



Thirty Years of Farmland Preservation in North America: Discourses and Ideologies of a Movement

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Abstract — Thirty years after it first captured public attention, farmland preservation in North America remains a contentious issue which has failed to mature into an integrated element of rural land use planning. This paper argues that the explanation for this lies in the examination of the public discourses of the farmland preservation movement and the ideologies that underpin them. The evolution of popular and academic discourses and the influence of environmental and agrarian ideology are explored. This reveals an expanding discourse with ideological foundations riven with internal contradictions yet intersecting in different ways. The result has been a policy agenda influenced by a shift to increasingly broader motivations for farmland preservation and controlled by largely non-farm interests. Farmers, however, remain at the centre of the issue, cast in roles ranging from guarantors of food supply to guardians of nature, open space and rural community. Yet farm voices are barely detectable in the discourse of the farmland preservation movement. This illustrates the representative power of discourse and suggests why farmland preservation remains a contentious policy issue. © 1998 Elsevier Science Ltd. All rights reserved

Introduction

It is almost three decades since farmland preservation first became a serious public issue in Canada and the United States. In that time a variety of policies have been enacted to protect farmland from development. Yet it has remained an issue; a contentious policy idea which has had limited success, continues to provoke debate about its purpose and effectiveness and which has never quite matured into an integrated element of rural land use planning. This is in distinct contrast to the situation in much of Western Europe where farmland has not only been subsumed by general countryside planning, but has also been overtaken by the belief that it is modern agricultural land use itself which represents the main threat to the countryside (e.g., Shoard, 1985). This transatlantic contrast can be explained in part, of course, by basic geographical, historical and political differences in the nature and use of rural land which have fashioned divergent meanings of countryside. It is also a function of the relative recency of the emergence of agricultural

land conversion as a planning issue in North America.

Throughout the 1950s and 1960s the dominant public perception was of a continent, with a limitless supply of farmland and unbounded technological capabilities, which was the breadbasket of the world. With large surpluses and the potential to produce even greater ones, the possibilities of a declining farmland base were furthest from the thoughts of policy makers, and certainly were not a consideration in local land use planning. Yet, by the early 1960s, evidence of a growing problem of soil degradation and urban sprawl prompted the first academic rumblings of concern about the true productive capacity of the North American agricultural land base (Bogue, 1956; Crerar, 1962). A few jurisdictions in the United States — Maryland was the first — adopted limited measures to reduce urban pressure on state farmlands (Lehman, 1995). But it took another 10 years for the issue of the urban conversion of farmland to capture serious public attention. A flurry of studies in the early

1970s revealed rapidly increasing rates of conversion (e.g., Clibbon, 1972; Real Estate Research Corporation, 1974; Reilly, 1973; Simpson-Lewis *et al.*, 1979). These revelations were quickly turned into media headlines and political action inevitably followed. Canadian and US governments sponsored studies to measure rates of change in farmland which provided further ammunition for those who had begun to argue for more land use regulation (Diderikson *et al.*, 1977; Manning and McCuaig, 1977; National Agricultural Lands Study, 1981). And even before these reports were made public, state, provincial and local governments across the continent had begun to respond with various farmland protection policies. By the end of the decade most state and provincial and many local jurisdictions had some form of legislation in place (Furuseth and Pierce, 1982).

Much of this legislation, especially at the local level, was driven by concerns over wasteful patterns of urban development (Lehman, 1992) in which farmland preservation was used as a growth management tool to regulate urban sprawl. This urban-centred perspective on farmland preservation is a thread which has continued to run through local land use planning (Daniels and Nelson, 1986; Bunce, 1991). Yet, while urban sprawl was a significant factor in early policy initiatives, the emergence of farmland preservation as a public issue was fuelled more by concerns over the impact of sprawl on agricultural land itself and in particular on the productive capacity of the resource base. Productionist arguments dominated the emerging discourse of the farmland preservation movement. If so much farmland was being converted to non-agricultural uses, it seemed obvious that food production would be threatened. Yet little evidence was produced to show that the overall level of agricultural output or the integrity of the agricultural economy was being seriously affected. The few predictive models of the impact of a declining land base provided no conclusive evidence of a serious threat to productive capacity (e.g., Cocklin *et al.*, 1983). To be sure, in regions with especially scarce and specialized agricultural lands, such as British Columbia, Ontario's Niagara Peninsula and parts of New England, it was not difficult to establish the necessity of strong farmland preservation strategies. And there was general agreement about the negative impacts of urbanization on agriculture in most metropolitan fringes. However, by the 1980s it was apparent that the main threats to regional and national agricultural economies came from overproduction and global competition rather than land shortages. And in the decade since, liberalization of continental and global agricultural trade has further weakened the productionist argument. Moreover, challenges to the validity of at least the US farmland conversion data

have prompted several prominent scholars to question whether there ever was a farmland crisis (Crosson, 1984; Fischel, 1982; Platt, 1985; Simon and Sudman, 1982).

Given the weakness of the productionist argument, what then has sustained farmland preservation as a separate and contentious rural planning issue? That there are other motivations for restricting the urbanization of agricultural land has been widely recognized (Bryant and Russwurm, 1982; Bunce, 1991; Jackson, 1981). These range across the control of urban sprawl, preservation of countryside amenity, protection of natural environment, maintenance of rural communities and the farming way of life, even, as in Quebec, the guarding of national identity (McCallum, 1994). Indeed Bryant and Russwurm (1982) went as far as to suggest that the apparent lack of resolution to the debate over the need for farmland preservation policy could be attributed, in part, to the multiplicity of values surrounding agricultural land. Three years later, Furuseth observed that

as the number of farmland protection programs has proliferated, most recently diffusing downward to the local level, the controversy surrounding the rationale and the need for these activities has become increasingly intense. (Furuseth, 1985, p. 443)

However, while the varied agendas of farmland preservation have been acknowledged, there has been little attempt to explore in any depth their role in the farmland preservation debate. One of the exceptions is Lehman's recent analysis of the history of federal government farmland policy in the United States (Lehman, 1992, 1995). He maintains that the farmland preservation issue has really been an ideological struggle, the nature of which has been obscured by the dominance of the debate over the statistics of farmland loss.

