
Chapter 5
Farmland Preservation

Introduction

Cumberland County’s fertile soils have long supported a healthy agricultural community. Cumberland County’s working farms provide quality foods and feeds; support the local economy through sales, jobs, and support of farm-based businesses; protect important landscapes such as wetlands, floodplains, and lands that provide food and cover for wildlife; and maintain scenic, cultural, and historic landscapes. The soils that support the agriculture of the County are literally irreplaceable. This chapter will identify and describe: the agricultural resources of the County, various farmland preservation programs, trends in farming locally and challenges facing productive farms. Lastly, the chapter provides strategies for farmland preservation.

Soils of Cumberland County

Cumberland County contains some of the finest agricultural land in the state and the country. The quality of the soil and protection of the best soils is critical for the future of agriculture.

The *Soils Association Map (Map 5-1)* illustrates the eight soil associations found throughout Cumberland County. Descriptions of each soil associations are found in Appendix B. The fertile cropland soil associations of Hagerstown/Duffield, Murrill/Laidig/Buchanan, and Berks/Weikert/Bedington are prominently located in the Cumberland Valley.

The value of the valley soils is further illustrated on the *Soils Map (Map 5-2)* which highlights Prime Soils and Soils of Statewide Importance. Prime Farmland in Cumberland County includes Class I and Class II soils. Prime Farmland encompasses approximately 31 percent of the County or approximately 110,000 acres, according to the Natural Resource Conservation Service (NRCS). Pennsylvania has classified Class III soils as “soils of statewide importance” due to their productive capabilities. Approximately 60 percent of Cumberland County contains productive soils.

USDA Soil Capability Classes
Class I Soils have few limitations that restrict their use.
Class II Soils have moderate limitations that reduce the choice of plants or require moderate conservation practices.
Class III Soils have severe limitations that reduce the choice of plants or require special conservation practices, or both.
Class IV Soils have very severe limitations that reduce the choice of plants or that require very careful management, or both.

Soils for Development

Soils are a prime consideration when evaluating the feasibility of development plans. Slow percolation rates for on-lot sewage disposal, shallow depth of bedrock, and erodibility are limiting factors. If onsite soils cannot be utilized for sewage disposal then public sewer or innovative disposal methods will be required for development to occur. The *Soil Limitations for On-Lot Septic Map (Map 5-3)* illustrates areas of the County that have severe, moderate, and slight limitations. Approximately 71 percent of the County has severe limitation, especially the ridge areas and the northern portion of the valley floor. This will limit development that is dependent upon on-lot disposal but will not affect development proposals that use public disposal systems.

The best soils of the County for farming are also the most compatible soils for development. This results in a conflict that

brings pressures on farmers to sell farmland for development and raises the cost of farmland. The American Farmland Trust, *Farming on the Edge* report notes that this conflict is occurring nationwide with our highest quality farmland threatened by development. "We're losing our best land - most fertile and productive - the fastest. The rate of conversion of prime land was 30 percent faster, proportionally, than the rate for non-prime rural land from 1992-1997. This results in marginal land, which requires more resources like water, being put in production."¹ According to the American Farmland Trust, south central Pennsylvania is part of the second most threatened agricultural landscape in America.

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Agricultural Preservation Programs

There are several statewide programs available to promote the protection of agricultural lands and farming in Cumberland County.

Clean and Green Program

This program offers landowners a tax break for agreeing to keep their properties as farms, woodland, or pastures. The program allows a differential property assessment based on the value of productive farmland, not development potential. Landowners must have at least 10 acres of farmland to participate.

Participation in the Clean and Green Program does not preserve farmland per se, but rather, provides landowner tax benefits through lower assessments and helps keep farming viable. In 2004, Cumberland County had 142,516 acres (2,665 parcels) enrolled in the Clean and Green Program.

Agricultural Security Area Program (ASA)

The ASA program does not directly preserve farmland but promotes farming operations by strengthening the farming community's sense of security in land use and the right to farm. Table 5-1 provides a summary of ASA's by municipality.

This municipal administered, voluntary program provides certain benefits to landowners. Parcels placed within the program receive a variety of benefits including:

- Limited protection from local regulations - Local governments may not unreasonably restrict farming operations and farm structures. Local governments shall provide exceptions for normal agricultural activities within ASA's when defining public nuisances.
- Limited protection from condemnation of land - The power of state and local agencies to exercise eminent domain over productive farmland in an ASA is limited. Any condemnation of farmland within an ASA must be reviewed by the Agricultural Land Condemnation Approval Board and show that the proposed condemnation

¹ *Farming on the Edge - Sprawling Development Threatens America's Best Farmland*, (Wash., D.C.: American Farmland Trust, 1997, 2002).

would not have an unreasonable adverse affect upon the preservation and enhancement of agriculture or municipal resources within the area; or that there is no reasonable or prudent alternative to utilizing the lands within the ASA.

