

## 'A raging crisis': Metro Phoenix is losing its family farms and local food sources

[EMILLY DAVIS](#) | Arizona Republic



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### Take a look at Crooked Sky and Blue Sky farms in the Phoenix area

Local farmers warn that unless drastic action is taken soon, Maricopa County may one day have no remaining farmland. And that could be disastrous.

As David Vose looked out at acres of his farmland that will soon be covered in houses, his daughter Addison tugged on his pant leg.

"Papa, now can I have a tractor ride?" she asked.


Vose is the proud owner of Blue Sky Organic Farms in Litchfield Park, where he's been growing organic produce for 25 years.

His wife, Sara Dolan, raises goats, oversees the farm store and helps keep everything running smoothly. Their two daughters, Scout, 4, and Addison, 2, enjoy spending their days running around outside, playing with the baby goats and getting tractor rides from their dad.

But Fulton Homes has bought the dairy farm they lease their farmland from, and is planning a housing development on the land. Vose and Dolan aren't sure how much longer they'll be able to continue their way of life as a farm family — at least not in metro Phoenix.

Arizona's "Five C's" — copper, cattle, cotton, citrus and climate — made the state's economy what it is today. Yet the three agriculture-related industries

What's happening to Blue Sky Organic Farms has [happened to dozens of family farms in metro Phoenix](#). Over the past two decades, since the population began to skyrocket in the 1990s, farmland has been paved over to make way for houses.

 Sara Dolan of Blue Sky Organic Farms and 4-year-old daughter Scout stand at their farm in Litchfield Park. Local farms in Maricopa County are slowly disappearing and mainly being replaced by housing developments. Blue Sky Organic Farms will be losing 70% of its land in 2021 to Fulton Homes, which owns the land.

Sara Dolan of Blue Sky Organic Farms and 4-year-old daughter Scout stand at their farm in Litchfield Park. Local farms in Maricopa County are slowly ... **Show more** ▼

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In 2000, there were 640 square miles of agricultural land in Maricopa County and 540 miles of residential land. In 2019, agricultural land had decreased to 410 miles while residential land had increased to 750 miles, according to the Maricopa Association of Governments.

Local farmers and national experts warn that unless drastic action is taken soon, Maricopa County may one day have no remaining farmland. And that could be disastrous, they say.

The county's food system would be reliant on outside sources, leaving residents vulnerable in times of crisis. Even in the midst of COVID-19, residents have increasingly turned to local farmers as some food supplies were slowed and families began to cook more at home.

“I don’t know if there’s time to wake people up to the fact that if you don’t support agriculture in your own community, there won’t be any,” Vose said.

Cindy Gentry, president of Sun Produce Cooperative, which coordinates with farmers to provide produce to local individuals, schools and organizations, said Maricopa County residents need to pay attention to what's happening before it's too late.

“We’d just be a place of buildings. I can’t imagine a place that’s only human-built and doesn’t allow room for the fruits of the Earth and the people that work here. Somebody has to care enough to stop and say, 'What would it look like if there were no farms?’”

### 'One of the more shocking studies'

Ken Meter, a food system analyst and president of Crossroads Resource Center, has provided economic and food system assessments for 144 cities in 41 states.

He said he's never conducted an assessment of a place's food system, or lack thereof, that troubled him as much as the assessment he conducted in 2018 for the [Maricopa County Food System Coalition](#).

Funded by the Gila River Indian Community, the assessment provided the first real deep dive into the county's food system.

“This is one of the more shocking studies I’ve done around the country,” Meter said. “It was the most grotesque case where income was rising rapidly, population was increasing, there were all these more mouths to feed and more money to spend on food, and yet nobody thinking about what the future of our food supply was going to look like.”

The assessment included profiles and interviews with 11 of Maricopa County's key farmers, including Blue Sky Organic Farms, Crooked Sky Farms and Pinnacle Farms.

Meter said he was surprised to find that the farmers are among some of the most productive in the country, producing as much as much as \$250,000 to \$300,000 per acre.

