Land Conservation in the United States and China: A Comparison of Policies, Property Rights, and Data Implications for Assessment and Evaluation

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Abstract: At first glance the United States and China appear to have entirely different economies and economic institutions. Upon closer inspection, there are many similarities. Both countries have large and diverse agricultural sectors that compete intensely with non-agricultural sectors for scarce inputs. In both countries, roughly half of farm household income comes from non-farm sources. With regards to land policies, both countries have established policies to retire farmland from production in environmentally sensitive areas. Yet, the distribution of property rights associated with land in these two countries differs significantly, which gives rise to differences in the way these policies work as well as how they can be evaluated.

This paper compares land conservation policies in the U.S. and China. The authors focus on the role of household decision making about land use and conservation practices, the differences and similarities of property rights to land, and the implications for data needed to evaluate and compare the effectiveness of the policies. The paper provides an overview of the major conservation policies in the US and China, such as the Conservation Reserve Program in the United States, and the Sloped-land Conversion Program in China. We examine the differences in the goals and the structure of these programs, mechanisms used to induce participation, monitoring efforts, and outcomes.

Finally the authors analyze how the distribution of property rights can impact the effectiveness of these programs. We discuss the implications for data required to effectively evaluate these programs, focusing primarily on the level of enumeration.
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