In this paper I argue that it is in the examination of this ideological dimension and of its influence on the broader valuation of farmland that a large part of the explanation for the peculiar status of farmland preservation policy in North America lies. I argue further, however, that these values have been articulated through the public discourse of a loose-knit farmland preservation movement. It is this which defines the broad social and political context which, as Cloke and Little (1987) have rightly stressed, is where we should look for an understanding of policy development. The discourse consists of a veritable babble of different voices, speaking at the national, regional, local and even personal level, representing academic, government, pressure-group and community viewpoints and arguing for the protection of agricultural land from

a diversity of perspectives. Yet running through all of these is the common thread of the socially constructed primacy of farmland. Whatever its specific motivation, the language of farmland preservation articulates ideals for which farmland itself acts as a physical symbol and thus elevates the meaning and significance of agricultural life and landscape above that of a basic productive resource. This representative power of the discourse, that is its power to construct 'systems of meanings' (Foucault, 1972) around the urbanization of agricultural land, has had a significant influence over farmland preservation policy. It is a discourse which taps the broader idealization of the countryside about which I have written elsewhere (Bunce, 1994). But it rests more specifically on two paradoxically intersecting ideological foundations: environmentalism and agrarianism.

From resourcism to amenity: the environmentalist perspective

It is hardly surprising that farmland preservation, as Lehman suggests in his recent study of its political history in the United States, should have emerged as a land use planning issue in North America with the rising environmentalism of the 1960s (Lehman, 1995). After all, environmentalism is an intellectual and social movement (Evernden, 1984) which at its heart is about the reform of people-land relationships. And what could embody all of the aspects of this relationship more than farmland? At once a resource for satisfying basic human needs, a landscape which retains natural elements and amenities, and an environment which still embodies our fundamental connections with the earth, agricultural land inevitably became part of the broader environmentalist discourse; of the language, that is, of resource management, ecological conservation and amenity protection.

Resource management

As I have already indicated, it was the threat to the capacity of the land base to sustain agricultural output which initiated farmland preservation as a land use policy issue in North America. This perspective is firmly embedded in the resourcist ideology which dominated the burgeoning environmental movement of the 1950s and 1960s, and in particular in the neo-Malthusianism which centred on the population-land equation. It was Fairfield Osborn's book, *Limits to the Earth* (Osborn, 1953), followed by Karl Sax's, *Standing Room Only* (Sax,

1955), which first resurrected the Malthusian spectre of rapid population growth outstripping global food production capacity. But it was in the 1960s and early 1970s that this became, with nuclear war and the energy crisis, one of the central anxieties of an era replete with doomsday scenarios. Books with sensationalist titles such as the *Population Bomb* (Ehrlich, 1968), *Exploding Humanity* (Regier and Falls, 1969), *The Hungry Planet* (Borgstrom, 1967) and *Famine-1975!* (Paddock and Paddock, 1967) and even the more measured analyses of Lester Brown (1963) and the FAO (United Nations, Food and Agricultural Organization, 1962) engendered a general sense of imminent global food crisis. For the most part this was seen as a developing world rather than North American crisis. Yet it had a profound impact on North American environmental attitudes and especially on attitudes to agricultural land. The prospect of declining per capita land supply, linked to the rhetoric of global famine, established a general unease about food production capacity which environmental groups readily exploited in spreading the gospel of resource stewardship.

This resourcist environmentalist atmosphere, highly charged as it was with neo-Malthusian rhetoric, provided ideal conditions for the germination of concern over North American agricultural land resources. But more importantly, it also furnished much of the language of the early farmland preservation movement. As academic concern over urban sprawl and evidence of urban conversion of agricultural land mounted during the 1960s, the anxiety over global farmland capacity was transferred to the North American setting. The growing problem of soil erosion and other forms of land degradation had already been publicized by conservational organizations and, to some extent, recognized by government agencies. However, while the soil-degrading practices of an increasingly intensive North American agriculture presented a long-term threat to productive capacity, the promotion of improved management practices was generally seen to be a guarantee of restoring the renewability of agricultural land. With urbanization, however, the land was lost forever. Even the relatively limited evidence of this was enough to spark the attention of a public which was already sensitized to the language of global famine and general resource scarcity.

Much of the initial public perception of the farmland preservation issue therefore was shaped by the pessimistic scenario of running out of agricultural land in much the same way as we were running out of other resources. The language of farmland preservation presented images of an agricultural land base which was literally 'shrinking', 'dis-

appearing', even 'vanishing' before our eyes. Much of this emanated from the popular media. Headlines such as 'Shrinking Farmlands: Sprawl of Cities Stirs Fears that Agriculture Will Run Out of Space' (Presto, 1971), 'Vanishing Farmlands: Selling Out the Soil' (Oguibene, 1980), 'The Vanishing Land' (MacGregor, 1980), and 'Ontario's Farming Land Dwindling' (Globe and Mail, 1986) helped to keep these images in the public mind in both the United States and Canada. Nor were academics averse to using this language. As early as 1959, Krueger was writing of the 'disappearance' of the Niagara Fruit Belt in Ontario, a theme which he continued to pursue until the 1980s (Krueger, 1959, 1984). Lester Brown, arguably the pre-eminent analyst of global cropland changes, wrote of the prospect of vanishing North American croplands (e.g., Brown, 1978). And, not surprisingly, the farmland preservation movement adopted this language in its public campaigns. Publications such as *Disappearing Farmlands: A Citizen's Guide to Agricultural Land Preservation* from the National Association of Counties Research Foundation (Thompson, 1979), claims about the 'rapid depletion of the nation's farmland resource' and of 'disappearing farmland' from the American Farmland Trust (1983), and dire warnings from the Ontario Coalition to Preserve Foodland that if the rate of urbanization were to continue 'by the year 2025 all our foodland would be lost' (Ontario Coalition to Preserve Foodland, 1984), typify the willingness of citizens' groups to employ the rhetoric of imminent farmland shortages.

