares have multiple causes. The proposed sales freeze is a policy recommendation—not an authority created by existing law—and would need separate legal, fiscal and implementation analysis. [1–7, 11, 14]

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The evidence comes first; the national proposal follows. The soil-health essay is included as a separate supporting appendix.

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PART I — A GROWING NATION AND A SHRINKING AGRICULTURAL LANDSCAPE

1. Introduction: A Familiar American Story

Drive through a growing American community and you may find houses standing where crops once grew, or a warehouse occupying what used to be pasture. Roads that once passed between farms become commercial corridors, and what residents remember as open agricultural country gradually disappears from view. For Americans who have lived in the same region for decades, this transformation is something they have watched happen.

Development is not inherently wrong. Families need homes; communities need schools, businesses, employment, and transportation. The concern is what the nation gives up when the land accommodating that growth is the same land capable of producing its food. Productive soil, suitable climate, and workable terrain are not assets we can simply manufacture somewhere else.

Four overlapping trends help explain the growing pressure on this finite resource. They are not presented as a formula in which every new resident or investor converts a predictable number of acres. They are common-sense indicators of a country whose demand for housing, infrastructure, and land-based investments continues.

A growing population and more households

The Census Bureau estimated the U.S. population at approximately **341.8 million in 2025**, about 1.8 million more than the year before. Although the population growth rate has slowed, the number of residents continues to rise. Harvard's Joint Center for Housing Studies projects roughly **8.6 million additional households from 2025 to 2035**—and with households come homes, services, utilities, and transportation needs. [1, 2]

Greater private wealth

UBS reported that the United States added approximately **441,000 dollar millionaires in 2025**, and Forbes counted **989 U.S. billionaires** in its 2026 ranking. These figures reflect expanding private investment capacity. They do not prove that the wealthy are personally responsible for any specified acreage of conversion, but real estate remains one avenue for investing and preserving wealth. [3, 4]

Real estate as an investment

Realtor.com reported that investors purchased approximately **534,000 American homes in 2025**, or **11.3%** of purchases, compared with 11.0% in 2024. Those transactions include smaller investment entities and established investors; they should not all be attributed to giant corporations. Home purchases are not the same as new construction, yet the figures illustrate the importance of property as a financial asset alongside its practical use. [5]

Farmland as an investment asset

The USDA's 2024 landownership survey found approximately **348 million acres of rented farmland**, with **79% of that rented acreage owned by non-farming landlords**. Many such owners are individuals, families, and trusts, and their land often remains in production. Still, the finding illustrates that farmland is not simply owned by the people cultivating it: it is also an asset held by others with financial interests in the land. [6]

Together, these forces help explain why agricultural land near expanding communities faces continuous pressure. Our national land supply is finite, but the economic demands upon it keep changing. The central issue is whether America is paying enough attention to the long-term cost of permanently surrendering productive acreage.

PART II — THE HISTORICAL EVIDENCE

2. America's Disappearing Farmland: What the Numbers Reveal

The historical record provides a stronger foundation than observation alone. The USDA's National Agricultural Statistics Service (NASS) measures land operated by farms and ranches, while its Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) tracks physical changes in land cover and use through the National Resources Inventory (NRI). Because those measures answer different questions, we will identify them separately rather than blend their totals. [7, 8]

In 1980, the United States reported approximately **1.039 billion acres of land in farms**. By 2025, the figure was **874 million acres**—a decline of approximately **165 million acres**, or about 16%. This does not mean that all of the lost operating acreage became developed land; some acreage shifted to forest, other rural uses, conservation programs, or different ownership and operating arrangements. Nonetheless, it marks a major long-term contraction in land operated by American farms and ranches. [8, 9]

