

A Call for New Ruralism: Reinvestment in Metro-Region Agriculture Is Integral to Metro-Region Sustainability

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Sustainable agriculture can help bring cities down to earth, to a deeper commitment to the ecology and economy of the surrounding countryside on which they depend. This paper proposes the concept of “New Ruralism” —the preservation and enhancement of urban edge, rural agricultural areas as places that are indispensable to the economic, environmental, social, and cultural vitality of cities and metropolitan regions—as a framework for creating a bridge between sustainable agriculture and smart growth. New Ruralism embraces the power of place-making that can help American agriculture move from an artificially narrow focus on production to a wider focus on resource conservation. As a place-based and systems-based framework,¹ New Ruralism nurtures the symbiotic relationship between urban and rural areas.

Here are some ideas about what New Ruralism could mean.

The Rationale for New Ruralism

To thrive and endure, regions and the cities within them need a vital local agricultural system that encompasses individual farms, rural communities, and stewardship of natural resources. Rural areas—especially those at the urban edge—face enormous challenges. In California, as in many parts of the developed world, agricultural operations near cities are under extreme pressure from suburbanization, environmental degradation, and an industrialized and globalized farm economy. Urban areas are contending with the flip side of this problem: the multiple costs of sprawl and a national crisis of health problems due to poor diets and lack of exercise. Too many urban residents are overfed and undernourished. They are disconnected from rural and natural surroundings that further recede with increasing low-density, auto-dependent urbanization. In many ways, industrialized agriculture and urban sprawl are similar blights: both operate with little regard for the natural conditions of the landscape, and both are oblivious to the ecological and cultural uniqueness of place.

The concept of New Ruralism is built on 25 years of reform in food, agriculture, and land use planning. The sustainable agriculture and local food systems movements have taken organic foods mainstream, made farmers’ markets a basic town-center amenity, and put “slow food” on a fast track. At the same time, New Urbanism projects and smart growth initiatives have demonstrated the possibilities of creating healthier, more livable urban centers. Communities

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¹ Place-based means connected to a specific geography; systems-based implies a functional relationship.

large and small are using smart growth tools to create mixed-use, pedestrian-friendly, and transit-oriented developments; encourage infill and revitalize downtowns; institute green building policies; and better balance the growth of jobs and housing. The 1996 Charter of the New Urbanism includes a principle stating that “farmland and nature are as important to the metropolis as the garden is the house.” Yet, approaches for strengthening the vitality of surrounding rural areas as a means to contain and sustain cities have not been thoroughly investigated. In many ways, New Ruralism is now where New Urbanism and smart growth were two decades ago – a powerful idea that is generated mostly by professionals, out of sight of the public and academia.

Vision

Just as New Urbanists and “critical regionalists” (who strive to counter placelessness in architecture) have articulated and demonstrated the potential for a renewed movement of place-affirming urban planning, our regional rural areas need a similar call to action. It is time for a New Ruralism with a framework of principles, policies, precedents, and practices. Following is a preliminary definition:

New Ruralism is the preservation and enhancement of urban edge rural agricultural areas as places that are indispensable to the economic, environmental, social, and cultural vitality of cities and metropolitan regions.

The geography for New Ruralism can be defined as rural lands within urban influence: the larger the metropolis, the larger the field of influence. The geographical structure of metropolitan regions extends from the urban-rural interface and the rural-urban fringe to exurbia and beyond to urban-influenced farmland. Rural lands are too often a contested landscape of transitional land uses, speculative land values, regulatory uncertainty, and impermanent agriculture. The current default is that metropolitan agriculture inevitably dissolves and retreats as the urban footprint expands.

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New Ruralism would help create permanent agricultural preserves on the urban edge as sources of fresh food for the larger urban region, and as places for nurturing urban connections with the land. These could take the form of green “food belt” perimeters, buffers between urban areas, small agricultural parks at the urban-rural interface, or bigger preserves further afield that include larger farms and rural settlements. This vision must work hand in hand with the New Urbanism vision of compact, mixed-use, urbanized areas; the elimination of low-density, auto-dependent sprawl; and distinct “edges” between towns and their surrounding rural working lands.

Principles

These ideas provide a starting point for some preliminary principles.

New Ruralism would denote specific rural places located near urban areas and part of broader metropolitan regions. Such New Ruralist places would have their identity rooted in unique and significant agricultural, ecological, geographical, and cultural attributes. This identity would contribute to a broader regional sense of place through local farm products, rural activities, iconic landscape, and opportunities for public experience. These rural places may also have general designations as agricultural preserves or local “food belts.”

