

22 local simple fresh



Russell Lee/Farm Security Administration

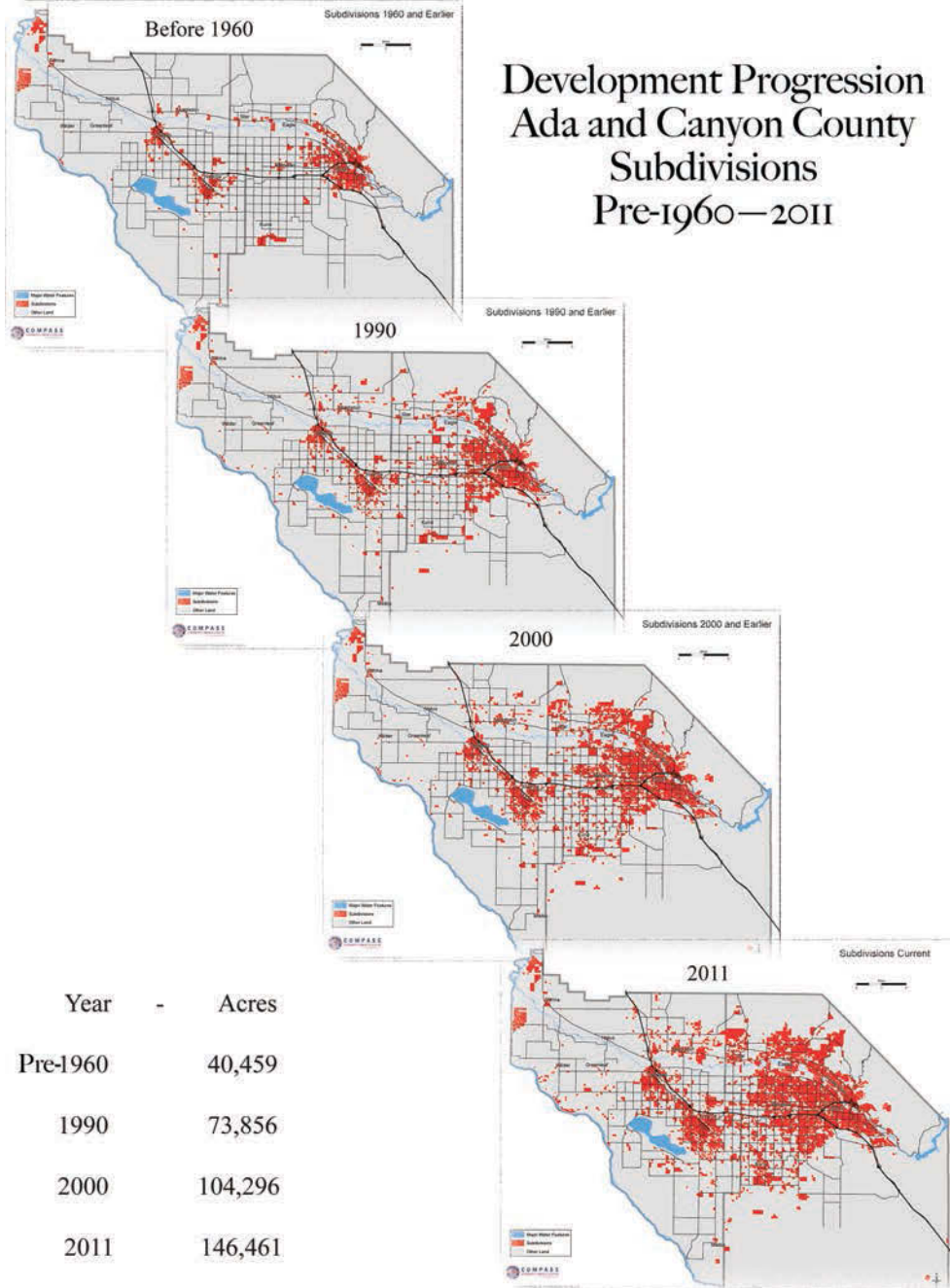
Harvesting peas near Nampa, 1941.

Vanishing LANDS

by Bryce Evans

A The V.V. Sparks acreage borders the busy Highway 55 that bisects the heart of Canyon County's rich farm country. Nearby, rooftops and asphalt have replaced onion and beet fields as real estate development creeps south of Nampa. But the Sparks farm won't suffer the same fate. Rather than someday disappear under a developer's bulldozers, the Sparks acreage will remain forever untouched, protected by a conservation easement arranged by the late Evelyn Craig, V.V. Sparks' daughter.