In the words of one skeptic, 'the United States was said to be running out of itself' (Easterbrook, 1986). Strongly influenced by what Paarlberg (1982) has referred to as the 'scarcity syndrome', which dominated resourcist environmental thinking throughout the 1970s and early 1980s, the predictions of vanishing farmland were presented largely as a production capacity problem. A pamphlet, *Where Have all the Farmlands Gone*, which publicized the establishment of the US National Agricultural Lands Study, re-echoed the disappearing farmland theme and raised the question 'How long will it be before the farm land loss severely cripples farm land production?' (National Agricultural Lands Study, 1980). Charles Little, one of the leading figures in the NALS programme, argued:

It may now be asserted for the first time in this nation's history, that each new subdivision, highway, dam, factory, power plant or shopping centre threatens permanently to reduce the productive capacity of American agriculture. (National Agricultural Lands Study, 1980)

The popular media was quick to pick up this theme. 'America's capacity to feed itself and a burgeoning

global population', wrote Oguibene (1980) in the *Saturday Review*, 'now depends entirely on the amount of land we are willing to devote to agriculture' (p. 7).

Others were prepared to go as far as predicting domestic food shortages. As scientific an organization as the Ontario Institute of Agrologists (1975) issued a report entitled *Foodland: Preservation or Starvation?* Its warning of the threat of urbanization to Canadian food production capacity echoed the persistent theme of the country's seriously limited agricultural land resource base in the farmland preservation discourse in Canada. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the publications of the Lands Directorate of Environment Canada. Set up in 1971 to 'keep an eye on the nation's land resources', for the next 15 years it had a powerful influence on the development both of public awareness of and policy towards agricultural land.

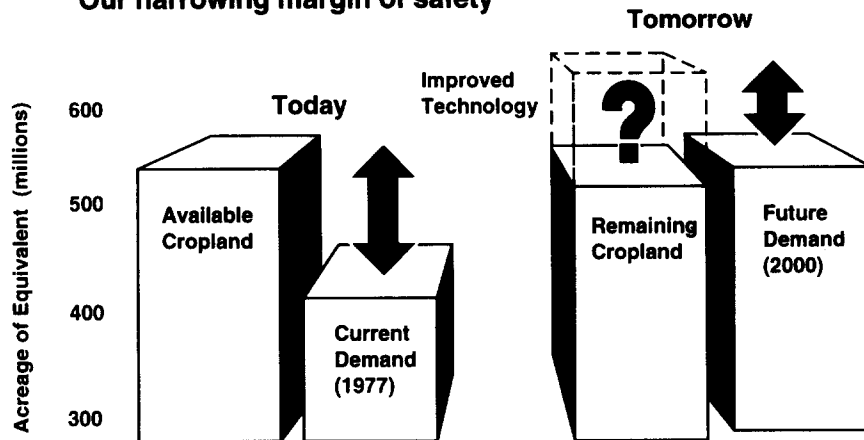
As I have already pointed out, no evidence could be produced of an immediate decline in agricultural output. Much of the resourcist argument therefore was presented as a long-term food security issue. The introduction of the Ontario Foodland Guidelines, for example, was justified in terms of the need for policies which 'ensure that, as much as possible, land with the capability for agriculture is kept available for farming when it is needed' (Ontario, Ministry of Agriculture and Food, 1978, p. 4), while another rationale for a national farmland policy presented by the NALS study was public uncertainty 'about the capacity of the U.S. agricultural land base to supply food and fiber at the high levels that are likely to be demanded in the coming years' (National Agricultural Lands Study, 1981, p. 8). In its illustration of the problem (Fig. 1), the American Farmland Trust presents the issue in terms of a 'narrowing margin of safety' highlighted with a large question mark. An argument that draws directly on the wise stewardship philosophy of resourcism, it exploits the uncertainties rather than the certainties of the impact of farmland conversion on production capacity. In particular it stresses the folly of paving over land that might be needed for future food needs:

It seems to be only common sense to keep our options open...our ability to cope with the resource and food needs of the future will depend upon our present actions. (Simpson-Lewis and Manning, 1981)

At its height between the mid-1970s and mid-1980s, then, the farmland preservation discourse was dominated by the language of resource scarcity. That the arguments were at once simplistic and alarming made them all the more persuasive, especially in the

DISAPPEARING FARMLANDS

Our narrowing margin of safety



Assumes 1.5 million acre annual loss of cropland due to conversion and soil depletion. 30 percent aggregate growth in domestic and export consumption, and 1 percent average annual growth in per acre crop yields through year 2000. Current data from 1977 USDA National Resources Inventory. Source: American Farmland Trust, 1983.

Figure 1.

molding of public opinion to support preservationist land use policies. Yet this also generated the counter-argument that the resource scarcity predictions were smokescreens for other farmland preservation agendas (Fischel, 1982; Hart, 1976; Simon, 1994). That the farmland preservation movement, both inside and outside government, could make no direct statistical link between conversion and declining food production not only aided the skeptics but also led the movement towards broader rationales for its policy position. In the first instance this took the form of the food security issue that I have just described. It was also driven by concerns about the profitability of farm enterprises and the sustainability of local agricultural economies.

But the arguments for preserving agricultural land to ensure future food needs, as I have suggested, were influenced also by the wise-use philosophy of resourceism. The NALS report emphasized the costs of 'farming the wrong acres'. Prime farm lands, the report declared 'are our most energy-efficient acres, producing the most food, feed, fiber, forage and oilseed crops with the least amount of fuel, fertiliser and labour' (National Agricultural Lands Study, 1981). The American Farmland Trust pointed out that bringing marginal lands into production would be 'prohibitively expensive' (American Farmland Trust, 1983). These arguments were strongly influenced by the growing evidence by the mid-1970s of diminishing returns to intensification. In the words of Charles Little:

What is becoming increasingly clear is that if high levels of productivity are needed, and if yields are not increasing, then it becomes important to look at the acres themselves. (Quoted in Lehman, 1992, p. 263)

These kinds of statements were linked to the repeated assertion that the main threat came from the conversion of prime land. This played particularly well in Canada where the Lands Directorate studies showed that half the conversion between 1966 and 1976 occurred on the best cropland (Warren and Rump, 1981). That this might push Canadian agriculture onto more marginal land was declared to be self-evidently economic and environmental folly (McQuaig and Manning, 1982).

