

Rural Landscape— a Changing Heritage

Ronald W. Tuttle, national landscape architect,
Soil Conservation Service

America's rural landscape suggests to many of us an array of colors and forms, a rich diversity of open space and managed cropland, clusters of ranch or farm buildings, and small communities in harmony with their surroundings. But these patterns of rural land ownership are changing. Traditional farmsteads and farming practices are being consumed by urbanization with productive farmland lost and rural residents displaced. Farm consolidation, an increase in absentee landowners, and an economic crisis on many farms threaten rural America.

Different Perceptions of the Rural Landscape

One definition suggests that it is "a complex of ecological, economic, and cultural qualities on which a variety of life forms are dependent."¹ Another authority defines the rural landscape as beginning at the edge of town—"beyond the last street light and where the familiar asphalt ends."²

No two areas are alike. Any part of the rural landscape reflects its physical

setting and the cultural meanings associated with it. Although most of us appreciate the rural landscape, we assign different values to it.

A rural landscape that is considered the traditional family home by many rural residents can provide a daily excursion or a weekend get-away to nonrural residents. Others value it as property to be managed and intended for production or for future development. Regardless of its specific value to any one individual, the uses assigned to the rural landscape affect all of us.

Characterized by a predominance of agricultural patterns that are interspersed with natural features, farmsteads, homesites, and rural communities, the rural landscape is a bountiful but finite resource. Valued for its productive capability, it also is a part of our cultural heritage.

Pace of Change Increasing

Entitled *The Face of Rural America*, the 1976 Yearbook of Agriculture was devoted to a visual record of America's agriculture in the Bicentennial year.

Earl L. Butz, Secretary of Agriculture at that time, was quoted in the Yearbook as saying, "Modern agricul-

¹American Society of Landscape Architects, *Policy on the Rural Landscapes*, 1985.

²Erwin H. Zube and Margaret J. Zube, *Changing Rural Landscapes*, 1977.



The dust, odor, and noise of farming often are sources of conflict with adjacent subdivision residents. (Tim McCabe, SCS, VA-5,277)

ture is changing so fast that it is hard to keep up. Those who used to live on the farm may have fond memories of those experiences, but if they are away from the farm for even a while, they quickly fall behind.”

This rapid pace has not diminished in the decade since 1976. Complex economic and technological factors are causing current changes to occur more rapidly than in the past and often on a larger scale.

Agriculture's Historical Impact

Since its beginning in this country, agriculture repeatedly has changed the character of the rural landscape. The agriculture practiced by the settlers of the 18th and 19th centuries gave way

to mechanized agriculture in the middle of this century.

The diverse mixed crop and livestock farming of the settlement era was soon replaced with the one- or two-crop, highly specialized farming enterprises found in many places today. Agriculture and the rural landscape may again be going through a fundamental change, which growing farm problems and urban encroachment have helped bring about.

Changes in the rural landscape may be quiet yet dramatic. New homes may suddenly appear in a pasture on which cows grazed a few months earlier. Other changes are less dramatic but equally significant; for example, a gradual loss of topsoil or subtle change in water quality easily

can be overlooked. Highly effective conservation measures can be removed thoughtlessly with devastating results. Change is a continuing theme in the rural landscape, influenced by land use, technology, and farming practices.

Migration of the Affluent

Repercussions of land-use changes in the rural landscape are many and interactive. For example, existing rural residents are displaced when residential developments introduce urban-oriented people. Often affluent, these new residents may have a pastoral ideal of the rural landscape and not be prepared to cope with the reality of unpaved roads, farm chemicals, or the dust, odor, and noise of a farm enterprise.

A concentration of nearly uniform dwellings, paved streets, storage sheds, manicured lawns, and exotic vegetation replace the clustered farmstead buildings, indigenous vegetation and rural roads. The social and economic structure of the rural community is extricably altered.

National Agricultural Lands Study

In 1980, the *National Agricultural Lands Study* called attention to prime agricultural lands being converted to other uses. Whether this change poses a threat to the future adequacy of farmland acreage in this country has been broadly debated.

A disconcerting decrease in family farms and in experienced farmers is evident. Approximately 5 to 8 percent of all farmers in this country left

farming in 1985.³ Many of the farms they left were acquired by farm management companies or absentee owners who are isolated from the needs of the land or rural community.

