

Agriculture and Land Use in Wisconsin: Planning for Viable Agricultural Systems

Panel Discussions

On November 20, 1996, WEI hosted its second major conference, *Agriculture and Land-Use in Wisconsin: Planning for Viable Agricultural Systems*. This conference drew 150 people to the Wisconsin Dells to discuss farm profitability, environmental issues and the pressures to develop farmland. Farmers, planners, government officials, environmentalists, business managers, developers and other interested citizens attended the event.

The problems facing Wisconsin agriculture could not be solved in one day, needed to achieve a sustainable agriculture. Dan Poulson of the Wisconsin Farm Bureau expressed his excitement, "Today is the first meeting where we've begun to sit down and listen to each other." but WEI's conference was the first step toward creating the partnerships

Keynote Address

Alan Tracy, Secretary of the Wisconsin Department of Agriculture, Trade and Consumer Protection, suggested that we all have a common vision for Wisconsin, a state where agriculture thrives and is a vital part of our economy, our landscape and our culture. He challenged the conference participants to recognize this common ground and work together as partners to achieve sound development and a viable agricultural system.

Panel I: Farm Profitability

John Malchine summarized the feelings of all the panelists. He said, "The bottom line is money." Farmers need to make a just return on their investment, and without that, Wisconsin will not have a viable agricultural system. The ensuing debate focused on ways to achieve profitability. Raising the price for agricultural products, lowering taxes and lowering production costs through low-input farming were the popular solutions.

Panel II: Environmental Issues

George Meyer, Secretary of the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources, shared his thoughts about how environmental regulations sustain agriculture. He stated that environmental regulations are designed to protect our land and water, the two fundamental inputs of production agriculture. He noted, however, that the management of natural resources will fail if the farm economy is not improved. The other panelists agreed that it is important to preserve our natural resources, but the viewpoints on how to accomplish this varied. Preventing problems through alternative farming methods, paying farmers more for their products so they can afford to be environmentally friendly and devising goal-oriented regulations rather than prescriptive ones were the most salient suggestions.

Panel III: Urban Pressures

The final panel produced a lively debate over farmland conversion. Bryce Luchterhand, the State Director of USDA Rural Development, stated, "The development of agricultural land is an oxymoron. You can't improve it. Agricultural land is the primary use of the land and ought to be treated as such." John Kassner of the Wisconsin Builder's Association disagreed. "If there's a house here, the place for a new house is next door. Even if the land to be

developed is prime farmland, it's next to go." In addition, Kassner stated that planners try to force people to live in the city while simultaneously ignoring market forces. "The cheapest you can buy an acre in Madison is \$40,000, but in the country you can buy the same amount of acreage for a lot less money."

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Roundtable Discussions

The roundtable discussions were truly the highlight of the conference. Sonnie Sonnenshein of the Wisconsin-Illinois Upper Des Plaines River Ecosystem Partnership summarized the feelings of most attendees. "Unlike most conferences which give groups a short time to engage in discussion, this conference allowed people the time to listen to one another and give each issue thoughtful consideration. The format was great!"

Roundtable I: Farm Profitability and Entry/Exit

Raising the price of agricultural products was a popular solution to the farm profitability problem. Reducing the middleman's share, limiting supply, reforming the dairy price system, marketing products to add value and increasing consumer willingness to pay more for food by educating the public about the need for a viable agricultural system were the most prevalent suggestions. However, some tables disagreed with the belief that raising prices would be a successful approach. These tables discussed the impact of a national and international market on Wisconsin's agricultural industry and questioned the ability to increase consumer prices as lower priced products from other areas enter Wisconsin markets.

Using conservation easements was the predominant answer to the question of how to solve the entry/exit problem. Conservation easements allow new farmers to buy land at agricultural prices while simultaneously allowing the retiring farmer to receive retirement income. Conservation easements could be placed on agricultural land through a purchase of development rights program or clustered development or by land trusts and individual buyers. Other suggestions included creating land-use plans that do not promote sprawl, increasing farm profitability and changing taxation to encourage the retention of land for agricultural purposes.

Roundtable II: Environmental Issues

Every roundtable agreed that farming can be both profitable and environmentally sound. Some tables suggested that higher prices for agricultural products would allow farmers to pay for the equipment and infrastructure needed to be environmentally friendly. Other tables called for increased research and education about environmentally sound yet profitable farming methods. Rotational grazing, contour farming and natural or biological control of pesticides were given as examples of effective, low-cost techniques.

Roundtable III: Development Pressures and Farmland Retention

Nearly every roundtable agreed that land needs to be preserved for agriculture and that urban development conflicts with farming when it forces the price of farmland up beyond

what local farmers can afford. To mitigate this conflict, most tables suggested that Wisconsin create an incentive-based system that encourages redevelopment and infill and discourages the conversion of farmland to urban uses. Specific components of this system could include the purchase or transfer of development rights, the donation of conservation easements, community tax-base sharing and impact statements to determine the long-term costs and benefits of alternative development strategies. In addition, there was a strong desire for more effective communication among stakeholders to create land-use plans that control sprawling development.