Ecological conservation

With this shift in attention from the quantity to the quality of land the farmland preservation issue was drawn under a broader, more ecologically oriented environmentalist banner. As I have already pointed out, early concern over the urbanization of farmland emerged in part from the soil conservation movement. The involvement of the Soil Conservation Service in the United States in the first surveys of agricultural land conversion reveals the connection that was made from the outset between the paving over of farmland and the degradation of its soils. And this has been a persistent theme in the subsequent farmland preservation discourse. Lester Brown has written of soil erosion and conversion to non-farm uses in the same context (Brown, 1978). R. Neil Sampson, the Vice-President of the National Association of Conservation Districts in the United States, has echoed this, most notably in his paperback, *Farmland or Wasteland: a Time to Choose*, in which the urbanization of agricultural land is portrayed as yet another degradation of a resource base already ravaged by intensive cultivation

(Sampson, 1983). A tune which has been replayed again and again in the popular press, it also defines the purpose of the American Farmland Trust, which was established to 'address the twin threats of urban sprawl and soil erosion' (American Farmland Trust, 1983).

In drawing parallels between these two threats, the argument being made was that agricultural land was under attack from within and without; from intensive agriculture and urban development. While much of the discussion of this was influenced by a resourcist perspective, it also attracted the attention of those who saw it as a more general warning about our relations with the natural environment. In arguing that the farmland preservation movement in the United States emerged with the environmental movement of the 1960s, Lehman (1995) stresses the influence of Aldo Leopold's land ethic. But in fact it is not until a decade later that this environmental philosophy finds its way into the farmland preservation discourse. It was with the weakening of the production capacity arguments for farmland protection that attention began to turn to more fundamental agricultural land management questions. The call for farmland preservation as part of a new agricultural land ethic begins to appear in the late 1970s. One of the earliest allusions to it came from Mary Rawson who in 1976, in the context of farmland protection policy in British Columbia, wrote that in taking seriously

the critical task of preserving food-producing lands, we do so in the belief that there are broader and less animal concerns...that nurture the growth of a new understanding of man's relationship to land, a new land ethic. (Rawson, 1976, p. 6)

Similar rhetoric was employed by some of the leading protagonists of US farmland preservation policies. Writing in a 1979 volume published by the Soil Conservation Society of America, Sampson proclaimed:

What is needed is a new land ethic — an ethic forged of our twin concerns for the land's proper use and proper care. Farmlands should be given a 'place of honor' and looked at 'in the same way we would a Van Gogh painting'. (Sampson, 1979, p. 4)

Sampson is extensively quoted in the publicity brochure which announced the National Agricultural Lands Study, along with the opening lines of Woody Guthrie's popular song *This Land is Your Land* and an extract from Aldo Leopold's writings. With this reinvocation of Leopold's philosophy of an ecological relationship with agricultural land (Leopold, 1949), the protection of good agricultural land from developers' shovels was now promoted as part of the more general argument for ecologically

sustainable agriculture which had begun to emerge in the late 1970s. Although the leading protagonists of this philosophy rarely made direct reference to the urbanization issue, their writings helped to elevate agricultural land to the status proposed by Sampson. Arguably the most influential figure in this was Wendell Berry, whose prolific writings promoted the re-establishment of reverential relationships with farmland (Berry, 1977, 1981). These ideas established an ecological stewardship philosophy which became a strong undercurrent in the farmland preservation movements of the 1980s. Take for example the Ontario Coalition to Preserve Foodland, an organization made up of farmland preservation and environmental groups, which began its campaign by arguing the usual food security line, but by the mid 1980s was promoting a broader 'conservation ethic for those who manage foodland' and for a 'stewardship which means hugging the soil as if you were a child' (Ontario Coalition to Preserve Foodland, 1984).

Support for this ecocentric position came from the mainstream environmental organizations. In the second edition of its *Handbook for a Conserver Society* in 1981, Friends of the Earth devoted almost 20 pages to the issue of agricultural land resources, adding its considerable influence to the argument that the protection of prime farmland from urban development was a necessary condition for an ecologically sustainable agriculture (Friends of the Earth, 1981). In the late 1970s, the Sierra Club's National Land Use Committee formed the 'Farmlands Task Force' to 'organize and assist local and regional efforts to protect America's valuable farmland' (Asbaugh, 1978). And it was the Sierra Club which, in coalition with the National Association of Soil Conservation Societies of America, National Resources Defense Council and the National Wildlife Federation, formed the American Farmland Trust in 1981 (Lehman, 1992).

By the early 1980s too, farmland preservation was being increasingly presented not just as a prerequisite for sustainable agriculture, but also as an integral element of natural environmental protection. In billing itself as the 'only national organisation dedicated to conserving land for agricultural purposes — with scenery and habitat protection as incidental public benefits', the American Farmland Trust implied that farmland preservation and the protection of the natural environment are synonymous (American Farmland Trust, 1983). The Preservation of Agricultural Lands Society in Ontario has gone further in broadening farmland preservation into a general conservational agenda with a high-minded strategy for the Niagara fruitlands which includes the 'preservation and enhance-

ment of genetic diversity, through the protection, enlargement and linkages of natural areas, good conservation practices and the preservation of our genetic base for agriculture' (Preservation of Agricultural Lands Society, 1990, p. 74). And, displaying extraordinary ignorance of modern agriculture, the Save the Rouge Valley organization on the outskirts of Toronto argues for 'colourful rows of farmers' fields, majestic cliffs, meandering watercourses, dense forests, lush wetlands, and a flurry of wildlife activity. This is a well-balanced ecosystem...' (Save the Rouge Valley System, 1990, p. 2).

