

# Southwestern Illinois Lands at Risk

A REGIONAL ASSESSMENT OF NATURAL RESOURCES,  
URBAN SPRAWL AND LAND PROTECTION MEASURES



**THE LAND CONSERVANCY (TLC)**

a division of Southwestern Illinois RC&D, Inc.

Dear Friends,

Open space in the seven counties of the Metro-East is vanishing at an alarming rate. You've probably noticed that, each year, a few more fields, forests and natural areas have vanished, replaced by highways, houses and malls. This trend is especially evident in Clinton, Madison, St. Clair and Monroe Counties, although it also affects the rest of Southwestern Illinois.



We all agree that thoughtful urban expansion helps our local economy. Yet the very qualities that attract us to this place - the woodlands, streams and farms that give us critical open space, wildlife habitat, agricultural products, scenic views and recreation assets - are now broadly threatened. And as conversion accelerates, the owners of family farms and natural properties can face immense pressures to join the race.

It's a question of **BALANCE**. There ARE ways to balance managed urban growth with protection of our natural and farm heritages. There ARE ways to support private landowners in their desires to preserve their properties, for the benefit of our generation and those to come.

One important way is through the work of The Land Conservancy, described in this booklet. TLC is a new initiative of Southwestern Illinois Resource Conservation & Development Inc., a non-profit organization active in efforts to protect and sustain our region's natural resources through economic development, education, recreation and prudent growth management.

Thank you for your interest in natural resource conservation in Southwestern Illinois, and for considering an investment in TLC. We look forward to partnering with you.

Sincerely,

**Stephen Gonzalez**

Chairman, Southwestern Illinois RC&D, Inc.

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### It's a Question of Balance

From the time of the “mound builders” through the colonial period of Jefferson, Lewis and Clark, and on to the present day, the rich lands surrounding our Cahokia and Kaskaskia Rivers have supported life in Southwestern Illinois. Farms, forests and fields are our heritage. They give us agricultural abundance, economic prosperity and the touchstones of history, culture and nature.

But we are losing this heritage to unmanaged urban growth at alarming rates. While this is part of a much larger national problem, naturally we feel the impact most keenly “in our own backyard.” The Metro-East is growing explosively, far more rapidly than we can closely monitor or properly manage. And this growth is subsidized – local governments spend \$1.10 to provide urban services for every \$1.00 of tax revenue they take in.

Over the past 20 years, land devoted to urban use in our seven-county area grew by almost 50%, from 219,000 acres to an estimated 300,000 acres. During the mid-1990s, we were losing about 4,000 acres each year to this conversion – roughly the size of eight family farms. Clearly, these losses are increasing steadily.

At its worst, rapid, unmanaged growth creates “patches” of expansion that destroy the large land corridors needed by wildlife to survive, or that hedge in family farms with malls and industries. When these points are reached, pressures for additional conversion become almost insurmountable.



But if handled with care, urban development CAN create new residential and commercial opportunities, while preserving the extraordinary character of our rural and natural surroundings. The Land Conservancy offers tools to preserve key properties, be it the family farm, an intact woodland or stream, or such fragile habitats as our Sinkhole Plain.

### LOSS OF FARMLAND & OPEN SPACE

#### Nationally

- 9 million acres converted to urban uses from 1997 to 2001
- 34 million acres converted from 1982–2001
- 8 square miles lost daily

#### Illinois

- We lose nearly two townships or 50,000 acres every year to urban sprawl and development
- This is equivalent to a loss of 140 acres per day

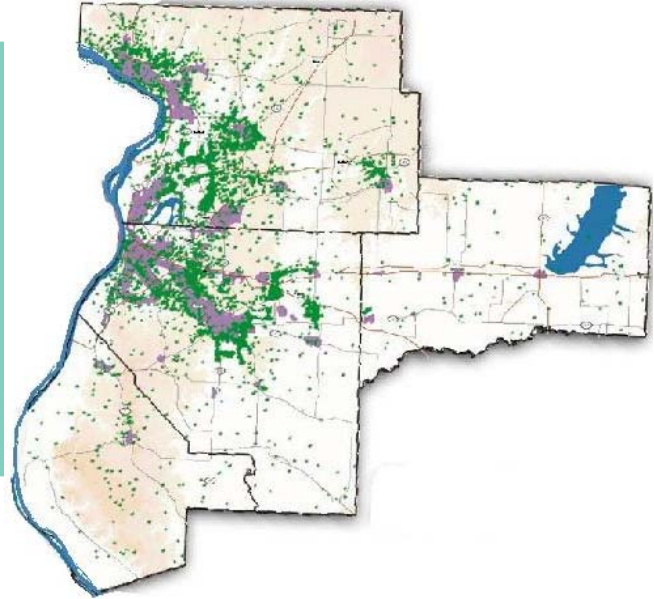
#### Southwestern Illinois

- 4,130 acres per year converted to urban land from 1992 to 1997
- Rate of conversion from 1997 to 2001 has increased from previous five-year period

