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Vanishing Farmland Poses Questions

O.S. BOYD, a farmer and president of Cleveland County Farm Bureau, has a street address in Norman. Does he commute to his farm?

"No, I'm still living on the same farm in the same house," Boyd replied. "When I moved there my farm was two miles out in the country. Now the city goes a mile and a half beyond my place."

This is an example of how farm land is being devoured by urbanization, but it might not be typical. Many farmers are persuaded to sell their farms for high prices offered by developers.

The phenomenon may be observed on the fringes of virtually every growing city and town, and around some that are not growing.

It is a matter of concern to the Oklahoma County Conservation District and other such districts. Oklahoma county board members are Howard Holmes, chairman; Roy P. Stewart, Theron Booher, Alan Williams and Bill Lott.

They estimate that 5.8 per cent of 102,065 acres of prime farmland in Oklahoma County is being converted to urban uses annually. This in-

cludes 44,120 acres of cropland, 24,925 acres of pasture, 29,895 acres of rangeland, and 3,125 acres of woodland.

At the estimated rate of disappearance, half of these acres will be consumed by urbanization within the next 10 years.

A resources inventory made by conservation districts shows Oklahoma has 15,647,000 acres of prime farmland. This is about 38 per cent of total rural land, ranking our state sixth (behind Texas, Kansas, Illinois, Minnesota and Iowa) in number of acres of prime farmland.

Prime farmland has been defined as that which produces relatively more food with less erosion and with lower demands for fertilizer, energy and other resources.

Land disappears from agricultural uses when it is sold to sprout houses and factories instead of crops, when it is taken over to build airports or widen highways, and for several other persons.

At least 42 states have enacted laws to deter urbanization of farmland. Massachusetts law provides

for state purchase of development rights, restricting land to agricultural uses. Wisconsin law provides a complex system of tax relief to farmers who agree to preserve land for agricultural purposes.

Critics have noted that placing limitations upon available land could push developmental prices higher, and that placing payments in hands of political officials creates a hazard of favoritism.

While desirability of conserving and preserving farmland is hardly a debatable subject, major questions are raised by proposals on how to deal with it. Fundamental to such discussion is the traditional right of Americans to own land and determine its use.

Apparent need for protection of land on which to grow food offers a convenient vehicle which is being ridden by those who wish to centralize land use control in a federal bureau.

Still undetermined is how to stop erosion and urbanization losses without losing the right of private land ownership and control.