

Fraying Legacies:

The State of Indiana Agriculture, 1985 to Today



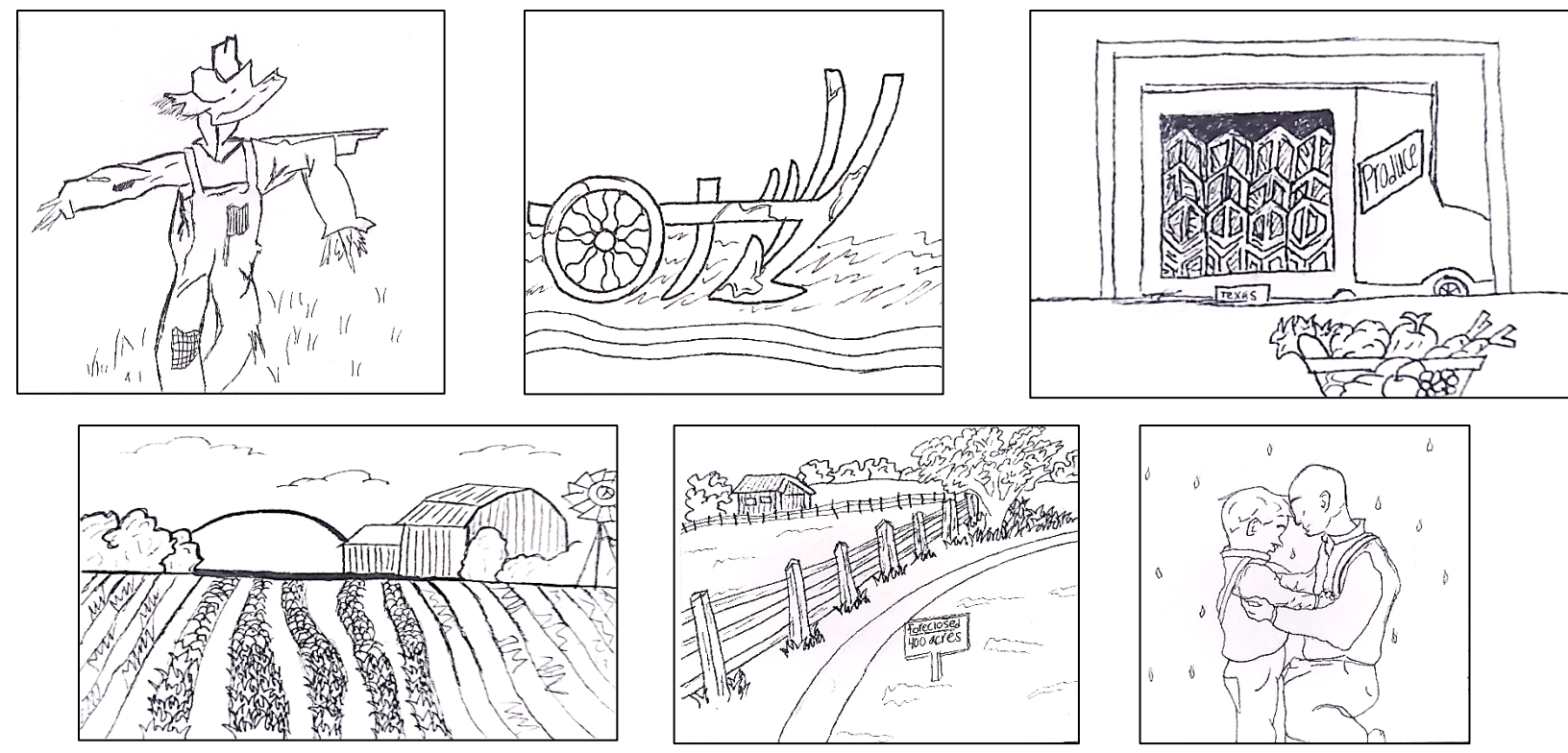
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Introduction



Policy history, census data, and industry reports reveal how economic and technological forces have transformed family farms into contemporary sacrifice zones, highlighting challenges like generational turnover, farm closures and rising start-up costs, and considers what the state's sustainable agricultural future might look like.

