

A Framework for Assessing the Condition of Agricultural Lands

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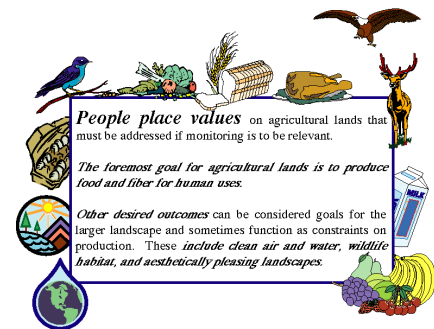
Mission: To develop indicators of the condition of agricultural lands within an ecological framework, and to monitor and evaluate this condition on a regional basis.



Sustainable agriculture has been discussed, defined, and dissected in countless papers.

Definitions tend to be broad and encompass ecological, economic, social, and even policy dimensions. Although these dimensions are intertwined, each may be examined independently.

In our efforts, we sought methods to examine only the ecological aspects of sustainability.



The ecological condition of agricultural land is defined by its productivity and the degree to which valued biotic and abiotic resources are conserved and protected.

Agricultural land in good condition is productive and does not compromise valued resources. Sustainability is the ability to maintain good condition over time.



Indicators were selected to reflect crop productivity and land stewardship.

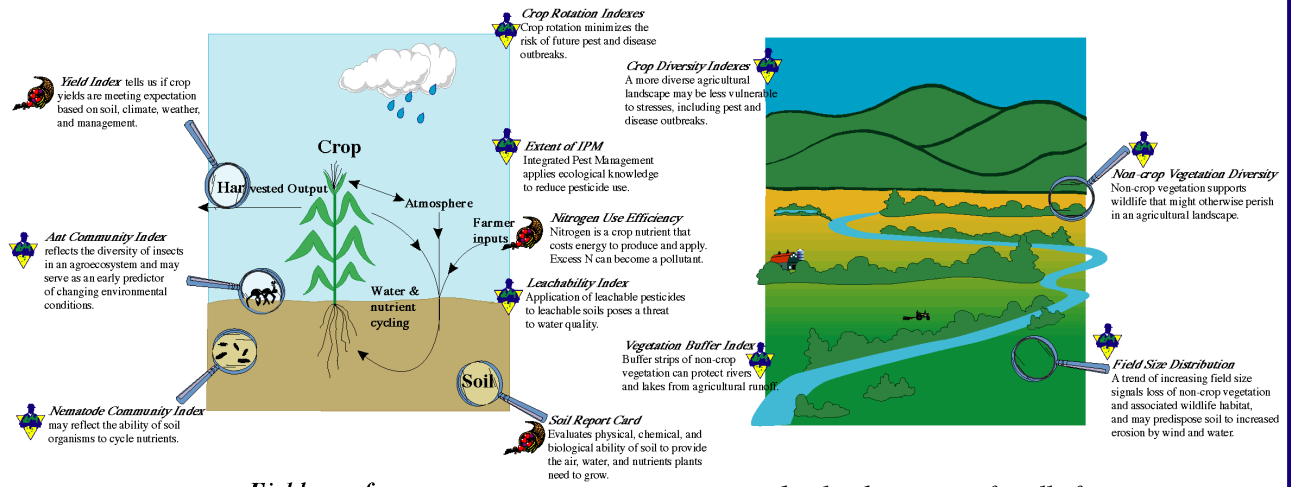
In making an assessment, condition is reported for each indicator. An overall condition may also be reported, but depends critically on the relative weighting of the goals for agricultural lands.

For sustainability, one can examine trends in crop productivity and stewardship practices.

Potential Indicators for Annually Harvested Herbaceous Cropland

As a starting point, we chose to concentrate our efforts on developing indicators for **annually harvested herbaceous cropland** — land planted with crops that are harvested every year whether the plants are annual or perennial. Common examples are corn, wheat, soybeans, alfalfa hay, and strawberries.

We also endeavored to supplement, rather than duplicate, existing efforts. Our conceptual framework is flexible enough to incorporate indicators based on data from other monitoring efforts. For example, an erosion indicator could be developed using the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service's Natural Resource Inventory data.



Fields are for crops . . .

. . . but landscapes are for all of us.

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