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► To cite this version:

Coline Perrin, Camille Clement, Romain Melot, Brigitte Nougarèdes. Farmland preservation issues on the urban fringe: a review in developed countries. 10. Annual Conference of the International Academic Association for Planning Law and Property Rights, International Academic Association on Planning, Law and Property rights (PLPR)., Feb 2016, Bern, Switzerland. hal-02793295

HAL Id: hal-02793295

<https://hal.inrae.fr/hal-02793295>

Submitted on 5 Jun 2020

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Farmland preservation issues on the urban fringe: a review in developed countries

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Abstract

Farmland preservation has been a longstanding challenge on the urban fringe. Most Western countries have developed laws and planning instruments, with varying degrees of success. An abundant scientific literature is devoted to the subject, involving planners, economists, geographers and other social sciences.

We propose a review of such literature in developed countries, in order to understand how this issue may have been renewed since twenty years by the context of land scarcity and the framework of sustainable development. This review is the starting point of a research project examining the social dimension of periurban farmland protection in France, Italy and Algeria.

Our sample is based on i. a keywords search in international and French databases (Scopus, Web of Science, Cairn) and ii. an exhaustive scanning of the titles of more than 30 international journals in English and French in the fields of planning, geography and urban and rural studies, between 1995 and 2015.

This review maps several entry points of scholarly interest in farmland preservation. Focusing on public policies, an extensive literature describes and sometimes compares national planning systems and a variety of policy instruments designed to contain urban growth and protect farmland (or open space). Beyond regulatory approaches, a growing interest is dedicated to incentive-based approaches and public acquisitions, especially in Northern America and Australia. The assessment of public policies is often based on GIS analysis of land use change or on qualitative study of their local implementation. The latter method highlights property rights regimes and local administrative organization as key contextual factors of success.

Rationales for farmland protection, promotion of rural identity based on a renewed interest for local food supply, the multifunctionality of agriculture are also more and more studied, as well as governance issues. Scholars do not agree on the need and ways to integrate local stakeholders and civil society in policy elaboration. Some insist on the risk of lobbying by economic, pro-development or NIMBY interests. Others support innovative collaborative or participatory planning methods.

The interactions between spatial planning and property rights are visible in many papers, but rarely directly studied. Some authors argue that property rights need to be adapted in order to combine effective farmland protection and farming activity. Farmland may even be perceived as a common, requiring a community-based management.

Key words: farmland, urban agriculture, public policies, governance.

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