Journal of Agriculture, Food Systems, and Community Development
ISSN: 2152-0801 online
https://foodsystemsjournal.org

THE ECONOMIC PAMPHLETEER
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The need for radical change in access to farmland

Published online November 3, 2025

Citation: Ikerd, J. (2025). The Economic Pamphleteer: The need for radical change in access to farmland. *Journal of Agriculture, Food Systems, and Community Development*, *15*(1), 97–102. https://doi.org/10.5304/jafscd.2025.151.001

In my previous Economic Pamphleteer column, I made the case for fundamental changes in farm and food policies. I admitted that my policy proposals in the past have been too radical to be considered relevant in farm bill debates. However, recent changes in the federal budgeting process and the current political turmoil in Washington, D.C., create an environment conducive to radical change in farm, food, and rural development policies. My previous column focused on programs that would share the risks with farmers who want to start new, or transition to, ecologically and socially sustainable farming systems. This column focuses on policy changes to make farmland accessible and affordable for farmers beginning or transitioning to sustainable farming operations. Ways to change the U.S. supplemental food assistance programs will be addressed in my next columns.

It takes time, as well as intelligence and commitment, to learn how to manage a farm sustainably because sustainable farming depends more on intensive management and less on purchased inputs, off-farm technology, and financial capital. It also takes time to heal and restore health and productivity to soils that have been degraded and depleted by industrial farming practices. So, long-term land tenure will be necessary to facilitate the

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Why an Economic Pamphleteer? In his historic pamphlet *Common Sense*, written in 1775–1776, Thomas Paine wrote of the necessity of people to form governments to moderate their individual self-interest. In our government today, the pursuit of economic self-interest reigns supreme. Rural America has been recolonized, economically, by corporate industrial agriculture. I hope my "pamphlets" will help awaken Americans to a new revolution—to create a sustainable agri-food economy, revitalize rural communities, and reclaim our democracy. The collected Economic Pamphleteer columns (2010–2017) are available at https://bit.ly/ikerd-collection

transition from industrial to sustainable agriculture, through either ownership or long-term leases.

Access to affordable farmland was identified as the number one challenge by farmers who responded to a 2020 nationwide survey conducted by the National Young Farmers Coalition (Ackoff et al., 2022). Of those responding, 59% named finding affordable farmland to buy as very or extremely challenging, and 40% found it very or extremely difficult to find land that is available to rent (Ackoff et al., 2022). Farmland prices will decline over time if commodity-based subsidies are phased out, as proposed in my previous column, and as industrial producers are forced to bear the risks inherent in large-scale, specialized production. However, sustainable farmers will need access to land long before farmland prices drop back to levels consistent with sustainable farming.

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In the meantime, land ownership for beginning farmers may be limited to smaller acreages used to produce high-value crops, such as vegetables, fruits, and berries, to be marketed directly to local customers. Profitable farming operations will generate capital for increased land ownership over time. However, management-intensive farms need not be as large as capital-intensive farms to provide an acceptable economic standard of living. Sustainable farming is a desirable way of life rather than a way to accumulate wealth.

Farmland could also be made available to beginning and transitioning farmers through leases that allow farmers to build equity in permanent structures and land improvements. Leases could make possible access to the larger acreages that are needed for grains, legumes, and tubers. Sustainable land improvements include soil fertility, biodiversity, ecological integrity, and overall resilience and regenerative capacity. Long-term leases could be based on the initial value of the land and not adjusted annually to reflect increased productivity and regenerative capacity. The economic value of increased "ecological equity" could be realized not only in increased productivity but also in the value of leases that are sold and transferred to succeeding generations of sustainable farmers.

At first glance, the challenge of transitioning sufficient farmland from industrial to sustainable use to ensure long-term domestic food security may seem impossible. The U.S. Census of Agriculture (U.S. Department of Agriculture, National Agricultural Statistics Service [USDA NASS], 2024b) reported that 1.6 million farms controlled 880 million acres (356 million hectares) of farmland in 2022. Farms larger than 1,000 acres (405 ha) made up 9% of all farms but controlled 73% of all farmland. Farms less than 50 acres (20 ha) made up 42% of all farms, but controlled only 2% of farmland. Midsized farms accounted for 49% of all farms and controlled 25% of the farmland.