"She saw Nampa growing out and eating up farmland. She didn't want anything to happen to her property," explained Tim Breuer, director of the Land Trust of the Treasure Valley, which holds the voluntary conservation agreement placed on the land. "We don't own or control it ... we just assure that it will never be developed." The Sparks property remains a farm to this day, more than 10 years after the agreement was established.





Canyon County's population grew by about 40 percent, 2000-2010. Pictured: farmland for sale near Nampa.

While the Sparks farm provides an encouraging example to those who lament the loss of local farmland, it is an exception to a pattern that has seen Ada County lose 14 percent of its farmland between 2002 and 2007 as rural housing developments popped up to accommodate anticipated population growth. Canyon County, with more acres in agriculture, lost 4 percent. Alarmed by the loss of cropland, a handful of organizations—the Coalition

26 local simple fresh

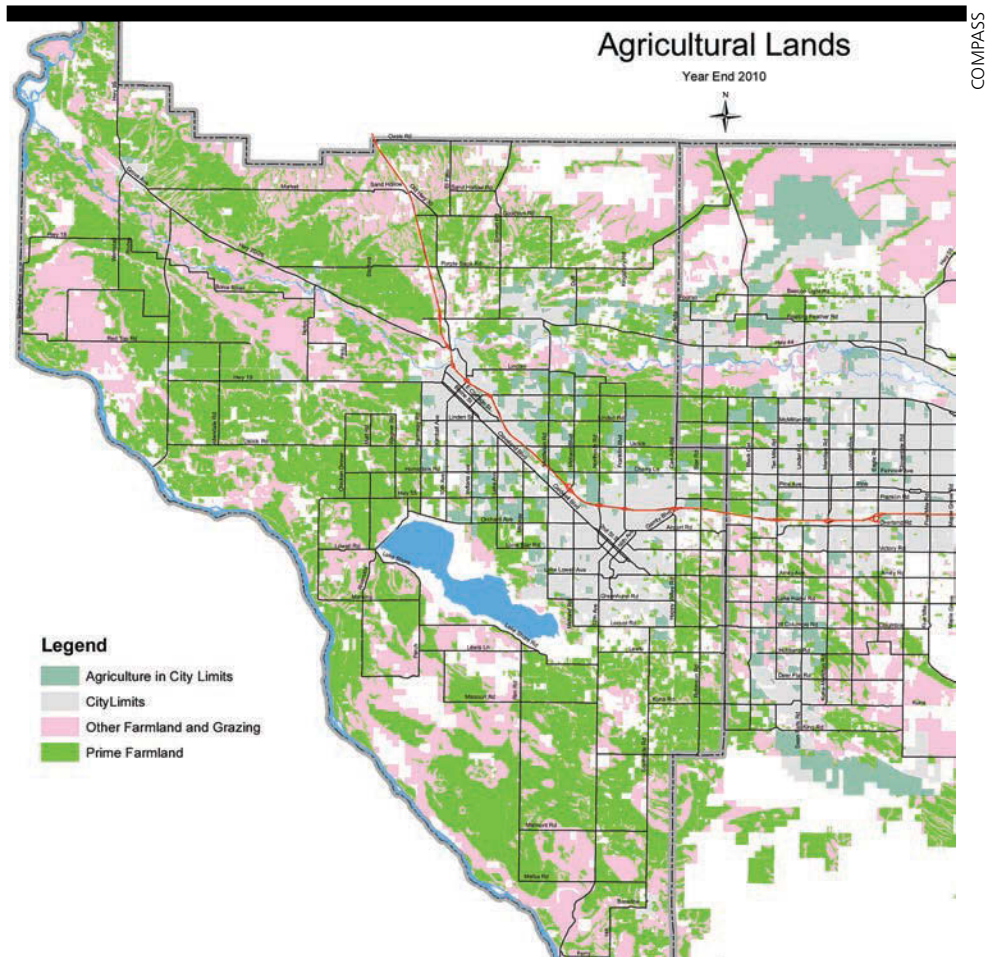


Nicholas DiPietro

Homedale fronts the Snake River in the receding checkerboard sea of Owyhee County farmland.

for Agriculture's Future, the Land Trust of the Treasure Valley, Idaho Smart Growth, the Urban Land Institute and others—are working to preserve the valley's farms and the heritage they represent. "We are not anti-development. But we do want to preserve the agricultural traditions that have forged the values of Idaho's people for generations," said George Crookham, part owner of the Crookham Seed Company in Caldwell and chairman of the Coalition for Agriculture's Future.

