

# Thriving Farms and Ranches

IN SUPPORT OF AMERICA'S FARMERS AND RANCHERS

**A CALL TO ACTION**

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COVER PHOTOS: FRONT—LANCE CHEUNG/USDA; ABOVE AND BACK COVER—SHAWN LINEHAN



# Executive Summary

American agriculture is at a crossroads. Confronting substantial economic, environmental, and land use challenges, agriculture must adapt to ensure a sustainable and resilient future.

Since the nation's founding, agriculture has been central to America's prosperity and democracy. Our founding fathers clearly recognized the importance of farms and farmers to the future of our new nation.

Today, agriculture is a pillar of rural prosperity, a cornerstone of the U.S. economy, and an essential safeguard of our nation's food and national security. Combined with its related industries, it contributes \$1.5 trillion to the U.S. gross domestic product and more than 10% of total jobs.<sup>1</sup>

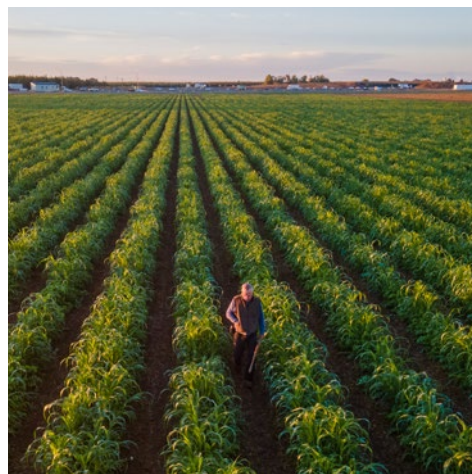
America's farms and ranches feed us, clothe us, and provide us with energy. They supply nurseries, pharmaceuticals, and a host of environmental services. Farmers and ranchers contribute to civic life: Serving on town committees or volunteering for the local fire department, loaning time and equipment to build a new playground or ball field, and donating food, flowers, and plants to community events. Yet despite their importance to our food, national security, environment, and rural communities, their future is at stake.

Farmers and ranchers are facing unprecedented challenges. According to the USDA Economic Research Service, over half of farm families had negative farm income in 2024.<sup>2</sup> About 84% relied on non-farm sources for most of their household income.<sup>3</sup> And they lost over \$20 billion due to fire and other weather disasters.<sup>4</sup>

America is losing small and mid-sized farms at an alarming rate. According to the National Agricultural Statistics Service (NASS), since 1981, the U.S. has lost over 559,000 farms. Just since 2002, we have lost nearly 11% of our farms—most of them small and mid-sized. At the same time, the average age of farmers continues to rise, with the number of farmers over the age of 65 increasing by 12% between 2017 and 2022.<sup>5</sup> Linked with these demographics, nearly 300 million acres of American farmland and ranchland—one-third of the land in farms in the contiguous US—are expected to change hands in the next 15 to 20 years.

***More must be done to save the land that sustains us—and to support the farmers and ranchers who steward the land.***

For more than 45 years, American Farmland Trust has worked to protect farmland, promote sound farming practices, and keep farmers on the land. Pragmatic and nonpartisan, AFT has played a significant role in federal Farm Bills and state and local policy, catalyzing billions of conservation dollars and providing a wide range of direct assistance services to farmers, ranchers, and rural communities.



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From this vantage point, we see an urgent need to expand support for farmers and ranchers to strengthen the resilience of agriculture and rural communities across the country. We also see a great opportunity: When agriculture thrives, America thrives.

We envision a future where farms and ranches of all types and scales can prosper; where farmers and ranchers have secure land tenure and can earn a living from the land; and where rural communities grow stronger through investments in land, markets, and sustainable farming practices. *We envision a future with Thriving Farms and Ranches.*

Thriving farms and ranches mean more resilient rural economies, more sustainable food systems, and communities anchored by agriculture. To achieve this vision, AFT will bring together public and private partners from across the country in a collaborative initiative that can create a future where agriculture sustains both people and landscapes, where farmers and ranchers are leaders and stewards, and where they and their communities thrive.

