

“Change” and “Continuity”: The Policy Evolution of Rural Construction Planning Permit System

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Abstract: The rural construction planning permit system has played an important role in regulating rural construction activities. However, issues such as illegal construction, land encroachment, and ecosystem damage remain frequent in practice. Using content analysis and focusing on key policy texts since the reform and opening up, this paper, based on the framework of the discontinuous equilibrium theory, reviews the policy evolution of the rural construction planning permit system. It identifies that under the interaction between the policy landscape and policy field, the system has evolved from simplified management to standardized management, and further to comprehensive spatial control. The administrative and execution mechanism reforms around the concept of “integration of multiple plans” have temporarily alleviated contradictions between planning management, but have failed to fundamentally address the problem of “divided governance” in spatial management systems. The execution issues of the rural construction planning permit system are the result of the complex and systematic interplay between institutional and mechanism factors in spatial governance. The paper proposes future optimization directions, including enhancing the central-local management system, optimizing interdepartmental collaboration mechanisms, establishing a full life-cycle land use control system, and strengthening the political and legal nature of the planning permit system.

Keywords: Rural construction planning permit system; National spatial use control; Policy evolution; Integration of multiple plans; Discontinuous equilibrium theory.

Introduction

Since the establishment of the rural construction planning permit system, it has played a significant role in regulating and controlling rural construction activities. However, issues such as illegal construction, occupation of arable land, and damage to ecosystems continue to occur frequently. China’s long-term exploration of “integration of multiple plans” has led to the organic integration of land use planning, urban and rural planning, and other planning frameworks. The establishment of the national spatial planning system marks a new phase in the advancement of the “multiple plans integration” work, providing an opportunity for the reform of the planning permit system. Institutional reform should not be merely for the sake of change but must summarize the unchanging characteristics within the myriad of changes, identify the underlying institutional causes of problems, and find optimization directions that align with the historical context, the governance philosophy of the party and the state, and the needs of rural public interests. These efforts will also offer valuable experiences for the implementation of “multiple plans integration.”

The achievement of these goals is closely linked to the study of the policy evolution of the planning permit system. Reviewing related literature, research on rural construction planning permit systems in China mainly focuses on administrative licensing reviews, land approval, rural planning management, residential management, and national spatial use control. Policy evolution research has primarily concentrated on the development of administrative approval systems, the development of planning administrative licensing systems, and the development of village and town construction management systems. However, existing studies face several shortcomings: a lack of analysis from a public policy theory perspective, limitations in the selection of policy texts within the field of construction planning management, insufficient depth in policy evolution analysis, and a lack of exploration into the institutional causes of observed phenomena.

The discontinuous equilibrium theory suggests that during policy change, there are long periods of stability interrupted by sudden shifts. Through analyzing the interaction between the policy landscape and policy field, this theory explains the causes of stability and change in the public policy process. After the reform and opening up, significant changes in China's economic system and social contradictions influenced the policy evolution of the planning permit system, exhibiting characteristics of long-term stability and discontinuous shifts. This paper analyzes 140 national-level policy documents from 1978 to 2024 using the discontinuous equilibrium theory framework and text analysis, clarifying the development of the system amidst changes, and exploring the underlying institutional causes of the system's evolution.

1. The Policy Evolution of Rural Construction Planning Permit System

Based on the discontinuous equilibrium theory framework, the policy evolution of the rural construction planning permit system can be divided into four stages:

1. 1978–1992: The embryonic stage of the planning permit system
2. 1993–2007: The preparatory stage for the planning permit system
3. 2008–2017: The establishment stage of the planning permit system
4. 2018–present: The reform stage of the planning permit system

The discontinuities occurred with the promulgation of the “Regulations on the Management of Planning and Construction of Villages and Towns” in 1993, the promulgation of the “Urban and Rural Planning Law of the People’s Republic of China” in 2008, and the State Council institutional reforms in 2018.

1.1 The Embryonic Stage of the Rural Construction Planning Permit System (1978–1992)

1.1.1 The “Dual-track” Economic System and the Policy Landscape of Prioritizing Urban Over Rural

In 1978, the Third Plenary Session of the 11th Central Committee of the Communist Party of

China marked the beginning of the reform and opening up. The goal of “economic construction as the center” shifted the national focus. During the transition from a planned economy to a market economy, the country experienced a “dual-track” period, resulting in significant changes in urban and rural development. On one hand, the household contract responsibility system and market-oriented reforms in agriculture greatly increased rural productivity and income, stimulating enthusiasm for rural housing construction and promoting the exploration of rural construction planning management systems. On the other hand, the role of cities in the national economy was enhanced, and urban spaces became the core carriers for capital accumulation and resource distribution, leading to growing demands for urban construction planning management and the formation of a management system centered on “two certificates” (planning and construction permits).