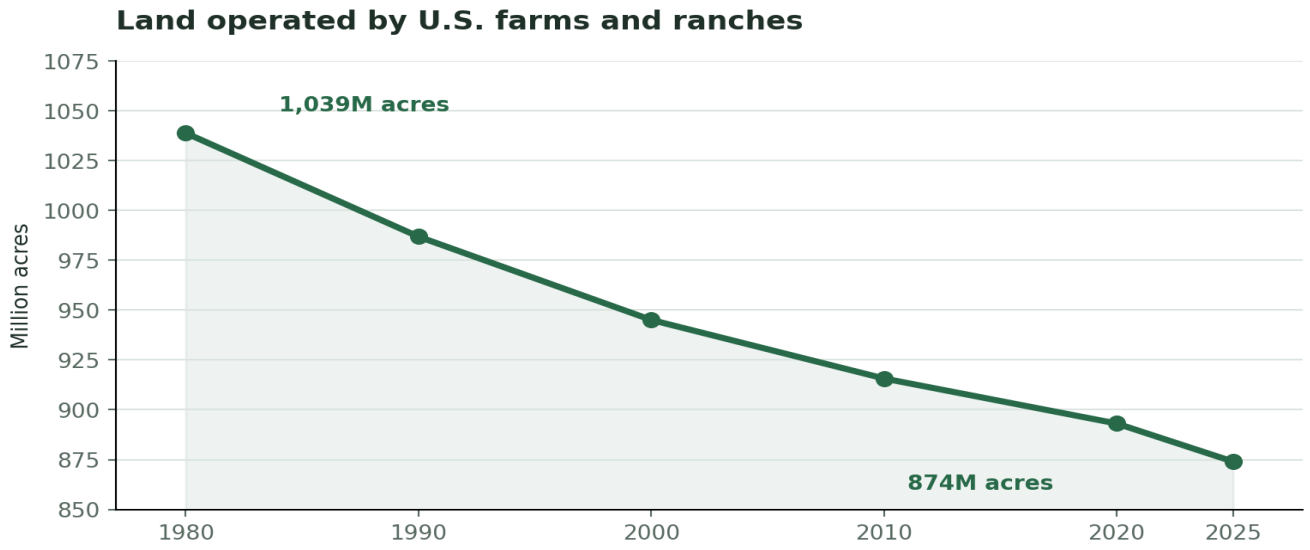


Figure 1. Land in farms, 1980–2025. Selected USDA NASS historical observations and estimates; millions of acres. [8, 9]

The NRI records a related, more direct land-use story. Between 1982 and 2022, it estimates that cropland declined from approximately **419.9 million to 364.3 million acres**, pastureland from **131.1 million to 125.4 million**, and rangeland from **416.0 million to 399.7 million**. During the same period, developed land increased from approximately **72.6 million to 120.2 million acres**. These measures reflect the NRI's own geographic coverage and definitions and should not be confused with the different totals in the USDA Economic Research Service's Major Land Uses series. [7, 10]

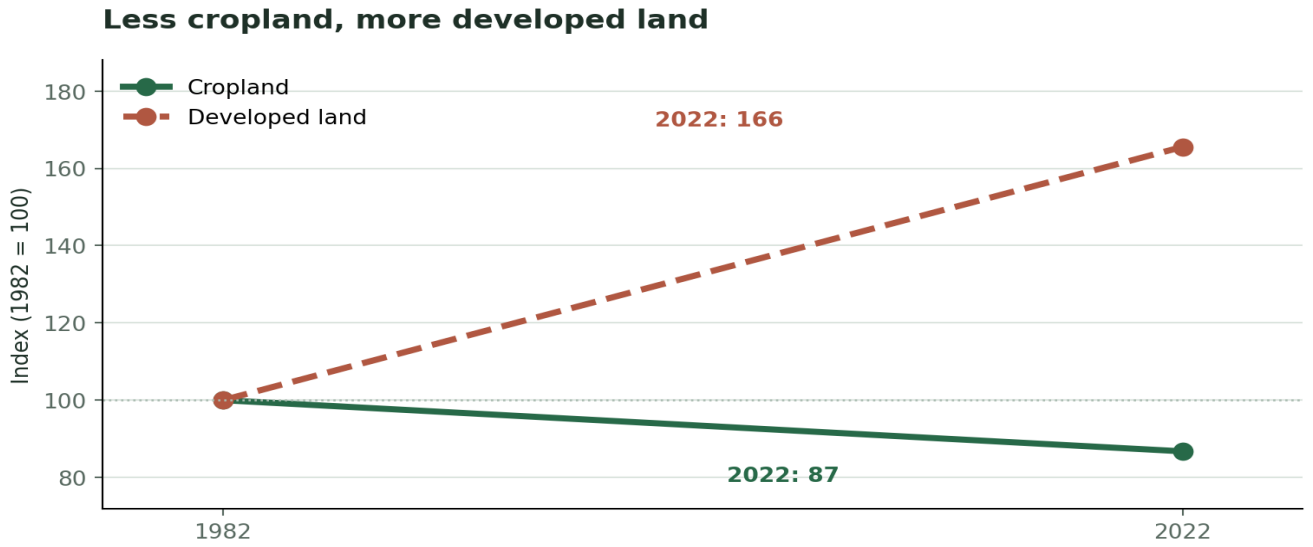


Figure 2. NRI endpoints indexed to 1982 = 100; solid cropland line, dashed developed-land line. Straight segments connect two observations, not annual measurements. [7]

