

# Turning Breadbaskets into Battery Backups - A Recipe for Disaster

Over the past 25 years, the United States has watched **75 million acres** of farmland disappear—a steady drumbeat of loss averaging **3 million acres annually**. That’s an area more than three times the size of Indiana gone to urban sprawl, industrial development, and other land uses that don’t grow a single ear of corn. Farmland that once fed millions is now being replaced by urban sprawl and industrial projects that don’t so much as offer a side of mashed potatoes. For rural communities and farmers, this isn’t just a number; it’s a warning bell. And it’s only getting louder.

The research is clear. According to Carl Zulauf, Gary Schnitkey, Jonathan Coppess, and Nick Paulson in their 2024 analysis published in *farmdoc daily*, this loss represents a massive reduction in the land available to support America’s population. To put it into perspective, each acre of farmland can feed **3.08 people annually** on a plant-based diet or **0.37 people** on a meat-inclusive one. That means those 75 million missing acres could have supported **231 million plant-eaters** or **27.8 million omnivores** each year. Either way, that’s a lot of empty dinner plates.

But the story doesn’t end there. Renewable energy advocates—bless their optimistic hearts—say they need just **1% of the nation’s farmland**, about **8.93 million acres**, to power the United States with solar and wind. It doesn’t sound like much until you realize that’s another Maryland-sized chunk of agricultural land permanently out of commission. That’s farmland that could have fed **27.5 million people annually** on a plant-based diet or **3.3 million meat-eaters**. Apparently, you can’t eat electricity, but you can burn a lot of calories debating the logic.



## What's on Your Plate?

Now, before anyone suggests we could just shift everyone to a plant-based diet and call it a day, let's look at the facts. According to a 2016 Pew Research Center report, "*The New Food Fights: U.S. Public Divides Over Food Science*", only **3%** of Americans identify as vegans, with another **6%** as vegetarians. That leaves a whopping **91%** of the population who enjoy the occasional steak or cheeseburger (or maybe just a lot of bacon). In other words, most of our farmland is already doing the heavy lifting of supporting meat-inclusive diets. Losing more of it? That's a recipe for disaster.

## Looking Ahead: 2025 to 2050

Now let's fast forward. By 2050, the United States wants to be 100% reliant on renewable energy. Admirable? Sure. But what's the cost? At the current rate of farmland loss—**3 million acres a year**—we're set to lose another **75 million acres** between 2025 and 2050. Add the **8.93 million acres** for renewable energy, and we're looking at **83.93 million acres** of farmland gone forever.

Meanwhile, the U.S. population is projected to grow from **334 million in 2025** to **369 million by 2050**, adding another **35 million mouths to feed**. That's not just a curveball—it's a full-on fastball aimed right at food security.

With this combination of shrinking farmland and a growing population, the numbers don't add up. Between 2025 and 2050, the farmland we'll lose could have fed **28.26 million omnivores** or **23.27 million plant-based eaters** every single year. Together, that's over **51 million people annually** left without sustenance.

Now, you might be thinking, "Sure, but these numbers seem to apply to the U.S. population, so what's the big deal?" Here's the thing: The United States isn't just feeding itself—it's feeding the world. As one of the largest exporters of food globally, the U.S. ships everything from grains to meat to countries that depend on these imports to sustain their populations. When farmland disappears here, the ripple effect is felt halfway around the world.

So while the U.S. population might not feel the direct impact of this loss, a family somewhere across the globe—one that depends on U.S. food exports—certainly will. For them, this isn't just an abstract debate about farmland or renewable energy. It's about whether they have enough to eat. It's about survival. And no amount of solar panels can fill an empty bowl.

### **The Farmer's Dilemma**

For farmers, this isn't just about land; it's about survival. Every acre lost means more pressure to produce more food on less land, driving up costs, reducing yields, and adding stress to an already strained system. Rural communities, the backbone of America's food supply, are the ones left holding the bag—literally and figuratively.

And here's the kicker: the policies driving these changes don't seem to account for the fact that farmland isn't just "extra space" waiting to be repurposed. It's the foundation of food security, economic stability, and community resilience. Many believe renewable energy is important, but at what cost? Trading farmland for solar farms isn't just shortsighted; it's downright reckless when you consider the stakes.

### **Help educate your policy makers and your community!**

As policymakers push forward with renewable energy goals, they need to take a hard look at the bigger picture. Incorporating renewable energy into our energy demands is a worthy goal, but it must not come at the expense of the farmland that feeds us. There are smarter, less disruptive ways to implement renewable energy that don't require sacrificing prime agricultural land.

Instead of sprawling solar farms on fertile fields, imagine solar panels shading parking lots, sitting atop industrial complexes, covering the roofs of homes, and reclaiming brownfields—those already degraded, abandoned industrial sites. These are spaces where renewable energy can thrive without jeopardizing food production.

Here's something policymakers might want to chew on: a hungry voter is an angry voter. And let's face it—angry voters have long memories. The policy decisions that trade food security for short-sighted renewable energy projects won't be easily forgotten or forgiven. If lawmakers think they can ignore the needs of rural communities and farmers while still earning their votes, they're in for a rude awakening.

The United States can't afford to sacrifice food security for energy sustainability. Without farmland, there is no food. And without food, all the renewable energy in the world won't keep the lights on for a hungry population.

So the next time someone cheerfully suggests that “just 1%” of farmland is all it takes to power the future, remind them what's at stake: millions of Americans who won't just be left in the dark—they'll be left hungry. Farmland is more than dirt. It's dinner, livelihoods, and the backbone of rural America. And without it, there's no future worth powering.