"The farmers are more isolated from each other and from the public discourse than anywhere I’ve been. But also they’re among the most productive farmers," Meter said "There’s such a small number of farmers and they’re so distant from the public discussion, that it’s a very scary time."

Meter said one of more shocking findings that came out of the assessment was farmers' perception that city and county leaders seemed to have no issue with

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"Most of the farms I interviewed have either moved or were threatened with moving since I was there two years ago," Meter said. "And that's shocking, I don't know any place that is that unstable."

[Farming in Maricopa County](#) is going away at a more rapid pace than even in the rest of Arizona. The number of farms statewide fell 5% between 2012 and 2017. But in Maricopa County, the decline was 24%, [according to the 2017 Census of Agriculture](#).

Metro Phoenix's growth has boosted the price of land, often making it too expensive for farmers to buy new farmland. And several farmers said state and local officials aren't doing anything to protect existing farmland.

Rosanne Albright, Phoenix's environmental programs coordinator and food systems representative, said the city was a major partner in Meter's food assessment with the Maricopa County Food System Coalition.

She said she and other city staff will be contacting Phoenix farmers soon.

"We will be reaching out in the next two months to farmers located in the city of Phoenix to develop a relationship and understand each individual farm history, production, market, challenges and opportunities," Albright said. "We also intend to create a resource directory that highlights these great agricultural assets in our city."

Agricultural land currently makes up roughly 4.46% of the county, according to the MAG's [Maricopa County land use map](#). But the organization's future land-use map predicts farmland to make up less than 1% of county land. It predicts the existing farmland to be replaced mostly by single-family residences.

MAG Project Manager Scott Wilken said the map is not the best resource for predicting the future of farmland as it's based off of the voter-approved general plans of the cities and towns in the county.

A lot of those plans don't zone much land agricultural because it may be developed in the future and it's easier to develop land if it's already zoned residential, Wilken said.

"I don't know what the answer is. All I know is I feel like I've been shown the door," Vose said. "I've put my heart and soul into something that's not valued (by officials)."

## 'This is my farmland'



Ana Jimenez cleans vegetables while talking to farm owner Frank Martin of Crooked Sky, who may lose his farm to a sewage treatment plant for ...

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Housing developments are not the only things replacing farmland.


Phoenix is one of the fastest-growing cities in the U.S. and as its population increases, so does the need for services.

Frank Martin, or "Farmer Frank" as he's known in the community, grew up in Buckeye and has operated Crooked Sky Farms since 2003. But in the coming years, his farm will most likely become a water sewage plant.

## [Martin a 90-day notice to vacate the property.](#)

“It was kind of weird to me that they could evict me off of land that they don’t own and made no agreement on, just land that they want to own,” Martin said.

The notice caught the public's attention on social media, and Phoenix officials have since said Martin is not required to vacate in 90 days. Although he hasn't received anything in writing, Martin said he's been told he will be able to remain on his farmland for at least two or three more years.

 Farmworkers clean vegetables at Crooked Sky Farms in Phoenix. Farmer Frank Martin of Crooked Sky may lose his farm to a sewage treatment plant for the city in the next few years.

Farmworkers clean vegetables at Crooked Sky Farms in Phoenix. Farmer Frank Martin of Crooked Sky may lose his farm to a sewage treatment plant for ... [Show more](#) ▾

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Not far from Martin, on 27th Avenue, Janna Anderson owns Pinnacle Farms, a seven-acre citrus tree farm. Born and raised in the Valley, she's been leasing 50 acres of farmland in the West Valley since 2009 and worked tirelessly to afford to buy Pinnacle in 2011 and restore it to viable farmland.

Phoenix told Anderson earlier this year that it will need to take out 20-30 feet of the front portion of her property for a sewage drain pipe.

The drain pipe construction, which Anderson was told was supposed to start in August, would take out her navel oranges, grapes and a historic Matkoom date palm tree bought from Iraq in 1910.


Anderson has yet to hear an update from the city on its plan, but she said she will fight it for as long as she can.

"This is my farmland. I worked really hard for it for a long time. And those fruit trees that they're going to take out have been there for many years. They're worth a lot more to me than they are to them," Anderson said.

