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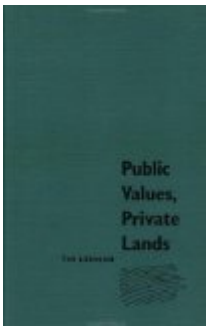
Tim Lehman. *Public Values, Private Lands: Farmland Preservation Policy, 1933-1985.* Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995. xii + 239 pp. $55.00, library, ISBN 978-0-8078-2177-0.



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In 1937, President Franklin D. Roosevelt asked Secretary of Agriculture Henry A. Wallace, "if a farmer in upstate New York or Georgia or Nebraska or Oregon, through abuse of his land, allows his land to erode, does he have the inalienable right as owner to do this, or has the community, i.e., some form of governmental agency, the right to stop him?" (p. 28). This question highlighted the conflicts between American agriculturalists striving to earn a living by producing abundant supplies of food to feed the world and social scientists, conservationists, and politicians seeking the implementation of preservation plans to regulate farmland usage and mitigate the risks of natural resources damage from land exhaustion and urbanization that threatened future agricultural production.

Tim Lehman, an historian at Rocky Mountain College in Billings, Montana, has written a comprehensive account about this complex issue, chronicling efforts to preserve privately owned rural lands in twentieth-century America through federal regulation. By analyzing intellectual and political aspects of United States agricultural history as nineteenth-century subsistence farming was transformed into twentieth-century commercialized agri-business, Lehman has presented an enlightening and thorough overview of rural land use planning and related agricultural legislation from the *New Deal* through Ronald Reagan's first presidential term. In the process, he reveals how the divisiveness of conservationists, economists, and politicians prevented attainment of land preservation regulation in the 1970s. Lehman asks, "in a society that views the farmer as the paragon of individual freedom, how is farmland to be governed for the sake of long-term environmental and social benefits?" Stressing that the 1930s soil conservation movement and 1970s environmental movement "ran squarely against the profound American hostility toward centralized regulatory controls," he presents the differing definitions of farmland preservation, ranging from saving family-owned farms to soil conservation, emphasizing that "While these issues blur together in places, my interest is primarily in the history of the unfulfilled hopes for agricultural land use planning" (pp. 3-4).

Lehman introduces his topic by noting the apathy, even disdain, of President John F. Kennedy and urban, liberal leaders toward agriculture. By the 1960s, agriculture was dismissed by politicians as an unimportant national policy concern: "farm problems were an anachronism and farmers were politically retrograde. Intellectual energies were turned toward more modern problems" (pp. 1-2). Lehman explains that this lack of interest was due to thirty years of agricultural surpluses after the New Deal. Agriculture in the 1970s, however, attracted attention because of crises that demanded political consideration. Evaluating Congressional reports, government documents, and significant archival collections, and interviewing key participants, Lehman presents farmland preservation policy within the context of agricultural historical scholarship, including works by such authorities as Richard Kirkendall, Theodore Saloutos, Gilbert C. Fite, David Danbom, Wayne Rasmussen, and Willard W. Cochrane as well as conservation works penned by historians Samuel P. Hays, Robert J. Morgan, and Donald C. Swain. Commenting on the absence of major records, particularly those for the National Agricultural Lands Study which were haphazardly disposed of, Lehman has skillfully pieced together information from his varied sources to describe political efforts for farmland preservation and explain why such policymaking failed.