1.1.2 The Planned Management Under the Leadership of the State Planning Commission and the Policy Field of Divided Land Resource Governance

For a long time, rural resource allocation and project construction were primarily directed by the central government through top-down instructions. The State Planning Commission played a significant role in guiding the project feasibility study process, while the former Ministry of Construction conducted site selection and implementation management. In terms of land management, the State Planning Commission and the State Land Administration Bureau jointly determined land use quotas for distribution from central to local levels, with the Bureau responsible for specific rural land use management. Additionally, departments such as forestry, agriculture, and water resources implemented a single-element division of rural land management, with multiple departments jointly managing rural affairs, thus increasing the complexity of governance.

1.1.3 Land Consolidation for Coordination, Elemental Division of Law-based Land Use Management in Rural Areas

The rapid increase in population and the severe destruction of land resources and ecological balance prompted the country to promote land consolidation efforts. A four-tier land planning and management system was established, covering national, provincial, autonomous region, and municipal levels, with the aim of coordinating the decentralized management of rural land resources. Various land resource management authorities intensified the development of regulatory frameworks, establishing systems for land use change, land management, and construction project reviews, thereby enhancing the level of rule of law in rural land management. Although the rural construction planning management system did not directly involve land resource management, it responded to the goals of land consolidation through the regulation of construction activities, thereby strengthening its connection with land resource management.

1.1.4 Urban Construction as the Priority, Rural Land Use Management for Housing

In order to meet the demand for land during the urbanization process, relevant regulations were introduced to establish the legitimacy of expropriating rural land for urban construction, granting local governments the authority to requisition land. This marked the beginning of large-scale rural land requisition. At the same time, a top-down land use planning and management system was set up, with land use plan indicators being decomposed and issued from national to local levels. The system stipulated that collective rural construction land should not encroach upon national construction land quotas. The passive role of rural areas in the land distribution system did not impede the actual construction process, and a large number of rural housing and town enterprises were built in coastal areas. In response to the growing demand for rural construction management, the government established a land approval system for rural housing, setting standards for various types of construction land. Due to the mismatch between land supply and demand, “illegal construction” became increasingly common, leading to more stringent management challenges.

1.1.5 Gradual Improvement of Urban Management Systems, Simplified Rural Construction Planning Management

To strengthen the management of infrastructure, the government introduced the principles of unified planning and hierarchical management, and stipulated that local urban planning departments would have review authority over construction projects within urban areas. This regulation laid the foundation for what would later become the urban-rural planning permission system. As cities became the political, economic, and cultural centers of the country and regions, the need for improved local urban construction management grew. The National Development and Reform Commission (NDRC) established a feasibility study review system for construction projects, and urban planning authorities introduced the “two permits” system for urban planning. Compared to urban management, rural construction planning management was simpler, mainly focusing on reviewing land use locations and scopes.

1.2 Rural Construction Planning Permission System Preparation Phase (1993–2007)

1.2.1 Rapid Urbanization and the Market Economy, the Policy Landscape of the Dual System of Urban-Rural Division

The establishment of the socialist market economy system and the goals of reform propelled rapid economic growth. After the tax-sharing reform, local governments gradually transformed into more “enterprise-like” entities. Due to the mismatch between financial capacity and administrative authority, local governments faced increasing pressure to balance their budgets. Given the unclear property rights, circulation control, and forced expropriation of rural land, local governments gained significant profits through the price gap between land requisition and commercial land transfers, shifting the focus of development toward land development. Policies such as “Comprehensive Well-off Society,” “New Socialist Rural Construction,” and “Urban-Rural Economic and Social Development Integration” promoted rural development, with the rapid

growth of rural industries and the rise of township enterprises injecting strong momentum into rural economies. However, the development model that relied on urban growth for economic speed had not changed, leading to frequent forced land expropriations in rural areas and a growing urban-rural gap, highlighting the emerging dual system of division.

1.2.2 Multi-departmental Management of Rural Construction Planning, the Policy Landscape of Weakened Single-department Functions

A policy landscape of multi-departmental management of rural construction planning gradually took shape. Various administrative departments institutionalized their functions and powers by establishing administrative approval matters at different stages of project management. For project initiation, the NDRC set up a feasibility study review system; for mid-term land management, land departments established systems for land use pre-examination, land use conversion approval, and land 手续办理; and for construction planning management in the later stages, housing and urban-rural development departments established planning preparation approval, project site opinions, construction permit approval, and craft qualification review systems. Due to internal restructuring, the administrative level of village and town management bodies was lowered, and the original village and town construction department was transformed into a subordinate rural construction office, causing significant changes in the administrative organizational structure from central to local governments. Many local governments no longer set up independent village and town construction management agencies. Although the Ministry of Housing and Urban-Rural Development later established a rural construction guidance committee to address the increasingly complex management situation, the lack of functional division within the “Three Decisions Plan” failed to achieve true internal coordination and external cooperation.

1.2.3 Comprehensive Land Consolidation for Coordination, Elemental Division of Law-based Rural Land Use Management

As land consolidation efforts were carried out, the contradictions between environmental resources and socio-economic development were eased, but problems such as food security, ecological safety, and regional development imbalance became prominent. The country began to shift toward comprehensive administrative approval matters like land use and construction permits to address land management. However, due to the fragmented administrative functions, the establishment of a unified coordination mechanism for land consolidation proceeded slowly. Various departments independently carried out specific land consolidation actions, and by improving laws and policies, they strengthened their roles in managing rural land resources, which objectively created a complex situation requiring coordination between multiple departments for rural construction planning management.

