

American Land Use: the Next 50 Years

Let us imagine what will be required of the American landscape over the half century 2009–2059. As matters now stand, the land will be expected to produce most of the food and fiber for a population predicted to grow from 300 million to 500 million. It will be expected to produce significant exports. The land will be expected to supply freshwater adequate for those agricultural requirements as well as for all the other systems that comprise human economic activity. It will also be expected to provide wilderness and semiwilderness areas large enough for the effective protection of biodiversity.

The land will be expected to fulfill these tasks over a period in which the prices of carbon fuels and fertilizers will rise steadily. So, too, will the costs rise of making good the environmental losses induced by our reliance on cheap carbon: soil erosion, aquifer depletion, grassland shrinkage, and forest removal. And, as

David Orr makes clear, these expectations are to be met at a time when unprecedentedly rapid changes in climate will have important but imperfectly understood changes on local conditions.

The challenge is to match our socioeconomic expectations with the sustainable capacity of the land. How can we assure a good life for our descendants without impoverishing the natural inheritance we want to pass on to them?

It is time for a national discussion on the matter of the U.S. landscape. As a society we Americans have found it difficult to talk about land-use planning. Our experiences have been generally limited to urban and suburban zoning, and zoning battles never seem easy. But necessity now demands of us a larger frame of planning reference: devising ways in which all lands—urban, suburban, and rural—meet both social and ecological demands during a historic

term of transition. Planners and conservationists do not have all the answers, but we can say with confidence that the dominant land uses for the greater part of the 20th century will not suffice for the 21st century. Fuels and fertilizers will never again be cheap; ecological losses cannot be prolonged indefinitely; previous weather patterns are no longer reliable. Our land uses must be resilient, sustainable, and productive.

The following essays are summaries of land-use objectives over the next 50 years in the 3 most extensive uses of American territory: farming, forestry, and ranching. Although Americo-centric, these short pieces will no doubt apply equally well to many areas of the planet.

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