Noting that American politicians have only twice attempted federal protection of farmlands, in the 1930s and the 1970s, Lehman divides his topic into an introduction and conclusion and five chapters, each addressing a specific aspect of agricultural land policy as it evolved chronologically from the 1930s to 1980s. As public lands were transferred to private ownership during westward movement in the late nineteenth century, the government lost control over the use and depletion of the natural resources of millions of acres. Lehman comments how early soil conservation efforts sought to improve the quality of rural life and tackle poverty; combating soil erosion was not a primary concern. Progressives of the early twentieth century promoted conservation of public forests, not private property. Lehman discusses precursors to 1970s farmland preservation legislative activity. By the 1920s, intellectuals, including rural land economists such as Richard T. Ely and Lewis C. Gray, influenced governmental policymaking. The increasing commercialization of agriculture and introduction of national and international markets encouraged farmers to increase production regardless of resulting damage to farmland. Critics expressed Malthusian fears that production would not balance population increases because of inadequate agricultural resources, suggesting that individuals should be responsible for restoring their land. Ely stressed the need for far-reaching land policies, not just emergency measures to counter that decade's agricultural depression. Gray promoted the centralization of land policy and classification of farmlands.

Lehman outlines 1930s New Deal conservation measures, including the government buying submarginal lands. The Soil Erosion Service survey identified millions of acres destroyed by erosion, and Hugh Bennett, director of the Soil Conservation Service (SCS), crusaded for erosion control to preserve farms and rural life, not simply soil. Because of opposition from extension agents, soil conservation districts unsuccessfully attempted to save eroded acreage. Various conferences and meetings were held in an attempt to coordinate conservationists and farmers to achieve effective land reform and accountability of land owners, and President Franklin D. Roosevelt warned Americans that "The nation that destroys its soil destroys itself" (p. 30). His agricultural advisor, Milburn L. Wilson, a Montana State College professor, asserted that private land owners and society shared a responsibility to protect private lands so that future generations "will inherit fertile fields and forests rather than eroded slopes and barren plains" (p. 29). World War II interrupt-

ed these efforts to instill combined private and public responsibility for farmland preservation.

During the period after World War II to the 1970s, agricultural production drastically accelerated to meet consumption demands of global markets. Lehman tells how agriculture became capital-intensive because farmers relied on technology and chemicals to plant and harvest their crops; genetic hybrids developed through biotechnology also boosted yields. As productivity increased, the importance of land to agriculture was discounted in favor of technology. Economists equated land with commodities and did not advocate its preservation. Urban populations grew, and suburbs spread into the countryside, reducing the amount of productive farmland as the best acres were coated in asphalt. Family farms began to disappear as agriculture became an industry. Despite this urbanization of rural areas, agricultural surpluses accumulated during the 1950s and 1960s, creating a false sense of an infinite possibility for agricultural prosperity.

In 1974, Secretary of Agriculture Earl Butz urged farmers to "plant fencerow to fencerow" to meet global demand (p. 60). He commissioned the *Potential Cropland Study* to determine how much reserve cropland could be planted, discovering that 76 million of 111 million available acres "carried high economic or environmental costs in their development as cropland" (p. 93). By the mid-1970s, an agricultural productivity plateau occurred while the world population increased at alarming rates. Agriculture was hindered by water shortages, the energy crisis, high-priced oil, and diseases attacking genetically uniform hybrid corn. Some social scientists expressed concerns about future shortages of fertile agricultural land, and the preservation of farmland was incorporated into environmental platforms which were critical of modern farming methods using technology.

Lehman reveals how political activity for farmland regulation resumed in the 1970s, when politicians and bureaucrats became aware that limited agricultural resources would block the United States's economic growth. An estimated one million acres of cropland were being usurped each year for rural factories, military bases, airports, shopping malls, and subdivisions, totaling 35 million acres of rural land consumed for suburbs between 1950 and 1970. Interest in fighting soil erosion reemerged, gaining popular support, and local reforms were developed into a national environmental movement demanding federal regulation to protect private agricultural lands. When he was president, Richard Nixon recognized the need for regulation of private farmland, writing that the "time has come when we must accept the idea that none of us has a right to abuse the land, and that on the contrary society as a whole has a legitimate interest in proper land use," emphasizing that it was the "most pressing environmental issue before the nation" (p. 74).