Agriculture has played a key role in the region's economic and cultural life ever since the canal systems were put into place throughout the valley in the late 1800s and early 1900s. The new irrigation systems allowed early farmers and ranchers to convert more than 400,000 acres of high-desert shrub ground into productive farmland, turning the Treasure Valley into the agricultural powerhouse that it has been for a century.



Boise Valley Agricultural Lands, COMPASS 2010. Exurbs leap to the rural outskirts, fragmenting farms.

But in recent years that agricultural heritage has slowly eroded. Inexpensive, low-density land that is converted to high-density uses can reap large profits for developers, making the land far more valuable than the crops planted on it. Farming acreages on the fringes of urban areas are especially vulnerable. Rising land prices, which lead to higher property taxes, often make it too hard for farmers to resist the temptation to sell. Thus, subdivisions and commercial developments have taken farmland out of produc-

28 local simple fresh

tion, due largely to urban or suburban sprawl that overextends residential housing into previously undeveloped areas. Fueled by a booming economy, the Treasure Valley's population steadily grew until the recession began in 2008. Boise added 20,000 people between 2000 and 2010, according to the U.S. Census Bureau. Meridian and Nampa each added 30,000. Janie Burns, the owner and operator of Meadowlark Farm near Nampa, has seen first-hand the growth that has taken place. "When I first bought my farm I was several miles outside the city; now my farm is considered to be in the area of impact zone for Nampa," she said.

"The single largest harm resulting from loss of farmland is its resulting impact on the local economy, the effects of which will then influence every other element of local life," said Crookham. He explained that when 10 acres of cultivated farmland are lost, the economic impacts are the loss of \$158,340 in base sales, \$33,790 in base wages and one job. Crookham added that agriculture-related industries provide nearly 20 percent of all jobs in the state, which equates to approximately 130,000 Idaho workers producing paychecks totaling \$2.8 billion. So losing farmland also means losing jobs and a higher rate of unemployment in an already tough economy. "Anything that reduces or retards the agricultural economic engine will reverberate throughout the local area. Look at the public attention given to the impact when a company closes or moves out of the area. Yet that is what is happening every time agricultural land in the Treasure Valley is lost to development," said Crookham.

Farmland fuels to the economy both in terms of raw capital and jobs. But which really adds more to the economy: farmland or subdivisions? Subdivisions add construction jobs and commercial centers include businesses that hire workers. Yet, Deanna Smith, the project coordinator at Idaho Smart Growth, points out the boom and bust nature of construction work. "When you're going through a housing boom you can produce a lot of construction jobs, but that's not a permanent industry," she said. Crookham added: "Certainly, skilled craftsmen can earn substantial wages in construction compared to those in the agricultural sector. However, Idaho's construction industry, along with high-tech and the service industries, profusely hemorrhaged jobs at unprecedented rates during the most recent recession while employment in the agricultural sector not only remained stable, but actually added jobs."

Is the public better served with high-paying jobs of short duration or with more moderately paying jobs that provide long-term stability and reliability? Crookham said large-scale loss of farmland would directly translate



Idaho-Office-of-Refugees-International-Rescue-Committee

Compensating, in part, for the decline of family farming, the City of Boise has loosened zoning restriction on small-scale urban agriculture

into the loss of stable jobs that can be lifesavers during economic conditions like Idaho faced during this recent recession. More than 10,000 construction jobs left Idaho from 2008 to 2009 alone, according to the Idaho State Department of Labor. On the other hand farming jobs remained consistent and sustainable.