To mitigate Indiana's agricultural sacrifice zones, policy solutions like the [Retiring Farmers Tax Credit](#) and [Agricultural Land Easements](#) are essential.

This project applies the concept of **sacrifice zones** — areas exploited for profit/progress (Hedges and Sacco 2012) — to analyze how decades of **consolidation**, an **aging workforce**, and **uneven investment** have reshaped Indiana's farming landscape.

A Brief Timeline of Political Acts that Affected the Landscape of American Agriculture

1852 & 1890

Morrill Acts
(land & funding)

1862

USDA
Established

1914

Smith –
Lever Act

1933 & 1938

Agriculture
Adjustment
Acts

1935

Soil
Conservation
Act

1973

Omnibus
Farm Bill

1976

US-Soviet
Union Grain
Deal

1985

Farm Aid
Established

Timeline Highlights

The current state of agriculture cannot be separated from the historical context upon which it was developed.

❖ Morrill Acts of 1852 and 1890

- Granted land to states to form secondary education schools around agriculture and mechanics

❖ Establishment of USDA or “The People’s Department” 1862

- Original purpose to improve American farming productivity
- Added the Forest Service in 1905 and the FDA in 1906
- Added the Soil Conservation Service in 1935, now Natural Resources Conservation Service

❖ Smith-Lever Act 1914

- Formally established agricultural extension work through Land-grant colleges and universities

❖ Agriculture Adjustment Acts 1933 and 1938

- Crop insurance program, parity payments, production control, and soil conservation
- Jones-Connally and Jones-Costigan Acts 1934, Kerr-Smith Tobacco Control Act, Warren Potato Act 1935

Method

Quantitative

- ❖ Publicly available data
 - Indiana State Department of Agriculture
 - American Farmland Trust

Qualitative

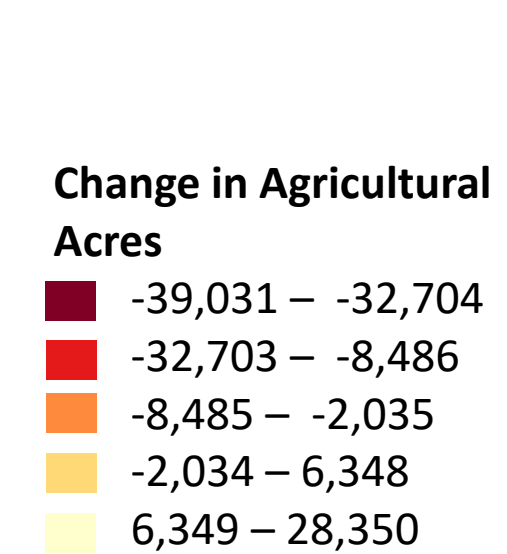
- ❖ Publicly available data
 - Census Bureau
- ❖ Newspaper articles
- ❖ Agricultural non-profits and interest groups
 - American Farm Bureau Foundation, 1914
 - Farm Aid, 1985
 - National Young Farmers Coalition, 2010

Table 1. Projected Agriculture Land Conversion 2016-2040 (AFT 2020)



Freegood et al. (2020) expects the most agricultural land to be lost in Hamilton, Hendricks, and Lake Counties by 2040. Agricultural land around urban centers is susceptible to conversion to non-agricultural (or residential) use in the coming decade.

Table 2. Agriculture land change from 2010-2022 (ISDA 2023).



As of 2023, Lake County gained agricultural land (+4,914 acres) while Monroe and Jefferson Counties have lost the most (-32,704 and -39,031 acres respectively) (ISDA 2023).

Findings

Agriculture Overview

- ❖ Agriculture accounted for \$35.1 billion of Indiana's economy
 - 9th largest farming state in the U.S.
 - Soybeans, corn, and feeds
 - Oldest aged workforce (Gerber 2024)
 - 10% of retirement aged farmers are Hoosiers

