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Title 7 - Agriculture

Subtitle B - Regulations of the Department of Agriculture

Chapter VI - Natural Resources Conservation Service, Department of Agriculture

Subchapter F - Support Activities

Part 658 Farmland Protection Policy Act

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PART 658 - FARMLAND PROTECTION POLICY ACT

Authority: 7 U.S.C. 4201-4209.

Source: 49 FR 27724, July 5, 1984, unless otherwise noted.

§ 658.1 Purpose.

This part sets out the criteria developed by the Secretary of Agriculture, in cooperation with other Federal agencies, pursuant to section 1541(a) of the Farmland Protection Policy Act (FPPA or the Act) 7 U.S.C. 4202(a). As required by section 1541(b) of the Act, 7 U.S.C. 4202(b), Federal agencies are (a) to use the criteria to identify and take into account the adverse effects of their programs on the preservation of farmland, (b) to consider alternative actions, as appropriate, that could lessen adverse effects, and (c) to ensure that their programs, to the extent practicable, are compatible with State and units of local government and private programs and policies to protect farmland. Guidelines to assist agencies in using the criteria are included in this part. The Department of Agriculture (hereinafter USDA) may make available to States, units of local government, individuals, organizations, and other units of the Federal Government, information useful in restoring, maintaining, and improving the quantity and quality of farmland.

§ 658.2 Definitions.

- (a) *Farmland* means prime or unique farmlands as defined in section 1540(c)(1) of the Act or farmland that is determined by the appropriate state or unit of local government agency or agencies with concurrence of the Secretary to be farmland of statewide or local importance. "Farmland" does not include land already in or committed to urban development or water storage. Farmland "already in" urban development or water storage includes all such land with a density of 30 structures per 40-acre area. Farmland already in urban development also includes lands identified as "urbanized area" (UA) on the Census Bureau Map, or as

urban area mapped with a “tint overprint” on the USGS topographical maps, or as “urban-built-up” on the USDA Important Farmland Maps. Areas shown as white on the USDA Important Farmland Maps are not “farmland” and, therefore, are not subject to the Act. Farmland “committed to urban development or water storage” includes all such land that receives a combined score of 160 points or less from the land evaluation and site assessment criteria.

- (b) **Federal agency** means a department, agency, independent commission, or other unit of the Federal Government.
- (c) **Federal program** means those activities or responsibilities of a Federal agency that involve undertaking, financing, or assisting construction or improvement projects or acquiring, managing, or disposing of Federal lands and facilities.
 - (1) The term “Federal program” does not include:
 - (i) Federal permitting, licensing, or rate approval programs for activities on private or non-Federal lands; and
 - (ii) Construction or improvement projects that were beyond the planning stage and were in either the active design or construction state on August 4, 1984.
 - (2) For the purposes of this section, a project is considered to be “beyond the planning stage and in either the active design or construction state on August 4, 1984” if, on or before that date, actual construction of the project had commenced or:
 - (i) Acquisition of land or easements for the project had occurred or all required Federal agency planning documents and steps were completed and accepted, endorsed, or approved by the appropriate agency;
 - (ii) A final environmental impact statement was filed with the Environmental Protection Agency or an environmental assessment was completed and a finding of no significant impact was executed by the appropriate agency official; and
 - (iii) The engineering or architectural design had begun or such services had been secured by contract. The phrase “undertaking, financing, or assisting construction or improvement projects” includes providing loan guarantees or loan insurance for such projects and includes the acquisition, management and disposal of land or facilities that a Federal agency obtains as the result of foreclosure or other actions taken under a loan or other financial assistance provided by the agency directly and specifically for that property. For the purposes of this section, the phrase “acquiring, managing, or disposing of Federal lands and facilities” refers to lands and facilities that are acquired, managed, or used by a Federal agency specifically in support of a Federal activity or program, such as national parks, national forests, or military bases, and does not refer to lands and facilities that are acquired by a Federal agency as the incidental result of actions by the agency that give the agency temporary custody or ownership of the lands or facilities, such as acquisition pursuant to a lien for delinquent taxes, the exercise of conservatorship or receivership authority, or the exercise of civil or criminal law enforcement forfeiture or seizure authority.
- (d) **State or local government policies or programs to protect farmland** include: Zoning to protect farmland; agricultural land protection provisions of a comprehensive land use plan which has been adopted or reviewed in its entirety by the unit of local government in whose jurisdiction it is operative within 10 years preceding proposed implementation of the particular Federal program; completed purchase or acquisition

of development rights; completed purchase or acquisition of conservation easements; prescribed procedures for assessing agricultural viability of sites proposed for conversion; completed agricultural districting and capital investments to protect farmland.