Agricultural productivity has also improved substantially over the decades, allowing growers to produce more from many acres than before. That achievement does not make farmland disposable. Improving yields on remaining acreage and safeguarding the capacity to produce food in future generations are complementary responsibilities, not competing objectives.

3. What Has Replaced America's Farmland?

The strongest evidence goes beyond declining acreage totals. The NRI tracks sampled locations through time, allowing researchers to identify land classified as cropland or grazing land in 1982 that was classified as developed in 2022. That makes it possible to connect the agricultural land base with the physical expansion of developed land. [7]

According to the 2022 inventory, approximately **28.2 million acres** moved from agricultural use to developed use between the 1982 and 2022 inventory endpoints. This included approximately **13.8 million acres of cropland, 7.8 million acres of pastureland, and 6.6 million acres of rangeland**. In the same direct-conversion accounting, agricultural land represented roughly **58% of formerly rural land converted to development**. [7]

Developed use encompasses urban and built-up land, smaller developed areas, and rural transportation corridors. It includes the kinds of places Americans recognize as subdivisions, stores, factories, warehouses, and roads, although the NRI does not attribute every converted acre to one specific type of building. Nor does it mean that every acre lost from agricultural classifications became developed; forest and other rural land uses also gained or lost acreage.

The significance of direct development lies in its persistence. Cropland can become pasture and sometimes return to crops, but reversing buildings, roads, compacted soils, and utility networks is much more difficult. As a result, the conversion of a productive farm can remove that land from food production for generations, even while many less permanent rural land-use changes continue elsewhere.

4. What Ohio Reveals About a National Trend

The national numbers come into focus in Ohio, where many communities have watched farm fields give way to housing and commercial construction. A 2025 Ohio State University analysis of satellite land-cover data found that **585,862 acres of Ohio agricultural land changed to another land-cover category between 2000 and 2023**, and **440,602 acres—about 75% of those gross losses—became developed land**. Accounting for agricultural land gained elsewhere, the statewide net reduction was approximately **423,539 acres**. [12]

The conversion was concentrated in metropolitan areas, with particularly prominent losses in and around the expanding Columbus region. This pattern is familiar elsewhere: agricultural property at the edge of a growing city can become increasingly attractive for nonagricultural purposes. Each project may appear manageable in isolation, but together they transform the landscape over decades.

Ohio is an example, not a claim that every state experiences identical rates of loss. It shows, however, how the national statistics translate into roads, neighborhoods, commercial sites, and altered rural communities that citizens recognize from their own experience.

5. Is the Rate of Development Increasing?

Farmland conversion has continued, but its pace has not moved in one direction every decade. In the NRI record, the pace was particularly high during the development boom of the 1990s, moderated substantially during and after the housing downturn, and rose again in the latest five-year period measured. [7]