She said farmers in Maricopa County don't feel valued. She pointed to Loop 303, which was known by farmers as some of the best farmland in the area and

Martin said he's watched thousands of acres of farmland in that area be bought up just in the past few years.

“When you look at how much farmland that’s been farmland for 100 years over there that has disappeared in the last few years, it’s about 3,000 to 4,000 acres, just that I know of in one spot,” Martin said. “So what else is disappearing? How much farmland are we really losing?”

 Janna Anderson, owner of Pinnacle Farms on 27th Avenue, poses in front of the front half of her property that may be taken out by the city for a drain pipe.

Janna Anderson, owner of Pinnacle Farms on 27th Avenue, poses in front of the front half of her property that may be taken out by ...

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EMILLY DAVIS

## 'It's a raging crisis here'


Dolan said if she and Vose wanted to buy the land Blue Sky Organic Farms is on, it would cost them \$130,000 an acre, which they could never dream of affording.

They said moving their family to another state where farmland is reasonably priced may be the only option if they want to continue farming.

“It’s the hushed conversation at the back of the party that nobody wants to talk about, because it’s ugly,” Dolan said. “But it is very much here.”

They can keep their farmland until June 2021, which Vose said is enough time for one more growing season.

After that, the development will be taking over 23 of the farm's 35 acres, about 70%, and they'll be left with roughly eight acres of farmable land. Vose said that won't be anywhere close to enough for them to sustain the farm operations and continue to employ 25 people.

 Blue Sky Organic farmer David Vose with his daughter Addison, 2, at their farm in Litchfield Park. Local farms in Maricopa County are slowly disappearing and mainly being replaced by housing developments. Blue Sky Organic Farms will be losing 70% of its land in 2021 to Fulton Homes, which owns the land.

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There are some people who value what they do, Vose said, like the loyal customers who come to their farm store and farmers market stands regularly.

But, so far, he said, that hasn't been enough to spur efforts to protect existing farmland. And it's no easy task for farmers to find new viable farmland.


Farmers spend years caring for their land, said Adrienne Udarbe, executive director of Pinnacle Prevention, a nonprofit focused on creating a healthy food system in Arizona.

"They nurture that soil for years and years and years to get it to a quality viable place to be able to grow food in a healthy, quality way," she said. "It's not as simple as just up and relocating."

And any farmland needs access to quality water, and transportation options to move their crops.

Dolan said the only the affordable land left wouldn't grow anything. What Blue Sky Organic Farms is on now is "prime farmland," she said.

"We actually right here have good water, good soil, and you can't just go find that anywhere," Dolan said. "We're losing it rapidly. It's a raging crisis here."

 Blue Sky Organic Farms workers harvest strawberries at the farm in Litchfield Park. Local farms in Maricopa County are slowly disappearing and mainly being replaced by housing developments. Blue Sky Organic Farms will be losing 70% of its land in 2021 to Fulton Homes, which owns the land.

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## 'No future for farming in Phoenix'

All of the farmers interviewed by The Arizona Republic for this story said they feel that farmers and agriculture are not valued by local officials in Phoenix or Maricopa County.

Dolan said. "“I would like to see attention brought to the subject, I would like to see it acknowledged —acknowledgment that this is a real problem.”

Anderson, of Pinnacle Farms, said she's terrified about her future.

Especially once her farm loses some of its acreage to the city, she said, relying on only agriculture for income is not going to be enough to support herself.

Anderson's dream is to be able to host "agritourism" events on her farm, like weddings, dog agility training, birthdays and dinner parties that would help her make a profit while teaching people about local agriculture.

She currently hosts a couple of unique camping spaces on the farm through Airbnb and HipCamp, and she said she's gotten a lot of positive feedback from guests over the years. But because of the city's current zoning laws, she'd have to apply to rezone her property to be able to do anything besides agriculture.

“If you want to keep some of the small farms in Arizona, then putting down a designated 'agritourism' (zoning) category would be very helpful, because then we can do things that generate income and tourist activities," Anderson said. "We can educate people about what farms look like and why we need them. I think that’s one of the best things they could possibly do.”