Most farms of less than 50 acres are owned by families that rely on off-farm income to support the farming operation. These farms are more places to live than ways to make a living. Most midsized farms are profitable but rely heavily on off-farm income to meet family living expenses. They may be too small to compete with large commodity producers, but are large enough to transition to management-intensive farming systems that integrate diverse crop and livestock enterprises to create sustainable farming systems.

The Census of Agriculture indicated that more than 45% of U.S. farmland was used for permanent pastures for beef cattle and dairy production, and 43% was devoted to crop production (USDA NASS, 2024b). About 80% of the cropland was harvested, and 20% was set aside for various conservation practices. About 8% of all farmland was in woodlands, and 4% in farmsteads and other miscellaneous land uses. Acreages of different crops planted, harvested, exported, and used for various purposes vary from year to year, but general patterns of land use are more stable.

Nearly 60% of all harvested cropland in 2022 was used to produce corn and soybeans, with roughly equal acreages of each (USDA NASS, 2024c). In recent years, 10%–20% of the U.S. corn

crop has been exported rather than used domestically (USDA Economic Research Service, 2025). Of domestic uses, corn ethanol claimed 45%, and 40% was fed to livestock and poultry, leaving only 15% for seed, industrial, and food uses (USDA ERS, 2025). Less than 10% of domestic corn production, 5.2 million acres (2.1 million ha), is used in food products (Leibtag, 2008).

More than 50% of the U.S. soybean crop is typically exported (USDA Office of Communication, 2015). Virtually all domestically used soybeans are crushed into meal and oil. Soybean meal for livestock and poultry feed accounts for about 80% of total domestic use, and biofuels have claimed more than one-third of soybean oil in recent years (Ramsey, 2024). Less than 15% of domestic soybean production, 6.3 million acres or 2.5 million ha, has been used for cooking oil and other food products (Ramsey, 2024).

Wheat, rice, and dried beans and peas are food crops, but account for less than 14% of harvested cropland. More than 50% of the production of these crops is exported. This leaves about 6% of harvested cropland, 18.2 million acres or 7.4 million ha, of these crops available for domestic food production. Only 3% of all farmland, or about 9 million acres (3.6 million ha), was used to produce fruits, vegetables, nuts, and nursery crops.

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This means less than 40 million acres (16 million ha)—about 13% of harvested cropland and only 4% of total U.S. farmland—are devoted to the production of food for direct human consumption. Furthermore, the 100 million acres or 40.5 million ha of corn and soybeans that supply feed for large concentrated livestock and poultry operations could be used more sustainably in diversified crop and livestock farming systems. Most of the 400 million acres or 162 million ha of grazing land are unsuitable for crop production, but a significant portion could support grass-based dairies and intensively managed beef, sheep, and goat operations.

Consequently, transitioning sufficient cropland from industrial to sustainable farming to meet current domestic food needs is not as big an undertaking as it might at first seem. Fewer than 60,000 farms of 500 acres could supply the food currently produced on harvested croplands. It would take 180,000 fruit, berry, and vegetable farms of 50 acres to replace today's large, industrial operations. These 240,000 new and transitioning sustainable farmers would equal less than 15% of the total farms in the 2022 Census of Agriculture.

Many of today's farmers who consider farming their primary occupation rely on off-farming employment for most of their household incomes. If the 240,00 new and transitioning farms were full-time family farms, employing two or more people, they would employ about 35% as many people as today's producers who consider farming their primary occupation (USDA NASS, 2024a). Livestock and poultry production for domestic consumption could be limited to animals raised on sustainably managed, diversified family farms and intensively managed grazing operations, supporting still more full-time farmers on fewer acres of land.

Such a transition, barring an economic collapse, will require a radical rethinking of U.S. land-use policies. If land belongs to anyone, it belongs to everyone. No one created it; no one has absolute ownership of it. Land ownership is actually a "land use right" granted by society to individuals. Indigenous Peoples never claimed anything more than "use rights" to the lands that were stolen by or sold to those who claimed land ownership. It is appropriate and often necessary for governments to implement land-use policies that ensure sufficient land is used in ways that serve the common good of society, as well as the individuals who own the right to use it. Government policies that make farmland accessible and affordable to ensure long-run domestic food security through sustainable farming are an example of that necessity.

