WEP Warwick Evans Publishing

International Journal of Social Sciences and Public Administration

ISSN: 3005-9836 (Print), ISSN: 3005-9585 (Online) | Volume 9, Number 1, Year 2025
DOI: https://doi.org/10.62051/ijsspa.v9n1.27
Journal homepage: https://ijsspa.org

Historical Changes and Evolutionary Logic of Prime Farmland Protection Institution Since the Reform and Opening-up

-- Anlysis based on Historical Institutionalism

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ABSTRACT

Prime farmland protection system is an important part of China's arable land protection system, carrying the important mission of arable land protection and food security. Based on the analytical framework of historical institutionalism, this paper reviews the whole course of China's basic farmland protection system since the reform and opening-up, and finds that the basic farmland protection system has experienced four periods: germination and pilot, promotion and establishment, development and perfection, and deepening change. The reform of economic system, the adjustment of governmental institutions and the situation of arable land resources are the deep structure affecting the change of basic farmland protection system. The high exit cost, learning effect, synergy effect, and the formation of adaptive expectations make the basic farmland protection system have a strong path dependence, and the game of multiple interests and the administrative rational choice of the central government become the driving mechanism of the change of the basic farmland protection system. Looking ahead, the basic farmland protection system needs to break through the path dependence and develop towards the direction of high-standard permanent basic farmland.

KEYWORDS

Prime Farmland Protection Insititution; Historicalinstitutionalism; Evolution Logic.

1. INTRODUCTION

"Food is the paramount necessity of the people." Food security remains a critical issue concerning the very foundation of human survival. Half a century ago, the successful development and widespread application of hybrid rice technology resolved the food supply problem for nearly one-fifth of the global population. However, since 2020, China's population has exceeded 1.4 billion, while its cultivated land area has been continuously shrinking.Amid the accelerating evolution of a century-long transformation in the world, the international environment grows increasingly complex, and food security is vital to national destiny and people's livelihoods. Among all matters, food comes first; food security is a matter of utmost importance to the nation. Since the 18th National Congress of the Communist Party of China, General Secretary Xi Jinping has repeatedly stressed the importance of safeguarding “grain fields” and put forward a series of views on food security, including that “food security is of paramount importance” and that “the Chinese people must hold their rice bowls firmly in their own hands.”The effective protection of primary farmland is not only the most fundamental cornerstone for ensuring national food security, but also a prerequisite for advancing agricultural modernization and promoting high-quality economic development.

Current academic research on farmland conservation primarily focuses on two aspects: First, farmland conservation systems and frameworks. For instance, Professor Kong Xiangbin employs a factor-process-function theory of farmland quality to conduct systematic scientific assessments of farmland quality. He advocates strengthening the protection of both farmland quantity and quality, proposing a comprehensive three-dimensional conservation system encompassing quantity, quality, and ecology[1].On the other hand are specific measures for farmland protection. These include mechanisms for land acquisition compensation[2-4], protection funds and grain subsidies[5], and the delineation of basic farmland[6].A review of literature on prime farmland reveals two primary research strands. Empirically, much work focuses on the planning and demarcation of prime farmland protection zones, ranging from early methods based on agricultural land use classification[7] , land evaluation approaches [8] and GIS-integrated cropland quality assessment models [9], to recent demarcation techniques incorporating factors such as cropland contiguity and spatial connectivity patterns within TOPSIS comprehensive evaluation frameworks [10]. Theoretically, significant attention is devoted to examining the necessity of establishing prime farmland protection systems [11], analyzing their developmental trajectories [12-13], and discussing the objectives and entities involved in prime farmland conservation.Overall, existing research on prime farmland has primarily focused on theoretical and policy-oriented empirical studies, while lacking in-depth systematic examination and discussion of the prime farmland protection system itself. In light of this, this paper adopts a historical institutionalism approach to systematically analyze the historical evolution and developmental logic of China's prime farmland protection system since the reform and opening-up period, with the aim of contributing to the further reform and improvement of the system.

2. ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK

Historical institutionalism originally embodied an intention to elucidate how political struggles are both mediated and shaped by their institutional settings [14].The research approach of historical institutionalism can be divided into two main components: first, it involves an in-depth exploration of the core elements within institutions that reveal their deep-seated structures and carry broad significance; second, it utilizes these elements to elucidate specific or complex institutional phenomena. Furthermore, it is essential to establish logical connections between these fundamental institutional elements and particular institutional manifestations, thereby enhancing our understanding of how such universal elements drive the mechanisms and conditions underlying the emergence and evolution of specific institutions. [15].The analytical framework of historical institutionalism encompasses three dimensions: the deep structure at the macro-structural level, path dependence at the meso-institutional level, and the dynamic mechanisms at the micro-actor level [16].The prime farmland protection system is, in essence, an institutional arrangement designed to coordinate land-use economic relations and activities through behavioral norms. By establishing rules and measures, it aims to guide and optimize land-use practices-particularly in protecting prime farmland-to ensure sustainable cultivation. Historical institutionalism, with its distinct strengths in analyzing institutional and policy evolution, provides a necessary and suitable framework for examining this system.

3. HISTORICAL CHANGES

Broadly defined, China's prime farmland protection system encompasses policies, laws, regulations, and technical standards issued by governments and relevant departments at all levels. This institutional framework comprehensively integrates all provisions and mechanisms crucial to prime farmland conservation. Specific components include responsibility systems, land use regulations, and approval mechanisms for farmland use. This study examines the evolution of this system through a review of policy documents issued since the founding of the People's Republic of China.China's prime farmland protection system has evolved in response to land use changes, particularly cultivated land

utilization, progressing through four distinct phases: initial experimentation, nationwide establishment, systematic improvement, and comprehensive reform.

3.1. Intial Experimentation Phase (1978-1988)

Since the Third Plenary Session of the Eleventh Central Committee, China has entered a new phase of prioritizing economic development while advancing various sectors comprehensively. During this period, non-agricultural industries experienced rapid expansion, initiating a transformation of the traditional economic structure.According to data, China's cultivated land area decreased sharply by 5.8 million hectares between 1981 and 1985 [21], reaching a historical low in 1985. This critical situation drew high-level government attention, marking the initial emergence of cultivated land protection awareness.

In 1982, the State Council established the Land Administration Bureau within the Ministry of Agriculture, Animal Husbandry and Fisheries to centralize land resource management. That same year, detailed regulations were issued addressing key land management issues-including state construction land use [Regulations on State Construction Land, 1982], rural housing land [Regulations on Village Housing Land Management, 1982], and land transfers [Notice on Regulating Land Sales and Leases, October 1983]. These measures demonstrated the government’s growing recognition of unauthorized occupation, misuse, and destruction of cultivated land, marking a pivotal awakening to the need for cultivated land protection.During this period, while the government demonstrated initial awareness of both cultivated land and prime farmland protection by issuing relevant regulations and notices, these measures were largely advisory and lacked enforceability. Practical implementation remained limited and experimental, as rapid economic growth continued to be the primary focus at all governmental levels.

3.2. Nationwide Establishment Phase (1989-1998)

Since the 1990s, the burgeoning market economy has triggered a nationwide wave of "development zone fever" and "real estate fever" across various regions.Local governments at various levels relied on urban expansion to drive urbanization, leveraging the economic gains from converting agricultural land to non-agricultural uses to fuel economic growth. This phenomenon led to extensive occupation of cultivated land, resulting in severe structural imbalances in land utilization.