- Eligibility for agricultural conservation easements – Landowners enrolled in ASA’s are eligible to participate in the state agriculture conservation easement program.²

Table 5-1 Agricultural Security Areas by Municipality			
Municipality	Acres	Municipality	Acres
Dickinson	3,735	Silver Spring	1,143
Hopewell	2,859	Southampton	10,443
Lower Frankford	2,571	South Middleton	4,358
Lower Mifflin	5,423	South Newton	962
Middlesex	2,503	Upper Allen	843
Monroe	3,976	Upper Frankford	6,296
North Middleton	2,137	Upper Mifflin	3,263
North Newton	4,085	West Pennsboro	7,877
Penn	6,707	Countywide	69,181

Source: Cumberland County Agricultural Land Preservation Board, 2005.

Pennsylvania Agricultural Conservation Easement Program (ACE)

This County administered State program provides a mechanism for purchasing agricultural conservation easements from willing landowners in ASA’s. Federal, state, county and local funds are used to purchase land development rights. The farmer maintains ownership of the land and can continue to farm it but cannot convert the land to non-farm use.

The agricultural conservation easement is held in perpetuity and provides permanent protection of farmland. Additionally, the landowner benefits from the money generated from the sale of the development rights. The *Farmland Preservation Planning Map (Figure 5-1)* identifies priority areas for future agricultural conservation easements based on concentrating preservation efforts on areas surrounding existing preserved farms. This concept is promoted by the Agricultural Land Preservation Board and achieves the goal of created large clusters of working farmland.

The *Agriculture Lands Map (Map 5-4)* illustrates farmland parcels that have been enrolled in the Agriculture Security Area Program. The Agricultural Lands Map also identifies parcels that have been permanently protected through purchase of agricultural easements.

Farmland Preservation Statewide

- ✓ 54 of the 67 counties in PA participate in the ACE program
- ✓ 308,461 acres of farmland are permanently protected statewide through 2,687 easements
- ✓ PA is #1 in the nation for total acres of farmland preserved

Source: Pennsylvania Department of Agriculture, August 2005.

² *Planning for Agriculture*, Governor’s Center for Local Government Services, (PA, DCED, February 2003), p. 6.

Since the programs inception in 1989, 10,300 acres of Cumberland County farmland have been preserved. Table 5-2 provides a summary of preserved farmland in Cumberland County by municipality.

**Table 5-2
Summary of Preserved Farms by Municipality, 1989-2005**

Municipality	Total Acres Preserved	Total Cost	Average Cost/Per Acre
Dickinson Township	1,159.40	\$ 2,697,485.73	\$ 2,326.63
Middlesex Township	127.98	\$ 338,565.00	\$ 2,645.45
Monroe Township	1,693.10	\$ 5,209,364.30	\$ 3,076.83
North Middleton Township	99.99	\$ 225,879.60	\$ 2,259.02
North Newton Township	379.20	\$ 558,179.00	\$ 1,471.98
Penn Township	1,849.94	\$ 3,245,271.44	\$ 1,754.26
Shippensburg Township & Southampton Township	229.21	\$ 716,328.00	\$ 3,125.20
South Middleton Township	632.77	\$ 1,207,727.00	\$ 1,908.64
South Middleton Township & Dickinson Township	459.90	\$ 1,100,984.00	\$ 2,393.96
Southampton Township	1,306.73	\$ 2,802,193.00	\$ 2,144.43
Upper Allen Township	108.74	\$ 374,590.00	\$ 3,444.82
West Pennsboro Township	1,887.66	\$ 3,399,810.00	\$ 1,801.07
West Pennsboro Township & Penn Township	373.04	\$ 574,582.00	\$ 1,540.27
Total Countywide	10,307.65	\$ 22,450,959.07	\$ 2,178.09

Source: Cumberland County Agricultural Land Preservation Board, 2005.