Local amenity protection

While this perspective may well reflect an altruistic environmental ethic it is one which is dominated by urban and intellectual values (Lehman, 1995), which are readily translated into language which plays well with a public increasingly concerned about the environmental quality of its surroundings. For long the subtext of productionist and resourcist arguments, the protection of the general amenity quality of rural land and community has become an increasingly important theme. While this has influenced the policy debate at the national, state and provincial level, it is at the local scale that the amenity perspective has become dominant. Indeed in the United States especially, it is local rather than state governments which have generally been most successful in implementing measures to protect farmland (Alterman, 1997). The amenity rationale has been widely recognized in the literature on farmland preservation. Indeed Pierce and Séguin have argued that the weakening of the resource adequacy issue in the public mind led directly to the shift in support for protecting the amenity values of farmland (Pierce and Séguin, 1993). Although this is a largely a development which emerged in the mid-1980, the advantages of combining the two causes of open-space and farmland protection have always rumbled beneath the surface of the farmland preservation movement. It was at the heart of the 1963 referendum campaign in New Jersey (Esseks, 1978) and in the early 1970s, the Save Our Farms Committee which was instrumental in the implementation of the pioneering Purchase of Development Rights programme in Suffolk County, New York, set out to 'secure through the farmland preservation program... Clean Water, Clean Air, Agriculture, a Balanced Economy, Lower Taxes, Sound Planning, Open Space and Recreation' (quoted in Esseks, 1978).

As local governments have played an increasingly central role in the initiation of preservation policies and programmes, especially at the county level in the United States, they have done so in the context

of a rapidly expanding community conservation movement, which in large measure has hijacked the farmland preservation agenda for its own amenity ends. A widely quoted example is the Farmlands Conservation Project ('Save the Farmbelt') of the People for Open Space organization in California's Bay Area. In answer to its own question, 'How do people in cities benefit by having farms and ranches near them?' the project proposed a broad amenity role for farmland as the basis of a permanent greenbelt, 'to produce a portion of our food; to supply high-quality water; to reduce the threat of floods and other hazards; to maintain the richness of plant and animal life; to give us room to wander and to breathe' (People for Open Space, 1980, p. 7).

However, it is in the upsurge of community protectionism in gentrified exurbia, rather than in regional greenbelt planning and certainly the agricultural heartland, that the amenity perspective is most evident. Much of the contemporary farmland preservation campaign now occurs in the context of local amenity activism (Furuset, 1985; Peters, 1990), which Wright argues is the consequence of the 'failure of governmental land-use planning programs to protect cherished places from urbanization' (Wright, 1993, p. 269). The past decade has seen the emergence of grass-roots initiatives in which farmland preservation is embedded in a broader movement to protect rural environment and character. In outlining a set of strategies for local rural initiatives, the National Trust for Historic Preservation argues in its 'Save America's Countryside Campaign' that 'rural conservation should integrate natural resource conservation, farmland retention, historic preservation and scenic protection' (Stokes, 1989, p. 3).

In placing its emphasis on the 'historic countryside' the Trust reflects sentiments which blend natural environment, farmland and old buildings into a single notion of rural heritage. This perspective has found its most influential expression in the land trust movement which has spread across rural America at a phenomenal rate in the past decade. Local non-profit organizations which 'are directly involved in protecting land for its natural, recreational, scenic, historical or productive value, through direct acquisition, conservation easements and other forms of community control over land development, land trusts now number almost a thousand and are the principal vehicle for organising local conservation (Elfring, 1989).

Many trusts, such as the Marin Agricultural Land Trust just north of California which was instrumental in negotiating conservation easements on property owned by the movie producer George Lucas (Peters, 1990), do indeed focus their attention

on farmland preservation (Elfring, 1989) usually in cooperation with local government protection programmes. Yet agricultural land is generally presented as an essential part of the overall conservation package, fulfilling the role of guardian of open space, nature, scenery and rural character, and, by extension, of bulwark against urban development. The Flathead Land Trust uses conservation easements, to keep the land 'in its agricultural use and still protect its scenic value and its natural habitat' (Land Trust Alliance, 1989). The Open Space programme in Boulder, Colorado has preserved 1700 acres of open space to protect scenery, create recreational trails and to safeguard farmland (Elfring, 1989). The American Farmland Trust has taken an increasingly active role in promoting the link between natural and cultural amenity and the preservation of farmland. In Maryland, for example, it recently funded a conservation easement which prevented residential development of Sugarloaf Farm and thereby ensured an essential link in the greenway connecting Washington, DC with Sugarloaf Mountain, a popular scenic attraction. Nor are these activities restricted to eastern conurbations. In northeastern Nevada, the Trust has been working with the Nature Conservancy in the Ruby Valley to protect an ecosystem which can sustain both wildlife and food production (Thompson, 1993).

It is this undercurrent of broader rural amenity conservation which has prompted much of the criticism of the farmland movement. One critic of the US National Agricultural Lands Study has gone so far as to suggest that the productionist argument has merely been a ploy used by local amenity groups to 'elevate farmland preservation to the national agenda' and that 'the real beneficiaries are local anti-development interests' (Fischel, 1982), while the most outspoken critic of farmland preservation policies, Julian Simon, has declared that 'the famine-protection claims are simply a smoke screen for property owners who want a bucolic view...' (Simon, 1994). These arguments ignore the role that concern over the survival of the local agricultural economy has played in sustaining the farmland preservation movement. Yet they are hard to refute in the face of local rural conservation agendas which are so obviously dominated by amenity perspectives, especially when these are largely controlled by non-farm people. Local rural conservation is at its most active in exurban communities, in which the protection of open space and of rural character is inextricably bound up in lifestyle and property values.