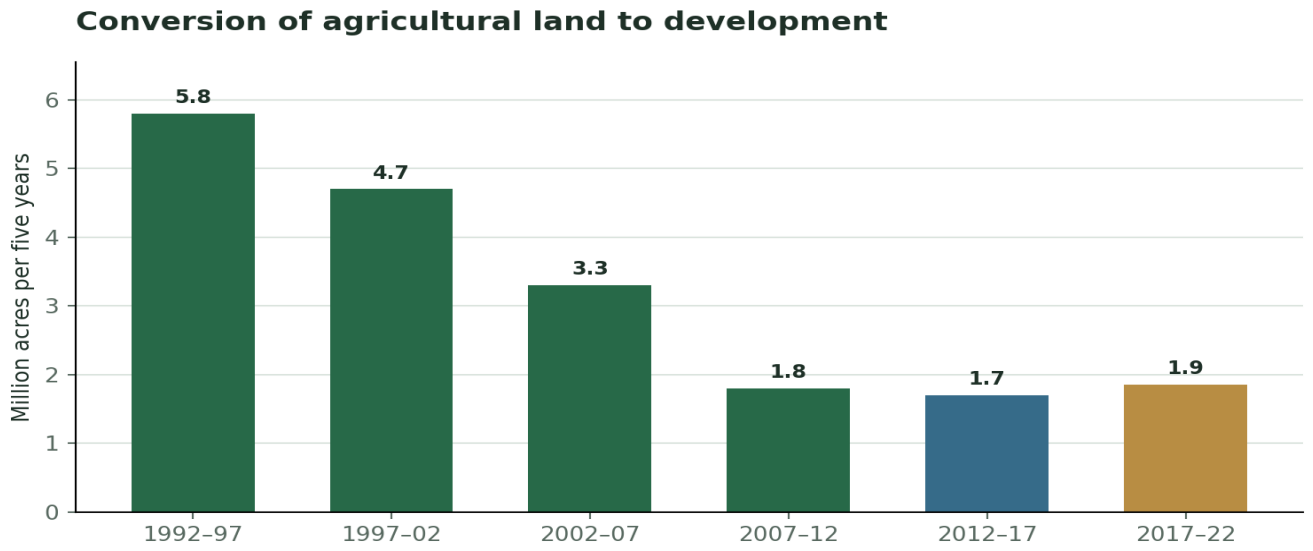


Figure 3. Five-year agricultural-to-developed land conversion totals (cropland, pasture, rangeland), rounded. The final interval rose approximately 9% versus the preceding one. [7]

Approximately **1.70 million acres** of cropland, pastureland, and rangeland were converted to developed uses during **2012–2017**, compared with approximately **1.85 million acres during 2017–2022**. That is a recent increase of roughly **9%**, still far below the high conversion rate recorded in the 1990s. The proper conclusion is that conversion remains

substantial and has recently turned upward—not that national development has accelerated without interruption for forty years. [7]

Annual satellite-based land-cover datasets extend into more recent years and may help establish whether that increase continued after 2022. Those sources have different methods from the NRI, however, and should be compared carefully before making an additional numerical claim. Regardless of the precise pace in a given year, every additional conversion adds to the cumulative loss of farmland already documented. [13]

6. The Value of the Land We Are Losing

Not every acre of open land has the same ability to produce food. Soil depth and quality, water availability, drainage, terrain, and climate shape where crops grow well and where livestock can be raised efficiently. Some of the same qualities—level terrain, accessible roads, and proximity to communities—also make agricultural land desirable for development.

American Farmland Trust's *Farms Under Threat 2040* research projects that under a business-as-usual scenario, **18.4 million additional acres** could be converted, fragmented, or compromised between 2016 and 2040. Approximately two-thirds of the projected acreage is associated with low-density residential development and one-third with urban and highly developed uses. These are projections rather than observed losses, and the low-density category is not synonymous with every acre being paved. [14]

The quality of threatened land matters as much as its acreage. The nation has extensive undeveloped territory, but it cannot assume that a new agricultural field created elsewhere will possess the same soils, growing conditions, infrastructure, or local food-production value as the land replaced by construction.

The need to preserve fertile land grows stronger when we consider that the soil itself is under pressure. Erosion, land degradation, changing rainfall, heat, and other stresses may reduce agricultural productivity even on land that remains in farming. **Appendix A, "The Soil Beneath Our Food,"** explores this separate but closely related issue, including evidence about soil loss and the nutritional quality of certain crops.

PART III — THE CONSEQUENCES FOR AMERICA'S FUTURE

7. America's Growing Dependence on Imported Food

The United States remains an exceptionally productive agricultural nation and a major exporter. International trade brings clear benefits: it supplies foods that are difficult to grow domestically, extends seasonal availability, and gives American producers access to markets abroad. Yet rising imports of certain everyday foods deserve attention when examined alongside the permanent loss of farmland. [11]

The USDA Economic Research Service reports that imports supplied approximately **50% of U.S. fresh fruit availability in 2007**, rising to **59% in 2023**. For fresh vegetables, excluding potatoes, sweet potatoes, and mushrooms, the import share rose from approximately **20% to 35%** over the same period. These changes involve trade policies, production

costs, consumer preferences, weather, and other conditions; they cannot be attributed entirely to disappearing farmland. [11]