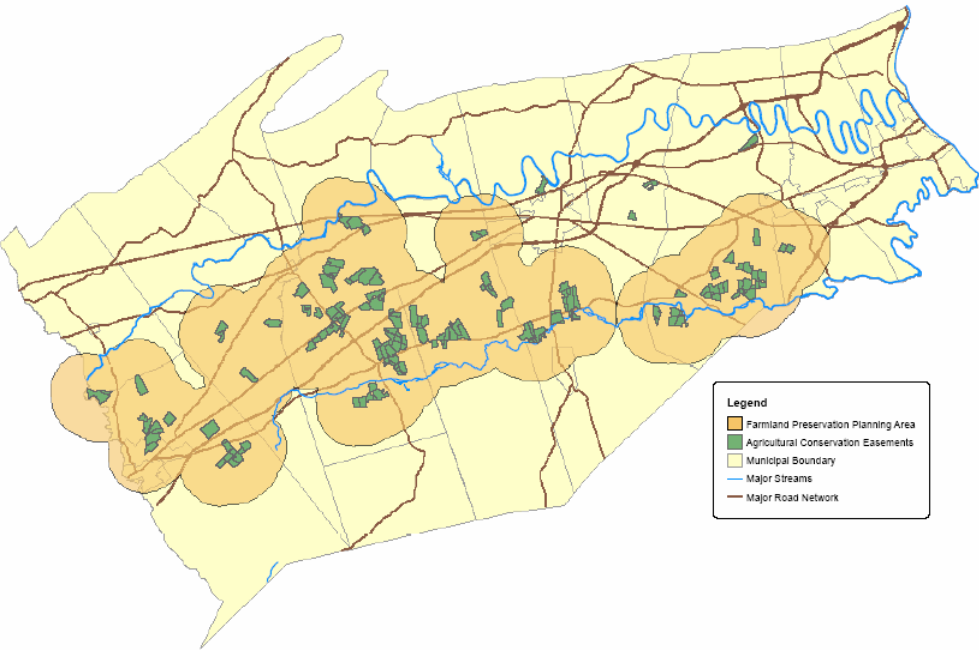


Figure 5-1 Farmland Preservation Planning Map

Agriculture Industry in Cumberland County

Cumberland County's agrarian roots grow from the early settlers who recognized the fertile soils of the Cumberland Valley. The tradition continues today with 40 percent of the County land area devoted to agriculture. In addition to the quality soils, farmers list the County's closeness to markets and convenience of the major highways as some of the main advantages for agriculture in Cumberland County. Even with these advantages, agriculture in Cumberland County is changing. In 2002 there were 1,116 farms occupying 143,159 acres in Cumberland County, based on the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA), National Agricultural Statistics Service. In 1997 the USDA listed 1,274 farms occupying 153,076 acres. This is a loss of 158 farms in five years and 9,917 acres of farmland loss in the same time period.

Cumberland County is part of the national trend of losing farmland. The American Farmland Trusts publication *Farming on the Edge* found that every single minute of every day, America loses two acres of farmland.³ Pennsylvania ranks sixth in the reports findings of the highest amount of prime farmland lost by a state between 1992-1997, with 134,900 acres lost, statewide.⁴

Even with less land dedicated to farmland, the market value of farmland production grew between 1997 and 2002, up one percent overall and the average market value of production per farm rose 15 percent in the same timeframe. The productivity of farmland in Cumberland County is growing.

Agriculture is the leading industry in Pennsylvania and Cumberland County ranks tenth in the state for total agricultural products sold. The 2002 USDA statistics listed the market value of agricultural products sold from Cumberland County at \$89,672,000. The majority (50.7 percent) of sales associated with farming in the County are categorized as small sale farms with sales under \$10,000. The agriculture industry in Cumberland County employs over 1,400 workers and generates nearly \$130,000,000 for the local, regional, and state economy. The County ranks tenth in the state for grain production and ninth in the state for cattle and calves.

Challenges to the Agriculture Industry and Farmers

There are many challenges facing farmers today, from the high cost of land, to expanding government regulations, and devising strategies for retirement. The character of farming and the challenges facing Cumberland County farmers were explored in a survey conducted as part of *The Future of Cumberland County Agriculture (FOCCA): A community-based program to address the needs and future of farming in Cumberland County* (2003). The FOCCA survey was completed by volunteers who visited a randomly selected group of farmers from throughout the County. The interviewees talked to the farmers about their concerns, identified

³ *Farming on the Edge – Sprawling Development Threatens America's Best Farmland*, (Wash., D.C.: American Farmland Trust, 1997, 2002).

⁴ *Ibid.*

their needs, and sought input about what could and should be done to help agriculture prosper in the future in Cumberland County. Volunteers successfully interviewed 73 of the 99 Cumberland County farmers they attempted to contact. Findings of the survey paint a picture of the challenges facing Cumberland County farmers.

