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Review of *Holding Our Ground: Protecting America's Farms and Farmlands* by Tom Daniels and Deborah Bowers

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Holding Our Ground: Protecting America's Farms and Farmlands. Tom Daniels and Deborah Bowers. Washington, DC: Island Press, 1997. xvi+334 pp. Figures, tables, photographs, references, index. \$34.95 paper (ISBN 1-55963-482-0).

Holding Our Ground is an ambitious attempt to help private landowners and communities devise strategies to protect farmland from poorly planned development, or sprawl. Daniels and Bowers articulate the importance of farmland to communities and persuasively advocate balanced growth that includes a dynamic role for agriculture. The authors are seasoned practitioners who have experienced the socio-political dynamics that make farmland protection a challenging task. They appreciate the value of farmland as an economic asset providing an attractive landscape as an associated benefit, and they emphasize the importance of agriculture as an industry that both relies on and supports an infrastructure of secondary businesses.

From 1956, when Maryland passed the first property tax relief measure, to the enactment of the federal Farmland Protection Program in 1996, every state in the US has passed some kind of farmland protection law. In between, states and municipalities have tried a variety of approaches to keep land in agriculture. Even though many of these have proved effective, competition for land and land use conflicts have added a host of economic and regulatory challenges to agriculture's traditional problems of unpredictable weather and markets. Escalating real estate values and property taxes make it hard for farmers to buy, rent, or transfer land to other farmers—or to expand their operations. Neighbors unaccustomed to the sounds and smells of farming operations complain about and sometimes sue over standard agricultural practices. Farmers are outnumbered in local planning and zoning decisions. Weakened profitability leads to a decline in farmer satisfaction with agriculture as a business and as a way of life.

While these challenges have driven the loss of farmland in developing areas for decades, only recently has sprawl emerged as an issue of national significance. Communities across the country looking for help in sustaining their agricultural base will find *Holding Our Ground* a solid contribution to

the effort to assist them. It offers valuable insights on how to approach farmland protection issues, and it provides substantial information for community leaders to digest in their planning process.

Farmers and ranchers comprise only about 2.4% of the population, yet most of America's privately held land is still in their hands. While the authors do not suggest that America is running out of land, they provide reliable figures to support their argument that "*the quality of land is a different issue.*" The United States covers about 2.3 billion acres, of which about 40% is owned by government—local, state, or federal. Of the 1,417 million acres of private land, the authors report, 940 million are owned by farmers and ranchers. Only 43 million acres of flat, fertile Class I soils, however, and about 200 million acres of Class II soils remain undeveloped. Overall, this means less than one-third of our agricultural land can be considered prime for production. What is most worrisome is that the land being consumed by development is of our best quality, disproportionately located near ever-expanding metropolitan areas.

Tackling the major issues that must be addressed to save farmland at the local level, the authors are strongest in chapters related to managing community growth, agricultural zoning, and Purchase of Development Rights. They are somewhat weaker when they try to provide information for concerned citizens with limited knowledge or background. The book is probably most useful for local planning boards and commissions or people who already have some knowledge of land use planning. For example, what could be a compelling chapter on "Making the Case for Farmland Protection" tries to do too much and consequently becomes somewhat hard to follow. Although raising important issues, it does not provide a plain and lucid message advocates could use.

The authors rely heavily on the experience of the Mid-Atlantic region—especially in the model documents provided in the appendices. Certainly the region boasts some of the most successful state and local programs in the country and provides a good historical model, especially for heavily populated areas. But it is also important to give treatment to other significant local efforts, especially those in areas like the Great Plains and Rocky Mountain states, which are typically less identified with farmland protection.

Apart from these weaknesses, the book is well-written and convincing. The quality of the authors' insights and their wealth of information make *Holding Our Ground* a substantial contribution to the literature. **Julia Freedgood**, *Farmland Advisory Services, American Farmland Trust*.