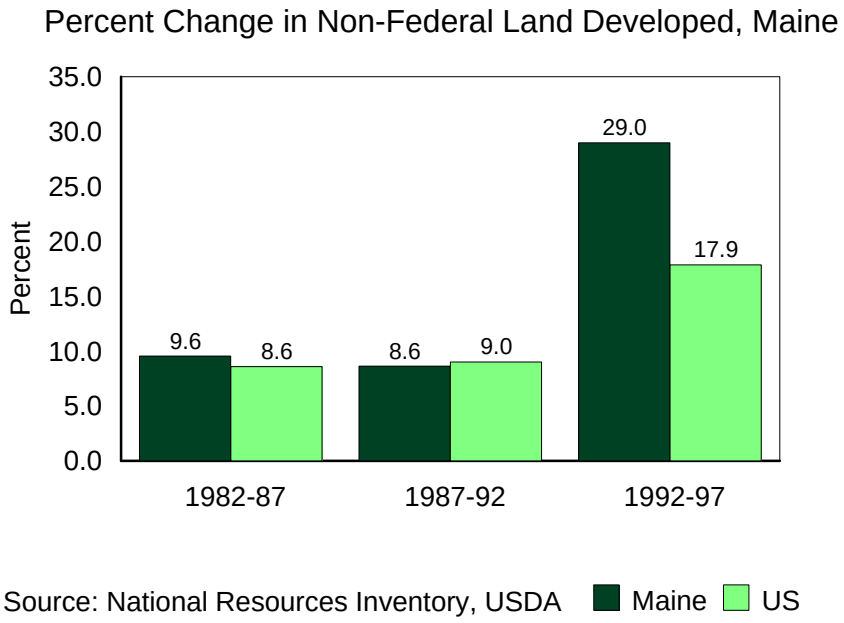
AGRICULTURAL LAND LOSS

Of all the land types at risk of conversion from development sprawl, open farmland is among the most at risk.

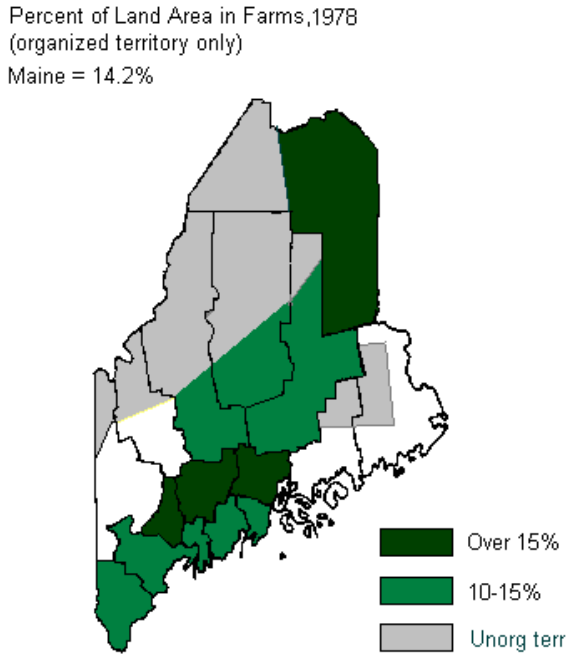
When farmers cleared land for agricultural use decades ago they chose land that was most productive and most efficient to farm: land that is relatively flat or gently rolling, made up of well-drained soils, and generally located along river and travel corridors. Agriculture had become widespread throughout much of Maine by the end of the 1800's, and though it still remains remarkably dispersed, it is today found primarily along the same great river valleys and major highways. After all, our early road system was laid out essentially to connect farm to farm and the farms to town centers. Maine's farmland has been in the path of development ever since.