The rezoning application procedure is expensive, complicated and not at all "farmer-friendly," Anderson said. Her application was rejected and she lost thousands of dollars in the process.

"Everything they do is making it more and more difficult for farmers to stay where we are," Anderson said.

Anderson doesn't know how much longer she'll be able to continue farming in Phoenix, the city where she was born and raised.

"There’s really not much of a future for the city farming," Anderson said. "The parcels are too small and the development pressure is too high. There is no future for farming in Phoenix."

## Stepping up during a pandemic

sources.

Stores, which mainly stock produce from out of state and out of the country, struggled to keep shelves stocked. [But Maricopa County farmers rallied to help feed their community.](#)

Blue Sky changed its model completely, Dolan said.

A bulk of its income usually comes from selling a specialty salad mix to a New York client who had to stop buying from them during the pandemic. Dolan said they were able to transition and quickly plant crops people here needed.

Demand was so high that they were operating their farm store six days a week as opposed to the usual four days, and there were long lines of people waiting in their cars each morning.

Dolan said sales of the farm's CSA subscription box went up 280% in the beginning of the pandemic. It was a nice change, she said, because they've always wanted to feed their immediate community but the demand was never there.

Martin, of Crooked Sky Farms, said in the first weeks of the pandemic his CSA subscriptions went up roughly 100 families a week. Anderson of Pinnacle Farms said she also saw an increase in subscriptions and suddenly had dozens of shoppers at her quiet farm stand every day.

Dolan said she hopes the pandemic will change the way people think about their food sources.

"Once you give away your ability to produce your own food, you've given away your security," Dolan said. "If you can't produce your own food, what are you going to do during a pandemic like what we're in the middle of?"

Meter hopes the disruptions caused by this pandemic will illustrate to Phoenix and Maricopa County just how fragile its food system is and prompt them to take action.

not planning for that future of having really healthy food, you're very vulnerable."

## Looking for solutions

Maricopa County's current food system is unhealthy and unable to resiliently serve its residents in the face of a crisis, Meter said. But there is still time to move in that direction.

The first step local leaders could take toward a healthy food system is to give farmland protections, Meter said. He said the current system of developers receiving a tax break by leasing land to farmers and then kicking them off the land a couple years later is destructive to farmers.

There are many cities and states that have instituted land trusts, easements and other agricultural protections to ensure that farmland remains farmland.

One state Meter said has done that exceptionally well is Maine, where [there are dozens of programs and policies to protect farmers and their land](#). Farmers who plan to farm long-term can enroll in the state's farmland property tax program to reduce property taxes on working farmland.

The state also allows land owners to sell development rights in exchange for granting an agricultural conservation easement.

One of the most beneficial programs, Meter said, is [Maine Farmland Trust](#), which helps protect farmland from nonfarm development with agricultural easements and ensures the land is sold at affordable rates to farmers.

Maine Farmland Trust also works directly with hundreds of farm families and incoming farmers to help them access land, keep their land or donate it.

Some cities in Maine [have even created voluntary municipal support programs](#) to reimburse property taxes on farmland and farm buildings in exchange for 20-year conservation easements.

"It's a gesture the city made that said, 'We care about farmers being close to where we live,'" Meter said. "The place to start with that (in Maricopa County)

Vose, of Blue Sky Organic Farms, said his dream is to teach and mentor young farmers and leave his farm to them so it can stay in the community. But he doesn't think that dream can come true in metro Phoenix.


"Eventually, I can no longer invest so much energy and time and money into the community that isn't ready for it," he said.

Udarbe said Pinnacle Prevention would like to see Phoenix buy viable land and make it available to farmers at a low rate.

The city should simplify all the legal processes farmers are required to follow into a "one-stop shop," Udarbe said. She said farmers would be more successful if they had assistance with issues such as acquiring loans, choosing and securing viable farmland and building market share.

"Ultimately, what we want for our farmers is we don't want them in and out of banks talking to lenders and trying to fill out paperwork and do all that work all the time," Udarbe said. "We want them with their hands in the dirt growing the good food. That's what they know how to do."



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