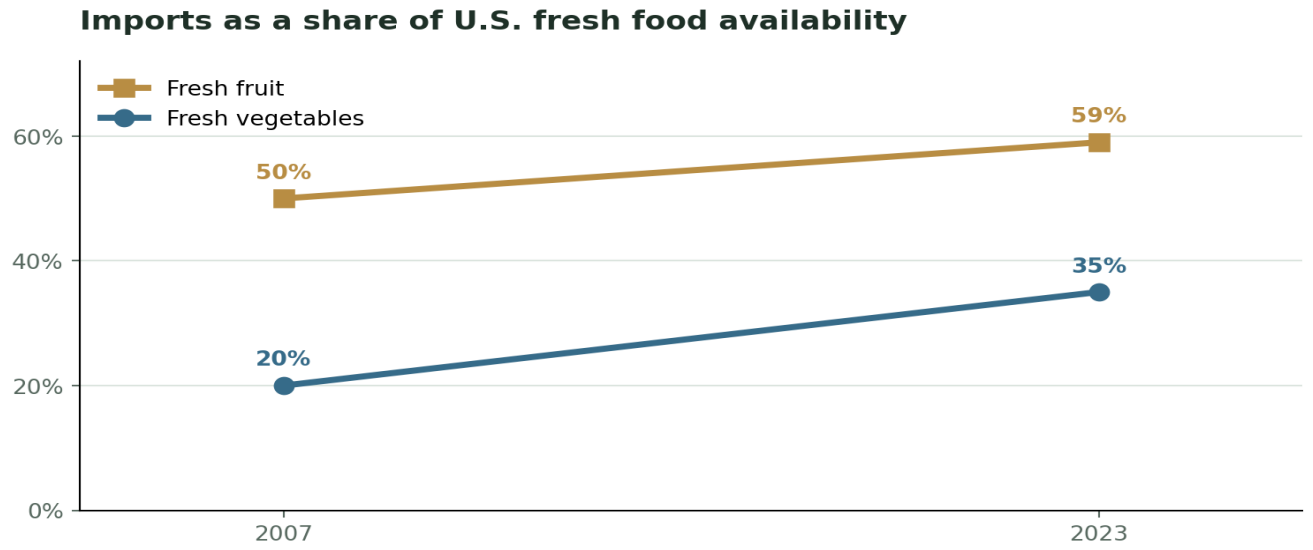


Figure 4. Import shares of U.S. fresh fruit (square markers) and vegetable (circle markers) availability, 2007 and 2023. Lines connect two published endpoints, not annual observations. [11]

The point is not that America should end international agricultural trade. Food independence means preserving the capability to meet a substantial share of domestic needs and to respond when foreign production, shipping, trade relations, or supply chains are disrupted. Farmland protection is one way to preserve that capability and leave future generations with more choices rather than fewer.

The essential question is both practical and forward-looking: **Why continue permanently surrendering land capable of producing food here at home while becoming increasingly reliant on imported supplies of certain foods?** We need not prove that every additional import results from a developed farm to recognize the strategic value of keeping productive acreage available.

8. The Human and Economic Reality of Farming

The decision to sell a farm rarely occurs in a vacuum. Agricultural producers face major expenses for equipment, labor, seed, fertilizer, fuel, livestock care, and financing, while crop and livestock prices can fluctuate for reasons beyond any individual farmer's control. The USDA's September 2026 forecast projected approximately **$492.8 billion in farm production expenses** and **$47.4 billion in direct government payments** for 2026, illustrating both the scale of agricultural operations and the existing importance of public programs. [15]

A farmer near an expanding metropolitan area may receive an offer reflecting the property's development value rather than its agricultural earnings. For an older owner considering retirement or a family facing expensive transitions, the choice to sell can be entirely understandable. It would be unfair to portray such farmers as the problem when the wider economy rewards land conversion so strongly.

Family inheritance belongs at the heart of this discussion. Farmland may represent generations of work, a place to live, a productive business, and the financial security of an entire family. Any permanent protection proposal must recognize the ability of farming families to pass ownership and stewardship to future generations, while ensuring that national preservation does not leave them carrying an unfair economic burden.

9. Food Production, National Security, and Public Safety

Food is not merely another commodity. Its reliable availability supports public health, economic stability, and a functioning society. The federal government recognizes Food and Agriculture as a critical infrastructure sector, placing food systems among the services and resources essential to national well-being. [16]

Congress acknowledged similar concerns in the **Farmland Protection Policy Act of 1981**, which described farmland as a vital national resource and recognized the potential consequences of irreversible conversion. That statute mainly addresses the effects of federal programs; it does not create the perpetual nationwide restriction proposed here. Still, its findings demonstrate that concern for the nation's agricultural land base is neither new nor merely local. [17]

National security is often discussed in terms of defense capabilities, energy systems, and emergency readiness. A dependable food supply belongs in the same broad conversation. Protecting productive land—and supporting the people capable of keeping it productive—offers the nation a measure of resilience that cannot be replaced by financial assets alone.