The work begins with helping farmers and ranchers succeed, and young and beginning farmers enter the field. Yet it extends outward—to communities planning for agriculture, ensuring land is available, essential infrastructure is in place, and robust markets support local producers and supply healthy food for consumers.

***AFT is prepared to meet the moment. We invite you to join us!***



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# Introduction

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America's farms and ranches are the backbone of a thriving nation. When they are profitable and supported, their success ripples outward. They provide both direct and indirect employment opportunities, stimulating local businesses and strengthening rural economies. Farms and ranches also provide food—and food security—for the nation and are essential for healthy and resilient food systems. Additionally, when farmers and ranchers implement sound farming practices, they promote clean water and healthy soil, leading to better wildlife habitats and more sustainable working landscapes. All of which contributes to rural prosperity and vitality.



PRESTON KERES/USDA

But right now, farmers and ranchers face unprecedented challenges and an unpredictable future.

## Farming in Crisis

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Farming has never been easy. Growing crops and raising livestock with uncertain weather, volatile markets, and changing consumer preferences has always been a challenge. Today, however, many farmers and ranchers are being pushed to a state of crisis. Mounting costs, shrinking markets, labor shortages, non-farm development pressure, high land values, extreme weather, and more combine to create an increasingly uncertain future.

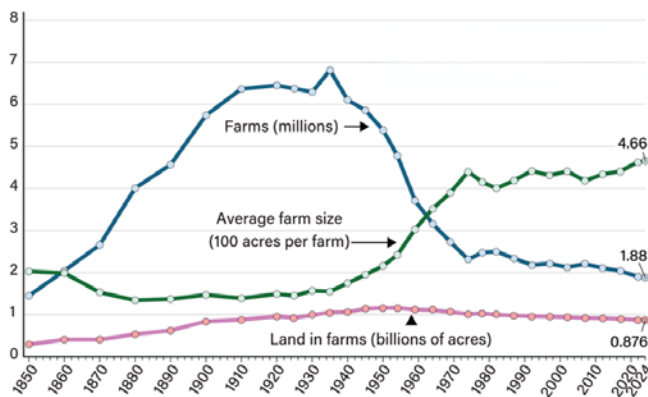
Farm debt and bankruptcies are up. University of Arkansas researchers found that Chapter 12 filings for farmers and family fishermen nearly doubled from last year.<sup>6</sup> According to Bloomberg Law, family farm bankruptcies increased by 55% in 2024 compared to 2023 and are trending even higher in 2025. “Unpredictable tariffs, immigration overhauls, federal program cuts, and frozen Agriculture Department funding are now part of the discussions farmers are having as they seek financial help.”<sup>7</sup> Agriculture is also struggling to adapt to the ‘polycrisis’ of climate change and migration, combined with global conflicts that have disrupted markets and supply chains, leading to higher input prices and causing economic volatility, social unrest, and unstable global dependencies.<sup>8</sup>

These mounting pressures have accelerated long-standing structural shifts, reshaping who farms and how they do it. Farmers are now the nation's oldest workforce. A third are aged 65 and older, with more over age 75 than under 35.<sup>9</sup> According to the U.S. Senate Special Committee on Aging, this trend “poses significant challenges to the continuity of agricultural production, U.S. food security, and the sustainability of rural communities.” Meanwhile, there is pressure to adopt new technologies—from precision agriculture to robotics and drones—while also navigating challenges such as rising input costs and labor shortages. In this environment, young and beginning farmers struggle to gain access to land and capital, making it hard for them to enter the field.

The current crisis has been building for a long time. Farm numbers peaked in 1935, then sharply dropped due to rapid increases in agricultural productivity, urban expansion, and off-farm



**FIGURE 1.**  
Farms, land in farms, and average acres per farm, 1850–2024



USDA Economic Research Service  
U.S. DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE

