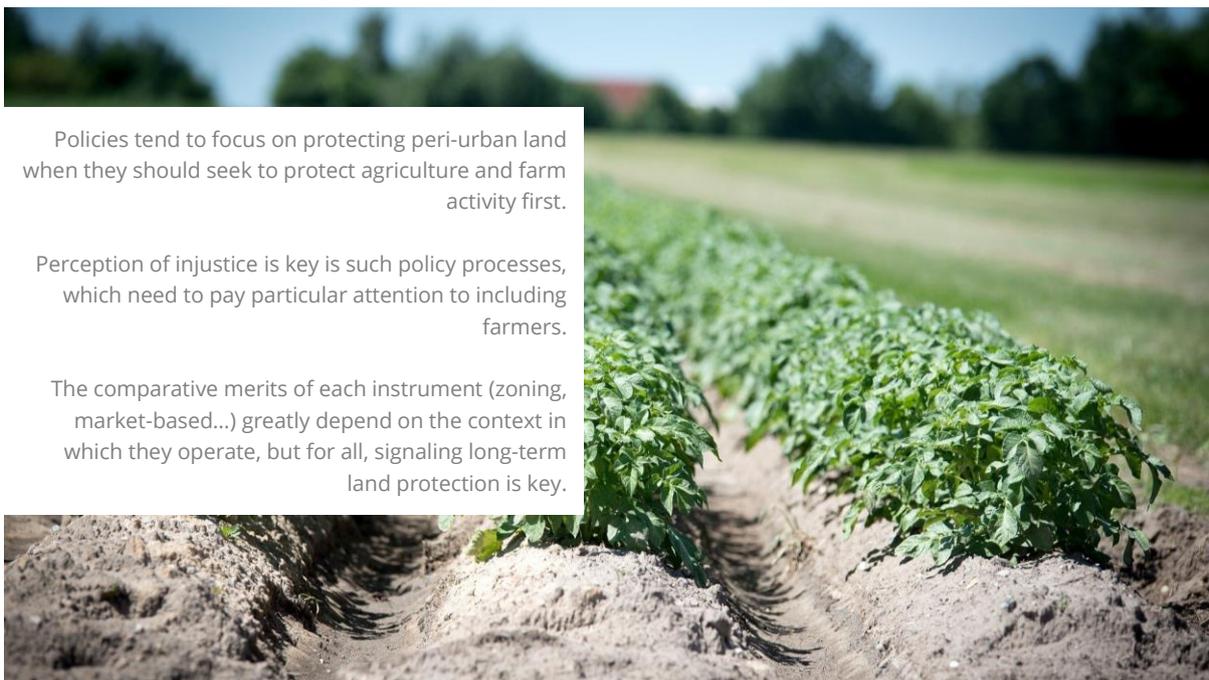


What would it take to protect farming close to cities?

Policies tend to focus on protecting peri-urban land when they should seek to protect agriculture and farm activity first.

Perception of injustice is key in such policy processes, which need to pay particular attention to including farmers.

The comparative merits of each instrument (zoning, market-based...) greatly depend on the context in which they operate, but for all, signaling long-term land protection is key.



Peri-urban farmland is under constant pressure from urbanisation. And it is disappearing at worrying rates ([see our previous article for global estimates](#)). What would it take to protect it? And what can we learn from countries that have tried to do so?

In a review article published in *Land*, researchers from the French National Research Institute for Agriculture, Food and Environment look more closely at success and failure factors for farmland protection policies in developed countries.

Farmland protection need to protect... agriculture

Their first conclusion comes as a surprise: *“farming systems tend to be neglected by farmland protection policies that focus on the land rather than agriculture”*. In other words, **policies tend to focus on protecting land when they should seek to protect agriculture and farm activity first**, land being a means to an end.

Indeed, such policies may **miss on key points that matter to protect agricultural activities**. For instance:

- They tend to overlook the importance of preserving a critical mass of continuous farmland. If preserved parcels are scattered, they are more likely to be fallow because they are more difficult to work on.
- They fail to provide long-term visibility for farmers, hence impacting their strategies. Indeed, long-term investments are more difficult in an unpredictable regulatory environment. For instance, landowners may shorten their lease to be sure not to miss on future land development opportunities.
- They don't take the time to understand the social context and the interests of local actors. Farmland protection can lead to very different results depending on its context. For instance, it did not

Albane GASPARD
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Source:
[Perrin C, Clément C, Melot R, Nougarèdes B. Preserving Farmland on the Urban Fringe: A Literature Review on Land Policies in Developed Countries. Land. 2020; 9\(7\):223](#)

See also:
[Perrin C., Nougarèdes B. \(2020\). An analytical framework to consider social justice issues in farmland preservation on the urban fringe. Insights from three French cases. Journal of Rural Studies](#)

Perrin C., Nougarèdes B. [Le foncier agricole dans une société urbaine : innovations et enjeux de justice](#). Cardère éd. 360 p.