1.2.4 Cultivated Land Protection and Urban-Rural Division of Rural Land Use Management

The disorderly expansion of urban construction land and the encroachment on cultivated land

became increasingly prominent. The country began exploring the establishment of strict land management systems. The concept of “land use control” was introduced for agricultural and non-agricultural land management, and policies such as “reclamation linking” were implemented to protect cultivated land. By designating basic farmland protection areas and defining the scope of village and town construction land, the government effectively controlled the phenomenon of village and town construction projects occupying basic farmland, clearing many illegal rural construction projects. To further expand the effectiveness of land market governance and activate land stock, the government formally established the “Urban-Rural Land Use Increase and Decrease Linkage” system to maintain the balance of total urban and rural construction land. However, the overall control of incremental land use did not change the urban-rural land use division situation, as the fundamental differences in land ownership systems still led to the implementation of separate construction land management systems for cities and rural areas (towns). During this period, the rural construction planning management system became an important policy tool for the national protection of cultivated land resources by strengthening the approval and management of construction land.

1.2.5 The Continuous Improvement of Rural Construction Planning Management under the “One Law, One Regulation” Framework

The national investment, fiscal and tax systems, and land use systems have undergone fundamental changes. The original management system led by the National Planning Commission could no longer meet the needs of the market economy. The promulgation of the “Urban Planning Law” introduced the “Site Selection Opinion” management system under the “Two Certificates” planning permit system, forming a city construction planning management system centered around “One Book, Two Certificates.” During this period, the management demand to improve the rural living environment and promote rural economic and social development became more prominent, while relevant laws and regulations had long been lacking. The enactment of the “Regulations on the Planning and Construction Management of Villages and Towns” and the “Measures for the Planning and Construction Management of Administrative Villages and Towns” changed this situation, establishing the management system for site selection opinions and construction permit applications, emphasizing the importance of planning results as the basis for approving construction projects. Following this, provincial-level administrative departments refined the construction management system, adding construction permits, commencement permits, and other requirements, forming a village and town construction planning management system centered around “One Book and N Certificates.”

1.3 The Establishment Phase of the Rural Construction Planning Permit System (2008–2017)

1.3.1 New-Type Urbanization and Beautiful Countryside Construction: The Policy Framework for Coordinated Urban-Rural Development

China's economy exhibited characteristics of the "new normal," gradually shifting away from an extensive, quantity-driven growth model to an intensive, quality-oriented development approach. During this period, for the first time in history, the total urban population surpassed the rural population, marking the official transition into a city-centered society. Urbanization shifted focus from land development to people-centered new-type urbanization. While fiscal, land, and financial systems had not undergone fundamental changes, the growth-driven policy system and the corporatization of local governments continued to show path dependence. Faced with increasing urban-rural disparities, "coordination" became the core idea and primary approach for addressing urban-rural relations during this period. Centered around the establishment of a new urban-rural relationship of "promoting agriculture through industry" and "mutual benefit between urban and rural areas," the Party and the state increased investments in the "Three Rural Issues" (agriculture, rural areas, and farmers). Strategic goals gradually shifted from "urban-rural integration" to "coordinated urban-rural development," advocating for a dual-drive approach of new-type urbanization and beautiful countryside construction. The income gap between urban and rural residents continued to shrink, and the level of public service equalization improved significantly, but there were still many issues in coordinating urban and rural construction planning management systems.

1.3.2 Fragmentation of Rural Management Functions and the Policy Landscape of Local Planning Committees Coordinating Responses

National government agencies reformed again to establish a unified large-department system, restoring the Village and Town Construction Division in the Ministry of Housing and Urban-Rural Development to manage construction in counties and below. The goal was to centralize urban-rural planning management. However, as other departments had already established self-contained rural management systems, the village and town management functions of the housing and urban-rural development department became greatly fragmented, leading to difficulties in policy implementation and interdepartmental collaboration. Local governments, faced with conflicts between higher-level departments, explored establishing urban planning committees to alleviate top-down management pressures. These "semi-official" planning committees played important roles in consulting, coordinating, deliberating, and decision-making, easing interdepartmental conflicts and advancing local rural management. However, the "Urban and Rural Planning Law" did not clearly stipulate the urban planning committee system, and its legal basis remains controversial.

1.4.4 Rural Construction Planning Management Centered Around Land Use Control

The establishment of the land spatial planning system promoted changes in planning permit systems from the perspectives of planning compilation, implementation basis, and control methods. In terms of planning compilation, the current land spatial planning system integrated the previously diverse rural planning systems and clearly stipulated the practical "multi-plan integration" rural planning at the detailed planning level. This ensured its role as a valid basis for land use control and planning permits. Building upon this, relevant policy documents emphasized

the status of village planning as the statutory basis for issuing rural construction planning permits and prohibited management entities from granting permits based on internal administrative meeting minutes, district plans, implementation plans, or urban design, reinforcing the legal foundation of permit management. A new rural land spatial use control system was introduced, implementing “detailed planning + planning permits” and “constraint indicators + zoning access” for rural areas outside urban development boundaries, improving the flexibility and feasibility of planning permit systems.