In May 1989, Jingzhou hosted the first national on-site conference on prime farmland protection zones, signifying that the innovative strategies pioneered in Jianli County had garnered high-level recognition from the central government.Between 1988 and 1989, the net reduction of cultivated land decreased from 612,400 hectares to 376,300 hectares-a decline of 38% year-on-year [13]. This data indicated that the demarcation of prime farmland protection zones in Jianli could substantially alleviate pressures leading to cultivated land loss. Consequently, the Notice on Collaboratively Improving Current Village and Town Planning and Demarcating Prime Farmland Protection Zones was formally issued in 1990 [13], marking the nationwide launch of prime farmland demarcation efforts aimed at replicating Jianli County’s successful experience in protecting high-quality cropland across China.The Agricultural Law stipulated that "people's governments at or above the county level shall designate prime farmland protection zones and implement special protection for the cultivated land within them" [17]. This provision served as a significant milestone in establishing the prime farmland protection system. Unlike previous policy directives, it legally affirmed the critical role of prime farmland protection in safeguarding cultivated land and underscored its overall importance. By the end of 1993, the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China and the State Council explicitly called for the establishment of "prime farmland protection zones" [18].The 1998 revision of China's Land Administration Law marked a significant milestone by establishing an independent chapter on "cultivated land protection" and incorporating the prime farmland protection system into legislation for the first time. That same year, the Ninth National People's Congress approved the State

Council's institutional restructuring plan, which integrated four agencies-the State Land Administration, Ministry of Geology and Mineral Resources, State Oceanic Administration, and State Bureau of Surveying and Mapping-into the newly established Ministry of Land and Resources. This reorganization demonstrated heightened national commitment to land governance, creating a dedicated authority with comprehensive jurisdiction to centralize management and coordination of cultivated land protection.

During this phase, the policy evolution of prime farmland protection followed a distinct pathway: initial bottom-up diffusion of successful local practices, which elevated the issue onto the national policy agenda, followed by top-down mandatory implementation. This pattern reflects the government-supply-driven nature of the system, where administrative mandates from the central authority primarily facilitated its nationwide adoption.In summary, this period witnessed the formal establishment of the "prime farmland protection" concept at the policy level, accompanied by a conceptual shift from general "cultivated land protection" to targeted "prime farmland protection" [11]. This transition elevated prime farmland conservation into an independent policy domain, requiring dedicated supporting mechanisms and systematic planning. Furthermore, the institutional status of prime farmland protection was solidified through legislative enactment.

3.3. Systematic Improvement Phase (1999-2012)

Since 1999, China has entered a phase of rapid urbanization and industrialization. The swift economic growth widened the urban-rural divide, driving massive rural-to-urban migration and accelerating urban expansion. Following WTO accession, increased global economic engagement further accelerated non-agricultural development, with economic growth exceeding initial projections. This surge triggered a new wave of "land enclosures," where prime farmland-seen as a low-cost and readily available resource-became a primary target for converting to construction land.The National Land Use Plan (1997-2010) explicitly designated prime farmland protection zones, firmly establishing these areas as an "inviolable red line." This measure formally institutionalized prime farmland protection as a fundamental national policy.In early 2001, the State Council explicitly emphasized the imperative to protect prime farmland and prevent unauthorized conversion of cultivated land to non-agricultural uses. Subsequently, the revised Agricultural Law of December 2002 stipulated that "the state shall establish a cultivated land protection system, providing special legal protection for prime farmland" [19].In 2003, the State Council formally identified land use as a tool for macroeconomic regulation. During the Third Plenary Session of the 16th Central Committee in October, it further emphasized implementing the strictest cultivated land protection system to ensure national food security. In response, the Ministry of Land and Resources introduced the "Five Prohibitions" [20] for prime farmland, reinforcing its status as an inviolable red line.In 2004, the State Council deepened land management reforms by mandating the establishment and improvement of responsibility systems for cultivated land protection and land administration [21]. It delegated the primary responsibility for land resource protection to provincial governments and implemented a vertically managed land oversight system below the provincial level, marking a transition to a partially vertically integrated land governance framework.

During this period, the prime farmland protection system underwent comprehensive refinement and entered the phase of permanent prime farmland conservation. Policy development intensified, addressing multifaceted issues including protection responsibilities, land use controls, compensation mechanisms for expropriated farmland, and land quality management. This represented a significant evolution beyond earlier single-dimensional approaches, affirming the unique protected status of prime farmland. The focus expanded from merely preserving quantity to systematically safeguarding quality.