When this is expressed in the language of groups like the Pickering Rural Association just east of

Toronto, which opposes the conversion of farmland and open space to 'keep Pickering rural' and thus to ensure the rights of a largely exurbanite population to the 'peaceful enjoyment' of its properties, then the subtext of farmland preservation is quite transparent (Pickering Rural Association, 1989). The Pickering organization, like most of its counterparts in Canada, is far less sophisticated as well as worse funded than most of the land trusts and other rural conservation groups in the United States. Yet its fledgling attempts to influence the local planning agenda mirror the self-interest of much of the rural preservation movement across the continent. The desire to preserve rural atmosphere is entirely consistent with the values of those who have invested directly in their private version of the countryside ideal (Bunce and Walker, 1993). However, as these groups have come to dominate local preservation movements, their influence has spilled over the boundaries of private amenity into the public landscape. At its most sophisticated this is articulated through a preservation ethic which aims to impose its own socially constructed notions of rural authenticity on the community as a whole. In his eloquent study of an exurban Pennsylvania community, Dorst describes how environmental conservation, farmland protection and historic preservation are combined under a broad heritage umbrella. This is intended to do more than merely shelter the community from further development, but rather to develop it to conform to an 'agrarian historical ideal' (Dorst, 1989, p. 41).

Agrarian ideals

The important point in Dorst's interpretation is that agriculture is retained because it is an essential ingredient of rural authenticity. And the retention, even the re-establishment of farms and of a local agricultural economy and culture, as well as the farmscapes they support, is dependent on the preservation of farmland. At its most superficial, this is simply another way of justifying the private amenity agenda. But when we examine it more closely we can detect underlying values which reach back into the persistent agrarian ideologies which, as numerous studies have shown, are entrenched in American, and, less explicitly, in Canadian political and social culture (e.g. Flinn and Johnson, 1974; Dalecki and Coughenour, 1992; Rohrer and Douglas, 1969).

From its early nineteenth century origins, agrarianism has evolved today into a diverse set of values. While these have in common the belief that farmers and farming are valuable elements of society and

economy (Montmarquet, 1989), this is a vague notion which has been readily manipulated to serve a variety of agendas from the promotion of agribusiness to the protection of the traditional family farm and rural community (Beus and Dunlap, 1994). From its outset, the farmland preservation movement has invoked the progressive agrarianism that argues for the maintenance of a strong and productive agricultural economy. It is with this perspective that the movement has been able to draw some support from farmers who have otherwise tended to oppose its more general regulatory objectives (Furuset, 1985). The resourcist environmental rationale which dominated the general farmland preservation discourse at its height was, in large measure, matched by an economic discourse which portrayed agriculture as a strategic sector of national and regional economies. As a president of the American Farmland Trust put it:

At stake is nothing less than the world's food supply and the stability of our nation's most basic industry. (Wheeler, 1983, p. 4)

In this language we can recognize the physiocratic agrarianism — the belief that the true wealth of the nation is drawn from the land — which underlies the progressive side of Jeffersonian ideology. But Jefferson saw agriculture as also serving political and social goals. In declaring, in his much-quoted phrase, that 'those who labour the earth are the chosen people of God', Jefferson saw the independent yeoman farmer as the source of moral and civic responsibility, the foundation of an harmonious yet bountiful agrarian republic. The farmland preservation discourse is replete with references to the protection of the farm enterprise, and especially of the family farm. In the popular media the urbanization of farmland and the demise of the family farm have invariably been presented as a coterminous issue. This was especially true of the height of the first upsurge of public concern over farmland in the mid-1970s when articles with headlines such as 'Saving the Farms' (Time, 1975) and 'Suddenly an Alarm Over Vanishing Farms' (US News and World Report, 1975) appeared in the popular media with as much frequency and with much the same language as commentaries on the loss of farmland.

The nostalgic tone of this language represents a corrupted version of the Jeffersonian ideal, a sentimental strand of agrarian ideology which looks to the family farm and its land as the lingering symbols of an era of rural virtue, simplicity and self-reliance, the loss of which threatens the very heart and soul of the nation and leads to the severing of rural roots. It is this agrarian perspective which local rural preservationists invoke in drawing farmland preservation into the broader agricultural heritage preser-

vation agenda. Farmland preservation is assimilated into the process of what Dorst (1990) calls 'traditionalisation', through the extension of heritage preservation to a living agrarian society.

Historic farmhouses and barns are more interesting if they are still used by farm families and surrounded by active farmland. (Stokes, 1989, p. 3)

This taps into what has been termed the romantic stream of agrarianism (Danbom, 1991; Montmarquet, 1989), which promotes the culture rather than the economics of farming — agriculture as a way of life — at the heart of which are notions of connectedness to land, nature and community. Inspired, as Danbom (1991) has suggested, more by Thoreau than Jefferson, this is an ideology which has its roots in the anti-urbanism and anti-industrialism of the back-to-the-land movements of the early part of this century. This has been a recurrent theme in the growth of a *gemeinschaft*-inspired communitarianism (Naples, 1994), in which the ills of urban-industrial society are to be solved by returning to the land, which in turn will lead to the re-establishment of the ideal rural community.

The modern exponents of this ideal extend it into a broad thesis which argues that it is both urbanization and agricultural industrialization which represent the real threat to true community. Only by preserving and restoring traditional family farm culture — 'the good work of good farmers' — can we re-establish the traditional rural community (Berry, 1981). The academic contribution to this particular discourse is epitomized by the Goldschmidt thesis which links the demise of the family farm with the decline of rural community (Goldschmidt, 1978). While this thesis remains controversial amongst rural sociologists it has long influenced a stream of research which focuses on the problems of the decline of family farming and which reveals a deep-rooted popular agrarian sentiment which is most frequently associated with the family farm-based community ideal (e.g., Flinn and Johnson, 1974; Buttel and Flinn, 1975; Willits *et al.*, 1990). Indeed this research has revealed such strong agrarian sentiments in American society at large that it has prompted Molner and Wu to characterize the family farm as a 'national icon' and a 'sacred object' (Molnar and Wu, 1989).