During this period, the planning permit approval process, steps, and materials were streamlined: the site selection and land pre-approval procedures were merged, construction land planning permits and land approvals were combined, and approval materials were simplified to reduce the approval process. The approval process for simple village construction projects was optimized, and new approval services were introduced. For rural infrastructure and rural revitalization projects, recommendations were made to strengthen early-stage coordination in land approval and appropriately simplify planning conditions. Therefore, the new land spatial use control system is a comprehensive reform of rural construction planning management, progressing toward an integrated spatial control system.

2. Summarizing and Analyzing the Development Path and Logic of the System from “Change”

2.1 The Evolution of Rural Construction Planning Permit System

2.1.1 Evolution of the Policy Landscape of Rural Construction Planning Permit System

The policy landscape of rural construction planning permits reflects not only a grand narrative but also the collective will of the Party and the state in urban-rural development strategies. It influences the direction of the planning permit system’s evolution through three levels: the economic and social context, urban-rural relations, and construction planning management. In the early stages, when national development was limited, it was difficult to achieve balanced urban-rural development. In the urban-biased urban-rural relationship, cities received more resources and policy focus, while rural areas became resource-exporting regions with limited policy attention, resulting in relatively developed urban management systems and simpler rural management systems. As national development progressed, the issues of urban-rural imbalance and insufficient rural development increasingly became constraints on Chinese-style modernization. The new urban-rural relationship changed the direction of resource allocation and policy focus, driving the improvement of the planning permit system and enhancing its role within the land spatial use control system.

2.1.2 Evolution of the Policy Domain of Rural Construction Planning Permission System

The policy domain of the rural construction planning permission system involves the execution of the system and the implementation of policies by the main actors. By adjusting the collaborative relationships between departments at the same level, redefining the functional responsibilities within departments, and reallocating authority between central and local governments, a differentiated administrative system and execution mechanism have been formed, affecting the outcomes of the planning permission system (Figure 3). The vertical adjustments of authority (“centralization of some powers”) and the horizontal evolution of functions (“integration of some powers”) in the national administrative system essentially represent the redistribution of rural management responsibilities. As a result, some administrative bodies have seen their powers and responsibilities strengthened, while others have been relatively weakened. However, the co-managed policy domain has remained unchanged. The rural area, as a comprehensive regional system with diverse elements, is inherently complex to manage, making it impossible to coordinate all rural management affairs through a single level, single department, or single system. Instead, it requires collaboration among multiple actors. Each round of institutional reform disrupts the old management structure, and new policy domains are formed through intense power struggles. After multiple rounds of negotiation, actors gradually reach a consensus on collaboration rules and system implementation, creating diversified execution models within the complex administrative relationships, which further advances rural construction planning management.

2.2 Logical Summary of the Rural Construction Planning Permission System

The policy landscape depicts the national top-level urban and rural development strategic intentions, which are transmitted through influencing factors and provide the management framework for the formulation of the planning permission system. The policy domain clarifies the administrative structure and execution mechanism of the planning permission system, providing a management foundation for the implementation of policies through the power struggles between different levels and actors. Under the interaction of the policy landscape and the policy domain, the planning permission system has evolved from a simplified system exploration to the establishment of a standardized permission system, and then to the logic of comprehensive spatial control.

Planning Permission System Initial Stage:

The national economic and social reforms greatly unleashed productive factors between urban and rural areas, with development resources continuously concentrating in cities. In the “urban-heavy, rural-light” policy landscape, cities took the lead in institutional exploration, establishing the planning permission system. In contrast, rural management systems were relatively simple, focusing on project site selection and land use indicators as the core of a planned management logic. The top-level “division of powers and co-management” policy domain led to independent management systems between departments. During this period, the enthusiasm for rural housing and collective enterprise construction increased, raising the demand for management. However, due to the lack of clear management systems and the positioning of rural areas in the

lower levels of the land allocation system, local governments gradually found themselves trapped in management difficulties. As the supply-demand relationship became imbalanced, rural construction planning management began to spiral out of control.

Planning Permission System Preparation Stage:

The tax-sharing reform promoted the transformation of local governments into enterprises, with urban construction expanding outward in an uncoordinated manner. Under the “urban-rural separation” policy landscape, two separate urban and rural management systems emerged. Rural areas gradually established institutional management systems, which involved the coordination of rural spatial resources through village and town (land use) planning. The management logic was based on reviewing construction project sites and land use, and supervising the qualifications of construction units and individuals. As rural management responsibilities and tasks became more detailed, the top-level “division of powers and co-management” policy domain continued to solidify, while adjustments to the Ministry of Housing and Urban-Rural Development’s internal management system led to the dismantling of independent village and town construction management institutions from central to local levels. During this period, rural construction remained vigorous, and local governments had a clearer management system than before. However, under the joint influence of the “urban-rural separation” policy landscape and the “departmental co-management and decentralization” policy domain, system implementation did not reach the expected management goals.