PART IV — A NATIONAL PROPOSAL FOR PERMANENT FARMLAND PRESERVATION

10. A Permanent National Commitment to Agricultural Land

The evidence raises a question that incremental policies have not fully resolved: should the nation continue treating essential agricultural land as an ordinary real estate asset that may be permanently removed from food production whenever development becomes more profitable? This report proposes a different long-term priority—not a temporary pause, and not simply another local conservation incentive.

The proposal is a perpetual national freeze on sales of designated agricultural land used for crops, grazing, raising food-producing animals, and other essential agricultural purposes. Ownership would remain transferable within an appropriate national framework, including family inheritance and the continuation of farming across generations. The protected agricultural purpose of that land would endure in perpetuity.

The distinction matters. The proposal is not merely a rule against changing zoning categories; it calls for a different legal and civic standing for designated agricultural land itself. It recognizes that the land needed to feed the population has a public value extending beyond the highest immediate offer an owner might receive.

Such a policy would be radical by current standards and would require new federal and state approaches. Property rights, compensation, financing, and constitutional questions would deserve serious attention in any legislative design. The purpose of this report, however, is to establish the national vision and the fairness principles—not to settle every future technical provision before Americans have considered the central idea.

The proposed commitment is not an argument for ending growth or development. It is an invitation to decide that essential food-producing land deserves enduring protection as communities grow and as economic demands evolve.

11. An Equally Enduring Commitment to Farmers and Ranchers

A permanent agricultural land policy cannot succeed by simply limiting what owners may do. If the nation asks farmers and ranchers to preserve productive land for the long-term benefit of the public, the nation must also commit to their ability to make a reasonable living and maintain secure agricultural operations. These two commitments belong together.

That calls for a fresh examination of existing subsidies and support programs, with an emphasis on fair, dependable assistance; viable farm incomes; financing and succession opportunities; and the needs of different crops, livestock operations, and farm sizes. It also means addressing the circumstances of families whose land has long served as both a productive resource and the foundation of their economic security.

This report does not prescribe subsidy amounts or promise that every farm will be profitable. It proposes a governing principle: **food-producing land is a national priority, and the people who cultivate and care for it must be a national priority too.** Agricultural support should reflect the public value of maintaining domestic production, healthy soils, and continuity for farming generations.

12. From National Concern to National Action

A proposal of this scope would need open discussion led in significant part by farmers and ranchers themselves. Agricultural organizations, rural communities, economists, soil scientists, state and local officials, constitutional experts, and citizens would all have important roles. Thoughtful participation would help turn an enduring national objective into a fair and credible program.

The first task is awareness: making the historical evidence understandable and available to the public. The second is a national discussion about whether the long-term value of agricultural land warrants permanent protection. The third is designing laws and support arrangements that honor both food security and the rights and livelihoods of the people currently entrusted with that land.

The possibility of difficult decisions is not a reason to disregard the problem. It is a reason to begin the conversation before more productive acreage is lost and fewer options remain.

PART V — THE LAND WE LEAVE BEHIND

13. Conclusion: A National Decision Worth Making

America's growth has produced extraordinary opportunity, innovation, and prosperity. It has also changed the landscape. Across generations, farms and pastures have become neighborhoods, industrial sites, commercial centers, and roads, often through decisions that appeared sensible or necessary at the time.

Taken together, those decisions have permanently transformed millions of acres. Meanwhile, the nation continues to grow, the economy continues to develop, and productive agricultural land remains a resource with real natural limits. Today's choices therefore affect not only present landowners and communities, but people who will depend on the nation's food-producing capacity decades from now.

This report proposes two lasting commitments: to protect designated agricultural land in perpetuity, and to provide reasonable, dependable support for the farmers and ranchers whose work sustains the country. The proposal is bold, and its details will require serious deliberation. But the underlying principle is simple: a nation should preserve the resources its people and future generations cannot do without.

