

CHAPTER 14

AGRICULTURAL RESOURCES

Introduction

Agricultural resources within the study area of St. Lawrence Borough and Exeter and Amity Townships are shown on the Agricultural Security Areas, Conservation Easements, Clean and Green Lands Map.

Agricultural Resources in The Region

Prime Agricultural Soils

On the Agricultural Security Areas, Conservation Easements, Clean and Green Lands Map, areas containing prime agricultural soils, shown in the dotted pattern, cover most of the Region. Prime Agricultural Soils are soils in Capability Classes 1, 2 or 3 as identified by the United States Department of Agriculture Natural Resources Conservation Service. Prime agricultural land is often easily, developable land, and without protection, prime agricultural soils in the Townships are subject to development.

Agricultural Security Areas

Properties within the Region which are included within the Agricultural Security Areas are shown as yellow hatching on the map. This is the first step to getting lands preserved through the conservation easement program administered by Berks County. Agricultural Security Areas are properties, which owners voluntarily enroll in an agricultural security program created by a municipality. The enrollment in an Agricultural Security Area typically demonstrates a commitment to keeping a property in agricultural use and affords some protection for agricultural properties, but does not prevent development of the Agricultural Security Areas. Property owners may leave the program and develop their land. Some protection is afforded to properties in Agricultural Security Areas. The Agricultural Area Security Act prohibits local government units from enacting nuisance regulations; addresses the use of eminent domain by government units; requires inclusion in an Agricultural Security Area for easement purchase; and provides for all agricultural conservation easement to be perpetual. Hazardous waste sites may not be located in any municipality that has an established Agricultural Security Area.

Conservation Easements

Agricultural Easements are displayed on this map in blue stripes (hatching pattern). These easements are purchased through State and County funding sources. This program

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has very specific guidelines, which apply to each parcel under consideration. One stipulation is that the parcel(s) have to be located within an established Agricultural Security Area. Once the County accepts a parcel, and a purchase price of the development rights is agreed upon, the development rights are sold. The land(s) can remain cultivated for profit and can be sold for agricultural purposes, and it is guaranteed that the land will be preserved as farmland. Both Townships have land that cannot be developed because the development rights have been sold through this program.

Clean and Green Lands

Clean and Green Lands are shown in green hatching. The Clean and Green program provides a tax break to farmers who enroll in this program by taxing land at its current use value rather than market value. Once a farmer enrolls, there is a certain amount of acceptable (per program regulations) land development or subdivision activity that can occur on the property. The program does allow minor subdivisions over a period of time, however; if any activity over the program's allowable acreage is disturbed, back taxes have to be paid for all the years enrolled in the program. This may encourage farmers to keep farming on their land(s) by providing a tax incentive to continue to do so, but does not prevent developers to come in and offer to buy up irreplaceable prime farmland for residential, commercial and/or industrial land developments/subdivisions. This is a voluntary program, and 10 acres is the minimum amount of contiguous acres allowed to receive the benefits of this program.

Farmed Areas

The northern and central portions of the region contain areas that are still actively farmed.

Questionnaire Responses

Thirty-four (34) out of 37 responses to the St. Lawrence, Exeter and Amity Region Planning Questionnaire strongly agreed that farmland should stay in agricultural use within the Townships. Two (2) disagreed and one (1) had no opinion. When the questionnaire asked why respondents felt agricultural land should be preserved for farming, ten (10) responded that it provides open space, seven (7) responded that it is part of the region's history and should be preserved for future generations, two (2) stated it supports the rural character in the area. Written-in responses were as follows: So we don't have to import food; need agricultural land for conservation purposes; when a farm is developed it's gone, Townships should limit development where not practical on agricultural land; and preserve agricultural industry as an important part of the economy.

Goal and Objectives for Farmland Preservation for the Region

A goal of this plan is to preserve farmland for future generations as generations in the Region have done for over two hundred years. Programs should be encouraged and continued so that preservation of farming, and not just the preservation of farmland, occurs in order to also preserve the quality of life and rural character deemed so valuable by residents in this area. Continuation of farming can help to slow upward pressure on taxes. Programs should preserve the best farmland and support efforts of farmers to see that these lands can be gainfully farmed and maintained. Agricultural lands can continue to be productive and benefit the area as a component of its economy and culture.