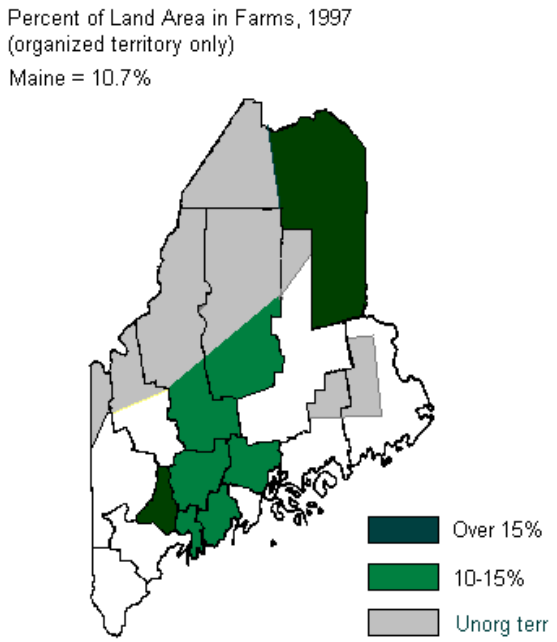
The National Resources Inventory, conducted every five years by the USDA/NRCS shows that land in Maine is being converted from rural to developed uses at an increasing pace. Since 1992, an average of 33,600 acres per year has been converted. Conversion of rural land has been happening at a faster rate in Maine than nationally, increasing by 29% in Maine between 1992 and 1997 compared to an increase of 18% nationwide.

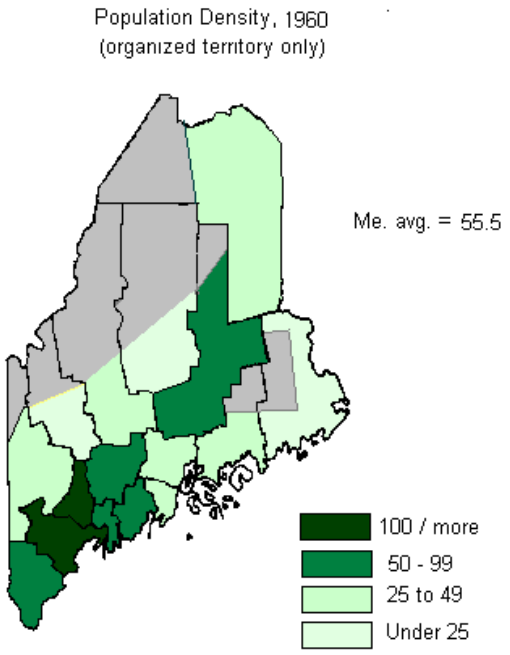


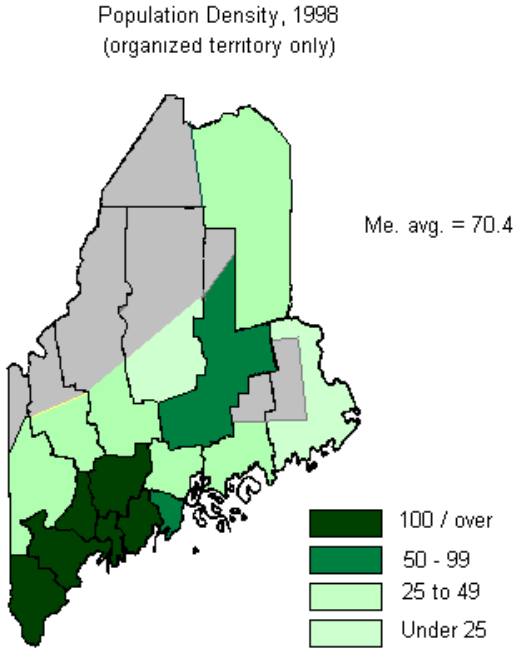
Joyce Benson, analyst
Maine State Planning Office

<u>The location of most of Maine's farmland is in the path of growth</u>:









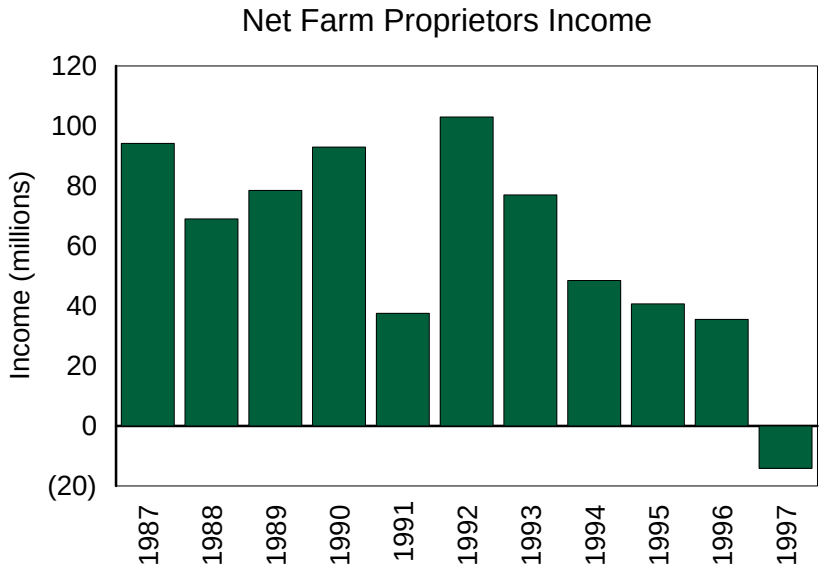
Joyce Benson, analyst
Maine State Planning Office