The primary land use would be small- to medium-scale sustainable agriculture integrated and overlapping with areas for wildlife and habitat management and passive recreation. Conducive agronomic conditions for field-crop production and long-standing traditions of farming in this place would be primary factors determining the location of such agricultural preserves. Other factors would include dedicated current farmers and identified aspiring farmers, crops and livestock distinctive to the place, processing and marketing infrastructure, affordable housing on farms or in nearby communities for farm employees, and regulations supportive of value-added enterprises and agritourism operations. The “Wild Farm” movement demonstrates the potential value of this kind of multifunctional agriculture.²

Urban-rural connectivity would require a multi-faceted exchange of goods and services. A major linkage would be locally grown food, promoted through direct marketing channels and institutional networks. “Local food-shed” is an attribute ripe for quantification and even certification, due to its connotation of fresh, healthy, and flavorful food and its potential for public access and interaction. (Such a place-based designation has long been used for wines and is now being used for crops tied to a place and method of production.) Connectivity would also take the form of creating physical links to urban green spaces and regional hiking, equestrian, and biking trail systems. Another link is environmental services. Services such as carbon sequestration, green waste composting, aquifer recharge, flood and fire protection, and preservation of biodiversity would be part of the urban-rural economic exchange that would help reestablish the value of the ecological systems that ultimately hold sway over the built environment.

New Ruralist agricultural preserves would welcome the public as visitors and residents. One of the highest values of rural areas near cities is their attraction as homesites for people who are not farmers. With careful planning, this bane can be a boon. On large rural estates, affirmative agriculture easements and projects that require homeowners to contribute baseline support to their surrounding agriculture demonstrate the symbiosis of agricultural production and landscape values. However, the benefits of country life should not be limited to the wealthy. Following both the demand for a rural lifestyle and the trend toward the not-so-big-house,

² The Wild Farm Alliance was established by a national group of wildlands proponents and ecological farming advocates who share a concern for the land and its wild and human inhabitants. The group’s vision is for “a world in which community-based, ecologically managed farms and ranches are seamlessly integrated into landscapes that accommodate the full range of native species and ecological processes.” <http://wildfarmalliance.org>.

clustered, modest, non-farm rural homesites could be a key value proposition for preserving agricultural land, especially if they are strictly limited and their value is tied to the local agricultural economy. Perhaps these homeowners can purchase a share of the farm production along with their modest dwellings.

The development and management of each agricultural preserve would be guided by a comprehensive plan. Such a plan could be established and implemented as a joint powers agreement among city, county, and resource agencies. Broader regulations and incentives would likely also come into play. The key to establishing rural places that reflect metropolitan regional values is a holistic approach to public health, conservation, economic development, housing, agricultural productivity, and more. In fact, increasingly the General Plan updates for counties with or near large urban areas are including health elements with local food policies and agricultural elements with conservation policies. Each plan might also have specific quantified objectives, such as goals for local food production, local jobs, ecosystems services, or educational programs. Through these plans, New Ruralist places would compensate landowners for specific public good amenities provided for the local town or broader metropolitan region. This is already being done through transfers of development rights from rural to urban places and through various kinds of conservation easement programs.

Precedents

New Ruralism draws from past models. Some obvious examples are the agrarian context for the original “Garden City” concept³ and the self-sufficiency elements of eco-villages. New Ruralism is also informed by current programs and initiatives, such as those outlined below:

- The **Tri-Valley Conservancy/South Livermore Specific Plan** in South Livermore, California⁴ includes a conservation easement program that is funded and administered for the preservation of land in perpetuity. The plan is partially funded by development mitigation fees and state funds. The mitigation program is countywide, which allows development fees in urban areas to pass through to the surrounding agricultural lands that are conserved.
- The **Brentwood Agricultural Land Trust**⁵ in Contra Costa County, California is an agricultural resources preservation program that links farmland protection with agricultural economic development. The farmland conservation program uses several planning and market-based tools, including an agricultural mitigation fee, conservation easement, purchase of fee title, and transferable agricultural credit. The economic development program focuses on collaborations with local government to strengthen food and farm policies. Examples include a local food purchasing policy for county institutional purchasers and agricultural tourism zoning, both of which are pending. It also includes collaborations with initiatives such as the Buy Fresh Buy Local campaign.

³ The garden city movement is a method of [urban planning](#) that was initiated in 1898 by Sir [Ebenezer Howard](#) in the [United Kingdom](#). Garden cities were intended to be planned, self-contained communities surrounded by “[greenbelts](#)” (parks), containing proportionate areas of residences, industry and agriculture.

⁴ <http://www.trivalleyconservancy.org/slvap.html#SLVAP>.

⁵ <http://www.brentwoodaglandtrust.org>.