Picture credits: [Pixabay](#)

You can find this article on the URL below:
<http://www.urbanfoodfutures.com/farmland>



prevent some degree of agricultural desertification around Florence (Italy), where olive trees were kept more for their aesthetical than their productive value. On the other hand, at the same time, in Barcelona (Spain), it protected a vibrant agricultural economy that is instrumental to feeding the city.

Therefore, according to Coline Perrin, who co-authored the article, **protecting land is necessary, but not enough**. Policies should take a much closer look into the agricultural and social context they operate in. Otherwise, they may fail to prevent urban sprawl.

What are we protecting farmland for?

Why are farmland protection policies missing their target? This is due to many reasons, for instance, the lack of knowledge about agriculture in planning teams. The authors also point to an additional, more subtle, reason that has to do with who is asking for farmland protection.

Indeed, **farmland protection coalitions gather stakeholders with very different objectives**. Namely:

- **Food self-sufficiency**, i.e. the need to preserve the land to grow food;
- **Economic development**, i.e. preserving the benefits that a strong agricultural sector bring to the economy;
- **Environmental and landscape preservation**, i.e. preventing the environmental impacts of urbanisation, or, simply preserving the landscape for its aesthetical or recreational value;
- **Management of urban sprawl**, i.e. allowing the city to grow in a timely and orderly fashion.

In other words, **farmland preservation can be the means to very different ends**. Some research even shows that in Northern America, land preservation groups are mainly made up of actors representing interests that are not farming-related.

When planners become mediators

Can these objectives converge? And how can they collectively face the urbanisation pressure? Here, participatory processes are key to explicit values and reframe objectives in a way that makes sense to all local actors. Planners therefore need to become mediators between local interests.

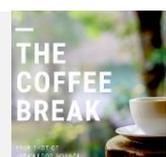
In such a mediation process, the authors insist on the fact that **“perceptions of injustice are pivotal”**. Many actors can feel left out, leading them to seek ways to go around the rule. For instance, landowners may think that they are not properly compensated for the loss of their property value, or residents who are inconvenienced by agricultural activities may perceive that their interests are undervalued (on this topic, [see this other article published by the team](#)).

Such processes need to pay particular attention to including farmers, who often do not have the time to attend traditional participation meetings. Planners should beware of considering farmers as a single entity. Indeed, views about land development can greatly vary according to activities (pasture, horticulture...), age, property status (landowner, tenant...), personal history before becoming a farmer.... For instance, some activities may require buildings to be erected on the land, and such needs need to be taken into account.

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Which policy instruments should we use?

Protecting agriculture while mediating between diverging interests... these are the arduous specifications of farmland protection.

Which instruments can planners use to do so? **There is a great variety of policy instruments, from regulation (zoning), incentives and voluntary agreements, and market-based instruments.** Zoning instruments are the most commonly used, while market-based instruments were first developed in English-speaking countries. Voluntary agreements include, for instance, [conservation easements](#), in which landowners sign a contract with public authorities to prevent specific uses on their land. Market-based instruments include [Transferable Development Rights](#), in which landowners can sell their development rights to developers that will use them on other parcels deemed suitable for urbanisation.

Each instrument has its pros and cons. For instance, zoning has historically been a somewhat unstable policy, and market-based instruments can entail a considerable amount of paperwork.

How efficient are they? Coline Perrin stresses that scientific literature is inconclusive on that point. Indeed, **the comparative merits of each instrument greatly depend on the context in which they operate.** However, efficacy most certainly lies in combining instruments (for example, Transferable Development Rights could be combined with regional comprehensive land-use planning and supporting zoning).

Regardless of the instrument used, though, what is crucial is that local actors believe in their stability. **Signalling long-term land protection is key**, the [Dutch Green Heart policy](#) being an interesting example of that. This is a challenge that lies ahead for many cities to ensure they preserve a much needed agricultural economy in their hinterland.

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