(e) **Private programs to protect farmland** means programs for the protection of farmland which are pursuant to and consistent with State and local government policies or programs to protect farmland of the affected State and unit of local government, but which are operated by a nonprofit corporation, foundation, association, conservancy, district, or other not-for-profit organization existing under State or Federal laws. Private programs to protect farmland may include:

(1) Acquiring and holding development rights in farmland and

(2) facilitating the transfer of development rights of farmland.

(f) **Site** means the location(s) that would be converted by the proposed action(s).

(g) **Unit of local government** means the government of a county, municipality, town, township, village, or other unit of general government below the State level, or a combination of units of local government acting through an areawide agency under a State law or an agreement for the formulation of regional development policies and plans.

[49 FR 27724, July 5, 1984, as amended at 59 FR 31117, June 17, 1994]

§ 658.3 Applicability and exemptions.

(a) Section 1540(b) of the Act, 7 U.S.C. 4201(b), states that the purpose of the Act is to minimize the extent to which Federal programs contribute to the unnecessary and irreversible conversion of farmland to nonagricultural uses. Conversion of farmland to nonagricultural uses does not include the construction of on-farm structures necessary for farm operations. Federal agencies can obtain assistance from USDA in determining whether a proposed location or site meets the Act's definition of farmland. The USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) field office serving the area will provide the assistance. Many State or local government planning offices can also provide this assistance.

(b) Acquisition or use of farmland by a Federal agency for national defense purposes is exempted by section 1547(b) of the Act, 7 U.S.C. 4208(b).

(c) The Act and these regulations do not authorize the Federal Government in any way to regulate the use of private or non-Federal land, or in any way affect the property rights of owners of such land. In cases where either a private party or a non-Federal unit of government applies for Federal assistance to convert farmland to a nonagricultural use, the Federal agency should use the criteria set forth in this part to identify and take into account any adverse effects on farmland of the assistance requested and develop alternative actions that would avoid or mitigate such adverse effects. If, after consideration of the adverse effects and suggested alternatives, the landowners want to proceed with conversion, the Federal agency, on the basis of the analysis set forth in § 658.4 and any agency policies or procedures for implementing the Act, may provide or deny the requested assistance. Only assistance and actions that would convert farmland to nonagricultural uses are subject to this Act. Assistance and actions related to the purchase, maintenance, renovation, or replacement of existing structures and sites converted prior to the time of an application for assistance from a Federal agency, including assistance and actions related to the construction of minor new ancillary structures (such as garages or sheds), are not subject to the Act.

- (d) Section 1548 of the Act, as amended, 7 U.S.C. 4209, states that the Act shall not be deemed to provide a basis for any action, either legal or equitable, by any person or class of persons challenging a Federal project, program, or other activity that may affect farmland. Neither the Act nor this rule, therefore, shall afford any basis for such an action. However, as further provided in section 1548, the governor of an affected state, where a state policy or program exists to protect farmland, may bring an action in the Federal district court of the district where a Federal program is proposed to enforce the requirements of section 1541 of the Act, 7 U.S.C. 4202, and regulations issued pursuant to that section.

[49 FR 27724, July 5, 1984, as amended at 59 FR 31117, June 17, 1994]

§ 658.4 Guidelines for use of criteria.

As stated above and as provided in the Act, each Federal agency shall use the criteria provided in § 658.5 to identify and take into account the adverse effects of Federal programs on the protection of farmland. The agencies are to consider alternative actions, as appropriate, that could lessen such adverse effects, and assure that such Federal programs, to the extent practicable, are compatible with State, unit of local government and private programs and policies to protect farmland. The following are guidelines to assist the agencies in these tasks:

- (a) An agency may determine whether or not a site is farmland as defined in § 658.2(a) or the agency may request that NRCS make such a determination. If an agency elects not to make its own determination, it should make a request to NRCS on Form AD-1006, the Farmland Conversion Impact Rating Form, available at NRCS offices, for determination of whether the site is farmland subject to the Act. If neither the entire site nor any part of it are subject to the Act, then the Act will not apply and NRCS will so notify the agency. If the site is determined by NRCS to be subject to the Act, then NRCS will measure the relative value of the site as farmland on a scale of 0 to 100 according to the information sources listed in § 658.5(a). NRCS will respond to these requests within 10 working days of their receipt except that in cases where a site visit or land evaluation system design is needed, NRCS will respond in 30 working days. In the event that NRCS fails to complete its response within the required period, if further delay would interfere with construction activities, the agency should proceed as though the site were not farmland.
- (b) The Form AD 1006, returned to the agency by NRCS will also include the following incidental information: The total amount of farmable land (the land in the unit of local government's jurisdiction that is capable of producing the commonly grown crop); the percentage of the jurisdiction that is farmland covered by the Act; the percentage of farmland in the jurisdiction that the project would convert; and the percentage of farmland in the local government's jurisdiction with the same or higher relative value than the land that the project would convert. These statistics will not be part of the criteria scoring process, but are intended simply to furnish additional background information to Federal agencies to aid them in considering the effects of their projects on farmland.
- (c) After the agency receives from NRCS the score of a site's relative value as described in § 658.4(a) and then applies the site assessment criteria which are set forth in § 658.5 (b) and (c), the agency will assign to the site a combined score of up to 260 points, composed of up to 100 points for relative value and up to 160 points for the site assessment. With this score the agency will be able to identify the effect of its programs on farmland, and make a determination as to the suitability of the site for protection as farmland. Once this score is computed, USDA recommends:
- (1) Sites with the highest combined scores be regarded as most suitable for protection under these criteria and sites with the lowest scores, as least suitable.

- (2) Sites receiving a total score of less than 160 need not be given further consideration for protection and no additional sites need to be evaluated.
- (3) Sites receiving scores totaling 160 or more be given increasingly higher levels of consideration for protection.
- (4) When making decisions on proposed actions for sites receiving scores totaling 160 or more, agency personnel consider:
 - (i) Use of land that is not farmland or use of existing structures;
 - (ii) Alternative sites, locations and designs that would serve the proposed purpose but convert either fewer acres of farmland or other farmland that has a lower relative value;
 - (iii) Special siting requirements of the proposed project and the extent to which an alternative site fails to satisfy the special siting requirements as well as the originally selected site.
- (d) Federal agencies may elect to assign the site assessment criteria relative weightings other than those shown in § 658.5 (b) and (c). If an agency elects to do so, USDA recommends that the agency adopt its alternative weighting system
 - (1) through rulemaking in consultation with USDA, and
 - (2) as a system to be used uniformly throughout the agency. USDA recommends that the weightings stated in § 658.5 (b) and (c) be used until an agency issues a final rule to change the weightings.
- (e) It is advisable that evaluations and analyses of prospective farmland conversion impacts be made early in the planning process before a site or design is selected, and that, where possible, agencies make the FPPA evaluations part of the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) process. Under the agency's own NEPA regulations, some categories of projects may be excluded from NEPA which may still be covered under the FPPA. Section 1540(c)(4) of the Act exempts projects that were beyond the planning stage and were in either the active design or construction state on the effective date of the Act. Section 1547(b) exempts acquisition or use of farmland for national defense purposes. There are no other exemptions of projects by category in the Act.
- (f) Numerous States and units of local government are developing and adopting Land Evaluation and Site Assessment (LESA) systems to evaluate the productivity of agricultural land and its suitability for conversion to nonagricultural use. Therefore, States and units of local government may have already performed an evaluation using criteria similar to those contained in this rule applicable to Federal agencies. USDA recommends that where sites are to be evaluated within a jurisdiction having a State or local LESA system that has been approved by the governing body of such jurisdiction and has been placed on the NRCS State conservationist's list as one which meets the purpose of the FPPA in balance with other public policy objectives, Federal agencies use that system to make the evaluation.
- (g) To meet reporting requirements of section 1546 of the Act, 7 U.S.C. 4207, and for data collection purposes, after the agency has made a final decision on a project in which one or more of the alternative sites contain farmland subject to the FPPA, the agency is requested to return a copy of the Form AD-1006, which indicates the final decision of the agency, to the NRCS field office.
- (h) Once a Federal agency has performed an analysis under the FPPA for the conversion of a site, that agency's, or a second Federal agency's determination with regard to additional assistance or actions on the same site do not require additional redundant FPPA analysis.

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§ 658.5 Criteria.