3.4. Comprehensive Refrom Phase (2013-)

The 2014 Central Document No. 1 explicitly called for implementing the strictest cultivated land protection measures and establishing land-use systems emphasizing conservation and intensification. The 2015 edition further mandated enhancing high-standard farmland construction and improving cultivated land quality protection [22].The 2016 "Notice on Comprehensively Defining Permanent Prime Farmland and Implementing Special Protection" explicitly delineated, for the first time, the national scope of permanent prime farmland at 154.6 million acres. This specification enabled the translation of protection measures from general land-use regulations to precise implementation on delineated plots, providing the technical foundation for enforcing strict conservation policies.The 2022 Central Document No. 1 further specified that cultivated land, permanent prime farmland, and ecological conservation redlines must be demarcated and managed sequentially as three binding control lines, prioritizing permanent prime farmland in spatial planning and protection mechanisms.

During this phase, the prime farmland protection system not only continued to deepen but was also consistently strengthened and refined in practice. Driven by heightened national emphasis on food security and the advancement of sustainable agriculture, the permanent prime farmland protection regime evolved through critical stages-from initial conception and formal establishment to comprehensive systematization. This series of developments and reforms signifies that China's prime farmland protection has entered a new historical phase. Throughout this process, institutional design has become more scientific, protective measures more rigorous and effective, and regulatory mechanisms more comprehensive. Riding the tide of progress in the new era, the prime farmland protection system has not only consolidated past achievements but has also advanced steadily toward establishing a more robust and enduring permanent prime farmland framework. This evolution lays a solid foundation for ensuring national food security, advancing agricultural modernization, and promoting sustainable socioeconomic development in rural areas.

4. EVOLUTIONARY LOGIC

Institutional change lies at the heart of historical institutionalism, which examines the development and transformation of institutions through a dynamic lens. A thorough examination of the historical evolution of China's prime farmland protection system since the reform and opening-up reveals that its trajectory has been shaped by the interplay of deep structure, path dependence, and dynamic mechanisms. Employing this analytical framework, this paper dissects the evolutionary logic of the system from these three dimensions.

4.1. Deep Structure: A Macro-Structural Analysis

Institutional evolution does not occur in isolation; its emergence and development are intrinsically linked to a deeper structural system. This "deep structure of institutions" primarily pertains to the macro-social framework, emphasizing the historical context-encompassing political, economic, cultural, and psychological macro-factors-in which institutional changes take place. These factors collectively shape the formation process and future trajectory of institutions.

First, the reform of the economic system has shaped the evolutionary trajectory of China's prime farmland protection system. The effective implementation of this system relies on specific policy mechanisms, which are integral components of the nation's economic structure. From its inception and development to its refinement, the prime farmland protection system has been intrinsically linked to China's macroeconomic environment and institutional framework.Throughout the developmental journey of the prime farmland protection system, the preliminary phase (1978-1988) was shaped by two key aspects of economic institutional reform. First, the launch of reform and opening-up policies prioritized economic development, leading to gradual economic recovery. This period witnessed the prime farmland protection system beginning to transcend the traditional planned economy framework,

wherein the central government held absolute control over both urban state-owned land and rural collective land. Evolving land use practices, coupled with a shift away from the conventional paradigm of subordinating all interests to national industrialization, brought cultivated land protection into the government's purview. Second, the refinement of the household responsibility system separated land ownership from use rights, accelerating the pace of economic growth.Since 2000, China's increasing integration into the global economy, notably through its WTO accession, necessitated adjustments in its economic structure to align with new global realities. During this period, the prime farmland protection system matured significantly, expanding its scope from merely preserving cultivated land area to a comprehensive concept of prime farmland conservation. This evolution emphasized the integration of economic, social, and ecological benefits within its protective framework.

