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Review of *Under the Blade: The Conversion of Agricultural Landscapes* Edited by Richard K. Olson and Thomas A. Lyson

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Under the Blade: The Conversion of Agricultural Landscapes. Edited by Richard K. Olson and Thomas A. Lyson. Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1999. xxii+459pp. Illustrations, tables, notes, references, index. \$60.00 cloth (ISBN 0-8113-3596-5), \$25.00 paper (ISBN 0-8133-3597-3).

Loss of agricultural land to other land uses is an issue of growing concern in the United States. A number of studies in recent years have drawn attention to the extent of agricultural land loss and have stimulated considerable discussion about the impacts of changing land use patterns. The 1992

National Resources Inventory by the US Department of Agriculture indicated that conversion of agricultural and forest lands to non-agricultural uses is occurring at an average rate of at least 1.4 million acres per year.

Because conversion of farmland to other uses is practically irreversible, even over a fairly long timespan, *Under the Blade* suggests that citizens and policy makers in the United States must become more attuned to the magnitude and long-term impacts of the problem and should be pursuing policy changes that bring more deliberation and control to the process.

Some observers suggest that the incremental loss of agricultural land is not a significant problem because such factors as land abundance, the land's increasing agricultural productivity, and land prices will work adequately to correct any imbalances. *Under the Blade* argues, however, that such forces have led to an unsustainable development pattern — urban sprawl and diffuse rural development — and that the agricultural land conversion occurring today is becoming an increasingly serious problem.

The book's principal aim — to help citizens, planners, politicians, teachers, and others better understand the complex forces behind the agricultural land conversion process — is reasonably well achieved. After establishing a framework for description and analysis of the land conversion process in the introduction and first chapter, the book proceeds to five chapters, each authored by contributing specialists, that discuss separate sets of factors with an impact on the future of agricultural land: landscape functions (chapter 2), land use law (chapter 3), economics of farmland conversion (chapter 4), socioeconomic characteristics of agriculture (chapter 5), and ethical and esthetic considerations in the loss of farmland (chapter 6). Chapter 7 is devoted to several recommendations for national farmland preservation policies.

The final third of the book consists of twenty-two location-specific case studies related to farmland conversion in the United States (and one in Norway). In addition, thirty supplemental "boxes" containing definitions, descriptions of programs or legislation, and summaries of newspaper articles and editorials on related topics are interspersed throughout the book's seven chapters.

Under the Blade includes a map of the twenty agricultural regions identified by the American Farmland Trust in 1997 as most-threatened by farmland conversion; only the Texas Blackland Prairie in eastern Texas is within or close to the Great Plains region. And only three of the case studies included in *Under the Blade* — two in Lincoln, Nebraska, and one in Austin, Texas — are in the Great Plains.

While the Great Plains region at this time is not experiencing the extent of agricultural land conversion evident in the eastern and western United States, the book emphasizes that the issue has pervasive direct and indirect impacts. *Under the Blade* presents a thought-provoking discussion of the land conversion issue and effectively broadens awareness of key factors affecting the process, as well as possible public policy responses. **Gordon Scholz**, *Department of Community and Regional Planning, University of Nebraska-Lincoln*.