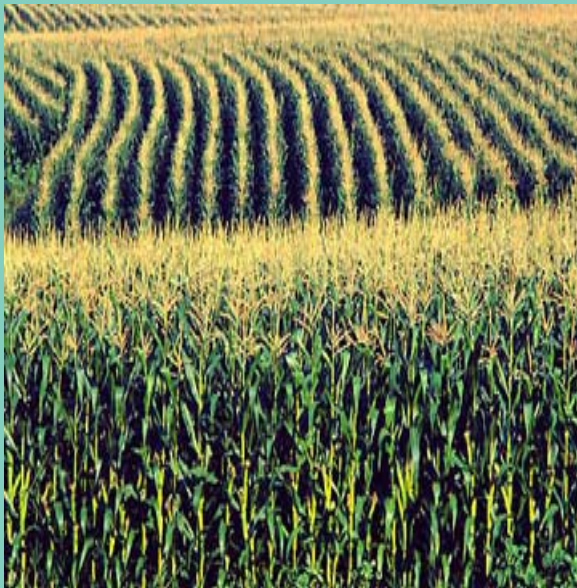
**REGIONAL RESOURCES AT RISK**

Urban development is rapidly expanding along the major transportation routes in the region. The farmland of Clinton, Madison, St. Clair, and Monroe Counties are rapidly being converted to residential and commercial uses as communities plan for expanding populations. Major changes are occurring along Interstate 64 and 70 as they head eastward into Illinois' open spaces. Urban expansion results in the loss of this productive capacity that has a major economic impact in the region on agriculture.

LEAMg (generic Land-Use Evaluation and Impact Assessment Model) simulates future growth in the region (shown in green) using a set of generic drivers, and assuming a relatively high growth in the region's population.



Meandering rows of row crops are rapidly being replaced with high-density residential development.



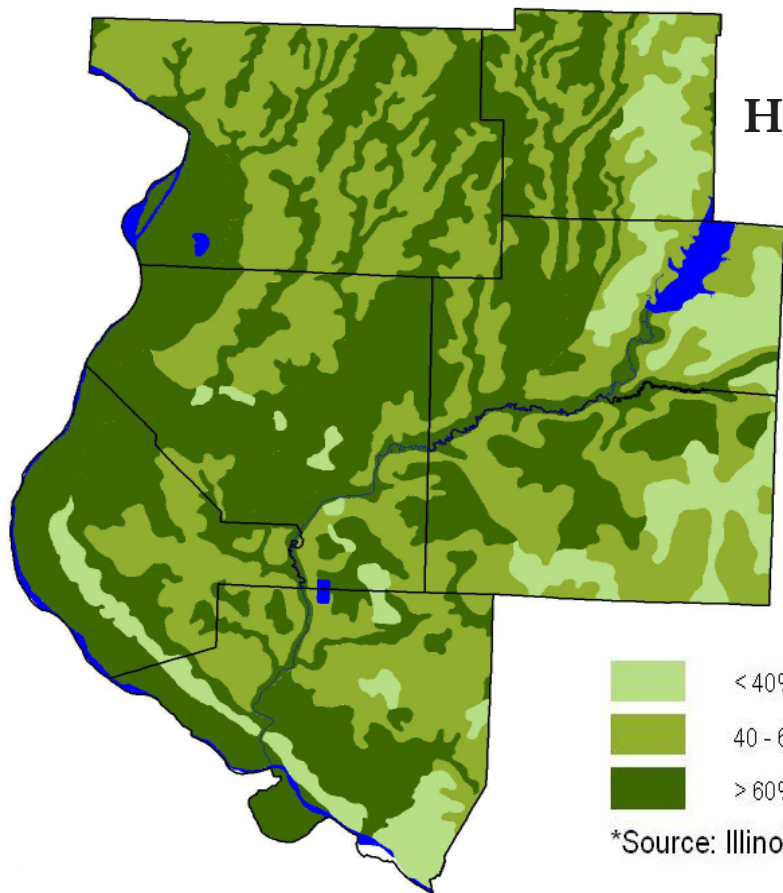
### At Risk – Prime Farmland

Across the United States, an imbalance is steadily growing between population growth – 17% over the last 20 years – and the conversion of land to urban uses – an astounding 47% during this same period. This is critically affecting our country’s supply of farmland. Nationally, 86% of our country’s fruits and vegetables, and 63% of our dairy products, are produced in counties next to major urban areas.