Second, institutional restructuring within the administrative management system has propelled the development and refinement of the prime farmland protection system. As prime farmland constitutes a critical component of land administration, reforms in governmental organizations reflect shifts in political power structures. These political power realignments have, in turn, accelerated the evolution of the prime farmland protection framework.Prior to the reform and opening-up, China's land management was characterized by fragmented oversight across multiple agencies. The Ministry of Agriculture’s Land Use Bureau managed rural cultivated land, while other ministries like Forestry, Transport, and Railways separately administered land within their respective domains. This decentralized approach prevented cohesive efforts to protect prime farmland. The 1982 establishment of the Land Administration Bureau under the Ministry of Agriculture, Animal Husbandry, and Fisheries marked a pivotal shift toward unified land resource management. This institutional consolidation addressed cross-departmental coordination challenges, creating the necessary conditions for developing a continuous and coherent prime farmland protection system.In 2004, the State Council made a pivotal decision to formally delegate the responsibility for land resource protection to provincial-level governments, marking a significant adjustment in China's land management system. This reform established a more direct and unified vertical management structure below the provincial level. However, this phase did not constitute a fully vertical system but rather initiated a new era of incomplete vertical management.Throughout the evolution of land governance, institutional restructuring has driven the management of prime farmland through distinct phases: from fragmented and sectoral administration, to unified management, to incomplete vertical management, and finally toward integrated governance. It is through this very process that the prime farmland protection system has been systematically developed and refined.

Third, the evolving context of cultivated land protection and corresponding conceptual shifts have continuously influenced the optimization of the prime farmland protection system. Essentially, the prime farmland protection system constitutes an integral component of the broader cultivated land protection framework, with its fundamental purpose being to achieve the overarching goals of cultivated land conservation.Consequently, the evolution of the prime farmland protection system is unequivocally intertwined with the development of the broader cultivated land protection regime. The prevailing status of cultivated land resources directly influences the stringency and regulatory intensity of prime farmland conservation measures.During the initial phase of reform and opening-up, land resources were extensively developed to serve the overarching strategy of economic construction, while awareness of cultivated land protection remained underdeveloped.The sharp decline in cultivated land resources has elevated its protection to a critical imperative, often described as a "red line" and a "lifeline." Consequently, prime farmland has now entered the phase of permanent preservation, accompanied by further refinements and adjustments in its planning, approval procedures, and utilization controls.

4.2. Path Dependence: A Meso-Institutional Analysis

Path dependence refers to the phenomenon whereby an initial institutional choice, once made, creates a self-reinforcing trajectory that becomes increasingly difficult to reverse. Due to strong inertial forces, the institution tends to perpetuate itself, making it challenging for actors to deviate from the established path [23].Historical institutionalism posits that established policies and institutions exert a preemptive effect on new ones, meaning the selection and implementation of policy alternatives are often constrained by preexisting models [24]. This represents a process of incremental evolution, where the formation of such models itself results from long-term historical sedimentation and accumulation.From a meso-institutional analytical perspective, path dependence theory posits that institutions possess self-reinforcing characteristics, which manifest concretely as significant inheritability and stability within the institutional field [25].China maintains relatively stringent protection policies for cultivated land and prime farmland within its land-use governance. However, enforcement intensity has fluctuated in response to economic development pressures, demonstrating characteristics of path dependence. Historical institutionalism attributes the emergence of such path dependence primarily to the mechanism of increasing returns [26], which can be understood through four specific aspects.

High exit costs. Once a country or region has chosen and embarked on a specific development path, the costs required to alter its course or deviate from this established trajectory become exceptionally high [27].Even when alternative institutional options exist, the barriers erected by pre-existing institutional arrangements severely hinder such transitions. Consequently, changes that might initially appear straightforward become exceptionally difficult to achieve in practice.Since the reform and opening-up, China's prime farmland protection system has evolved through phases of experimentation, establishment, and refinement over more than four decades. With continuously accumulating sunk costs and a multitude of supporting regulations, the system has developed into a comprehensive institutional framework. A long-term mechanism encompassing "demarcation, construction, management, compensation, and protection" has been established for permanent prime farmland. Consequently, the institutional evolution demonstrates incremental continuity rather than undergoing disruptive path alterations.

