

RURAL LANDSCAPES (1985, R1990, R2001, R2007, R2026)



Policy Statement

The American Society of Landscape Architects (ASLA) believes that rural landscapes, whether small town, farm, field, or forest, contain vital ecological, economic, and cultural qualities that are a valuable, finite, and dwindling resource. ASLA recognizes that the protection, conservation, preservation, and sustainable enhancement of rural lands is vital to the well-being of the nation in order to protect clean air, water, and soil, provide food, support communities, and celebrate the rural sense of place.

ASLA supports:

- Identification and recognition of the cultural and economic importance of rural landscapes in terms of biodiversity, productivity, and scenic value.
- Planning and design that engages communities and fosters partnerships to direct growth while supporting working rural lands; and planning and design that leverages natural and cultural assets to the benefit of all.
- Investments in nature-friendly solutions, including green infrastructure, to support the health, safety, and welfare of rural communities and landscapes.
- Conservation and preservation incentives for rural landowners.
- The protection of rural landscapes from urban sprawl and other harmful development.
- Investments in rural economies and supportive infrastructure that are important to sustaining and enhancing rural populations and lifestyles.

Justification

Landscape architects lead projects in rural communities that include sustainable agriculture, conservation, biodiversity, forestry, transportation, disaster resilience, scenic resource management, and responsible growth. Landscape architects are STEM professionals who utilize a variety of software, geo-mapping, and other advanced technologies to analyze environmental trends affecting rural communities. Landscape architects are leaders in community engagement who intentionally involve stakeholders in all phases of the planning, design, and implementation processes for projects affecting rural areas.

Issue

The term “rural landscape” describes the diverse portion of the nation’s land area that is not densely populated or intensively developed and not set aside for preservation in a natural state. The rural landscape includes a variety of geological and geographic features such as pastures, grasslands, forests,



deserts, swamps, rivers, and lakes. It also incorporates elements such as community infrastructure, architecture, and designed and managed landscapes with agricultural, historical, and cultural value.

Rural-Urban Interface

Rural and urban communities support one another in a variety of economic and environmental ways. Rural landscapes are an essential and fundamental part of this relationship. For example, rural landscapes produce food for everyone, while urban density helps maintain the functions of rural communities and the open-space character. Rural communities create recreational opportunities for both urban and rural residents. Urban economic productivity helps to finance rural infrastructure, while rural ecosystems help regulate air and water quality.

Biodiversity

The USDA reports that rural areas make up 72 percent of the nation's land acreage.¹ Rural America strongly overlaps with priority areas for biodiversity conservation. Just as biodiversity relies on the habitat patches and corridors of rural landscapes, the livelihoods of farmers, ranchers, and forest owners rely on biodiversity to maintain healthy lands and waters. Biodiversity conservation is a priority for landscape architects, and the profession actively contributes to natural resource sustainability, habitat connectivity, pollution prevention and mitigation, and native species recovery.

Conservation

The conservation of rural landscapes safeguards vital working lands and natural systems that are under threat in our country. Landscape architects contribute by assessing ecological and cultural resources, identifying priority conservation areas and connections, and preparing plans and designs that align protection goals with community needs and landowner objectives.

Effective conservation strategies—such as voluntary conservation easements, land protection incentives, and coordinated land stewardship—help keep farms, ranches, and forests economically viable while preventing fragmentation and incompatible development.

Transportation: Safety & Economy

Rural corridors are critical for the movement of people and commerce. However, it is essential to move people and freight through rural lands in a way that doesn't compromise the lives of those living in rural landscapes. Statistics show that safety issues associated with these systems are considerably higher in rural settings. Enhancing safety through design and investment is critical because nearly half of all truck vehicle miles traveled (VMT) occur on rural lands and feature two-thirds of all rail-based freight nationwide. Both rail and truck hauling move commerce that is integral to national supply chains, which is equally important to a healthy American economy. Through planning and design, landscape architects contribute to the safety of moving people through these

¹ <https://communities.springernature.com/posts/how-does-biodiversity-across-agricultural-landscapes-meet-the-needs-of-rural-people>



corridors, plan for appropriate land uses, and revitalize abandoned corridors for recreation and ecological benefits.

Tradition & Adaptation

Across America, summers are hotter, forests are drier, droughts linger, and rains come in increasingly intense bursts. As a result of climate change, these evolving seasonal trends are impacting all agricultural and recreational functions. However, rural landscapes are themselves tools for resilience. First, lands may be enhanced or restored to regulate natural systems, remove pollutants, and sequester carbon in the regional environment. Second, with the proper siting and degree of community engagement, rural landscapes can support new broadband and electricity transmission infrastructure. These improvements to the built environment will provide rural residents with the resources to maintain their local practices and better manage long-term trends in the natural environment.

Disaster Resilience

Rural landscapes are also subject to natural and human-made disasters such as toxic spills, floods, tornados, wildfires, hurricanes, heat waves, and blizzards. In addition to the physical safety risks of these disasters, extreme weather can be especially disruptive to rural livelihoods in agriculture, recreation, and resource management. To build resilience, rural landscapes nationwide require additional investment in regional-scale infrastructure and nature-based solutions such as greenbelts, greenways, storm water reserves, wetlands, and more.

Resources

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