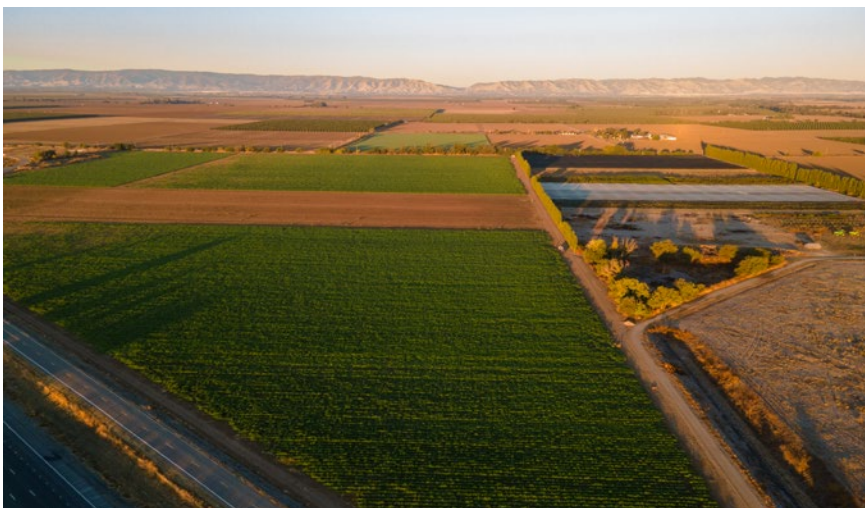
employment. After decades of “get big or get out” policies that drove specialization and dependence on fossil fuels and other inputs, farms have consolidated, and the number of farms has fallen to a historic low. According to NASS, the U.S. has lost 559,920 farms since 1981.

A recent USDA Economic Research Service report noted that the last few years have been among the best for farm income. But only about 150,000 farms received 89% of that revenue. At the same time, half of farm families had negative farm income, with most of their household income coming from off-farm sources.<sup>10</sup>

Despite some gains in large-scale operations, the overall number of farms continues to decline. Between 2017 and 2022, the U.S. lost 142,000 farms,<sup>11</sup> all small and mid-sized family farms. Although their numbers are falling, these sectors still represent 92% of total U.S. farms and ranches. Operating on 59% of the land,<sup>12</sup> they are the bedrock of many rural communities. But they are struggling to survive. Farm sector debt is expected to reach a record \$562 billion in 2025, which the Kansas City Federal Reserve attributed primarily to increased lending for small and mid-sized farms.

The decline of these farms has diminished the diversity of food supply chains, reduced employment and economic opportunity, fueled depopulation, and led to the loss of essential civic infrastructure such as hospitals, schools, and banks. Now, facing funding cutbacks and new policy constraints, rural communities must also address reductions to Extension education, food assistance programs, and Medicaid—with cascading economic and health ramifications.

Taken together, these trends underscore a simple truth: the security of farms is central to the security of rural communities—and to the nation itself.



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While unsettling, these challenges present new opportunities. With vision, foresight, and innovation, we can sustain agriculture as the backbone of our food systems and a pathway to prosperity for rural communities.

# Digging into the Challenges

What is contributing to the crisis facing American agriculture? The challenges are numerous. At a time when growing demand for healthy food is colliding with the environmental impacts of a changing climate, America's farms and ranches must overcome economic stressors, competition for land, an aging—and shrinking—workforce, droughts, floods, fires, and other environmental constraints.

## ECONOMIC STRESSORS

Rising costs for land, inputs, and labor, coupled with increasing market uncertainty, put enormous strain on producers. Consolidation makes it hard for small and mid-sized operations to compete in an increasingly concentrated marketplace where a handful of transnational companies dominate. Four or fewer firms control at least 50 percent of the market for 79 percent of common groceries.<sup>13</sup> Processing is similarly concentrated: four companies control 85% percent of beef purchasing and processing, and 67% of pork.<sup>14 15</sup> In response, large farms have often grown larger, more specialized, and more dependent on government payments, while diverse and diversified small and midsized farms and ranches have struggled—and all too many have gone out of business, hollowing out rural communities.