Planning Permission System Establishment Stage:

The country shifted to a high-quality, connotative economic development model, with narrowing the urban-rural gap and breaking the urban-rural dual structure becoming key issues. Under the “coordinated urban-rural development” policy landscape, the “Urban and Rural Planning Law” established the rural construction planning permission system, forming a management logic of “planning first, permission next, and construction later.” Specifically, this system strengthens urban and rural planning coordination to allocate rural spatial resources, reviews project sites, scale, land use, form, and development intensity, and ultimately grants administrative permission to determine whether a rural construction activity can proceed. The new system, although established, was imperfect. The executing entities, being newly restored teams, struggled to implement new policies within the top-level departmental division of powers. Furthermore, due to the differences in management goals and responsibilities between central and local governments, policies were selectively implemented at the local level, leading to diversified execution outcomes.

Planning Permission System Reform Stage:

The change in major social contradictions and the proposal of achieving Chinese-style modernization required addressing the imbalance of urban-rural development, reshaping urban-rural relations, and guiding the free flow of resources between urban and rural areas. Under the

“urban-rural integration” policy landscape, leveraging the reform of the national land spatial planning system, significant adjustments were made to the planning permission system. The system now relied on the uniqueness and legality of national land spatial planning as the basis for permission decisions, adopting a “zoning control + indicator control + list control + permission determination” approach to comprehensively manage rural construction projects, including function reviews, intensity control, admission determination, resource allocation, and empowerment. This comprehensive approach, which integrates all types and elements, unified the planning management basis for issuing permissions and diversified the management content and methods. Under the policy domain of top-level spatial planning management function integration, administrative resistance to policy execution has been greatly reduced, but it remains to be seen whether historical issues can be effectively resolved.

3. From “Immutability” to Summarizing and Exploring the Causes of System Problems and Optimization Directions

3.1 Analysis of the Causes of Problems in the Rural Construction Planning Permission System

3.1.1 Summary of Problems

Before the establishment of the planning permit system, rural construction planning was mainly dependent on the review of project site selection and land quotas, making it difficult to effectively manage construction activities. At that time, with low levels of grassroots management and a lack of professional technicians, a series of issues arose, such as the encroachment of farmland for housing construction, lack of design in construction, and concerns over building safety and quality. Subsequently, the management system developed by reviewing projects according to village and town plans and strengthening the review of the construction party’s qualifications helped to address illegal construction and improve construction quality. However, new problems arose, such as unauthorized land grabbing for building houses, lack of supervision during construction, difficulties in enforcing administrative penalties, unlicensed design and construction, and land occupation by village and town enterprises.

After the establishment of the planning permit system, a unified system was established for rural construction planning management. Issues such as illegal construction, encroachment on farmland, and unlicensed construction were somewhat controlled. However, under the influence of multiple factors, new problems emerged, such as building before approval, exceeding permit conditions, unclear permit procedures, long approval times, unclear management bases, and lack of supervision during the process.

Regarding the administrative system and execution mechanism reform of the planning permit system, the government has continuously issued policies and regulations to improve it. China’s

“integration of multiple plans” aims to reform spatial governance, and after many years of exploration, phased “co-governance” in planning and approval management has been achieved, alleviating conflicts in planning management in the short term. However, it has not fundamentally solved the problem of “separate governance” in spatial governance systems. The planning permit system, as an important part of planning implementation, shares common challenges with the “integration of multiple plans” reform and the execution of the planning permit system.

A critical question that needs to be answered is: In the evolution of the planning permit system, why have historical issues not been effectively resolved, and why do new management problems continue to arise despite the continuous integration of various spatial planning management systems? The key to addressing this issue lies in identifying the “unchanging” institutional reasons behind the complex intertwining of policies and change.

3.1.2 Institutional Causes

In the policy evolution of the rural construction planning permit system, there are four major policy elements and seven major policy relationships that remain unchanged (Table 1). Different entities select corresponding tools to achieve policy objectives based on different goals, seeking to implement governance concepts (Figure 4). For the planning permit system, as a policy tool for rural spatial management, different entities expect to use this tool to achieve control goals. The diversification of policy relationships makes the policy execution a complex process of competition. The planning permit system, as the intersection and point of interaction between policy elements and relationships, gradually evolved from a simple rural construction behavior management system to a comprehensive rural spatial control system. However, the conflicts among multiple entities and relationships become concentrated at this point, leading to difficulties in the execution of the planning permit system. This is the fundamental reason why the “integration of multiple plans” has consistently faced difficulties in aligning multiple management logics and governance behaviors in planning implementation over the years.

The management system problem of the planning permit system is a microcosm of the contradiction between the central-local vertical transmission of the “line-block” relationship and the horizontal coordination of administrative departments. For a long time, due to differences in management goals between central functional departments and local governments at all levels, the ongoing power struggle in the centralization and decentralization of authority has remained unchanged. The central government hopes that policies can be transmitted vertically and consistently, while local governments often follow the “take advantage, delay if not beneficial” approach, resulting in the poor implementation of the planning permit system. Furthermore, as independent stakeholders, central functional departments typically institutionalize their powers to strengthen their position and discourse power in rural management, leading to different types of rural spatial planning and independent administrative management systems. This results in conflicts in planning and management systems, unclear grounds for permit issuance, involvement

of multiple departments in approval, and long approval cycles.