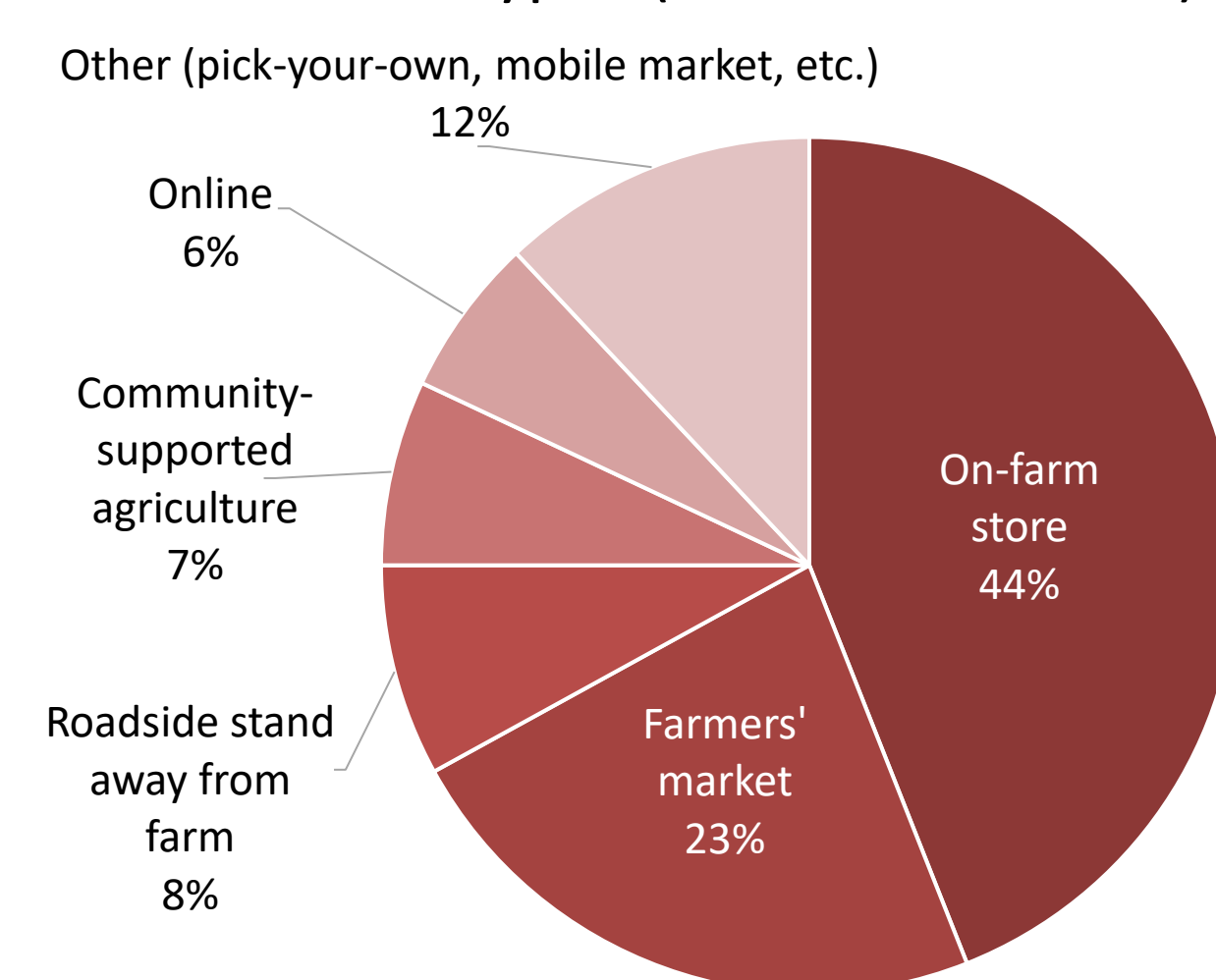
53,599 Agricultural Operations

- ❖ Around 94,000 farmers
 - Average farmer age: 56
 - Farmers 65+ years made up a 1/3 of Hoosier farmers (Gerber 2024)
 - Average farm size: 272 acres

Agricultural Land Conversion (ISDA 2024)