Illinois and our region of the state are part of this alarming trend. In fact, in some ways we feel the impact more severely. Almost 80% of land across the state is used for agriculture. And its extraordinarily high quality ranks it among the world’s most productive. From just 1992 to 1997 alone, about 160,000 acres of Illinois prime farmland were lost.



As we continue to lose viable farming enterprises, we suffer adverse effects on our region’s economy as well as our nation’s homegrown supplies of vegetables, grains and dairy products. Biomass used to generate renewable sources of energy, like ethanol, declines, increasing our dependence on foreign oil. We lose the serenity, balance and air and water quality so closely associated with open space and landscape diversity.



### High Quality Farmland

Land that has fewer limitations for agricultural use and has a higher level of productivity as compared to other soils in the state. High quality farmland is best suited to continued use for food and fiber production and require less input for sustainable high crop yields.

- < 40% of soils are high quality farmland
- 40 - 60% of soils are high quality farmland
- > 60% of soils are high quality farmland

\*Source: Illinois STATSGO data, class 1 & 2 soils

### At Risk – Sinkhole Plain

For millions of years, water percolating through the cracks and fissures of surface limestone has created an amazing labyrinth of underground crevices and caves. This Sinkhole Plain and its environs cover almost 1,300 square miles of Monroe, St. Clair, Randolph and Madison Counties, proportionately more than any other region in the entire state.

About 60% of our Sinkhole Plain is now being used for agriculture. Much of the remainder is still high-quality natural habitat – forests, glades, seeps, springs and prairies – supporting exceptional numbers of plants and animals.

These “karst” areas, as they are known can still function and yield immense benefits if used for agriculture and other relatively benign purposes, aggressive development typically causes far too much stress. As urban uses increase, so too does the threat of groundwater contamination, through pollutants, septic discharges and runoff of sediment and chemicals. Maintaining groundwater quality is a critical concern for our region.

- The region has 32 top-quality remnants of 17 presettlement natural resource community types, including seven kinds of forests, glades, seeps and springs, and three kinds of prairies.
- The caves of the Sinkhole Plain are the only places in the world where the Illinois cave amphipod, a small, cave-dwelling crustacean, is found.
- In parts of southern St. Clair, Monroe, and northern Randolph Counties, sinkholes number 230 per square mile, the highest density in the country.



Sinkholes in Monroe County, Illinois

### At Risk – Kaskaskia River Watershed

The Kaskaskia, the second longest river of inland Illinois, is one of the most crucial natural resources within the Metro East. We have come to depend on the many environmental, economic, and social benefits provided by this watershed.

Only 20% of Southwestern Illinois' original forests still exist, and a significant portion of these remaining forests are found in the lower reaches of the Kaskaskia River watershed. With habitat fragmentation a major concern in Illinois, and around the nation, the Kaskaskia region can still boast the largest contiguous tract of floodplain and post oak forest in our state, covering 7,000 acres, and at certain points is up to two miles wide.

The same applies to the watershed's fast-vanishing wetlands. Less than one fourth of the pre-settlement wetlands within the watershed exist today. These critical habitats prevent erosion, purify our air and water, reduce runoff and flooding, help replenish our groundwater supplies, support an abundance of wildlife and provide important outdoor recreation opportunities.

All told, this watershed supports thousands of species of fish, mussels, crustaceans, amphibians, reptiles, birds, mammals, insects, and plants, many of these ranked as endangered or threatened. The Kaskaskia forests are an especially critical refuge for migrating and breeding birds, most of which cannot survive on the "edges" created by aggressive development.

Recreation is a key economic factor in the watershed with hunting, fishing, camping, and water-based activities taking place throughout the reaches of the river. Maintaining the natural resources that contribute to these economic and social values will provide continued benefits to the community and the citizens of the watershed.