Perhaps the best illustration of the strength of this ideal is the popularity of Amish and Mennonite culture areas and images. Amish society in particular, with its explicit adherence to traditional ways of agrarian life, satisfies "a very strong American nostalgia for historical roots, traditional values and 'good old days'" (Cong, 1994). But above

all it is the Amish perpetuation of the family farm and the ideals with which it is associated which has captured the public imagination. Nowhere is this more evident than in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania where the artifacts of Amish culture have been commodified into a highly developed tourist region, complete with an Internet web site, which promotes an 'Amish Country' offering a wide range of nostalgic tourist experiences (www.800padutch.com/). At the same time the Amish cultural landscape has become the symbol of rural authenticity of the local historic preservation movement to which I referred earlier. And it is this landscape which the Lancaster Farmland Trust sets out to preserve in its farmland protection activities, campaigning for the protection of farms and farmland to ensure the 'productivity, character and quality of life that exists here' (Lancaster Farmland Trust, 1997). The maintenance of working Amish farms through the acquisition of conservation easements on surrounding farmland is integral to this objective (Lancaster Farmland Trust, 1997; Niemeyer and Kraybill, 1993).

The link between the protection of farms and the preservation of farmland has been made explicit in the recent policies of the American Farmland Trust. In a 1990 document entitled *Saving the Farm: A Handbook for Conserving Agricultural Land*, the Trust argues for a comprehensive agenda which places the sustainability of the family farm at the centre of its farmland preservation activities (American Farmland Trust, 1990). To a large extent this represents an agrarian ideal which reveals the growing support for an agriculture which operates in the local interest, not just in terms of protecting landscape and heritage, but also in satisfying demand for local produce through farmers' markets, farm-gate sales and pick-your-own operations. These are integral to fabrication of rural authenticity, providing both the flavour of the traditional market place as well as direct connections to the land. Both experientially and symbolically they tie into an agrarianism which supports a food system based upon family farms which serve local markets. But it also supports an alternative agriculture which is defined by its ecological sustainability. The growth in demand for local food markets is generally accompanied by demands for produce, and therefore farming, which is environmentally and livestock friendly. Free-range eggs, organically grown vegetables, hand-churned butter and stone-ground flour have become an essential part of exurban lifestyle. Much of the support for this version of agrarian values comes from those who have sought back-to-the-land experiences in small-scale operations which intentionally function in an alternative mode of production and marketing.

The restoration of the organic links of farming is thus an essential plank in the broader rural conservation agenda. But what is important here is that farmers are cast in the role of stewards of both land and community. When they are regarded as guarantors of community we can recognize the influence of the values of agrarian fundamentalism, of the myth of farming as the foundation of a sound and sustainable civilization, and of the 'intrinsic value of farming and the economic, political and social value of the family farm to American society' (Singer and de Sousa, 1983, p. 293). This harks back to the southern agrarianism of Jefferson with his emphasis on the moral and social values of the independent family farm (Montmarquet, 1989). This is the image of the steadfast and responsible yeoman — 'agrarianism's soft-side...which seeks a renaissance of the self-sufficient, craftsman-naturalist who manages sustainable ecosystems' (Dalecki and Coughenour, 1992, p. 51).

Viewed from this perspective, farmers are assigned the moral responsibility for caring for the land over which they have been given control, in other words the role of land stewardship. This is a strand of agrarian fundamentalism which is strongly influenced by Christian theology (Bruegemann, 1977), in which farmers are reminded of 'their responsibility as God's stewards' of the land' (Ontario Conference of Catholic Bishops, 1989, p. 8). This is a philosophy which has found a comfortable home in the farmland preservation movement itself. In Ontario, for example, the Christian Farmers Federation has played an active role in the province's principal farmland preservation citizen's group, arguing frequently for farmland protection as part of a broader Christian duty to ensure the perpetuation of family farmers as 'earthkeepers' (Ontario Coalition to Preserve Foodland, 1984). This notion of land as a sacred trust provides links to the environmentalist arguments for farmland preservation, for it invokes elements of Leopold's land ethic, of a relationship with land which involves 'an ethical obligation on the part of the private owner' to act for the good of what Leopold calls the 'land community' (Leopold, 1949).

Although Leopold has had an enormous influence on the environmental movement in general, his philosophy is articulated in terms of personal rather than societal relations with nature; with the relations, that is, that come with land and especially farm ownership. But what is more important is that it is a philosophy which regards stewardship not as a productionist goal, but rather as an ethical and spiritual end. For Wendell Berry, arguably the most eloquent proponent of an ethical, ecological alternative to industrial agriculture, this translates into the

old-fashioned practice of good husbandry, of a way of farming which is based on harmony with nature and therefore with family and community. For Berry agriculture is a cultural not an economic activity, best pursued on small farms producing for themselves and their community (Berry, 1977). This organic connection between land and community is a theme which can be detected in much of the local rural conservation movement. 'The Farmbelt as Culture' was one of the six reasons listed by the People for Open Space organization for protecting farmland in the San Francisco Bay area:

With farmland goes a farming culture, an agricultural way of life... In rural towns where the family farm tradition is strong, people do seem to get involved easily in civic groups and community affairs: there are plenty of joiners. (People for Open Space, 1980, p. 43)

Discussion

In this paper I have argued for understanding the development of the farmland preservation issue in North America in terms of an expanding discourse, the language of which reveals the influence of two ideological streams: environmentalism and agrarianism. These are powerful yet complex ideologies, riven both with their own internal contradictions and their conflicts with each other. Yet they also reveal points of convergence which help to explain the interrelationships between what has been previously treated as a disparate list of rationales for farmland preservation.

Within each of these ideologies we can recognize two apparently competing sets of values which have shaped the farmland preservation discourse. The influence of environmentalism divides into two fairly distinct streams. The first of these situates farmland preservation in resourcist environmental philosophy, emphasizing (especially in the early campaigns to generate public and official support) the importance of protecting the resource base as a guarantee of maintaining food production. Alongside this perspective, however, has emerged an ecological environmentalism which promotes farmland preservation as an issue of general environmental protection. Agrarianism follows similarly divergent paths. On the one hand it is the progressive agrarianism which promotes the centrality of a productive agricultural economy to the national interest. On the other it is the romantic and fundamentalist agrarianism with its emphasis on the culture of farming and its centrality to notions of rural authenticity and the restoration of connections between nature, land use and community.

