



Executive Summary

The Census of Agriculture data show a loss of 10,000 acres of farmland and an overall decline in agriculture in Prince George's County between 1992 and 2002. If the loss of farmland continues at this rate, no farmland will be left by 2050. The most striking finding from the census data is the clear demonstration of development pressure on farmland. The average market value of farmland and buildings increased 41.2 percent between 1992 and 2002, while the average market value of agricultural products sold decreased 47.2 percent during the same period.

Comparison of percent of land in farms in Prince George's County and five adjoining Maryland counties shows that Prince George's County lags behind. While counties with successful agricultural preservation programs have over 20 percent of their land in farms, farmland covers 14.6 percent of Prince George's County. These data suggest that if Prince George's County adopts an agricultural preservation program, it is quite possible to save a significant amount of farmland before it is all lost to development.

According to the 2002 Maryland Equine Census, Prince George's County is in fourth place in the state in terms of both number and value of equine inventory. The horse industry is certainly becoming an important part of agriculture in Prince George's County.

Interviews with local farmers and experts offer insight into why traditional farming is declining in Prince George's County. The average age of farmers in the county is over 60. The cost of farming is increasing. Certain agricultural support services are no longer available in the county. Farmers do not have health, retirement, or disability benefits. Some farmers see their farmland as a source for retirement income. For the farmer, the key is to get compensated for the value of the land. Some farmers consider the tobacco buyout program as the urbanization act for Maryland. There is virtually no networking among farmers. Vegetable growers are not protected by the federal government's price support programs.

Given the alarming potential farmland loss, it may be prudent for the county to establish strategies to protect this disappearing resource. Following are many of the reasons that exist for protecting farmland in Prince George's County:



Local farms provide fresh food to the community.



Farmland provides substantial environmental benefits.



Farming contributes to the county's economic base.



Farming is an integral part of the county's heritage.



Preserving farmland retains the rural character.



Farmland maintains scenic, cultural and historic landscapes that often attract and support the tourist industry.



Farmland can be used for outdoor recreational purposes.



Farms provide educational opportunities.



Preserving farmland contributes to historic preservation.

To help preserve farmland, policies and plans have been adopted both at state and county levels. One of the principles of Maryland's Smart Growth initiative is to "preserve open space, farmland, natural beauty, and critical environmental areas." The vision for the Rural Tier in the 2002 Prince George's County Approved General Plan is "protection of large amounts of land for woodland, wildlife habitat, recreation and agricultural pursuits, and preservation of the rural character and vistas that now exist." Both Subregion V and Subregion VI Study Area master plans have provisions about maintaining farmland, woodland, and the rural character. The Subregion VI Study Area master plan introduced the Rural Conservation Subdivision concept to allow preservation of permanent open space, without lowering land values or affecting landowners' equity. Legislation has been drafted and scheduled for introduction in January 2006 to implement this concept.

Maryland counties adjoining Prince George's County have local farmland preservation programs and participate in various state programs. Prince George's County lags behind its neighbors in preservation programs and has the least amount of preserved private farmland among all Maryland counties. In 2004, for the first time a county farm participated in the 27-year-old Maryland Agricultural Land Preservation Foundation (MALPF) program, and an easement was established on 122.74 acres.

Sustaining a strong agricultural economy is as important to the viability of farms as preserving farmland. Preserving farmland is imperative to the preservation of agriculture; however, if no one farms the land agriculture may still disappear. When farming is profitable, farmers are more likely to keep their farms undeveloped. Switching from conventional enterprises to high-value cash crops and employing creative marketing strategies can improve farm profitability.

Opportunities for diversifying include alternative crops, organic farming, horse industry, value-added agriculture, agritourism, and aquaculture. Direct marketing is the key to successful, profitable farming. There are several direct marketing strategies, including Community-Supported Agriculture (CSA), farmers' markets, pick-your-own operations, rent-a-tree operations, farm or roadside stands, cooperative marketing, sales to restaurants and specialty food stores, and internet marketing.