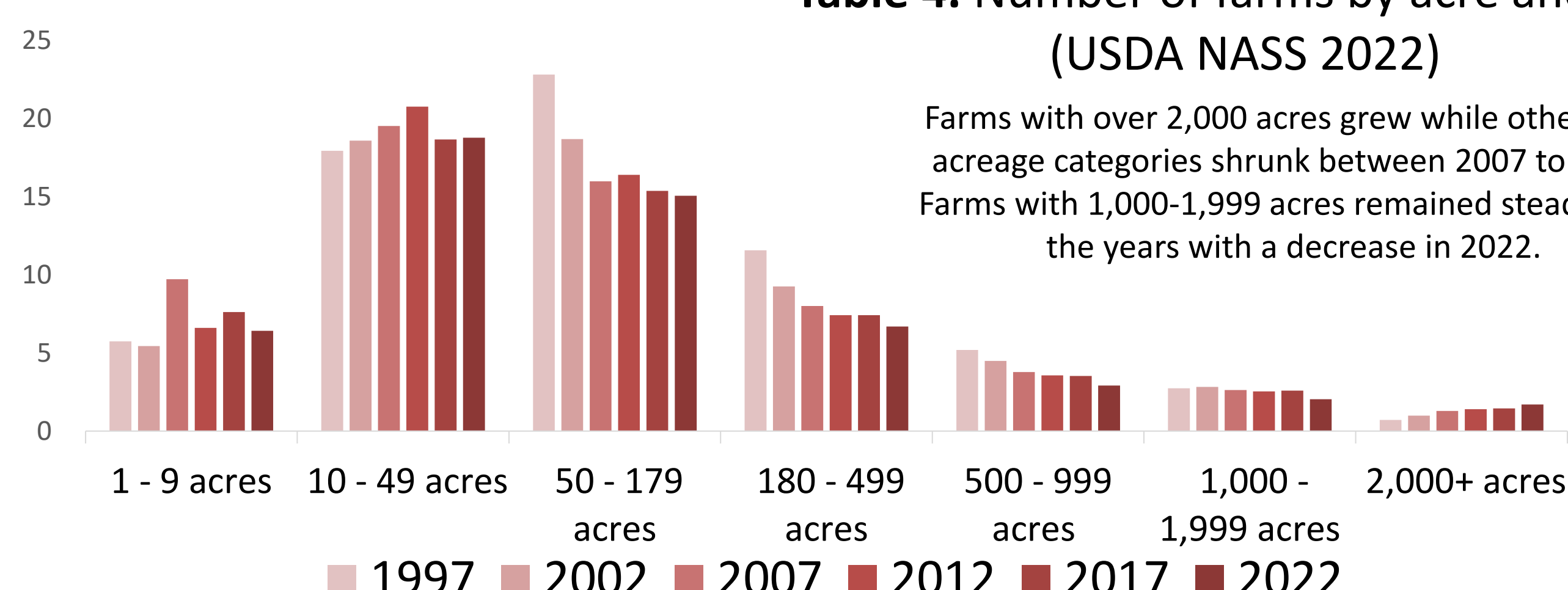
- ❖ 350,000 acres converted to non-agriculture use
 - Residential development on outskirts of city
 - Hamilton (-18,571), Hendricks (-13,674), Lake (4,914) converted acres
 - Converted lands expected to occur on Nationally Significant land: 71% (Freegood et al. 2020)

Table 3. Percentage of sells by direct-to-consumer sale types (USDA NASS 2016)



Nationally, 77% of farmers who sell food directly to consumers, retailers, and institutions have been in the profession for over 10 years and 67% of these farms are in a metropolitan county. On-farm stores and farmers' markets accounted for \$2 billion (67%) in direct-to-consumer sales (USDA NASS 2016).

Table 4. Number of farms by acre and year (USDA NASS 2022)



Farms with over 2,000 acres grew while other farm acreage categories shrunk between 2007 to 2022. Farms with 1,000-1,999 acres remained steady over the years with a decrease in 2022.

Discussion

Trusted Agricultural Non-Profits Contextualize Farmers

- ❖ Highlights current issues affecting today's farmers
 - Offers lived experience of issues and solutions

Current Legislation

❖ Retiring Farmers Tax Credit (Culp and Criswell 2025)

- Addresses aging workforce by giving tax credit to retirement age farmers who partner with young farmers (Pfeiffer 2025)
- Successful models in Iowa and Minnesota (Smith 2025)

❖ Agricultural Land Easements

- Protects productive, versatile, and resilient lands (Freegood et al. 2020)
- Conservation of Agricultural Land (Culp 2025)

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