This section states the criteria required by section 1541(a) of the Act, 7 U.S.C. 4202(a). The criteria were developed by the Secretary of Agriculture in cooperation with other Federal agencies. They are in two parts, (1) the land evaluation criterion, relative value, for which NRCS will provide the rating or score, and (2) the site assessment criteria, for which each Federal agency must develop its own ratings or scores. The criteria are as follows:

(a) **Land Evaluation Criterion - Relative Value.** The land evaluation criterion is based on information from several sources including national cooperative soil surveys or other acceptable soil surveys, NRCS field office technical guides, soil potential ratings or soil productivity ratings, land capability classifications, and important farmland determinations. Based on this information, groups of soils within a local government's jurisdiction will be evaluated and assigned a score between 0 to 100, representing the relative value, for agricultural production, of the farmland to be converted by the project compared to other farmland in the same local government jurisdiction, This score will be the Relative Value Rating on Form AD 1006.

(b) **Site Assessment Criteria.** Federal agencies are to use the following criteria to assess the suitability of each proposed site or design alternative for protection as farmland along with the score from the land evaluation criterion described in § 658.5(a). Each criterion will be given a score on a scale of 0 to the maximum points shown. Conditions suggesting top, intermediate and bottom scores are indicated for each criterion. The agency would make scoring decisions in the context of each proposed site or alternative action by examining the site, the surrounding area, and the programs and policies of the State or local unit of government in which the site is located. Where one given location has more than one design alternative, each design should be considered as an alternative site. The site assessment criteria are:

(1) How much land is in nonurban use within a radius of 1.0 mile from where the project is intended?

More than 90 percent - 15 points

90 to 20 percent - 14 to 1 point(s)

Less than 20 percent - 0 points

(2) How much of the perimeter of the site borders on land in nonurban use?

More than 90 percent - 10 points

90 to 20 percent - 9 to 1 point(s)

Less than 20 percent - 0 points

(3) How much of the site has been farmed (managed for a scheduled harvest or timber activity) more than 5 of the last 10 years?

More than 90 percent - 20 points

90 to 20 percent - 19 to 1 points(s)

Less than 20 percent - 0 points

- (4) Is the site subject to State or unit of local government policies or programs to protect farmland or covered by private programs to protect farmland?

Site is protected - 20 points

Site is not protected - 0 points

- (5) How close is the site to an urban built-up area?

The site is 2 miles or more from an urban built-up area - 15 points

The site is more than 1 mile but less than 2 miles from an urban built-up area - 10 points

The site is less than 1 mile from, but is not adjacent to an urban built-up area - 5 points

The site is adjacent to an urban built-up area - 0 points

- (6) How close is the site to water lines, sewer lines and/or other local facilities and services whose capacities and design would promote nonagricultural use?

None of the services exist nearer than 3 miles from the site - 15 points

Some of the services exist more than 1 but less than 3 miles from the site - 10 points

All of the services exist within $\frac{1}{2}$ mile of the site - 0 points

- (7) Is the farm unit(s) containing the site (before the project) as large as the average-size farming unit in the county? (Average farm sizes in each county are available from the NRCS field offices in each State. Data are from the latest available Census of Agriculture, Acreage of Farm Units in Operation with \$1,000 or more in sales.)

As large or larger - 10 points

Below average - deduct 1 point for each 5 percent below the average, down to 0 points if 50 percent or more below average - 9 to 0 points

- (8) If this site is chosen for the project, how much of the remaining land on the farm will become non-farmable because of interference with land patterns?

Acreage equal to more than 25 percent of acres directly converted by the project - 10 points

Acreage equal to between 25 and 5 percent of the acres directly converted by the project - 9 to 1 point(s)

Acreage equal to less than 5 percent of the acres directly converted by the project - 0 points

- (9) Does the site have available adequate supply of farm support services and markets, i.e., farm suppliers, equipment dealers, processing and storage facilities and farmer's markets?

All required services are available - 5 points

Some required services are available - 4 to 1 point(s)

No required services are available - 0 points

(10) Does the site have substantial and well-maintained on-farm investments such as barns, other storage buildings, fruit trees and vines, field terraces, drainage, irrigation, waterways, or other soil and water conservation measures?

High amount of on-farm investment - 20 points

Moderate amount of on-farm investment - 19 to 1 point(s)

No on-farm investment - 0 points

(11) Would the project at this site, by converting farmland to nonagricultural use, reduce the demand for farm support services so as to jeopardize the continued existence of these support services and thus, the viability of the farms remaining in the area?

Substantial reduction in demand for support services if the site is converted - 10 points

Some reduction in demand for support services if the site is converted - 9 to 1 point(s)

No significant reduction in demand for support services if the site is converted - 0 points

(12) Is the kind and intensity of the proposed use of the site sufficiently incompatible with agriculture that it is likely to contribute to the eventual conversion of surrounding farmland to nonagricultural use?