Learning Effect. The learning effect refers to the phenomenon whereby organizations, having emerged to adapt to an established institution, gradually master its rules through continuous engagement. This deepening familiarity enables them to conduct related activities with increasing efficiency [28].This process not only enhances organizational efficiency but also fosters acceptance and legitimacy of the institution itself. Throughout the historical evolution of the prime farmland protection system, land management agencies have undergone continuous restructuring to better address the challenges of cultivated land and prime farmland preservation under varying circumstances.During this process, China has integrated successful international practices to continuously advance its prime farmland protection system. For instance, drawing on the core principles of the U.S. agricultural land protection policy-which involves comprehensive evaluation and classification based on production potential, with prime croplands meeting specific criteria designated as protected zones where non-agricultural use is strictly prohibited [29]-China has established its own land use control system. This includes designating prime farmland, creating prime farmland protection zones, and implementing corresponding regulatory measures.

Coordination effects. Coordination effects refer to the phenomenon within an institutional structure where different institutional arrangements and implementations are interdependent. When a formal institution emerges, it tends to catalyze the establishment of other complementary formal or informal institutions, collectively forming an integrated institutional complex [26].Once this institutional complex begins to transform, its constituent elements interact in a self-reinforcing and coercive manner, continuously propelling the process forward [26]. Throughout this evolution, old beliefs and institutions gradually shift, while new beliefs and institutions-along with the directional trajectory of

future changes-progressively align and become mutually consistent.The protection of prime farmland encompasses multiple dimensions, including responsibility systems, land use regulations within protection zones, and approval mechanisms for land conversion. Through long-term development, these institutions have become mutually embedded, forming a coordinated institutional complex.The prime farmland protection system has established a relatively stable structure of interests, generating synergistic effects among its components. This incentivizes stakeholders to maintain the current institutional framework, which partly explains the absence of major disruptions in China's prime farmland protection regime.

Adaptive expectations. As contracts based on specific institutions gain popularity, they reduce uncertainty regarding the continuity of rules [26]. When an institution demonstrates effective implementation outcomes, relevant stakeholders develop adaptive expectations-they become more likely to believe the institution will continue to yield positive results in the future.Building on this, the state likewise leverages such adaptive expectations by seeking guidance within the existing institutional framework, thereby progressively establishing a complete positive feedback loop.The state's adaptive expectations toward institutions drive it to draw lessons from past institutional frameworks to guide practice, thereby gradually forming and reinforcing a complete positive feedback mechanism. For example, during the consolidation period of the prime farmland protection system from 1998 to 2006, land consolidation efforts added 38.7504 million hectares of cultivated land, with prime farmland accounting for 86.8% of China's total cultivated area [30]. The demonstrated effectiveness of this protection led to the designation of prime farmland as permanent prime farmland in 2008.

4.3. Dynamic Mechanisms: A Micro-Actor Analysis

Dynamic mechanism analysis examines the operational dynamics of specific actors within institutional change from a micro-level perspective. Its fundamental premise is that asymmetrical power distribution among actors drives institutional evolution. The interactions and interest negotiations among stakeholders form the core foundation of this mechanism.A review of the evolution of China's prime farmland protection system reveals repeated interactions and negotiations among the central government, local governments, and farmers, while also reflecting the rational decision-making of the central government in its administrative choices.

The game among multiple stakeholders. In the process of institutional evolution, whether maintaining and operating existing institutional arrangements or introducing new ones, results from interactions and reciprocity among actors pursuing their own interests [31]. Prime farmland protection can, to some extent, be viewed as a form of collective action involving strategic games among multiple stakeholders.The central government prioritizes national food security and overall social welfare, coordinating social, economic, and ecological considerations to progressively strengthen the prime farmland protection system for sustainable development. Local governments, focused on regional growth, face conflicting incentives between economic gains from non-agricultural conversion and the costs of protection, often embodying dual roles as both "preservers" and "violators" of prime farmland.Farmers are the direct agents of prime farmland protection. However, in pursuit of maximizing agricultural profits, they often engage in profit-driven non-grain farming practices.Prior to reform and opening up, the policy framework for protecting basic farmland was centrally coordinated by the central government, which held the upper hand in the power dynamics. The institutional arrangements benefited the central government. After reform and opening up, particularly since the 1990s, local governments have steadily expanded their autonomy, intensifying the power struggle with the central government. This heightened competition has propelled the basic farmland protection system into a phase of development and refinement.