A logical step to provide affordable land access to beginning sustainable farmers would be to offer low-interest government-guaranteed loans to purchase farmland for farmers who qualify for the sustainable farm tax credits proposed in my previous

column (Ikerd, 2025). Another logical approach would be to provide long-term leases of government-owned farmlands. The U.S. government owns roughly 640 million acres or 259 million ha of land (Hardy Vincent & Hanson, 2020). More than 150 million acres (61 million ha) of government-owned land, mostly in Western states, are leased by livestock producers for grazing (Bureau of Land Management, 2025). Current grazing leases could be transferred from large cattle and sheep grazing operations to smaller, sustainably managed multispecies grazing operations as these leases expire. Some of this government land could be restored to native prairies to restore and sustain biological diversity.

Some government land is currently leased to row-crop producers, but far less is available for crop cultivation than for livestock grazing. The government could obtain funds to purchase additional farmland for sustainable leases by imposing a windfall capital gains tax, perhaps 50% or more, on the increases in farmland value associated with rezoning land from agricultural to residential or commercial uses. Such increases in value are essential government grants, in that the landowners did nothing to increase the value of the land. High windfall capital gains taxes would discourage farmland conversion as well as the speculative investments that inflate farmland prices in peri-urban areas. Proceeds from windfall taxes could then be used to purchase farmland in peri-urban areas for farmers enrolled in the sustainable farming refundable tax credit program.

The American Farmland Trust estimated in 2022 that more than 300 million acres or 121 million ha—more than a third of all farmland—would change hands in the next 20 years, largely due to retiring landowners (Hunter et al., 2022). If the projected trend continues, 18.4 million acres or 7.4 million ha of this land will have been converted to residential and commercial development from 2016 to 2040. An estimated 6.2 million acres or 2.5 million ha would be converted to commercial uses and moderate-to-high-density residential development. The remaining 12.2 million acres or 4.9 million ha would be converted to low-density residential areas, ranging from large-lot subdivisions to scattered residences in rural areas. Approximately 80% of farmland lost to development in eight Midwestern states between 2001 and 2021was located in metropolitan statistical areas (Islam et al., 2024). These are areas where sustainable farmers would have ready access to high-value urban markets, but also face the highest land prices due to speculation in anticipation of residential or commercial development. Farmers in peri-urban areas or urban fringes, their customers, and their neighbors could all benefit from supportive land-use policies linked to the agroecological principles of sustainability, as promoted in the UK (Feldman & Driessen, 2023).

Instead of residential developments, the government could provide economic incentives for subdividing farmland into smaller farms rather than into residential lots. The farm subdivision program could be linked to the proposed 50% or higher tax on farmland rezoned to residential. Again, upzoning of land is a grant by society, and society has a right to limit individual economic gains. A portion of a development might be rezoned to residential use without paying the added tax if the rest is subdivided into smaller farms. For example, rather than subdividing a 500-acre farm into 100 five-acre lots, the developer could instead locate 100 residences on one-acre lots, leaving 400 acres to be subdivided into 16 parcels averaging 25 acres, for fruit, berry, or vegetable farms for beginning and transitioning farmers.

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The residential lots could be strategically placed around the farmland, like agrihoods or other intentional communities that integrate farms into residential neighborhoods (Sangroniz et al., 2024). Similar projects are currently referred to as Planned Unit Developments (PUDs). However, instead of residential communities with farms, farming subdivisions would be sustainable farming communities

with nonfarm residences. Farming subdivisions might also provide suitable locations for high-density, affordable housing for those working in nearby urban areas. Many of the current obstacles to agrihoods and other agricultural communities could be reduced or eliminated through accommodating changes in local, state, and federal policies (Sangroniz et al., 2024).

Federal, state, or local governments could provide low-interest guaranteed loans to finance the developments. The farmers would either own or hold long-term leases on the farmland. Farmers would be assured of livable incomes through refundable tax credits as they establish sustainable farming systems. Land access could be afforded for racial minorities, women, people with disabilities, and others who often face discrimination in financing farming operations.

The strategic use of capital gains taxes and refundable tax credits could allow developers to realize economic returns comparable to conventional residential subdivisions subject to the full 50% or greater farmland conversion tax. Residential lots in such developments might also sell at a premium, since sustainable farms are not only good places to live and raise families, but also good places to live around. Such developments could provide an ideal environment to establish sustainable communities, which will be the subject of a future column.

These are just a couple of examples of radical changes in land-use policies that could make farmland more accessible and affordable to more sustainable farmers.

These are just a couple of examples of radical changes in land-use policies that could make farmland more accessible and affordable to more sustainable farmers. The details of such policies would need to be worked out over time, but current land-use policies are not working and are not going to work in the future. There is no way of knowing what policies will work unless policymakers are willing to try something radically different.

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