

# On the Edges

## *Urban-edge communities can retain agricultural benefits; AFT partners with University of Nebraska–Lincoln on new report.*

American Farmland Trust (AFT) has partnered with Dick Esseks and the University of Nebraska–Lincoln (UNL) to release a report regarding the long-term viability of agriculture in counties that are becoming increasingly urban. The report, titled “Farm Viability in Urbanizing Areas,” explores which public policy efforts have been effective in retaining the spectrum of benefits provided by local agriculture.

“As agricultural counties transition to more urban land uses, it becomes increasingly important to plan for agriculture,” says Anita Zurbrugg, assistant director, AFT’s Center for Agriculture in the Environment, and one of the project researchers for the study. “This report utilizes case studies to exemplify the obstacles in the way of agriculture, and what planning tools are available to overcome them,” Zurbrugg adds.

The report is comprised of 15 county-level case studies from 14 different states, and is arranged into chapters covering production inputs, marketing, farmland protection and outlook for the

future. Some of the key findings and recommendations to emerge from the report include:

- Farmers were more likely to be positive about agriculture’s future in their county, if they regarded local government as sympathetic, or at least even-handed in resolving conflicts between farmers and non-farmers.
- State governments should enable, and local authorities should operate, effective programs for purchasing development rights to farmland, thereby, either adding to the base that agricultural zoning supports, or, achieving what zoning fails to realize.
- Local governments should apply zoning policies (e.g., large minimum-lot requirements, cluster zoning, urban growth boundaries) that help to preserve an adequate land base for farming.
- There are often insurmountable obstacles to young or beginning farmers purchasing and renting land, especially if they are not related to the

current farm owners. Public and private agencies should encourage farm families to plan carefully for the transfer of ownership and management to their children or other relatives.

- Public and private agencies should encourage the launching and sustainability of farm enterprises likely to be profitable on the urban edge and on small acreages — such as high-value specialty crops or livestock.

Farms closest to our cities, and often directly in the path of development, produce much of our fresh food — 63% of our dairy products and 86% of fruits and vegetables. Well-managed farm and ranch lands provide food and cover for wildlife, help control flooding, protect wetlands and watersheds, and maintain air quality.

“Without local farmland there is no local food, and we’ve compromised a community’s capacity to improve its environment and quality of life,” Zurbrugg says.

“If we can better understand how to maintain a sufficient land base, to

promote adequate marketing outlets and supplies of non-land inputs (credit, new farmers, hand labor, water, repair services, etc.), and to encourage types of farm enterprises likely to be profitable given market demand and input constraints, farming on the urban edge is likely to remain viable into the future,” concludes Esseks, researcher and lead author of the report.

Funding for the research was provided by a National Research Initiative Grant from USDA’s Cooperative State Research, Education and Extension Service (CSREES) Grant #1004-35401-14944). The research findings are available online at: [www.farmland.org/resources/reports/default.asp](http://www.farmland.org/resources/reports/default.asp) and [www.unl.edu/plains/about/research\\_reports.shtml](http://www.unl.edu/plains/about/research_reports.shtml).



**Editor’s Note:** This article was provided by American Farmland Trust. For more information contact Jennifer Morrill at 202-378-1255 or [jmorrill@farmland.org](mailto:jmorrill@farmland.org).