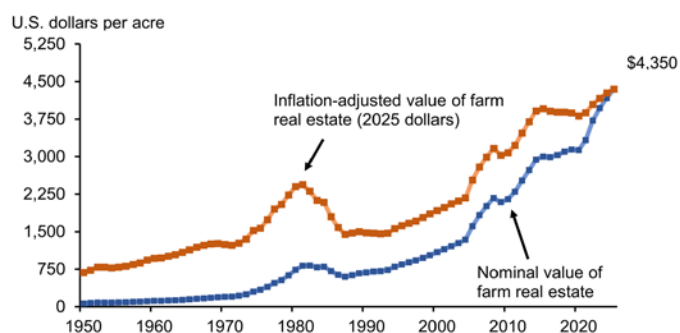
## COMPETITION FOR LAND

Farm real estate values have reached an all-time high, up about 40% from 2010.<sup>16</sup> They continue to face upward pressure from traditional development, as well as data centers, warehouses, utility solar projects, telework opportunities, and investors who view farmland as a stable asset class.

For example, the market for warehouses in the U.S. increased by 51% from 2007 to 2023, attributed to the e-commerce boom and shifts in consumer behavior.<sup>17</sup> Likewise, data center development increased significantly over the past decade, driven by cloud computing, AI, and digital transformation. Recent reports suggest that the growth rate for data center load tripled from 2014 to 2024, accompanied by a dramatic rise in both the volume and size of land parcels purchased annually.<sup>18</sup>

Cropland values have soared—up 106% since 2010 and 37% since 2020. Beyond inflated land values, these forces lead to the conversion of farmland to non-farm uses. Between 2001 and 2016, the US converted approximately 11 million acres of farmland to non-farm development—equivalent to all the land planted to fruits, nuts, and vegetables in 2017—much of it the most productive, versatile, and resilient land.<sup>19</sup>

**FIGURE 2.**  
Average U.S. farm real estate value, nominal and real  
(inflation adjusted), 1950-2025



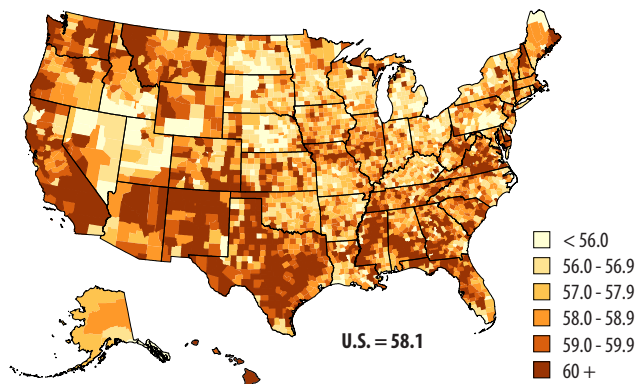
USDA Economic Research Service  
U.S. DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE

## A SILVER TSUNAMI

Consolidation and soaring land values make it very difficult for young and beginning farmers to enter agriculture and for small and mid-sized operations to expand. The average age of producers was 58.1 years in 2002, up 3.2% in a decade and continuing a long-standing trend.

Between 2017 and 2022, the number of producers aged 65 and over increased by 12%, while those between the ages of 35 and 64 declined by 9%. Even with a slight uptick in the youngest producers, there are four times as many farmers over 65 as under 35,<sup>20</sup> in striking contrast to the rest of the U.S. workforce.

**FIGURE 3.**  
Average age of producers by county, 2022



**USDA** National Agricultural Statistics Service  
U.S. DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE



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## WATER INSECURITY AND SEVERE WEATHER

While modern farming practices have achieved huge increases in productivity, some have degraded soil health and water quality. Productivity is important, but so are sustainability and resilience. Further, increasingly volatile weather, including droughts, floods, and extreme temperatures, disrupts planting cycles, reduces yields, and increases the risk of crop failures.<sup>21</sup>

Farmers and ranchers have always been at the mercy of unpredictable weather, but over the past 40 years, the extremity of those events has increased in unprecedented ways. Severe weather events damage crops and livestock, devastate communities, ravage supply chains, and diminish air and water quality. In recent years, an increase in mega-droughts has led to fallowed fields, withered crops, and livestock sold due to a lack of feed. Heavy rains and floods have destroyed crops and led to polluted run-off. Scorching heat has created dangerous working conditions for humans and harmed livestock.<sup>22</sup> In 2024 alone, 27 weather disasters, each with damages exceeding \$1 billion, struck the U.S. coast-to-coast. Total losses to crops and rangeland exceeded \$20.3 billion, accounting for 11.1% of NOAA's total economic impact from disasters.<sup>23</sup>