The management mechanism problem of the planning permit system is a reflection of the contradiction between the overall coordination and partial decentralization within the national land and natural resources system. The interconnection and tightness of the elements that make up the national land and natural resources system have remained unchanged. However, due to the inherent differences between various natural resource elements, multi-departmental governance and decentralization are justified, forming a series of independent and relatively closed management systems. While planning permits aim to regulate rural construction behavior, in essence, they manage the development of rural collective land. As part of the national land and natural resources system, the granting of planning permits for rural land inevitably involves other types of natural resource management systems. Due to the lack of top-level institutional design, coordinated governance is difficult to achieve, and often, differentiated permit decisions are made for the same application. This is the fundamental reason why comprehensive land remediation work is difficult to implement, while special land remediation actions are easier to carry out.

The management content problem of the planning permit system is a microcosm of the contradiction between land development and conservation. The planning permit system has always played a key role in coordinating the relationship between rural land development and conservation. In the past, the contents of planning permits mainly focused on controlling aspects such as site selection, scale, and appearance, fulfilling the management work of land development and utilization. However, the baseline management of land conservation was neglected, leading to severe damage to ecosystems and arable land resources after some permits were issued.

The management goal problem of the planning permit system reflects the contradiction between central development strategies and local development needs. As a dual policy tool for central and local governance, the planning permit system remains unchanged in its role as both a policy tool for the central government to implement rural spatial strategies and an important institutional tool for local governments to promote rural development. However, due to the broader and more comprehensive central policy strategy, which focuses on nationwide land coordination, the policy goals are more politically, socially, and comprehensively oriented, while local governments, facing both upper-level administrative management pressure and the various needs of local people for production and life, focus more on the normative, economic, and practical aspects. The deviation in policy goals between central and local governments often leads to a mismatch between central expectations and local implementation outcomes. Local governments tend to maximize the overall benefit of policy tool implementation within limited institutional space and behavioral boundaries, leading to the emergence of some planning permit management behaviors that are compliant and reasonable but not necessarily legal.

The management logic issue of the planning permit system is a reflection of the contradictions in

the urban-rural relationship. The complexity and differences in urban and rural management have remained constant. In the past, due to the disparity in urban and rural development and management levels, the differentiated urban-rural construction planning permit system formulated by the state was merely a temporary strategic choice. Rural areas also have prominent construction needs, and their management issues are uniquely complex. A simplified and streamlined planning permit system cannot meet the needs of grassroots management, leading to the difficulty in issuing permits. Additionally, the unbalanced land quota system between urban and rural areas cannot meet the needs of rural residents to improve their material environment and quality of life, giving rise to issues such as difficulty in handling permits and difficulty in building on land. Furthermore, due to a lack of a correct understanding of the inherent differences between urban and rural areas in management logic, some local governments directly apply urban management experiences to guide rural areas, complicating simple issues and adding unnecessary costs to the planning permit process for local construction.

3.2 Directions for Optimizing the Rural Construction Planning Permit System

Optimizing the Central-Local Management System: The central government should adopt selective centralization and partial decentralization, strengthening political and fiscal incentives for local governments to achieve diversified policy goals, ensuring that the planning permit policy tools are coordinated in terms of both objectives and execution. On the one hand, the central government should emphasize “responsibility boundaries” in policy formulation, clearly granting local governments the right to develop and use land, while adhering to the overall strategic development baseline and establishing a hierarchical system for land use control, devolving certain powers to ensure that local governments have discretionary authority within controlled zones that do not violate the baseline. On the other hand, the government performance evaluation system should be reformed to encourage local governments to use planning permit management tools to achieve diversified goals such as economic and social development, food security, and ecological benefits, and to reward innovative officers and regions with political promotion and central fiscal subsidies.

Optimizing Departmental Coordination Mechanisms: Establish a theoretical system for the integration of land space resource elements, respecting the differences in the characteristics of resource elements, and seeking organic coordination and integration. After the establishment of the Ministry of Natural Resources, the management functions of planning, land, and natural resources were unified within a single department, and coordination issues between departments turned into internal coordination issues within a single department. Planning permit management mechanism reforms should seize the opportunity for institutional reform, based on the concept of integrated protection and systematic governance of mountains, rivers, forests, farmland, lakes, and grasslands, to establish a theoretical system for land space resource elements, clarify the internal mechanisms, and define the relationship between individual elements and the overall system, as well as the distinctions and links between elements. On this basis, respect the characteristic differences of each natural resource element and existing management systems, streamline the coordination logic between management systems under

the concept of systematic governance, identify the points of intersection for different systems based on land resource element theory, integrate repetitive permit approval content, clarify the order of each system's management, and simplify the approval process.