Census data suggest that much of the recent rural population growth is within commuting distance of urban areas, but as far as possible into the rural fringe, which is also the area of fastest population growth. Currently, two out of five "rural" Americans are said to live in counties classified as metropolitan.⁴ Many of these newcomers are interested in acquiring small tracts of land that they can manage as "hobby farms." Existing rural communities are transformed from a set of traffic lights, a local farm implement company, and a coffee shop into small cities with shopping malls, office parks, and bypass highways.

Farms Change Land Too

Changing farm technology and practices change land just as surely as the more obvious process of urbanization. Few individuals are likely to notice the ecological effects of agricultural chemicals or the new land patterns that a large farm operation necessitates. Such changes may seem insignificant, but in fact may change the ecology and landscape quality significantly.⁵ A trend towards increas-

³*The Economist*, "On the Trail of the White Collar Settlers," 1986.

⁴*The Economist*, 1986.

⁵Duane Coen, Joan I. Nassauer, and Ronald W. Tuttle, *Landscape Architecture in the Rural Landscape*, American Society of Landscape Architects, Washington, DC, 1987.



Today's mechanized feeding and confinement facilities take animals out of the pastures and away from view. (SCS)



Farmers adjust crops to special market opportunities. These onions grow on muck soils in southeastern Wisconsin. (Dale Lange, SCS, WI-1536)



Contour stripcropping helps protect a Maryland farm from erosion, one of the ways rural landscapes can be conserved and still accommodate human needs and uses. (Tim McCabe, SCS, MD-30,622)

ingly large-scale farming with larger and more specialized equipment and production goals has caused farmers to increase field size and remove windbreaks, hedgerows, wetlands, woodland, and other features that give the landscape a special identity but impede efficiency.

New combines and similar equipment often require bigger machine shops, and other farmstead buildings are made obsolete by specialized handling and storage requirements. Instead of storing hay in enclosed structures, for example, many farmers now bale hay into large rolls that are left in the field until used.

Specialized Structures

Intensive husbandry of livestock now

confines pigs, poultry, and grazing animals in specialized buildings with controlled environments where feeding and waste management require special attention. Blue silos, metal or fiberglass roofing, and prefabricated buildings reflect the use of standardized materials and structures in place of local materials and structures designed for specific needs and site conditions.

New farm buildings tend to be large, one-story structures with a clear span, high eaves, and clad in sheet material. Because of the large area dimensions of these buildings, their construction often results in substantial changes to the site on which they are located.

Consolidated farm holdings have

caused a redundancy of farmstead structures and a growing number of tenant farmers. When they are absorbed into larger ownerships, many farmsteads are abandoned or demolished for increased acreage to maximize the use of the land for profitable production. High-input technologies have increased the use of chemical fertilizers, herbicides, and pesticides. Their use causes concern for water quality and ecological systems.

What about the Future?

Predictions are only as good as the crystal ball being used and unadvisable at the best of times. This is especially true of predicting something as complex as the future rural landscape. With that in mind, there are a number of possibilities to ponder.

The current farm crisis and adjustments in the rural landscape have been widely publicized. Some experts suggest that agriculture and rural lifestyles are evolving into something fundamentally different. Responding to politics, economics, climate, and technology throughout the world, life in the rural landscape will become increasingly dynamic.

Consolidation of rural land ownership and businesses will result in additional large-scale commercial enterprises. At the same time, an increase of small-scale operations tailored to geographic conditions, special market opportunities, and individual preferences is likely. Future farmers, ranchers, business people, and rural residents

will be innovators who look for alternatives to traditional methods and the resource information needed to make the alternatives successful. Sensitive to market conditions, they will be flexible in shifting to meet changing demands.

Protection vs. Usage

Environmental quality vs. resource potential will influence agricultural policy and rural activities. Interest in preserving glimpses of the rural past and present character are likely to grow. Farmers and others will be more inclined to adapt existing structures and equipment to meet ongoing and future needs. Biotechnology and other forms of emerging technology will introduce improved species and techniques that allow a greater tolerance to prevailing conditions and an independence from the use of farm chemicals. Advances in computer technology and automation will increase efficiency and provide more free time for rural residents.

Do We care?

The rural landscape will continue to change as people have new ideas. Before making changes, however, their effects on rural landscape values and quality of life should be understood and fully appreciated. Experience suggests that the rural landscape can be conserved and still accommodate human needs and uses. People, however, must care enough and be willing to accept the challenge.