

Updated January 9, 2017

Expanding Federal Support for Urban Agriculture

Over the past decade, food policy in the United States has addressed ongoing shifts in consumer preferences and producer trends that favor local and regional food systems. This has led to increased agricultural production in urban areas within and surrounding major U.S. cities.

Congress has influenced this shift through various enacted changes in U.S. farm policy. The previous two farm bills—the Agricultural Act of 2014 (P.L. 113-79) and the Food, Conservation, and Energy Act of 2008 (P.L. 110-246)—expanded federal support for local and regional food systems. These legislative changes, mostly in the form of new or expanded grants and loans, support urban agriculture although not explicitly so. Many of these changes resulted from introduced legislation representing comprehensive “marker bills” addressing provisions across multiple farm bill titles, recommending changes to provide additional support for local and regional food systems.

In addition to implementing these legislative changes, the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) implemented a number of agency-wide initiatives to further institutionalize these programmatic changes. Its leading initiative—“Know Your Farmer, Know Your Food”—was launched in 2009 to eliminate organizational barriers between existing programs and promote enhanced collaboration within USDA. In 2016, USDA also launched its “Urban Agriculture Toolkit” to support production and increase access to healthy foods through urban agriculture. During this period, USDA has invested \$1 billion in 40,000 projects to develop local and regional agricultural market opportunities.

In anticipation of the 2018 farm bill reauthorization, the Urban Agriculture Act of 2016 (S. 3420, Stabenow) was introduced in the 114th Congress. A similar bill was introduced in the 113th Congress (H.R. 5616, Kaptur). These bills proposed to expand existing farm programs and funding, as well as fund new programs and incentives, to promote urban agriculture (see **text box**). For example, in the 114th Congress, S. 3420 would have provided additional mandatory funding and authorize appropriations to support competitive grants and research initiatives supporting urban farming along with expanded risk management tools. It would have also provided new support for business planning, composting, community access to healthy foods and expanded USDA data collection. The expected total cost of the bill is not available, as the Congressional Budget Office did not provide a cost estimate.

Urban Agriculture in the United States

In the United States, urban agriculture has evolved over time, starting with vacant lot cultivation and encompassing school gardens, the city beautification movement prior to World War I, Victory gardens during World Wars I and II, and relief gardens during the Great Depression. Urban

farming now covers a range of operations including vacant city lots, city parks, churchyards, schoolyards, backyards, and community gardens. Operations may be on private or public land owned individually or by a community group, institution, municipality, or land trust. Operations may be managed by a nonprofit organization or private enterprise to grow food for sale at retail stores, or they may be smaller-sized operations that grow exclusively for sale at farmers’ markets or for field-to-direct-sales to consumers, food processors, and cottage food makers (home kitchens). Among the types of foods grown are row crops (including medicinal and ornamental plants), fruit trees, and some types of livestock (e.g., chickens, goats, and honey bees).

Urban farming operations, however, can be very diverse in terms of the types of systems and practices used. For example, increasingly urban agriculture involves large-scale innovative systems and capital-intensive operations, vertical and roof-top farms, hydroponic greenhouses (such as using soil-less systems), and aquaponic facilities.

USDA does not collect comprehensive nationwide data on urban agricultural sites in the United States, and only limited information is available for select localities from individual case studies of urban agricultural and community operations in larger cities and broader production regions. Cities with a larger number of urban agricultural operations include Chicago (IL), New York (NY), Philadelphia (PA), Detroit (MI), Oakland (CA), Portland (OR), Cleveland (OH), Los Angeles (CA), Providence (RI), Seattle (WA), San Francisco (CA), Austin (TX), and Minneapolis, MN, among other areas throughout the country (**Figure 1**). Some existing or planned large-scale facilities include Grange Farm and Gotham Greens (New York, NY); Hantz Farms (Detroit, MI); Growing Power (Milwaukee, WI, and Chicago, IL); FarmedHere (Chicago, IL); AeroFarms (New Jersey); and Bright Farms facilities (Illinois, Missouri, Pennsylvania, and Virginia).

Figure 1. Reported Urban Agriculture Sites



Source: Urban Farming, <http://www.urbanfarming.org/garden-locations.html>. Data are self-reported and not comprehensive.

