Idaho Science Journal 302 – Disappearing Farm Land, Part 2

(MUSIC)

**Rebecca Som Castellano**: I would just be shocked if this land is still, you know, in agriculture in another three or four years.

Joan Cartan-hansen: REBECCA SOM CASTELLANO HAS SEEN A LOT OF FARM LAND TURN TO INTO HOUSING.

SHE’S A SOCIAL SCIENCE RESEARCHER.

SHE AND HER TEAM HAVE BEEN TRAVELING THE TREASURE VALLEY ASKING RESIDENTS THEIR VIEWS ON FARM LAND PRESERVATION.

**Som Castellano**: when you look at research, people talk about the ways in which they appreciate the visual appeal of farmland, the open space. People appreciate the ways in which it provides habitat for various animals.

there's recreation. There's just a lot of ways in which farmland, maybe beyond our most obvious ideas, are beneficial to us.

Cartan-hansen: HER RESEARCH FOUND MORE THAN 90 PERCENT OF TREASURE VALLEY RESIDENTS SEE AGRICULTURAL FARMING AS AN IMPORTANT PART OF THE CULTURE OF OUR REGION.

AND OVER 79 PERCENT REPORTED THEY WERE CONCERNED ABOUT THE LOSS OF FARM LAND IN THE REGION.

AS FARMER CLAY ERSKINE KNOWS, IT’S A FEAR WITH FOUNDATION.

CLAY ERSKINE: I think if you look at the Treasure Valley as a whole, farming is feeling the pressure because people are moving here.

Cartan-Hansen: RESEARCHERS FOR IDAHO’S EPSCOR PROJECT, OTHERWISE KNOWN AS MANAGING IDAHO’S LANDSCAPE ECOSYSTEM SERVICES OR MILES, PROJECTED URBANIZATION PATTERNS FOR THE TREASURE VALLEY THROUGH TO THE NEXT CENTURY.

IN THE WORST CASE SCENERIO, THE VALLEY COULD LOSE ABOUT 60 PERCENT OF FARM LAND.

**Som Castellano**: I think that this kind of data, both from residents and also from farmers can be used in support of decision making, and perhaps that can lead to ideas about what to do and how we were thinking about urban growth and whether we preserve farmland or not.

ERSKINE: yes, we want to save agriculture, yes, we want to save farmland, the public wants to save farmland, but then the machine just keeps chugging along, and nobody really holds anybody accountable.

ERKINE AND OTHERS REALIZE THE PROBLEM ISN’T JUST A LACK OF PLANNING.

ERSKINE: property rights, I think, is the big elephant in the room.

you kind of get to that point, and then when you're ready to retire, and if you don't have any kids, it's like, well, I'll sell to a developer, and then I can retire. And that just can't be the only option anymore. We have to figure out some other option that that can happen.

PATRICIA NILSSON IS CANYON COUNTY’S DEVELOPMENT SERVICES DIRECTOR.

Patricia Nilsson: We have limited zoning tools and other tools to preserve farmland that are available in other states.

NILSSON SAYS ONE OPTION WOULD BE TO ALLOW COUNTIES TO PURCHASE DEVELOPMENT RIGHTS.

NILSSON: the property owner can keep, you know, farming, and keep doing what they've been doing, but they have a choice of then selling them to the public, basically, versus selling them to a private developer. As long as those programs give that choice to a farmer and don't dictate what they're going to do, more times out of ten, the farmer's going to choose to keep farming. That's what they know. They want to have that available to the next generations to keep farming.

CARTAN-Hansen: MANY STATES ALREADY HAVE PURCHASE OF DEVELOPMENT RIGHTS PROGRAMS.

IDAHO CURRENTLY DOESN’T.

SO IF WE WANT TO PRESERVE FARM LAND, THEN DECISION MAKERS HAVE TO ASK THE PUBLIC SOME SERIOUS QUESTIONS.

Nillsson: "Do you like this? Or would you prefer a different future for this area? And how much are you willing to actually pay to have a different future?"

ERSKINE: So how we choose to develop over the next 20, 30, 40 years, a lot of agriculture could go away, and a lot of industries could go away if we just go along as is, without consciously making decisions of this is how we want it to be.

FOR IDAHO SCIENCE JOURNAL, I’M JOAN CARTAN-HANSEN.

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