While at first glance these may appear as four largely separate and competing philosophies, under the broad banner of farmland preservation we can discern a common theme between resourcist environmentalism and progressive agrarianism on the one hand and between romantic agrarianism and ecological environmentalism on the other. Certainly the mainstream argument for protecting farmland from conversion to other uses has long been made in terms both of maximizing the supply of agricultural land resources and of maintaining a strong agricultural economy. This essentially brings the two ideologies together under a productionist and utilitarian rationale. By the same token, there is an obvious synchronicity between promoting farmland preservation as a prerequisite for general environmental conservation and regarding it as an essential element in protecting rural heritage and local amenity. Here the rationale is cultural and ecological.

Of course there are tensions within these two categories as well as overlaps between them. The productionist perspective embraces both the intensification of land use and the wise management approaches to land resources. The cultural/ecological framework supports an even broader range of values, from self-interested amenity motives to ecocentric and moralistic ideals of sustainable community. It is with the notions of sustainability of land use and community that we can recognize some of the overlap between the two sets of philosophies. Indeed, as the farmland preservation movement has matured in North America it has increasingly brought together issues of resource management, environmental protection, farm and community survival under the sustainability umbrella. This is especially true where farmland preservation has been subsumed by more general rural conservation activity, but, as we have seen, it has also been a developing undercurrent in the farmland preservation organizations themselves as they have broadened their message beyond the productionist rationale.

Within this confusion of conflicting, overlapping and merging ideologies, however, there is one constant: the centrality of farmers. Whatever the argument for farmland preservation, farmers and their land have been placed at the centre of the issue, cast in the role of guarantors of food supply, of national, regional and local economic stability and of our connections with the earth, as well as in the role of guardians of nature, landscape, open space, rural heritage and community values. They have been both coerced and co-opted into fulfilling these roles. Coercion has occurred through land use regulations — restrictive zoning, severance and subdivision

control, compulsory agricultural districting — which are intended to restrict farmers' rights of land disposal and therefore keep them on the land, so that it can continue to serve the various farmland preservation objectives. Faced with the loss of development rights, farmers have tended to be hostile or at the very least ambivalent towards the circumscription of their property rights (Bryant and Johnston, 1992). A more subtle approach, therefore, has been to co-opt farmers to the farmland preservation agenda through incentives and voluntary agreements. This is far more common in the United States than it is in Canada, largely because of the constitutional enshrinement of American property rights, but also because of the strength of American agrarian ideology which continues to support the independence of the property-owning family farm. And so, first with tax incentives, the transfer and purchase of development rights, and more recently with voluntary agricultural districting, conservation easements and management agreements, farmers have been drawn into the farmland preservation process as more or less willing participants. This is particularly apparent in local rural conservation activity, in which conservation and land trusts operate through negotiated agreements with land-owners. In some instances, farmers have become fully co-opted into the conservation process. A recent example is the Chesapeake Farms for the Future Board which includes farmers in a programme to protect farmland in Maryland and Delaware as part of the sustainable agriculture project of the Future Harvest Project (Future Harvest, 1995).

The determination of the degree of circumscription of property rights in farmland preservation policy presents the problem of resolving the main internal contradiction of agrarianism; between the independence of the family farm and the interests of society. Jefferson resolved this by arguing that family farmers are fixed on their land by the benefits of generational succession and the economic constraints on expansion and mobility (Browne *et al.*, 1992). They therefore have a vested interest in maintaining the land and supporting the community. Although a serious distortion of the nature and objectives of family farming, even in Jefferson's time, it is a myth which has had a powerful influence on the development of North American farmland preservation policy. If farmers can be fixed on their land, then the protection of farmland in all of its dimensions will naturally follow. Paradoxically this has had the effect of entrenching, rather than diminishing, farmers' property rights. As Braden has put it, 'the major theme of farmland preservation programs is to enhance private values attached to agricultural land rights' (Braden, 1982, p. 26).

Conclusion

If, as I have suggested, the inherent conflicts between the various objectives and ideologies which constitute the farmland preservation agenda are resolved through the agency of farmers themselves, then the question that follows is, where do farmers fit in the discourses of the farmland preservation movement? To answer this question empirically would require an analysis which goes beyond the scope of this paper. However, what I have shown is that the movement to protect farmland is dominated and controlled by the intersection of popular and professional discourses (Jones, 1995), and therefore of largely non-agricultural voices. This is not to say that farmers are excluded in the way, for example, the environmental movement takes an appositional stance towards corporate industry and agribusiness. On the contrary, as I have argued, the infusion of agrarian ideologies into the farmland preservation discourse portrays farmers, at least family farmers, as natural allies, who simply require the protection of their main resource, land, in order to fulfill their prescribed and chosen roles. Whether farmers accept this role is doubtful. A few studies have shown principled farmer support for farmland preservation (Furuseth, 1985) while there is occasional farmer involvement in preservation organizations (e.g., Friends of Foodland in Ontario which is led by a farmer from the Christian Farmers Association). Farmers too have been supportive of farmland preservation when neighbouring non-farm uses impinge on their activities (Pfeffer and Lapping, 1994). But most evidence suggests general resistance from farmers' groups to significant restrictions on their development rights.

What is certain is that mainstream farm voices are barely detectable in the farmland preservation movement. This leaves us with the question of who really defines and controls the farmland preservation agenda and whose interests it really serves. If, as this paper implies, it is an agenda which has come to be defined in terms of the socially constructed primacy of farmland as a physical symbol of a mix of ideologies and values held largely by non-farm people, especially those occupying the urban fringe, then it is hardly surprising that it remains a distinct and contentious planning issue. As Troughton has so perceptively put it:

...the true nature and the real needs have not been identified. At a very basic level, no farmland use policy is likely to have a satisfactory long-term effect in the absence of parallel attention to farm income and its maintenance. (Troughton, 1981, p.102)

It is this discontinuity between what is needed and what has actually happened that explains the

patently limited success in North America of most farmland preservation policy and the failure to integrate it with broader rural land use policy. But beyond this it illustrates the power of public discourse to represent the value of farmland in terms of its own interests and ideologies and thus to have significant influence over the policy agenda.

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