- **Wet prairies, once common within the watershed, have totally disappeared due to field drainage systems.**
- **Only one acre of high-quality savanna and eleven acres of high-quality prairie remains within the watershed.**
- **Less than 700 acres of local wetlands are in high-quality condition, 0.1% of total wetland acreage.**
- **The extent of its forested bottomland makes the Kaskaskia watershed ecologically significant. A forest larger than 500 acres is not just larger than a forest of 200 acres; because of the shelter provided by its interior, it is a different kind of forest too.**



## Southwestern Illinois Lands at Risk

### At Risk - American Bottom and Bluff Areas

Immediately south and east of the meeting of the three great American rivers, the Mississippi, Missouri, and the Illinois, lays the land known as the American Bottom. In pre-settlement time this region served as the home of the Mississippian society, the first group credited with altering the earth to the benefit of their lifestyle. Later this region also was home to the first state capital, Kaskaskia. Settlers were amazed at the fertility of the bottomland soil: *"This soil cannot be surpassed in quality and fertility by any land upon the globe. Eighty and one hundred bushels of corn to the acre are common crops without any labor except that which is necessary for planting."* Richard Mason, 1819.

The fertility of the soil has led to extensive tiling, levees and the leveling of land, which has nearly depleted the original prairie, wetlands, and bottomland forests that once consumed this region. The abundant waterfowl, fish and various plant species that required these features are also greatly diminished from the region.

- **Approximately 35% of the American Bottom ecosystem was once covered by a river, wetland, swamp, lake, or slough. (Source: Public Land Survey).**
- **The 532-acre Fults Hill Prairie Nature Preserve in Monroe County contains the largest complex of undisturbed loess hill prairie in Illinois, and was named a National Landmark in 1986.**
- **While proportionally nearly twice as much presettlement habitat survives in the American Bottom as in Illinois as a whole, the acreage is very small - 1,215 acres, less than two-tenths of one percent of what was once here.**



The bluff areas along the eastern edge of the Mississippi River floodplain are also a major resource to be protected within this region. Efforts are currently underway to protect the scenic values of the bluff areas along the Mississippi River from Alton to Grafton. Additional efforts are attempting to protect the bluff areas in St. Clair County from conversion to residential and commercial developments. These areas offer unique landscapes that have survived for thousands of years and that offer scenic values to the community that need to be protected for future generations.

## Benefits of Protecting Natural Resources

In summary, why should we save farmland, forests, waterways and other natural areas?

- They create important buffers to development.
- They provide and maintain wildlife habitat.
- They maintain the open space and landscape diversity that are essential to our quality of life.
- They reduce flooding, replenish groundwater supplies and improve water quality.
- They cleanse the air.
- They produce biomass for renewable energy sources, reducing our dependence on foreign oil.
- They maintain agriculture, forestry and tourism as important components of a diverse economic base.

It isn't too late to protect some of our region's most important resources. We can **balance** urban expansion with a strong supply of farmlands, forests and riverways. **The key is to provide options for landowners that make it economically feasible to preserve their properties in the face of advancing development.**



### MISSION OF THE LAND CONSERVANCY

To work regionally to protect agricultural, forest, and other natural lands in order to provide for open space, landscape diversity, sustainable agriculture, wildlife habitat, and conservation benefits for present and future generations.



### VISION OF THE LAND CONSERVANCY

To hold conservation easements, purchase lands, accept land donations, promote partnerships, foster innovative land conservation techniques, and provide strategic leadership which contributes to a healthy and sustainable future for communities and the general public.

### Successes in Protecting Local Lands

The Land Conservancy is a qualified conservation organization and the only non-profit land trust working throughout all seven counties of Southwestern Illinois. Let us tell you about some of our earliest success stories in protecting lands in the region.

#### *Sally Brown – O’Fallon*

The Brown family has donated conservation easements on 180 acres just north of O’Fallon, Illinois that will keep the land from being converted to urban uses. Forest, wildlife, and other conservation values will be maintained for perpetuity in an area where the surrounding lands will soon be totally converted to home sites. The Brown’s are committed to protecting the farm, forest, and wildlife values on their land for present and future generations.

#### *Madison County and Illinois Department of Natural Resources*

Madison County and the Illinois Department of Natural Resources are cooperating with The Land Conservancy to protect 39 acres in Madison County. The Land Conservancy will hold the conservation easement on this parcel of land to conserve the natural resources and prevent the use of development of the land for any purposes that would conflict with its significant natural features.

The land will be preserved for open space and provide flood control and wildlife habitat benefits to the community.

“The Land Conservancy has been a very cooperative partner in assisting Madison County with this long-term conservation effort. The Land Conservancy’s involvement will ensure that this land is conserved as open space for flood control and wildlife habitat for generations to come.”

- Mike Fruth,  
*Stormwater Coordinator*



*Sally Brown with husband, Tom Joseph and Queenie*

#### BY DONATING A CONSERVATION EASEMENT, WHAT DO I GET?

“I don’t know what the future holds for me, but I doubt that mine will be considered an exceptional life. Still, I want it to be a life with purpose and one of which I can be proud. When I signed the easement document for the first parcel of land, I knew that I had done the right thing – not just the right thing in the sensible, wise or appropriate sense, but the right thing in a moral sense.”