Farmland has the attributes developers desire:

The criteria that farmers used when they cleared the land are the same ones that are used by those seeking to develop land today. It is more economical to develop land that is already cleared because development costs are reduced. Soils with good drainage and land that is relatively flat also are easier and thus more efficient to develop. And, that same highway system that once merely connected farms to each other and to the community, though vastly improved, is essentially the same today. The farm land that remains is easily accessible, and most within commuting distance of jobs and services.

Economic returns to Agriculture have been Unstable:

The economic conditions influencing agriculture have also played a role. Farmers face many factors beyond their control - weather, market and price fluctuations, global competition, labor shortages, and much more, that make farming a high risk venture with uncertain outcomes each year. Overall, the net return on their investment has been chronically low. Years of low prices for some commodities have drained farm resources and accelerated the exodus from farming. In other situations, sudden severe conditions, such as plummeting prices or loss of crops to severe weather have been of such magnitude to force farms out or make it attractive to sell out, especially in areas of the State where the demand for land for development is high.

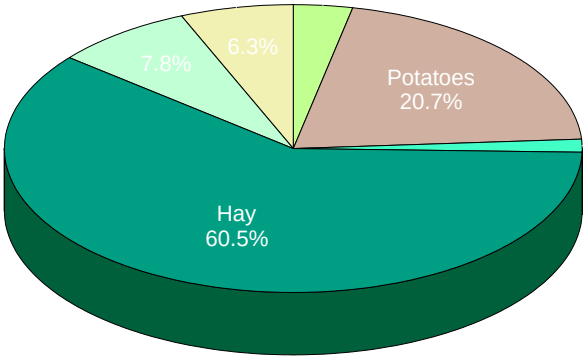


Source: US Bureau of Economic Analysis

Farmland Losses have been greater for certain types of Agricultural Uses:

Maine had a total of 540,000 acres of farmland in production in 1997. Most of this land is used for the production of feed for livestock.

Major Crops, 1997 Acres

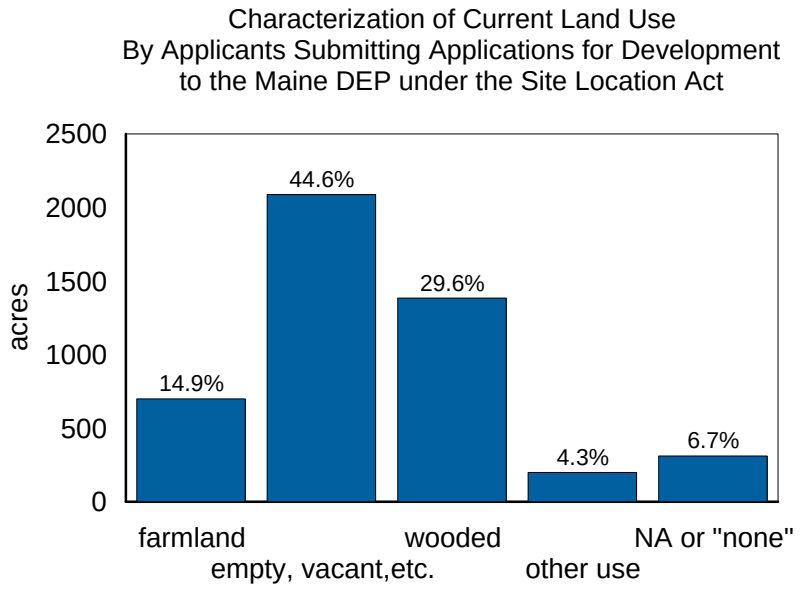


Note: This chart does not include Christmas Trees and Nursery Production. It does not include berries because the total berry acreage in Maine isn't disclosed (there are 23,000 acres of blueberries grown in Maine). Also not included are acres in pasture.