The rapid encroachment of subdivisions into farmland not only leads to the loss of those acreages, but it also can lead to conflicts between the remaining farmers and residents in newly built subdivisions. Idaho Smart Growth's Smith explained: "Some land uses are compatible and some are not; farms and residential should not cross. When you have houses surrounded by farmland, there is conflict. You have farmers who, because of their lifestyle and how they make their living, are up at odd hours of the day. They run noisy and loud machinery, and there are animals that make smells." Factor in the need for some farmers to crop dust and the dusty conditions surrounding unused farmland and even more conflicts are possible when farmland is close to residences. Added Smith: "You create these conflicts and

30 local simple fresh

then suddenly people are saying we don't want these guys [farmers] to be able to do X or Y or Z. So if you are not thoughtful about your land use development, then you create these conflicts—and we have created these all over Idaho.”

Small-farm owner Burns said these sorts of issues can frustrate farmers. When all of the neighboring farms turn into subdivisions, then it is more difficult to attain equipment used for specialized projects. “You can't just borrow a piece of farm equipment from your neighbors if you are surrounded by subdivisions,” she explained. This is not only a conflict of use but also puts further economic strain on farmers because they may now have to purchase or rent equipment that they previously borrowed. These clashes of use can often not only frustrate both parties, but might also force farmers off of their lands. “Conflict of use is just one more reason for someone to sell; it's also a reason for someone to not start a new farm,” said Smith.

Local governments often favor subdivision construction because it grows the tax base by increasing the area's population. While growth isn't necessarily a bad thing, uncontrolled growth is, said Smith, who calls it an issue of “thoughtful vs. random” sprawl. The issue is not that the region is growing, but rather how it grows. “If an area is to grow, then residential housing is crucial,” explained Crookham. “The issue is one of proper management of that growth process so that it does not unduly impact the agricultural sector of the local economy. Growing outwards from existing residential areas provides a means to accommodate growth. But spot zoning or dropping residential developments into the middle of agricultural lands should be avoided because of the long-term uncontrolled growth cycle it feeds,” Crookham said.

Agricultural land loss has slowed since the recession began five years ago. But in some cases land was already taken out of production or rezoned before the crash hit. Infrastructure such as roads, water and sewer systems were installed but then abandoned or left for repossession. Now much of that land is unusable for agriculture. The economic slowdown had a significant impact on development, said Breuer of the Land Trust of the Treasure Valley. “Platted subdivisions are now back to alfalfa ... or turned to weed patches. Lots of projects that started when farmland prices were sky-high have been shelved. Some have been sold back for dimes on the dollar.”

While the issues associated with farmland loss are familiar, the solutions are more vague. Money and private property rights are at the center of a complex set of relationships. Both the Urban Land Institute and the Coalition for Agriculture's Future say land use decisions need to put more



Gerry Slabaugh

Gothic arched turn-of-the-century barns are fast disappearing. Pictured: Gothic barn flanks the farmhouse on Nampa's Madison Avenue, 2012.

emphasis on the value of agriculture. "Agriculture may add \$3 billion to the Treasure Valley economy, but that holds little weight when our governmental bodies allow irresponsible urban development of historical lands," wrote Crookham in a letter to the Coalition's membership.

In a 2012 report titled "Sustainable Agriculture: Measuring Success," the Urban Land Institute stated, "In many ways, the issue is not if we can avoid developing agricultural land, but rather how we manage developing responsibly." The report went on to urge decision makers to include agricultural interests in land use discussions. "Agriculture must have a seat at the land use planning table. We do not need to convert more farmland for housing and developments, but we do need to properly integrate agriculture into the planning process," the report said. Farmland preservation groups can point to some successes. The 2011 Idaho Legislature passed a bill mandating that planning and zoning policies must adhere more closely to existing com-

32 local simple fresh



Susankinidaho/Flickr

A castle rises on farmland, Kuna, 2008.

prehensive plans and must consider the role of agriculture in zoning decisions. Canyon County eliminated its planned-community conditional use permit provision that previously allowed residential subdivisions to be dropped in the middle of agricultural land.

Some localities manage farmland loss by creating growth boundaries that in essence cap outward sprawl and create infill to more efficiently use space. This ensures that farmland stays farmland and that development remains separate. Smith said that urban growth boundaries allow growth to occur in a rational, logical pattern that protects farmland or other open spaces. "The benefit is they [growth boundaries] really help a community from an infrastructure viewpoint to really plan for and build in a manner that economically makes sense," she said. Oregon has been successful in using urban growth boundaries, especially in the Portland area, where the concept

has saved thousands of acres since its inception in the 1970s. But there is another side to the growth boundary issue. In addition to the potential clashes with private property rights, some believe boundaries cause housing costs to increase because they reduce land available for new development.