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Since 1988, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) has reported on impacts on food security from rising temperatures, increased frequency of extreme weather events, and other global impacts of a changing climate. It projects that without intervention, these patterns will intensify, with especially significant impacts on vulnerable communities. This includes increased food insecurity<sup>24</sup> caused by reduced food supply, higher food prices,<sup>25</sup> and reduced nutrients in crops.<sup>26</sup>

## Resilience and Opportunity

While unsettling, these challenges present new opportunities. With vision, foresight, and innovation, agriculture can remain the backbone of our food systems and a pathway to prosperity for rural communities across America.

If the challenges of the modern age have shown us anything, it's the productivity and resilience of America's farmers and ranchers. They've met the moment by producing more to meet the nation's needs and the needs of the world.

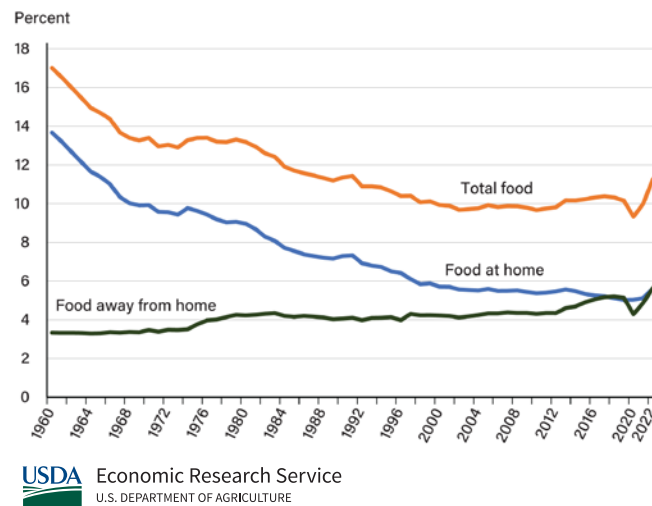
Between 1948 and 2019, total farm output nearly tripled while food prices fell. Despite recent inflationary pressures, greater reliance on meals outside the home,<sup>27</sup> and increased overall consumption, Americans devote only about 11% of their disposable income to food.<sup>28</sup> (See Figure 4 on p. 10.)



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**FIGURE 4.**  
Share of disposable personal income spent on food in  
the United States, 1960–2022



The COVID-19 pandemic illuminated both the vulnerabilities and adaptability of American agriculture. During the pandemic, farmers who marketed through local and regional food systems were quick to respond. They pivoted to meet changing demands, often communicating directly with their customers and supplying new markets. Shorter supply chains gave them greater flexibility and consumers greater transparency.

These connections strengthened trusting relationships and led to the sharing of knowledge, resources, and support. By adopting new technologies, producers became more efficient, adopting online systems for ordering and delivery, and streamlining processes, which resulted in larger orders.

Additionally, many regulatory agencies upgraded and/or relaxed policies, like moving SNAP benefits online or allowing sales of wholesale products to individual consumers.<sup>29,30</sup>



This response was in stark contrast to empty shelves at supermarkets and packing plant closures that caused meat shortages and left livestock producers without processing alternatives.<sup>31</sup>

Reflecting on what worked during the pandemic and improving upon what did not, USDA implemented a Food Systems Transformation plan—a series of efforts to strengthen local and regional food systems. More work remains. With planning, policy change, and public support, we can build new markets, expand economic opportunities, and help revive rural America.

## Expanding Opportunities

Seizing these opportunities requires a new path forward, one that lies in practices that both sustain the land and the people who steward it.

As a changing climate further disrupts agriculture, we must address issues across—not just within—political boundaries. As we’ve learned from floods and wildfires, water, smoke, and even soil cross jurisdictions. Food and farm products move through supply chains that bridge rural and urban communities, engaging many economic sectors. Just as rural transportation planning has fostered regional alliances, agriculture can benefit from multi-state or county collaboration to revitalize rural economies and enhance community food security.