- Sally Brown,  
*First Conservation Donor*

***Willoughby Heritage Farm and Conservation Reserve***

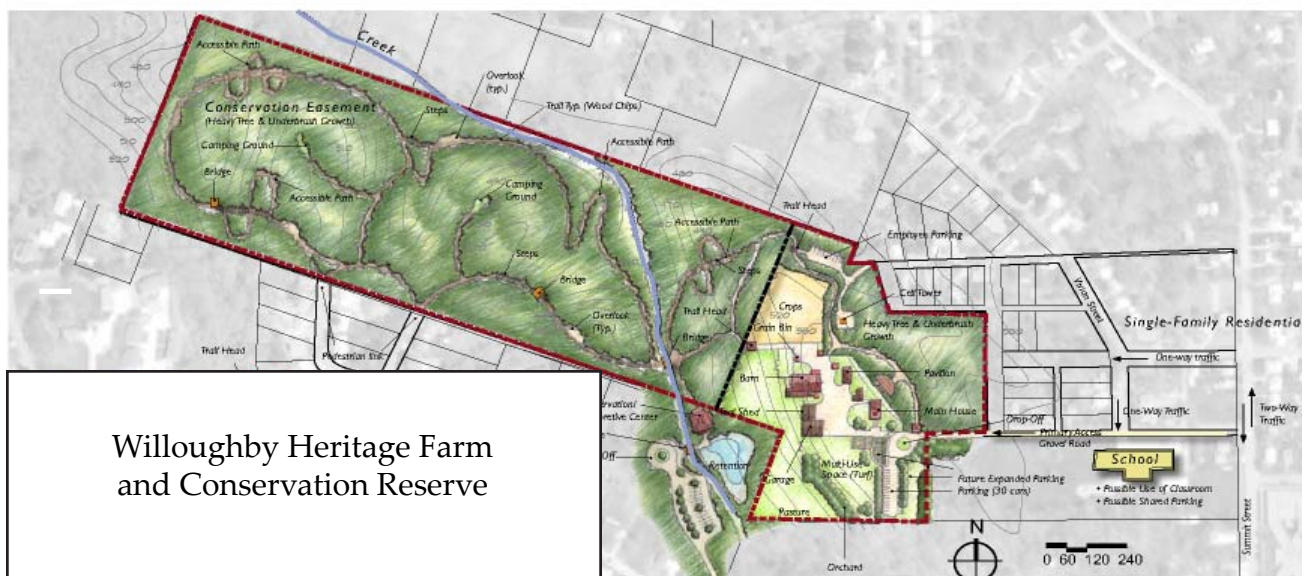
The Collinsville Area Parks and Recreation District entered into a conservation easement with the Southwestern Illinois RC&D in 2003 on 30 acres of wooded land located in Collinsville, IL. The land will be used for conservation purposes as outlined in the master plan for the property. Residential, commercial, and most all other land uses are prohibited by the conservation easement. The Land Conservancy of the Southwestern Illinois RC&D will monitor the property for perpetuity to make sure the conservation values are maintained.

The Willoughby Heritage Farm and Conservation Reserve is a unique site that is heavily secluded from adjacent properties. This secluded nature of the farm results in activity and education. Once developed, the farm will represent the stand-alone subsistence family farm of the 1920's through the 1950's. The conservation easement will ensure that a portion of the property retains the secluded feel of a wildlife preserve several miles from the nearest development.



“The Southwestern Illinois RC&D has been a great partnership for the Park District’s Willoughby Heritage Farm & Conservation Reserve. They continue to work with us on planning steps to improve the condition of flora and fauna within the site. The RC&D is a great resource of information as well as a solid partner for any individual or organization looking for assistance in preserving and protecting much needed open space.”

**- Mark Badasch,  
Park District Director**



## YOUR GIFT TO THE LAND CONSERVANCY

We are a young organization, but we have ambitious dreams. Our immediate goal is to preserve 2,400 acres in our region over our first three years, 2004 through 2006. Thereafter, we want to protect a minimum of 1,200 acres annually. In all cases, we intend to focus on the most threatened parcels whenever possible. This is no 'quick fix,' but rather a commitment to land conservation in perpetuity.

To realize our dream, we seek broad support from corporations, foundations, government agencies and individuals. Your donation will be a major factor in helping us reach landowners interested in protecting land for future generations.

Please consider a tax-deductible gift to The Land Conservancy – become a Charter Donor today!



### The Land Conservancy

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