Comprehensive Project Management: Establish a closed-loop management system for land use control throughout the entire lifecycle, achieving coordinated management of land space development and protection. The previous pre-approval method for planning permits should be changed, and it should be clarified that the issuance of planning permits is not the endpoint of project management. By introducing the concept of full lifecycle management, strengthen the collaborative links between planning permits and various stages of project management, achieving full-cycle closed-loop management from early project initiation, mid-stage planning permits, to later construction and operation. Additionally, the planning permit system should coordinate and balance land space development and protection, and when preparing detailed plans, protection constraints and development flexibility indicators should be proposed separately. Based on "detailed planning + planning permits" and "constraint indicators + zoning access" management methods, flexible use of positive and negative lists should be employed, establishing a differentiated space access mechanism, and based on the characteristics of different natural resource elements in various functional areas, a hierarchical and classified system for land use change approvals and spatial use permits should be established. Along with vertical government powers, a vertically transmitted mechanism that is gradually refined and decomposed should be formed.

Unified Management Goals: Establish an inclusive management logic, strengthen the political and legal foundations of the planning permit system, and respect urban-rural differences. The management goals of the planning permit system should be unified to align with the party and state governance concepts and meet the people's needs for a better life, thus strengthening the political nature of the planning permit system. First, the planning permit system should play a key role in the management of farmland protection, firmly prohibiting "non-agriculturalization" of farmland. Second, around the concept of ecological civilization, the system should improve the scope and conditions for various non-construction activities' use permits, achieving comprehensive and refined control over all types of land and natural resource elements. Finally, the approval process for planning permits should be improved, guiding reasonable layouts of rural production and construction projects, and providing institutional support for the implementation of rural public services and municipal infrastructure. Moreover, the legal foundation of the planning permit system should be strengthened, expediting the legislative process of laws such as the "Land Space Planning Law" and "Land Space Development and Protection Law," defining legislative models and specific institutional frameworks, ensuring the legal effectiveness of land space planning, and providing legal bases for the management of planning permits.

4. Conclusion

“Rural” defines the geographical scope for the implementation of the system, “Construction planning” clarifies the objects and primary basis for managing the system, and “Permit” indicates the type of administrative matters involved. After the establishment of the national land spatial planning system, the management connotation of the planning permit system has been enriched. From “rural” to “national land space,” it shows that the scope of system management is no longer confined to administrative boundaries, becoming more unified and systematic. From “construction planning” to “use” means that the objects of management are no longer limited to behaviors but focus more on the inherent attributes of the natural resources bearing these behaviors. The shift from “permit” to “control” reflects the diversification of management methods, with the permit being just one tool in a broader system that includes constraint indicators, admission reviews, and other methods to achieve comprehensive management goals.

In summary, the shift from the rural construction planning permit system to national land space use planning is essentially a transition from a single scope, subject, object, method, and result to a more unified, systematic, and diversified system. This involves the unified (mountains, rivers, forests, fields, lakes, and grassland as natural resource components) national land space (development and protection) use (functional zoning, planning layout, admission review, land conversion management, indicator constraints, permit determination) control (process and outcome).

An important conclusion drawn from this article is that the root cause of the issues in the rural construction planning permit system lies not in contradictions between individual management elements, but in the complexity and systemic issues resulting from the interaction of institutional and mechanistic problems in spatial governance. While it is undeniable that a series of policies issued over the years regarding the planning permit system have played a role in promoting system improvements, they have failed to address deeper institutional issues. As a result, comprehensive institutional reforms—from the central to local governments, across departments, and from urban to rural areas—have been difficult to implement. This has led to unresolved historical issues, and new problems have arisen after the introduction of new variables with the issuance of new policies. Therefore, institutional reform should not merely pursue breakthroughs in one area or formal adjustments. Many regions in China, while conducting “multi-plan integration” reforms, have focused too much on the “one” aspect—the preparation of “one blueprint”—and neglected the importance of establishing long-term, coordinated governance systems, ultimately leading to the failure of “one blueprint” to become actionable.

The establishment of the national land spatial planning system is a major initiative by the Party and the state aimed at realizing unified national land use control. Against the backdrop of institutional reforms by the State Council and the integration of spatial planning management, there has been a fundamental change in the spatial governance system’s administrative structure and management mechanisms, offering significant opportunities for optimizing the planning

permit system.

Faced with the new challenges of the new era, the rural construction planning permit system must play a more comprehensive role in national land space use control, providing institutional support for rural revitalization and urban-rural integration development, serving the governance of the Party and the state, and fulfilling the people's aspirations for a better rural life.