Smith cites Latah County as a model for what can be done to prevent sprawl and the destruction of farmlands. "What is unique about Moscow is that in effect it has almost the equivalent of an urban growth boundary and the reason they do is because their farmers almost demanded it in a sense because the farmland in the area is so valuable." She pointed to Moscow as an example of where community activists such as local farmers can hold significant sway if they band together. Idaho's land use planning and zoning rules should feature a measured approach when it comes to projects that will result in the loss of agricultural lands, said Crookham. "This does not mean that commercial growth and development should be restricted. It does mean that government must honestly and factually weigh the gains against the losses when making a decision as to converting agricultural land to other uses."

"It's not like there are bad guys and good guys," Breuer said. "Thing is, if you are sitting here in urban Boise and want to protect farmland, you are telling someone else not to develop their land. In some cases, it might be their 401(k). It is important to recognize political realities. While a number of studies have shown it makes economic sense to keep development within existing communities, it is not always easy to convince local officials that turning down development and reducing sprawl makes sense as an economic development tool."

Many farmers sell to developers because of simple economics. If farmers can't make a profit, they are more likely to sell their land. "One of the biggest barriers in the area today is that farmland has become less valuable as farmland than as development," explained Smith. "As people get into retirement age and they want to quit farming, they have developers saying, 'I'll pay you X millions of dollars for your ground.' And the kids don't want the farm, so they're saying, 'Sure why not?' This imbalance in property value can drive people off of the land and it's justifiable for the farmers." Added Breuer, "If you can make farming profitable, you are going to have farmland. If it's more productive to grow houses, that's probably what's going to happen."

In addition to regulatory approaches like zoning restrictions, preservationists are searching for financial incentives to encourage farmers to preserve their land. Smith suggested the possibility of a public fund that would

34 local simple fresh



tsarchitect.nsfianagan.net

Freeways stretch housing through cropland. The Boise Valley ranks first in the Pacific Northwest for auto-dependent, low-density sprawl.

be used to preserve threatened farmland. Economic incentives such as income tax benefits associated with conservation easements is a tool that might encourage owners to voluntarily protect their farmland. Incentive-based approaches such as land trusts, easements or development rights transfers do save farmland, as the preservation of the Sparks farm illustrates. Property owners or their heirs can place their land in a trust that ensures it will never be developed. In most cases the land remains in private hands, but is restricted to remain a farm, nature preserve, open space or other public use.

But Crookham urges caution when using government to provide further incentives to farmers to keep them from selling their land to developers. There is a fine line between protecting farmland while also protecting the

property rights of farmers, he explained. "As a matter of individual property rights, it would be wrong for government to interfere with the willing seller/willing buyer element of land transactions. Government subsidies or financial incentives to not sell would also constitute unwarranted governmental interference with the free market."

Another preservation strategy is to promote agritourism, a commercial enterprise that links agricultural production and/or processing with tourism to attract visitors to a farm, ranch or other agricultural business. Agritourism projects such as corn mazes, farm stands, scenic byways, bed-and-breakfasts and greenhouses can be a way to not only bring extra income to farmers but also inform the public about agricultural issues. This has been an especially effective strategy in the wine industry.

Promoting local food production is another means to help small-scale farmers stay on their land. Only a fraction of what farmers grow in the Treasure Valley is sold locally, but that is changing as local food markets, restaurants and grocery stores embrace local producers. The Treasure Valley Food Coalition estimates that area farmers could expect \$118 million in new income each year if Ada and Canyon County residents just bought 15 percent of their food each year locally. That could translate into 1,000 new jobs and \$13 million in labor income, the organization said. "If we have more pride in our local agricultural lands and products, we will do more to protect them," said Burns from Meadowlark Farm.

One of the major hurdles to farmland protection is the lack of public awareness. Said Crookham: "Not only the general public, but community and government officials need to be better educated on the actual beneficial impact of agriculture on the area. Ultimately, an agricultural economy cannot exist without land. Farmland lost is farmland lost forever. The real question is whether or not our leadership can fully grasp that fact before it's too late."

• • •

Bryce Evans is a senior studying Communication. He plans to pursue a graduate degree in Community and Regional Planning and begin a career in public service. He came to Boise State from Orange County in Southern California.