

Foodsheds - A New Ruralism Bridging Smart Growth and Sustainable Agriculture

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The urban-rural dichotomy doesn't work anymore. There's a connotation in the words 'urban' and 'rural' that suggests a neat line between the geographies of city and countryside. As a largely urban culture, we seem to need to imagine a timeless bucolic landscape as counterpoint to time-bound hard-scape city life. We also tend to imagine farmers as a stereotype - older guys more at home on tractors than with technology.

But drive out of the Bay Area in almost any direction, and it's difficult to tell where 'urban' ends and 'rural' begins. Many areas - Santa Clara Valley, Livermore Valley, Suisun Valley, Santa Rosa plain - look like a jigsaw puzzle of development being filled in; the dynamic 'figure' of urbanization on the inert 'field' of passive farmland.

Urban growth boundaries and agricultural zoning are helping contain cities, but these tools don't necessarily reflect a permanent commitment to demark urban from rural. And in many cases, the urban-rural line is already ragged and blurred, a contested zone where, increasingly, urban influence wins.

We need fresh thinking. We need to understand that sustaining cities and sustaining their regional agriculture are part of a common effort. The urban-rural interface must become common ground, not battleground. A central idea in making our thinking about urban and rural more holistic, is the concept of - and emerging policies around - foodsheds.

Foodsheds, unlike watersheds, do not have a hard and fast geography. However, they are similar in the connotation of stewardship of the places that produce basic resources - water and food - on which we depend. Fresh water is clearly understood as a locally-provisioned public good that requires public investment. We're not quite ready to regard fresh food and local foodsheds as public goods - farming and growing food are still basically regarded as economic enterprises - but we are getting there.

California, like other areas with large and growing metropolitan regions, is in the midst of intensive land use and transportation planning, mainly in the form of metro-area blueprints. Now metro-region planning agencies, such as SACOG (Sacramento Area Council of Governments) and initiatives, such as the San Francisco Urban Rural Roundtable, are undertaking corollary efforts to lay the foundation for strategic investments in their non-urban lands and agricultural resource base.

This is promising and timely. Urgent climate change issues are the main force behind the re-examination of the multiple environmental, social, and economic benefits and costs of various types of agriculture,

from large, export-oriented industrial monocultures to diverse, local-market-oriented organic family farms, and the many types of farms in between. Public health, economic development, and place-making are also driving discussion and policy-making.

So let's posit a New Ruralism framework to bridge smart growth/new urbanism and sustainable agriculture/regional food systems; and to extend the new urbanist transect into the rural areas. At the urban-rural interface, dedicated food belts can help contain and sustain cities. Market gardens and Agricultural Parks can provide food production, employment opportunities and agricultural learning - host of activities to address economic, health-related, educational and recreational needs. Children who are learning about growing food in school gardens and immigrants who want to grow the foods of their culture can be the new market gardeners of tomorrow.

Further afield, larger farms can be rewarded for their stewardship services - preserving habitat, enhancing soil and water quality, and sequestering carbon - as well as for producing fair, fresh food.

Creation of resilient metropolitan regions depends on urban and rural synergy not dichotomy.

The finalists for NRDC's first-ever [Growing Green Awards](#) are extraordinary leaders in the field of sustainable food. The award winners

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