Notes

- ① The research text covers various types of policy, including laws, internal Party regulations, administrative regulations, normative documents from the State Council, departmental regulations, and departmental work files, involving multiple administrative departments such as land resources, housing and urban-rural development, agriculture, forestry, and water resources.
- ② The division of discontinuity points is based on whether specific focal events have caused dramatic changes in the original long-term stable policy system, triggering significant adjustments in national administrative structures and regulations.
- ③ In October 1981, the State Council approved the National Construction Committee's notice on launching land consolidation work.
- ④ In August 1987, the National Planning Committee issued the "Regulations on Land Planning Compilation."
- ⑤ In May 1982, the State Council promulgated the "Regulations on National Construction Land Acquisition."
- ⑥ In October 1987, the National Planning Committee and the State Land Administration issued the "Interim Measures for Construction Land Planning Management."
- ⑦ In February 1982, the State Council issued the "Regulations on Village and Town Construction Land Management."
- ⑧ In April 1978, the National Planning Committee, the National Construction Committee, and the Ministry of Finance issued the "Notice on Strengthening Basic Construction Management."
- ⑨ In February 1983, the National Planning Committee issued the "Trial Management Measures for Feasibility Studies of Construction Projects."
- ⑩ In January 1984, the State Council promulgated the "Urban Planning Regulations."
- ⑪ In April 1997, the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China and the State Council issued the "Notice on Strengthening Land Management and Protecting Arable Land."
- ⑫ In January 1990, the Ministry of Construction and the State Land Administration issued the "Notice on Adjusting and Improving Village and Town Planning and Defining Basic Farmland Protection Areas."
- ⑬ In October 2004, the State Council issued the "Decision on Deepening Reform and

Strengthening Land Management.”

- ⑭ In August 2004, the “Land Management Law of the People’s Republic of China (2004 Amendment)” was promulgated.
- ⑮ In February 2016, the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China and the State Council issued the “Opinions on Strengthening Urban Planning and Construction Management.”
- ⑯ In November 2013, General Secretary Xi Jinping’s explanation on the “Decision on Comprehensive Deepening Reform.”
- ⑰ In April 2015, the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China and the State Council issued the “Opinions on Accelerating Ecological Civilization Construction.”
- ⑱ In September 2016, the Ministry of Finance, the Ministry of Natural Resources, and the Ministry of Environmental Protection issued the “Notice on Promoting Ecological Protection and Restoration Work for Mountains, Rivers, Forests, Fields, Lakes, and Grassland.”
- ⑲ In October 2008, the 17th National Congress of the Communist Party of China was held.
- ⑳ In January 2014, the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China and the State Council issued the “Opinions on Comprehensive Deepening Rural Reform.”
- ㉑ In January 2014, the Ministry of Housing and Urban-Rural Development issued the “Opinions on Implementing Village Construction Planning Permits.”
- ㉒ In March 2023, the 14th National People’s Congress passed the decision on the reform plan of the State Council.
- ㉓ In July 2020, the national meeting on addressing rural encroachment on farmland for housing was held; the Ministry of Natural Resources and the Ministry of Agriculture issued the “Notice on Prohibiting Illegal Construction on Farmland.”
- ㉔ In November 2020, the State Council issued the “Opinions on Preventing the Diversion of Farmland from Grain Production.”
- ㉕ In September 2020, the General Office of the State Council issued the “Notice on Resolutely Stopping the ‘Non-Agriculturalization’ of Farmland.”
- ㉖ In June 2023, the Ministry of Natural Resources issued the “Notice on Strictly Observing the Bottom Line in Guaranteeing Elements of Economic Development Land.”
- ㉗ In July 2020, the Ministry of Natural Resources and the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Affairs issued the “Notice on Ensuring the Reasonable Land Use for Rural Residential Housing Construction.”
- ㉘ In December 2019, the Ministry of Natural Resources and the Ministry of Agriculture and

Rural Affairs issued the “Notice on Regulating the Approval and Management of Rural Homestead Land.”

②⑨ In June 2019, the State Council issued the “Guiding Opinions on Promoting Rural Industrial Revitalization.”

③⑩ In December 2019, the Ministry of Natural Resources and the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Affairs issued the “Notice on Issues Regarding the Management of Land for Facility Agriculture.”

③⑪ In January 2021, the Ministry of Natural Resources, the National Development and Reform Commission, and the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Affairs issued the “Notice on Ensuring and Regulating Land for the Integrated Development of Rural Primary, Secondary, and Tertiary Industries.”

③⑫ In November 2023, the General Office of the Ministry of Natural Resources issued the “Policy Guidelines for Rural Revitalization Land Use (2023).”

③⑬ In May 2019, the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China and the State Council issued the “Several Opinions on Establishing a National Land Spatial Planning System and Supervising Its Implementation.”

③⑭ In August 2021, the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China and the State Council issued the “Outline for the Construction of a Rule of Law Government (2021–2025).”

③⑮ In September 2019, the Ministry of Natural Resources issued the “Notice on Advancing the ‘Multi-Plan Integration’ and Reforming ‘Multi-Review and Multi-Certificate Integration’ for Land Use Planning.”

③⑯ In August 2020, the National Development and Reform Commission, the Ministry of Natural Resources, and the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Affairs issued the “Guiding Opinions on Implementing Simplified Approvals for Village Construction Projects.”

③⑰ In August 2022, the Ministry of Natural Resources and seven other departments issued the “Notice on Strengthening the Preliminary Work for Land Use Approvals and Actively Promoting the Construction of Infrastructure Projects.”

③⑱ In November 2023, the Ministry of Natural Resources issued the “Notice on Strengthening and Standardizing the Supervision and Management of Planning Implementation.”

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