Diversified agricultural systems also sustain rural vitality. While large-scale farms are often more productive and profitable, small and mid-sized farms generally contribute more to local economies and community food security.<sup>32, 33, 34</sup>

They are also more likely to be diversified, employ more people, and purchase livestock, equipment, and supplies locally.<sup>35, 36</sup> Sustaining agriculture can stimulate rural revitalization and improve health outcomes, especially given the disproportionately high rates of rural food insecurity.<sup>37</sup>

The process must be reciprocal. Farming and ranching take place in communities that can either support or constrain them. When communities plan intentionally for agriculture, they can sustain their farms and ranches and strengthen



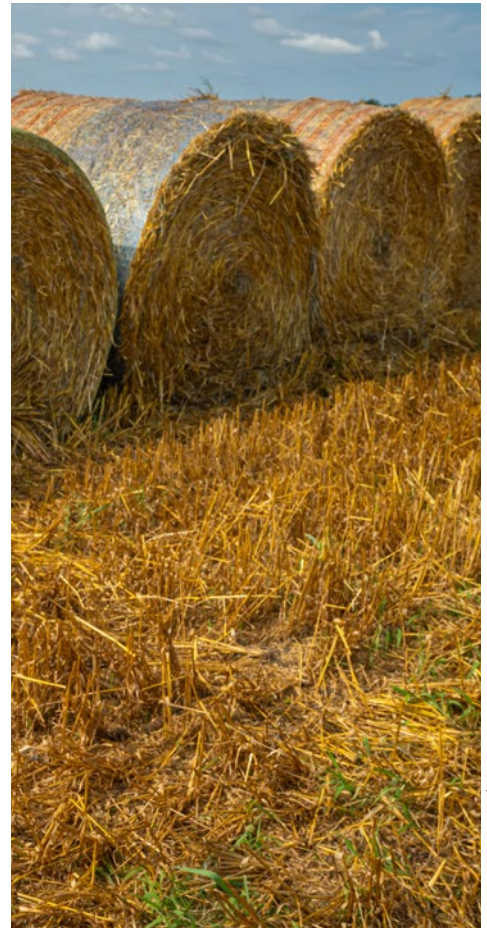


rural economies, improve environmental quality, and increase food security. Individual community efforts can be strengthened with state policies and regional collaborations.

It is equally important to support farmers and ranchers with policies and programs that address “whole farm needs” ranging from business and succession planning to risk management, climate resilience, and conservation adoption. These include technical assistance to provide financial management support, help farmers draft business plans, identify market and income opportunities, and other ways to increase profitability. We must address barriers like high land values and access to credit, capital, and markets, and strengthen programs for small and beginning farmers, including distressed borrowers. This will help address the needs of historically underserved producers and help them gain access to USDA programs and services. Finally, we must expand programs and policies to support land use planning and farmland protection—including innovations and investments in permanent protection—as well as land access and transfer planning through navigator networks, land access policy incentives, and other policies. These approaches help farmers and ranchers with the challenges that they face today while fostering strength and resilience for the future.



KEVIN KEENAN



KIRSTEN STROUGH/USDA

# A Call to Action

American agriculture is at a crossroads. Will we invest in rural America or settle for its slow decline? Will we champion thriving farms and ranches, or continue to watch them disappear?

At American Farmland Trust, we believe the choice is clear: a vibrant rural America where successful farms and resilient communities go hand in hand. Meeting this vision will require bold action and brave leadership. We invite you to join us!

The private sector, the philanthropic community, and non-profit organizations, along with federal, state, and local governments, must step up to advance new programs, policies, and investments that strengthen agriculture and rural communities. With foresight, collaboration, and planning at every level, we can create opportunities for American agriculture to thrive.

It is time to come together to support our working farms and ranches, help a new generation enter agriculture, and sustain our agricultural landscapes now and into the future.



*The result: economically resilient farms and ranches that drive rural prosperity and more sustainable food systems. Because when our farms thrive, America thrives.*

American Farmland Trust intends to launch **Thriving Farms and Ranches** as a comprehensive nationwide initiative in late 2025. Considerable effort has already gone into articulating strategies and crafting programming, but the work continues to evolve as we engage more groups and individuals in the process.

For a snapshot of the initiative's current status, go to  
<https://farmland.org.tfr>



## ENDNOTES

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