> **Perhaps the most important question is no longer whether we can afford to protect America's farmland, but whether we can afford not to.**

Appendix A: The Soil Beneath Our Food

Topsoil Loss, Land Degradation, Climate Stress, and the Nutritional Quality of Crops

The main report concerns the **quantity** of farmland America is losing to development. This supporting essay considers a second question: what is happening to the **quality and productive capacity** of agricultural land that remains? It is a related issue, but one with its own science and its own evidence. That is why it appears as an appendix rather than becoming another major part of the central report.

Topsoil: A living resource, not just dirt

Topsoil is the upper layer of soil in which much of a plant's root activity, soil biology, nutrients, and organic matter are concentrated. Healthy soil holds water, cycles nutrients, supports plant growth, and helps agricultural systems withstand changing conditions. Its formation depends on geological, biological, and climatic processes that usually occur slowly compared with the speed at which severe erosion can remove it.

Soil health can also be improved. Farmers and ranchers use a variety of practices—including cover crops, reduced tillage, diverse crop rotations, managed grazing, and other conservation techniques—to maintain or rebuild useful soil functions. The important distinction is that soil degradation is serious without being automatically irreversible in every location.

What the evidence shows about land degradation

The Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) estimated in its 2025 land-and-water assessment that **more than 1.6 billion hectares** worldwide have been degraded by unsustainable use and management, with **more than 60% of the affected area on agricultural land**. A separate FAO 2025 assessment estimated that **approximately 1.7 billion people** live in areas where human-caused land degradation has reduced crop yields by at least 10%. These are global estimates, not acre-for-acre descriptions of the United States. [A1, A2]

U.S. evidence reveals a more mixed and, in some respects, encouraging story. The USDA's 2022 National Resources Inventory estimates that cropland erosion rates from water and wind **declined approximately 34% between 1982 and 2022**. Total average erosion rates nevertheless remained measurable in 2022, demonstrating both the benefits of conservation work and the continuing importance of soil management. [A3]

This distinction matters. The soil crisis is not proof that farmers are incapable of protecting their land. In many places, they have made meaningful progress. Continued stewardship is one of the strongest reasons to support agricultural producers over the long term.

Climate pressures and food production

Agricultural productivity depends on workable temperatures, moisture, seasonal timing, and healthy soils. Extreme heat can impair plant growth; drought can reduce available water; intense rainfall can erode exposed soil and damage crops. These pressures differ by region and crop, and some changes may benefit specific areas or seasons even as others create additional risk. [A4]

Climate-related risks strengthen the case for maintaining a diverse and geographically distributed agricultural land base. When one region faces a poor growing season, productive capacity elsewhere can help sustain the food system.

Preserving land does not eliminate climate risk, but it protects the nation's ability to adapt rather than surrendering that capacity permanently to development.

Is the nutritional quality of food changing?

An emerging concern involves not just the *amount* of food harvested, but the nutrients certain crops contain. A 2025 peer-reviewed meta-analysis synthesized results across **43 food crops** and reported that elevated carbon dioxide can alter the nutrient composition of edible plant parts, with particular concerns for minerals such as zinc and for protein in some crops. The effects vary by species, plant tissue, nutrient, and growing conditions. [A5]

This is not the same as proving that all food grown today is less nutritious than food grown generations ago, nor that soil erosion alone is causing widespread declines in nutritional quality. Changes in crop varieties, agricultural practices, atmospheric carbon dioxide, and many other factors must be distinguished. The scientifically responsible conclusion is that nutrient quality is a legitimate research and public-health concern, and that preserving healthy soils and resilient agricultural production matters for both food quantity and food quality.

Why this strengthens the main proposal

When the nation loses a field to permanent construction, it loses more than its acreage. It loses the opportunity to preserve, restore, and improve the productive living soil beneath that field. Soil degradation and climate pressure create an additional reason to safeguard the agricultural land that remains, while investing in the people and practices capable of keeping it healthy.

The report's central proposal therefore has a wider meaning. **Preserving American farmland is about retaining the acreage that can feed future generations—and supporting the care that keeps that land capable of doing so.**

Sources & Research References

References are cited by number in the text. Where available, links open the original reports or the institution's publication page. Appendix A sources are identified separately.

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Appendix A supporting sources

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[A2] FAO. *The State of Food and Agriculture 2025: Land degradation and crop-yield losses*. Open source (www.fao.org)

[A3] USDA NRCS. *2022 National Resources Inventory Summary Report*, erosion chapter. Open source (www.nrcs.usda.gov)

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