Urban Agriculture Act of 2016 (S. 3420)

- Create a new USDA “Office of Urban Agriculture” to conduct outreach and/or coordinate policies and activities
- Establish an “Urban Agriculture Advisory Committee” to advise USDA on urban agricultural production policies
- Create USDA grant programs and expand existing grant and loan programs to benefit urban agriculture
- Expand selected existing USDA programs covering risk management, rural development, conservation, and agricultural research and cooperative extension programs
- Create new pilot programs targeting soil testing/remediation and composting and supporting sustainable practices and access to healthy foods
- Articulate “a broadly inclusive description of urban agriculture” covering practices such as “edible gardens, green walls, rooftop agriculture, and indoor vertical farms”
- Enhance USDA’s data collection regarding urban agriculture

Source: CRS from provisions in S. 3420 (114th Congress).

Urban farming operations often differ in terms of their underlying motivations and objectives. Oftentimes, urban agriculture is not strictly production-oriented. Among the goals are community and economic development, health education, access to nutritious foods, sustainable urban development, environmental protection, and a range of social justice and equity concerns. Studies show, for example, that groups engaged in urban agriculture are mostly motivated by an interest in community building, education, food quality, and sustainability. Urban farming has also been promoted as a means of supporting food access to address food insecurity in some urban areas (e.g., food deserts). However, some question whether urban farming can be profitable given the costs of land ownership, zoning restrictions, energy costs, and other farming inputs. Other challenges facing urban operations include access to credit and water and lack of infrastructure for marketing and processing foods grown in urban areas. While recognizing that urban farms may provide services other than food (e.g., education, community building, outdoor recreation), some question whether urban farms can substantially contribute to U.S. food consumption.

Defining Urban Farming and Other Considerations

Among the issues that may need to be resolved as Congress considers changes to U.S. farm policy to better support urban farming is what constitutes “urban agriculture.” Currently, there is no statutory or single formal definition of urban agriculture. The websites of both USDA and the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency state: “City and suburban agriculture takes the form of backyard, roof-top and balcony gardening, community gardening in vacant lots and parks, roadside urban fringe agriculture and livestock grazing in open space.” What constitutes urban farming likely varies depending on the location and level of development within the population. What constitutes a “farm” is generally defined as an entity that produces at least \$1,000 annually of agricultural products. This definition might exclude some operations that might self-identify as urban farms, such as some community gardens, very small commercial farms, and nonprofit farms.

S. 3240 did not define “urban agriculture” but defined an “urban farmer” as a beginning farmer or rancher farming in an urban area, which would be determined by USDA. H.R. 5616 defined an “urban farmer or rancher” as a person owning or operating a farm or ranch in an urban area, meaning an “area within a Metropolitan Statistical Area” (MSA) as defined by the Office of Management and Budget (OMB). OMB’s definition covers areas with at least one urbanized area of 50,000 people or more plus adjacent territory that is economically connected to the central urban area. MSAs generally cover a larger geographical area and likely include some traditionally agricultural areas. Separating out available MSA data to isolate farms in urban and/or peri-urban areas (referring to areas immediately surrounding a city or town, generally between the suburbs and rural areas) is difficult given existing data limitations.

Limited estimates are available from USDA on the number of U.S. farms within MSAs based on the 2007 *Census of Agriculture*. More recent statistics are not available. USDA estimates that there were about 859,300 metropolitan farms in the United States, accounting for about 40% of all U.S. farms and about 40% of the total value of U.S. agricultural production. USDA reports that metro farms tend to have a different product mix than farms in non-metro areas, with mostly high-value crops, such as fruits and vegetables, and also livestock and dairy products. A subsequent, more targeted analysis of the 2007 Census data, compiled by the leading 50 MSAs, suggest that about 6% of U.S. farmland (55 million acres) and 14% of U.S. farms (316,000 farms) were located in urban and peri-urban areas across 40 states nationwide. This illustrates that how urban agriculture is defined could influence what share of the U.S. farming population is covered by any farm policy changes.

Other general observations are as follows. First, some of the proposed policies could expand certain existing USDA programs to specifically include urban agriculture, although such production is not generally excluded from most USDA programs and may already be covered (e.g., USDA rural development, conservation, and research programs). Second, some proposed policies could expand the scope of certain existing USDA programs to include urban agriculture without providing additional program funding and could dilute coverage for others already covered by the program (e.g., USDA grant and loan programs). Third, despite an intended focus of urban agriculture, some proposed policies are open-ended and could apply to non-urban agricultural production (e.g., farm credit and risk management programs). Finally, some proposed policies tackle issues that have historically fallen outside the scope of U.S. farm policy and the farm bill (e.g., environmental quality and remediation, stormwater management, and land tenure issues).

For more information see CRS Report R43950, *Local Food Systems: Selected Farm Bill and Other Federal Programs*; and CRS Report R44390, *The Role of Local and Regional Food Systems in U.S. Farm Policy*.

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IF10498

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