

HALF A CENTURY OF CROPLAND CHANGE*

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ABSTRACT. The census concept of total cropland is a better measure of effective agricultural land than is total farmland, which includes extensive areas of woodland owned by farmers. The cropland area of the United States dropped from 478 million acres in 1949 to 431 million acres in 1997, for a net loss of less than 1 million acres, or roughly one-fifth of 1 percent, per year. In the midwestern agricultural heartland most counties changed less than 5 percent in the half-century, and more counties gained than lost. The West was a crazy quilt of change, and in the East most counties lost more than 10 percent. Major metropolitan counties lost a few percentage points more than did adjacent areas, but at a lower rate per capita than the nation as a whole. Most of the loss of cropland was in marginal agricultural counties with soils of low inherent fertility and topography unsuited to modern farm machinery. The loss of cropland to suburban encroachment may be cause for intense local concern, but attempts to thwart development cannot be justified on grounds of a net national loss of good cropland. *Keywords:* *cropland, suburban encroachment, United States.*

You and I both know that suburban development is encroaching on productive agricultural land in the United States, because we have the evidence of our very own eyes. Each of us can think of former fields that have been converted to nonagricultural use. But how representative are our observations? Advocates of growth control argue that this country is losing farmland at an alarming and unacceptable rate (AFT 1997; Sorensen, Greene, and Russ 1997; Sierra Club 1998, 1999, 2000). Should we share their concern?

We know that the use of cropland changes from year to year and that in any given year a significant fraction of our cropland, perhaps one-fifth to one-third, does not actually produce any crops at all. Drought, flood, storm, diseases, insects, and other destructive forces of nature can nullify the best-laid plans of farmers, but complete crop failure is only part, and usually quite a small part, of the explanation. Good farmers rotate their crops, and many rotations require that in some year of the rotation each piece of ground lie fallow, or be used only for pasture, or grow only cover crops that are not harvested.

The inherent capability of soil and climate to produce crops is only one of many factors that influence the way farmers use cropland. Land may also lie uncultivated temporarily for idiosyncratic, nonagronomic reasons: family squabbles over inheritance or divorce, compliance with or circumvention of government farm programs, quirks of wealthy landowners who do not have to extract income from every acre they possess. The use of cropland is constantly changing, and changes from year to

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