Farming is still a family business for most Cumberland County farmers. Survey respondents noted that the farm organization and management are primarily family oriented. The FOCCA survey found that farms of interviewees had been in the family for an average of 59 years. Some farmers expressed concern regarding the lack of family members to take over the farm when they retire and the lack of young farmers. The USDA tracks farm demographics and found that the average age of Pennsylvania farmers is increasing: in 1982 the average farmer was 50 years old and in 2002 the average age was 53.1.⁵

Although Cumberland County is losing farmland the size of the average farm grew between 1997 and 2002 by seven percent, from 120 acres to 128 acres.⁶ Farming in the County is becoming more productive with the average per farm market value of production gaining 15 percent in the five years between 1997 and 2002. The FOCCA survey found that farmers are concerned about the trend to larger-sized farms and 56 percent see the trend as a threat. This can be explained by the high cost of farmland and the loss of farmland to development which make expanding farm acreage a challenge. Even with the challenge of acquiring farmland, 62 percent of the FOCCA survey respondents said that they would purchase more farmland if they had the opportunity.

A majority (77 percent) of Cumberland County farmers cite the rising cost of land as a threat to their farm. The County's population grew by 9.4 percent between 1990 and 2000⁷ and housing development during the same time period generated an additional 11,836 dwelling units.⁸ Plans submitted for approval to the County in this time period totaled 37,676 acres.⁹ This expansion of residential development is encroaching on farmland and driving up the cost of land per acre. In addition to raising the cost of farmland, the growth Cumberland County is experiencing is consuming prime farmland. The prime soils of the valley present few limitations for other types of development. When the FOCCA survey asked farmers what they think the specific disadvantages of agriculture are in Cumberland County, 30 percent cited housing and warehouse development.

Farmers concerns about the profitability of farming were noted in the FOCCA survey. Cumberland County farmers list the need for agricultural product prices to rise to keep people in farming and

⁵ Rich Allen and Ginger Harris, What We Know About the Demographics of U.S. Farm Operator (USDA: National Agricultural Statistics Service, 2005).

⁶ Agriculture Census, (USDA: National Agricultural Statistics Service, 2002)

⁷ U.S. Census, 2000.

⁸ Cumberland County Planning Commission Annual Report, 2000.

⁹ Ibid.

suggested that locally grown farm products should be promoted to local consumers. Improving farm product prices was seen as important to maintain or enhance agriculture's role in Cumberland County.

A traditional economic concern of farmers is the reality that much of their personal assets are tied up in farmland. This presents a problem when farmers look to retirement. Very often it is necessary for a farmer to divest farmland to support his retirement. While, this might be an option, many farmers would rather see their land continue as farmland. Farmers connection to their farmland is often more than economic, they have been stewards of their land for decades and many consider with great care how best to continue stewardship into the future. A strong farmland preservation program will present viable options for farmers to consider as they continue to meet the challenges of agriculture in Cumberland County.

Farmland Preservation Strategies

To achieve Cumberland County's farmland preservation goals, a variety of types of strategies are needed. *Land Partnerships* includes strategies for acquisition and development, planning, promotion and education; together they offer a multi-faceted approach to farmland preservation:

Acquisition & Development

- FP1. Cumberland County should increase funding to the State Farmland Preservation Program to more aggressively reduce the backlog of applicants to the agriculture conservation easement program.
- FP2. Cumberland County should encourage partnerships with local municipalities to purchase joint local government/County agriculture conservation easements.
- FP3. Cumberland County should pursue funding available through the Federal Ranch & Farmland Program and other alternative funding sources for agricultural easements.

Planning

- FP4. Cumberland County should develop or fund the development of model smart growth and agricultural preservation ordinances for distribution at the municipal level.
- FP5. Cumberland County should promote agricultural security areas and assist municipalities with the development and periodic review of agricultural security areas (ASA).

Promotion

- FP6. Cumberland County should encourage best management practices on farms preserved through the State Farmland Preservation Program and should assist landowners develop and implement conservation plans.
- FP7. Cumberland County should implement a voluntary signage program on preserved farms to raise awareness and support for the State Farmland Preservation Program.
- FP8. Cumberland County should support and partner with local stakeholders to promote agriculture through the County, including, but not limited to the following organizations:
- Pennsylvania Department of Agriculture
 - Pennsylvania Farmland Preservation Association
 - Cumberland County Conservation District
 - USDA-NRCS
 - Penn State Cooperative Extension
 - Future of Cumberland County Agriculture
 - Cumberland Area Economic Development Corporation
 - Cumberland County Farm Bureau

Education

- FP9. Cumberland County should increase the public awareness of the benefits of farmland preservation for the individual farmers, the agriculture industry and the community through educational seminars, workshops, printed materials and website.
- FP10. Cumberland County should educate municipal officials and landowners about the benefits of the Clean and Green program, Agricultural Security Areas, Agricultural Conservation Easements, agricultural preservation zoning and smart growth planning.