The central government's rationally driven administrative choice.The state's prime farmland protection system represents a rational choice by the central government in balancing economic

development and ecological conservation, demonstrating a typical government-supply-led institutional change throughout its evolution. From a relative power perspective, both local governments and farmers assume passive roles when facing the prime farmland protection measures implemented by the central government, possessing limited autonomous decision-making power.Regarding the responsibility for prime farmland protection during the early reform and opening-up period, the central government served as the primary actor in cultivated land preservation. While awareness of cultivated land protection was awakening at the central level, policy priorities still leaned toward economic development. Consequently, the central government did not systematically advance the prime farmland system. Instead, pilot initiatives emerged from local governments, remaining confined to localized experimentation.Since the 1990s, while the central government has remained the guiding force in prime farmland protection, local governments and farmers have exhibited strategic behaviors in the implementation process. These actions exacerbated land resource scarcity and intensified human-land conflicts, prompting the central government to recognize the value of the Jianli experience and vigorously promote the establishment of a comprehensive prime farmland protection system.The prime farmland protection system has been consistently advanced and refined through top-down initiatives by China's central government. From defining the scope of protection and demarcating conservation zones to conducting large-scale inspection campaigns, each step demonstrates the central government's resolute commitment and strong leadership in safeguarding prime farmland [31].

5. CONCLUSION

Over the past four decades since the launch of reform and opening-up, the evolution of China's prime farmland protection system has been shaped by economic restructuring, governmental reorganization, and cultivated land resource dynamics. This developmental trajectory can be divided into four distinct phases: the preliminary experimentation phase (1978-1988), the nationwide establishment phase (1989-1998), the systematic improvement phase (1999-2012), and the comprehensive reform phase (2013--).The Party and central government have consistently prioritized prime farmland protection. The institutional framework has evolved from conceptualizing prime farmland to establishing a formal protection system, and ultimately designating permanent prime farmland. The focus of conservation efforts has shifted from merely preserving quantitative functional zones to emphasizing quality protection, while expanding from key localities to implementing comprehensive arrangements nationwide.Looking ahead, the prime farmland protection system must transcend existing path dependency through continuous institutional innovation, extending vertically toward high-standard permanent prime farmland.

To enhance the system's effectiveness, future institutional development should focus on the following dimensions.incentivizing multi-stakeholder participation to form a cohesive protection framework. The establishment and preservation of prime farmland often impact the interests of local governments and farming communities to some extent. The behavioral choices of these stakeholders directly influence the utilization and conservation outcomes of prime farmland.By fostering collaborative protection efforts among multiple stakeholders, we can more effectively advance the conservation of prime farmland, thereby safeguarding national food security and promoting sustainable agricultural development.Second, enhancing the coordination of supporting policies to establish a long-term mechanism.Previous prime farmland protection efforts primarily emphasized acreage maintenance and productivity metrics, focusing predominantly on quantitative targets. This approach prioritized the social dimensions of farmland preservation while overlooking its ecological functions. Consequently, future institutional design must integrate ecological considerations into the protection framework, ensuring both the quantity and ecological integrity of prime farmland are systematically safeguarded and enhanced.At the policy level, deeper coordination and integration are essential to move beyond the conventional approach of relying solely on prime farmland protection zoning. By employing diverse policy instruments, a long-term mechanism encompassing protection, construction,

management, and compensation can be established for prime farmland conservation.A multi-level governance approach helps uphold the baseline of high-quality prime farmland, ensuring that croplands with high productivity and strong ecological functions receive prioritized protection and rational utilization. This establishes a trinity supervisory system integrating quantity, quality, and ecology. In terms of quantity, it ensures no reduction in the total area of prime farmland, safeguarding the baseline for national food security. Regarding quality, it enhances both the productivity and ecological functions of prime farmland, achieving sustainable land use. Ecologically, it emphasizes the ecological attributes of prime farmland, protecting its biodiversity and ecological landscape. By strengthening the supervision and protection of prime farmland across these multiple dimensions, the comprehensiveness and effectiveness of conservation efforts are ensured.

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