Fields with Dreams: The Distribution of Farmland with Publicly-Funded Conservation Easements in Pennsylvania

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Abstract
Conservation easements have played an increasingly significant role in the American movement to preserve farmland from urban development. Conservation easements are legal instruments that enable a landowner to sell his right to develop his property to an outside party, typically a government entity or a private land conservancy. The distribution of conservation easements used to preserve farmland is highly variable. Conservation easements are most common in places where both public and private sectors give strong financial and political support for conservation.

This thesis analyzes the spatial variability and effectiveness of conservation easements purchased as part of Pennsylvania’s public farmland preservation initiative. Many of Pennsylvania’s counties, particularly those in the southeast, have experienced significant population growth in the past three decades. These same counties comprise the core of Pennsylvania’s agricultural land and economy. In response to farmland loss, citizens have given strong political support to state and county boards created to preserve farmland through the purchase of conservation easements.

An examination of conservation easement locations reveals that their distribution is notably uneven in Pennsylvania. My research confirms that urban development pressures and the strength of the local agricultural economy influence the lopsided usage of conservation easements. Principle components analysis of eighty-four variables for sixty-six counties demonstrates that conservation easements are purchased more frequently in counties where expansion of urban land uses conflicts with economically productive agricultural land. The research tests the model produced by principle components analysis through the comparison of counties’ component scores to the proportion of farmland they have preserved with conservation easements.

My research further explores the factors affecting the use of conservation easements through an evaluation of Lancaster County’s geographical situation and its conservation easement purchase program. The study reveals that local support, religious attitudes, and the implementation of other farmland preservation methods influences the success of the Agricultural Preserve Board.
This thesis explains why certain counties in Pennsylvania are committed to the use of conservation easements while others are not. The study provides a geographic interpretation of the public purchase of conservation easements as a method for preserving farmland in Pennsylvania. The study can serve as a model for others interested in public land protection in the United States.

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