Background. Farmers across the United States have faced increasing challenges to the viability of their enterprises and their ability to transfer their farms to a next generation. Challenges include increased global competition, weak or volatile commodity markets, rising input costs, and a lack of interest by young farm family members to pursue agricultural occupations. In urbanizing areas, farmers not only face these common challenges, but also must contend with relatively high land prices, conflicts with nonfarming neighbors, and more restrictive land use rules that can limit opportunities for adaptation and innovation.

Given these additional challenges, many consider farming at the rural-urban interface to be doomed to failure. Interestingly, census data suggest that farming continues to be a significant economic and land use activity in a large fraction of urban or urbanizing counties in the United States. The sustained viability of commercial agriculture has been linked to some unique opportunities present in these urbanizing contexts. These include greater access to urban amenities and activities, more diverse and lucrative opportunities for off-farm employment (for income and benefits), and the rapid growth of new food marketing opportunities that take advantage of the proximity of farms to large concentrations of urban consumers.

The “Agricultural Adaptation at the RUI” Project. A team of researchers at Ohio State University and Utah State University has been conducting a large national study of farm changes in urban areas. Titled “Agricultural Adaptation in the Rural-Urban Fringe: Can Communities make a Difference?” the project is funded by the USDA-CSREES National Research Initiative (NRI) Rural Development Program (Grant # 2005-35401-15272) and is intended to help identify the challenges and opportunities faced by urbanizing communities that have economically important agricultural sectors.

Our research has helped document the diversity of farm enterprise types and farm adaptation patterns at the RUI, and has sought to link patterns of farm change to the existence of various agricultural and land use oriented programs and policies adopted by local communities. Our results suggest that urban-oriented farm production and marketing strategies are important in many RUI counties, but that they are only one of several adaptive strategies that explain the persistence of farming. Our work has also explored the role of farm transition planning and behavior. It has become clear that regardless of farm type (alternative or conventional), the long-run viability of many commercial farms hinges on the identification of a farm heir and creation of plans for farm enterprise succession. Meanwhile, for the large group of more lifestyle-oriented farms, enterprise viability has more to do with quality-of-life considerations. Our work suggests that traditional land use policy tools – including restrictive planning or zoning, as well as incentive-based tax policy and easement programs – have surprisingly small impacts on the larger trajectories of agricultural adaptation at the RUI. Agricultural economic development and farm transition policies have emerged as important components of farm and farmland preservation toolkits. In all cases, policymakers need to recognize the diversity of farmers and farmland owners and adjust their approaches to fit these audiences. For more information on our project, please visit: http://exurban.osu.edu/agadapt.htm