Prince George's County's farmland is located in the rapidly growing Washington, D.C., metropolitan area. Despite the county growth management and farmland protection efforts, fragmented suburbanization is becoming inevitable even in the Rural Tier. Agriculture in Prince George's County is therefore regarded as farming at the urban edge. The coexistence of urban and rural land uses and the interaction of farming and nonfarming communities have both challenges and benefits for farmers. The high cost of land and property taxes, conflicts between farmers and new neighbors, declining agricultural support businesses, moving farm equipment on rural roads, trespassing, vandalism, theft, and urban smog create problems for the farmer. On the other hand there are several benefits of farming at the urban edge, including demand for locally grown vegetables and fruits as well as high-value ethnic specialty crops; increased direct marketing, agritourism, and value-added agriculture opportunities; larger pool of farm labor; off-farm employment opportunities for farmers and part-time farming opportunities for urbanites; recreational and educational opportunities for residents; and social interaction between farming and nonfarming communities leading to a better understanding and appreciation of agriculture.

To protect farmland or agriculture will require a holistic approach and a combination of many strategies that may transform agriculture. Recommendations to transform agriculture into a viable industry in the county include promoting agriculture as an economic development tool, educating and organizing farmers, marketing, promoting agritourism, developing farm labor, agriculture-friendly regulations (such as establishing an agriculture zone or changing Health Department regulations to allow value-added production), and farmland preservation.



Overview

Farmland in Prince George's County is dwindling at a rapid pace with approximately 10,000 acres lost to development in the last decade. Prince George's County must take proactive strategies or otherwise risk permanent loss of its 45,000 acres of farmland.

Located in the Washington, D.C., Metropolitan Area, one of the fastest growing regions in the country, Prince George's County has experienced extreme development pressure from the rising demand for new housing accessible to the nation's capital and its rapidly growing office market. Although several state and county policies exist to preserve farmland, to date Prince George's County does not have a local farmland preservation program nor does it effectively participate in any of the state programs. Prince George's County has the least amount of preserved farmland among Maryland counties.

In an urbanizing environment, agriculture cannot remain in its historical status, even with agricultural land preservation. The only way to economically save agriculture is to make it profitable. Historically-significant tobacco farming is no longer viable in the county. Most tobacco farmers took advantage of the state's tobacco buyout program and now must produce alternative crops. These factors, combined with changes in regional demographics and eating habits, create new opportunities in agriculture.

Although traditional farming has substantially decreased in the county, there is a tremendous opportunity for successful metropolitan farming. Smaller farms, alternative crops, and new marketing techniques paint the new face of agriculture. Diversification of agriculture in favor of high-value enterprises is considered as one way of coping with emerging challenges. Farms that are profitable are the ones that diversify. There are various opportunities for diversification and marketing alternatives for potentially successful farming in Prince George's County.

The county's farmland is located at the urban edge, which requires special attention to protect farming. The coexistence of urban and rural land uses and the interaction of farming and nonfarming communities have both negative and positive consequences for agriculture. Although adapting to this environment is very challenging, proximity to urban areas may present certain benefits.

Although farmland is dwindling, there is still a significant amount of farmland that can be preserved in the county. There are also golden opportunities to make agriculture a profitable industry that would contribute to the county's economy. Farmland can be protected through land use policies and programs such as Transfer of Development Rights, Rural Conservation Subdivision, conservation easements and promotion of agriculture as an industry. This may require incentives to transform agriculture into a viable economic activity.

Myths and Facts About Agriculture in Prince George's County

Myth 1: Tobacco farming is gone; therefore, agriculture is dying.

Fact: Tobacco farming is almost gone, but agriculture is alive and changing. Tobacco farms used to dominate the rural landscape, and tobacco was the primary crop in the county. Starting in the early 1980s, the number of tobacco farms and tobacco production significantly decreased. After 2000, many tobacco growers participated in Maryland's voluntary tobacco buyout program. Only a few farmers still grow tobacco. However, this does not mean agriculture is dying. Agriculture has been undergoing a transformation from traditional to metropolitan operations. Metropolitan agriculture is characterized by smaller farms, more production per acre, specialization in high-value crops, a diverse product-mix oriented toward local markets, and greater supplemental nonfarm employment.¹ The tobacco buyout program may have expedited this transformation by enticing farmers to diversify and grow alternative crops.