In Chapters Three and Four, Lehman describes Congressional efforts to secure farmland protection legislation. Concerned with conflicts between developers and preservationists, Senator Henry Jackson introduced a bill to resolve disputes about environmentally sensitive land, such as building the Miami airport next to the Everglades. Senator Jackson proposed that states would prepare land use plans, but the Nixon administration submitted a bill describing selective planning areas of environmental concern in states including farmland which began to be incorporated as a reason for federal land use planning. Vermont Senator George Aiken labeled farmland a "scarce natural resource," stressing that cropland preservation would be prioritized in planning, but some agricultural groups responded with suspicion towards land use reform, fearing unwanted urban and federal control over rural concerns. For example, the National Cattlemen's Association stated that government "cannot plan for agriculture." The United States Department of Agriculture was aware of negative reaction, noting "Rural constituents, in particular, have expressed concern that the bill proposed to

create a planning process on private lands [is] identical to the process on public lands. To them, that suggests absolute control by a federal agency." Some agriculturists feared that city planners would declare all farmland "undeveloped," and the American Farm Bureau Federation dismissed dire warnings of reduced arable land as "excessive emotionalism by doomsday zealots." Countering what they considered a federal threat, this conservative alliance helped to defeat legislation, and federal land use planning was considered "politically unacceptable" (pp. 77-79).

Renewed efforts to achieve farmland protection legislation "in its own right" began when Charles Little (division chief of the Environmental and Natural Resources Policy Division of Congressional Research Service), Robert Gray (aide to Vermont Congressman James Jeffords), and George Dunsmore (a minority staff member of the House Agriculture Commission) began discussing how to protect agricultural land from urbanization. They were joined by other government staffers interested in developing a legislative strategy and agreed that they should seek separate legislation from the general farm bill in 1977. The Jeffords Bill stated that federal government policy should strive to protect and improve farmland, support establishment of an Agricultural Land Review Commission, and sponsor demonstration projects to test methods to reduce the number of farmland acres being converted to nonagricultural uses. Jeffords criticized "buckshot urbanization" and water development projects, which he stated caused an annual loss of five million acres of agricultural land of which approximately one third was cropland. His statistics were controversial and proven to be inflated, hindering land protection legislation's advancement through Congress as members concentrated on the veracity of his figures while ignoring the problems they described. Proponents of farmland preservation legislation believed they needed to create a sense of crisis to get legislators' attention, but "What was really a struggle between competing philosophies, between a conservation mentality and a production mentality, between ecology and economics ... too often became a dispute over the validity of a set of statistics" (p. 113).

Farmland protection legislation encountered other roadblocks. The conservative right was skeptical of the legislation's purpose. During hearings before the House Subcommittee on Family Farms, Rural Development, and Special Studies, the Sierra Club's Wilma Frey suggested "in a well-meaning but near disastrous testimony" that farmland protection legislation "could be a tool for paving the way for acceptance of more general land use legislation" (p. 114). Opponents worried about potential federal government control and regulation of all land use. One American Farm Bureau Federation lobbyist asserted, "There's nothing magic about any one patch of ground. Farmers resent the threat that bureaucrats will steal their future by regulation" (p. 115). Most conservationists supported the bill, but economists who viewed land as a commodity, not a resource, protested possible government interference. In early 1979, protesting farmers, circling the capitol on tractors, distracted legislative efforts. Angry because a glut of agricultural goods had resulted in low incomes, farmers complaining of surpluses confused Congressmen. Lehman notes that many politicians could not comprehend warnings of future food shortages and agricultural crises and voted against farmland protection legislation because of their unfamiliarity with agriculture. The ***Washington Post*** also explained that the "main trouble was that it sounded to many members like a first step toward national land use planning which they fear would lead ultimately to a situation where government tells every landowner what he or she may do with property" (p. 131).