Proposed project is incompatible with existing agricultural use of surrounding farmland - 10 points

Proposed project is tolerable to existing agricultural use of surrounding farmland - 9 to 1 point(s)

Proposed project is fully compatible with existing agricultural use of surrounding farmland - 0 points

(c) **Corridor-type Site Assessment Criteria.** The following criteria are to be used for projects that have a linear or corridor-type site configuration connecting two distant points, and crossing several different tracts of land. These include utility lines, highways, railroads, stream improvements, and flood control systems. Federal agencies are to assess the suitability of each corridor-type site or design alternative for protection as farmland along with the land evaluation information described in § 658.4(a). All criteria for corridor-type sites will be scored as shown in § 658.5(b) for other sites, except as noted below:

(1) Criteria 5 and 6 will not be considered.

(2) Criterion 8 will be scored on a scale of 0 to 25 points, and criterion 11 will be scored on a scale of 0 to 25 points.

§ 658.6 Technical assistance.

- (a) Section 1543 of the Act, 7 U.S.C. 4204 states, "The Secretary is encouraged to provide technical assistance to any State or unit of local government, or any nonprofit organization, as determined by the Secretary, that desires to develop programs or policies to limit the conversion of productive farmland to nonagricultural uses." In § 2.62, of 7 CFR part 2, subtitle A, NRCS is delegated leadership responsibility within USDA for the activities treated in this part.
- (b) In providing assistance to States, local units of government, and nonprofit organizations, USDA will make available maps and other soils information from the national cooperative soil survey through NRCS field offices.
- (c) Additional assistance, within available resources, may be obtained from local offices of other USDA agencies. The Agricultural Stabilization and Conservation Service and the Forest Service can provide aerial photographs, crop history data, and related information. A reasonable fee may be charged. In many States, the Cooperative Extension Service can provide help in understanding and identifying farmland protection issues and problems, resolving conflicts, developing alternatives, deciding on appropriate actions, and implementing those decisions.
- (d) Officials of State agencies, local units of government, nonprofit organizations, or regional, area, State-level, or field offices of Federal agencies may obtain assistance by contacting the office of the NRCS State conservationist. A list of Natural Resources Conservation Service State office locations appears in appendix A, § 661.6 of this title. If further assistance is needed, requests should be made to the Assistant Secretary for Natural Resources and Environment, Office of the Secretary, Department of Agriculture, Washington, DC 20250.

§ 658.7 USDA assistance with Federal agencies' reviews of policies and procedures.

- (a) Section 1542(a) of the Act, 7 U.S.C. 4203, states, "Each department, agency, independent commission or other unit of the Federal Government, with the assistance of the Department of Agriculture, shall review current provisions of law, administrative rules and regulations, and policies and procedures applicable to it to determine whether any provision thereof will prevent such unit of the Federal Government from taking appropriate action to comply fully with the provisions of this subtitle."
- (b) Section 1542(b) of the Act, 7 U.S.C. 4203, requires, as appropriate, each department, agency, independent commission, or other unit of the Federal Government, with the assistance of the Department of Agriculture, to develop proposals for action to bring its programs, authorities, and administrative activities into conformity with the purpose and policy of the Act.
- (c) USDA will provide certain assistance to other Federal agencies for the purposes specified in section 1542 of the Act, 7 U.S.C. 4203. If a Federal agency identifies or suggests changes in laws, administrative rules and regulations, policies, or procedures that may affect the agency's compliance with the Act, USDA can advise the agency of the probable effects of the changes on the protection of farmland. To request this assistance, officials of Federal agencies should correspond with the Chief, Natural Resources Conservation Service, P.O. Box 2890, Washington, DC 20013.
- (d) To meet the reporting requirements of section 1546 of the Act, 7 U.S.C. 4207, and for data collection purposes, each Federal agency is requested to report to the Chief of the Natural Resources Conservation Service by November 15th of each year on progress made during the prior fiscal year to implement sections 1542 (a) and (b) of the Act, 7 U.S.C. 4203 (a) and (b). Until an agency fully implements those

sections, the agency should continue to make the annual report, but may omit the report upon full implementation. However, an agency is requested to file an annual report for any future year in which the agency has substantially changed its process for compliance with the Act.

[49 FR 27724, July 5, 1984, as amended at 59 FR 31118, June 17, 1994]