Myth 2: Agriculture is not compatible with suburban development and growth.

Fact: Agriculture can adapt to development, but does so by changing the products and services offered.² Suburban growth is encroaching on farmland, but low-density, fragmented development patterns allow agriculture to continue. In the United States, 33 percent of all farms and 16 percent of cropland are located in metropolitan areas, and they produce a third of the value of the country's agricultural output. However, to adapt to rising land values and increasing contacts with new residents, farmers may have to change their operations to emphasize higher value products, more intensive production, enterprises that fit better in an urbanizing environment, and a more urban marketing orientation.³ Some farmers have already experienced this adaptation, and many new farmers are directly going into metropolitan farming. Local residents' increasing demand for locally grown fresh produce and their appreciation of farming and farmland are also critical elements for the increasing success of metropolitan farming.

¹ Ralph E. Heimlich, "Metropolitan Agriculture: Farming in the City's Shadow," *Journal of the American Planning Association*, Autumn 1989, pp. 457-466.

² Ralph E. Heimlich and William D. Anderson, *Development at the Urban Fringe: Impacts in Agriculture and Rural Land*. Economic Research Service, US Department of Agriculture, Agricultural Economic Report 803, 2001.

³ Ibid.

Myth 3: Nursery and greenhouse horticulture is not farming.

Fact: Nursery and greenhouse horticulture is a form of metropolitan farming and the fastest growing agriculturally based industry. Although nurseries and greenhouses may not provide the visual effect of traditional farmland, they are essential elements of modern agriculture, cultivating fruits, vegetables, flowers, and ornamental plants. The demand for horticulture enterprises is expanding as new development occurs and more affluent consumers move into the county. Nursery and greenhouse products are high-value crops that have a high cash return per acre.

Myth 4: Horse farms are not considered agriculture.

Fact: Horse farms are viable agricultural businesses. The horse industry is becoming an important part of agriculture in the county. It is a nontraditional type of agriculture that increasingly contributes to the county's economy. Horse farms help preserve the open space and support other related agricultural businesses.

Myth 5: Farmers cannot make a living solely from farming.

Fact: Although it is true that most farmers rely on off-farm income, an increasing number of metropolitan farmers across the country make a living exclusively from farming. The secret behind this trend is to treat farming as a small business. Farmers who develop business skills and market directly to consumers are more likely to be successful in having profitable farm operations. By diversifying, growing high-value organic or specialty crops, and/or engaging in value-added agriculture, farmers increase net farm profits. Farming in proximity to the nation's capital, where there is a significant demand for locally grown fresh produce and specialty crops, is a big advantage for county farmers to develop profitable operations.

Myth 6: Farms less than 50 acres cannot be lucrative.

Fact: This statement may only be true for traditional farming and growing conventional crops. Even a five-acre metropolitan farm where specialty crops are produced can be lucrative. There are several examples of very small, highly successful farms in the county. The future of agriculture is in intensive farming. Growing specialty herbs on one acre and marketing them directly to high-end restaurants can provide more income than growing conventional soybeans on 100 acres.

Myth 7: Large-lot zoning protects agriculture and preserves rural character.

Fact: Large-lot zoning consumes rural land by carving parcels into residential lots and spreading development over large areas.⁴ It does not save land for farming, nor preserve the rural character. It only fuels the pace of land consumption through

⁴ New Hampshire Office of State Planning, *Preserving Rural Character: The Agriculture Connection*. Revised Technical Bulletin 8, Winter 2000.

the creation of large-lot suburban developments. Two more effective approaches include rural conservation subdivision and transferable development rights. These programs have proven highly effective in (1) preserving farmland and rural character, (2) protecting woodlands, environmentally sensitive areas, and wildlife, and (3) providing significant benefits to farmers, developers, and the general public.