In Chapter Five, Lehman focuses on the National Agricultural Lands Study (NALS) which presented its final report on January 16, 1981, just before Ronald Reagan's presidential inauguration

and the commencement of another administration uninterested in agricultural reforms. The NALS assessed the amount of farmland appropriated for nonagricultural purposes and reiterated warnings about the possibility of an impending agricultural land shortage, but its effectiveness was stymied by questions concerning the accuracy of its data about estimated cropland losses. The failure to achieve farmland preservation laws in the 1970s provided the framework for a political coalition in the 1980s that was more successful in passing legislation. The Farmland Protection Policy Act, designed to regulate federal agencies' conversion of cropland for nonagricultural uses, passed in 1981 because it was incorporated in the Agriculture and Food Act. This legislation, however, was "virtually meaningless" because it reflected compromises that minimized the strengths of Jeffords's bill, and it was ineffectively implemented. Federal land reform failed until the 1985 farm bill, which included some provisions for farmland preservation and reflected the concerns for potential agricultural and environmental shortages as expressed by a new alliance of agricultural policymakers, conservationists, and environmentalists.

Lehman concludes his treatise with the comment that agricultural historians should consider the impact of social science research on policymaking for federal land use regulations. By examining the varying opinions and actions of presidents, politicians, government employees, social scientists, and farm groups over five decades, he has astutely shown how potential farmland preservation legislation stagnated as administrations changed and political turnover prevented a consistent base of informed lawmakers resulting in "unfulfilled hopes" for agricultural land use planners. His book is especially strong in interpreting the politics of land use regulation since 1970. Although Lehman mentions some regional land protection measures, particularly on Long Island, his work is of a national scope and perhaps could be strengthened with other examples of regional and local farm protection regulations, analyzing their strengths and weaknesses. He compresses a wealth of detail and statistics regarding agricultural lands and legislation which often interrupt the flow of the text. His book would be enhanced with graphs and charts that illustrate cropland losses and agricultural surpluses to supplement statistical evidence and maps to show urban encroachment. The index is incomplete, not including references to such groups mentioned as the National Cattlemen's Association. One minor distraction in the notes and bibliography is the repeated misspelling of Ankeny, Iowa, location of the Soil Conservation Society of America, publisher of many of Lehman's resources.

Lehman's work is well documented and an excellent source for historians working in related fields. Although an advocate of farmland conservation, he has presented an even account of American agricultural land use and legislation in the twentieth century, showing how failures were unavoidable because of political infighting and uninformed, emotional reaction to issues concerning federal intervention in private concerns. He emphasizes the public, though, through the voices of politicians, social scientists, and lobbyists, while the private sector remains private with the exception of several brief comments from a few farmers or a collective statement through the perceptions of a bureaucrat or group representative. For the most part, farmers are mute except as anonymous constituents. The inclusion of more private landowners' opinions and their influence on policymakers would balance out the text.

Also, Lehman includes few women's voices even though women have been active agriculturists throughout American history. Males dominate the political and intellectual activity he describes, and only a few women scholars or conservationists, such as Rachel Carson, are specifically mentioned, including Wilma Frey who is presented as damaging any hope for farmland preservation's legislative success by her Congressional testimony, and Shirley Foster Fields who is listed as the

NALS publicity director and author of *Where Have All the Farmlands Gone?*. Scholars interested in the role of women in American agriculture should consult such works as Marie Maman and Thelma H. Tate, editors, *Women in Agriculture: A Guide to Research* (1996); Carolyn E. Sachs, *Gendered Fields: Rural Women, Agriculture, and Environment* (1996); Mary Neth, *Preserving the Family Farm: Women, Community and the Foundations of Agribusiness in the Midwest, 1900-1940* (1995); and Katherine Jellison, *Entitled to Power: Farm Women and Technology, 1913-1963* (1993). Trudy Huskamp Peterson, editor of *Farmers, Bureaucrats, and Middlemen: Historical Perspectives on American Agriculture* (1980), and Christiana McFadyen Campbell, *The Farm Bureau: A Study in the Making of National Farm Policy, 1933-40* (1962) also complement Lehman's study.

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