- The **Middle Green Valley Specific Plan/Green Valley Agricultural Conservancy**⁶ in Fairfield, California uses multiple planning and market-based tools (i.e., transfer of development rights, density bonuses, cluster developments) to address the physical and financial challenges to farming near a metropolitan center, where speculative pressures threaten to convert agricultural lands to urban use. In the Middle Green Valley Specific Plan under the transfer-of-development rights program, landowners in sensitive areas (sending areas) may transfer development rights to landowners in areas appropriate for higher density development (receiving areas). Landowners of sending areas and Solano County agreed on density bonuses, giving these landowners an incentive to participate in the program. By purchasing additional development rights from the sending areas, landowners in the receiving areas can build at greater densities and realize the market value of the land. One of the physical challenges to farming in Green Valley is the potential division of land into parcels too small for farming. The plan for clustering development around villages, leaving 1,500+ acres for agriculture or open space, addresses this issue.
- The **King County Farmland Preservation Program**⁷ in Washington State, which is funded by a bond measure, demonstrates how a county combines fee purchases and conservation easements with the concept of agricultural priority areas. Setting priority areas allows the county to apply several preservation and economic development tools in a concerted effort. The ready funding source facilitates opportunistic land purchases, which can be transferred subsequently to other entities with conservation easements in place.
- The **Montgomery County Agricultural Reserve**⁸ in Montgomery County, Maryland is a designated area where the county has implemented multiple farmland conservation tools, including a Rural Density Transfer Zone, right-to-farm laws, conservation easement, and economic development programs. Each tool reinforces the other within a targeted area. Farmland conservation in Montgomery County began 30 years ago; to date, 93,000 acres, 561 farms, and 350 horticultural enterprises have been conserved. Conservation efforts have been focused and continuously build on each other.
- The **Agricultural Enterprise Area (AEA)** program in Wisconsin⁹ is a tool for protecting the agricultural land base and promoting investment in agriculture, agricultural infrastructure, and agriculture-related businesses within a targeted area. The designation of an AEA does not, by itself, control or limit land use within the designated area. Farmers in a designated area can enter into voluntary farmland preservation agreements in exchange for income tax credits.

⁶ http://www.co.solano.ca.us/depts/rm/boardscommissions/middle_green_valley_cac/documents.asp.

⁷ <http://www.kingcounty.gov/environment/wlr/sections-programs/rural-regional-services-section/agriculture-program/farmland-preservation-program.aspx>.

⁸ http://www.montgomeryplanning.org/community/ag_reserve.shtm.

⁹ <http://www.countyofdane.com/lwr/landconservation/programs/AEA.aspx>.

- The **Coyote Valley Agriculture Feasibility Study**¹⁰ assessed the potential for creating a sustainable agriculture resource area within the 7,400-acre Coyote Valley, the last remaining farmland of the “Valley of the Heart’s Delight” just minutes from San Jose and until recently slated for development. The study concluded that it is feasible to sustain agriculture and conservation in the Coyote Valley and developed recommendations for strategic actions over a 25-year period. The multiple stakeholders who provided input to the study’s findings are now poised to help implement its vision: *The Coyote Valley is home to a regionally significant agricultural resource area that contains important farmland and key habitat; supports livelihoods for its farmers, ranchers and agricultural employees; provides healthy food and a recreational amenity for Bay Area communities; and protects important ecological and cultural resources of the region.*

Policies and Tools

As the examples above demonstrate, New Ruralism is characterized by the implementation of multiple mutually reinforcing policies and tools, including economic development programs, conservation easements, agricultural mitigation fees, transferable agricultural credit, right-to-farm laws, transfer of development rights, cluster development, density bonuses, and the designation of agricultural reserves. Additional tools and policies not mentioned above include urban growth boundaries; transferrable conservation tax credits; and a wide range of mechanisms to support new and beginning farmers, local food systems, regional agricultural infrastructure, and local agriculture education and programs. Different metropolitan regions will need some combination of these tools and policies to realize the kind of multifunctional agriculture that is most appropriate and most successful in their area.

Spurred by climate change concerns as well as by public health considerations, some California initiatives are taking urban edge planning and investment a step further. California is requiring its metropolitan regions to create integrated land use and transportation plans, or blueprints, with preferred and alternative scenarios. Now metro-region planning agencies, such as the Sacramento Area Council of Governments and the Association of Bay Area Governments, are integrating greenprints with their blueprints. These greenprints include assessments of existing conditions in urban-edge rural areas, metrics for monitoring change, and recommended actions for sustaining agricultural viability and working lands resources. In a recent exciting development, a number of these metro-regional planning agencies, along with the state natural resource and agricultural agencies, have agreed to use the one integrated modeling system for blueprint and greenprint data compilation and scenario planning. This is promising and timely.

¹⁰ <http://scc.ca.gov/overview-the-san-francisco-bay-area/coyote-valley>.

Conclusion

The urban-rural dichotomy doesn't work anymore in metropolitan regions because sustaining cities and sustaining regional agriculture can no longer be separate efforts; they must be interdependent efforts. The urban-rural interface must become common ground, and not a battleground, where too often urban influence wins. Using New Ruralism as the framework, metropolitan areas around the country can help protect their rural areas, while supporting local agriculture, improving access to healthy food, and offering new opportunities for economic growth.

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