Hay and forage land has been lost at a rate much faster than other kinds of farmland. There are several reasons. Hay and forage crops bring less return per acre to the farmer than a high value fruit or specialty crop. Livestock producers have confronted serious problems in recent years, from loss of critical infrastructure (slaughterhouses, dairy processors, etc.) to chronically low prices, making it impossible for many to stay in business. Therefore, confronted with pressures to sell and offered attractive prices, farmers are more likely to sell hay land than cropland.

More importantly, the public lack of understanding of farming and the role of land plays has a big role in the kind of farmland that is being converted. When the public sees a cow, a chicken, or a herd of sheep, they perceive them to be part of a farming activity. Most understand that they contribute milk, eggs, meat, wool, etc. to our food supply. When the public sees an orchard or a field of tomatoes or corn they perceive that as land being farmed. But a field of hay is simply viewed as "vacant", "unused", "empty".[1] It is common to hear people comment that they cannot understand why there is so much concern about farmland loss with "all that unused land". The necessity of those fields to feed livestock is not understood. In regions of Maine today there is an inadequate supply of productive hay and forage land to ensure the growth and future of livestock farming.

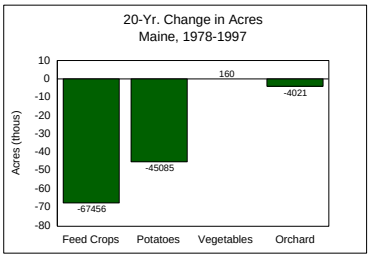
Examined on a county level, over the past 20 years, Maine counties have lost over 70,000 acres of land that had been used to produce feed for livestock. Only four counties have shown gains, but the gain has been very small, and largely reflects either the current trend toward larger and fewer dairy farms or the loss of infrastructure to support other kinds of agricultural production in some regions of the State.

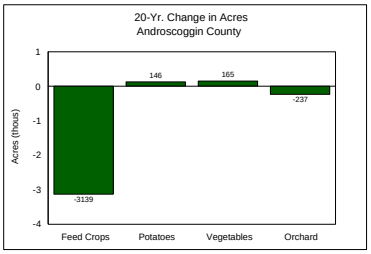


Source: A Study of Farmland Conversion in Nineteen Maine Communities, 1982

[1.] A Study of Farmland Conversion in Nineteen Maine Communities, Maine State Planning Office and University of Maine, Farmington, 1982. The study included a review of applications made under the Site Location Act. An overwhelming proportion of the parcels that were open farmland were identified by the applicants as empty, vacant, abandoned, with no use, or in similar terms.

Maine State Planning Office
Background Paper

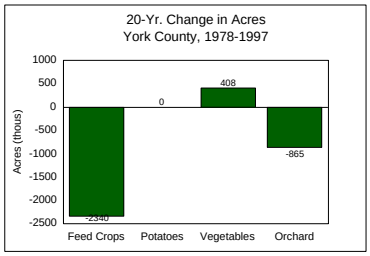


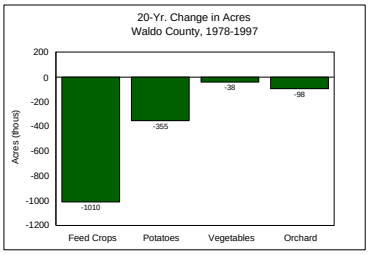


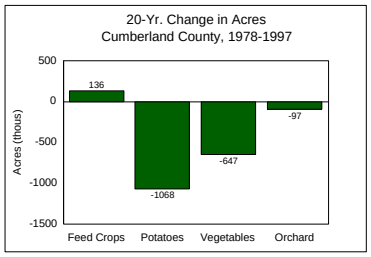
Declines in Agricultural Land

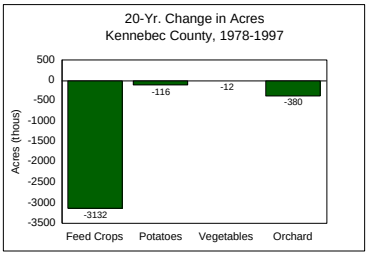
by Type of Agricultural Use

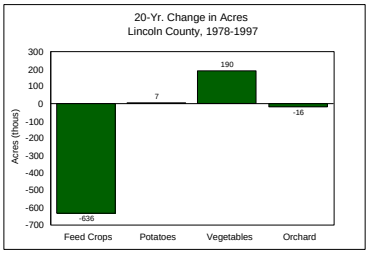
1978-1997 Agricultural Censuses

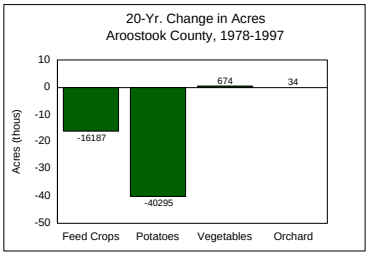


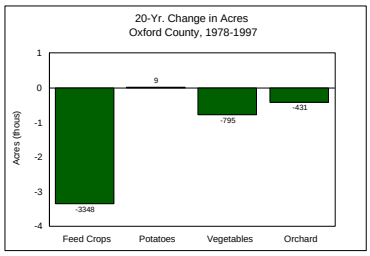


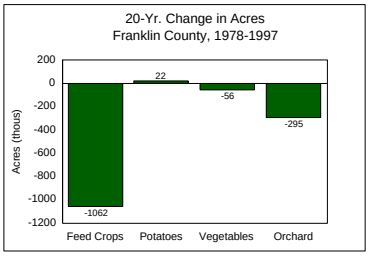


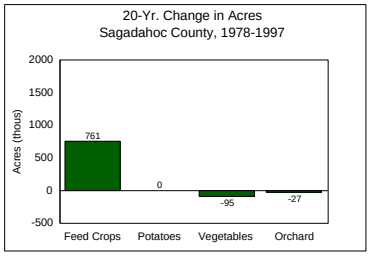


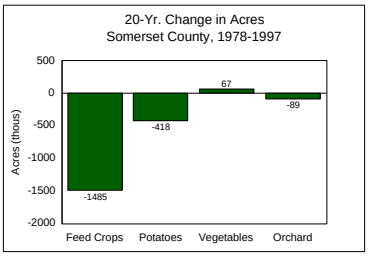


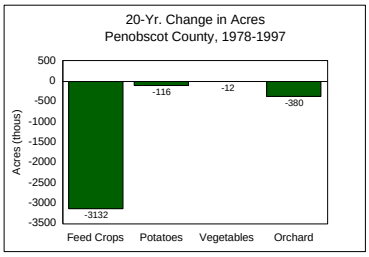


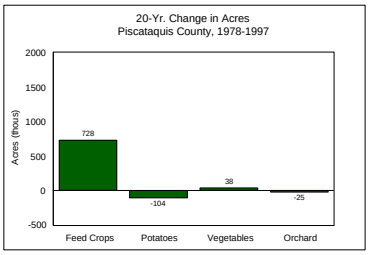


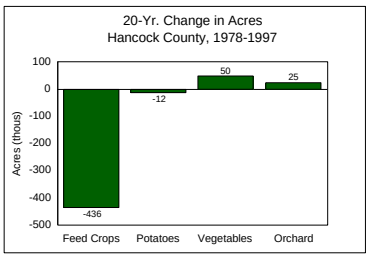


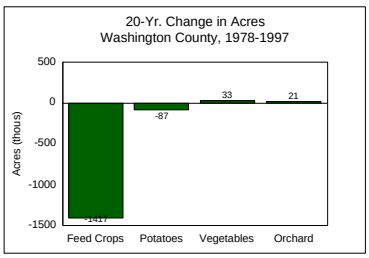


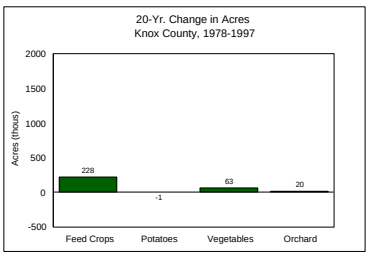












Joyce Benson, analyst
Maine State Planning Office