In the statement of Goals and Objectives in this Plan, the goal for the St. Lawrence, Exeter and Amity Region concerning agricultural resources is to preserve and encourage continuation of agricultural uses in the Region.

The objectives to reach this goal determined through the joint comprehensive planning effort are as follows:

- Promote the preservation of agricultural areas within the Townships through conservation development, agricultural security areas, purchase and donation of development rights, tax provisions and conservation easements.
- Continue and consider opportunities for expansion of effective agricultural zoning in the Townships.
- Assure policies regarding public sewer and water do not encourage development pressure on designated agricultural areas.
- Minimize impacts on agricultural uses around the perimeter of agricultural areas.

Importance of Agricultural Resources in the Area

Most Townships face increasing tax burdens, particularly school taxes. Land use policies within Townships can affect the taxes of Township residents because these policies influence land use patterns, the number of people moving into the Township, the number of school children, and thus, school taxes.

In the study *Fiscal Impacts of Different Land Uses*, prepared by the Penn State College of Agricultural Sciences and the Cooperative Extension, it was found that residential development in general does not pay for itself. Residential development increases costs more than it increases tax revenue, and other land uses must help subsidize school expenses. Current residents may end up paying higher taxes to cover the costs associated with new residents moving into the Township. Farmland and open land provide more in

tax revenue than they required back in expenditures, and can help keep residents' taxes low, even if the Clean and Green program reduces the real estate tax paid by farmers.

Another report, which looked at the relationship of land use and cost to residents is *The Cost of Sprawl in Pennsylvania* prepared for 10,000 Friends of Pennsylvania. Sprawl is the pattern of low density, scattered development requiring travel by motor vehicle, typically consuming agricultural land and segregating residential uses from other types of land use. Townships in the Region have experienced sprawl and could continue to do so in the future without appropriate land use policies.

The costs, which were found to result from the sprawl, are increases in costs of roads, schools, utilities, and transportation, increases in air pollution and water pollution, and consumption of agricultural lands, natural areas and open space. Sprawl affects the quality of life in rural areas and results in direct costs such as higher school taxes.

As additional residential development occurs, the loss of farmland diminishes a major component of the economy of Berks County. When agricultural operations are continued, they help maintain local agricultural supplies, make it easier for remaining farmers to continue to farm, maintain a cultural heritage and lifestyle of the region, and help maintain rural character and the beauty of the landscape.

Agricultural Zoning in the Municipalities

Successful effective Agricultural Zoning is now in place in Exeter Township in the north-central portion of the Township. The Agricultural zone constitutes a sizable zone in Exeter Township. Effective agricultural zoning allows agricultural uses and those uses compatible with farming, strongly limits dwellings and discourages subdivision of farms into parcels smaller than can typically be farmed.

Effective Agricultural zoning has been adopted in other municipalities in Berks County, including adjoining land in Oley Township. Amity Township does not have effective agricultural zoning.

One of the issues facing Amity Township is whether some of the land in the Township should be designated Agricultural Preservation in order to provide for coordinated land use along municipal boundaries, support the agricultural preservation activities in other Townships, encourage the viability of agriculture and support farm related businesses. This does not mean that Amity Township would have to institute effective agricultural preservation zoning. It could support agriculture through a number of administrative means. At some time in the future the Township could decide if it is appropriate to enact effective agricultural zoning when and where there is support for it.

Agricultural preservation activities can keep large areas relatively free of non-farm development, lessening conflicts with farming operations, which result from increased traffic, litter, complaints and damage to crops. They can also assure a supply of agricultural land for rental by farmers and protects the investment that is made in purchase of agricultural easements. Agricultural preservation protects natural systems, helps replenish groundwater and maintain stream flow, and conserves prime agricultural soils that are a resource that once lost, cannot be recovered.

Administrative Means For Agricultural Preservation

As noted above, Effective Agricultural Zoning is just one means of preserving existing agricultural activities in the Region. The following are examples of administrative and supplemental zoning techniques to encourage and protect agriculture:

- Work with local farmers to ensure participation in County's Purchase of Agricultural Conservation Easements Program
- Establish Township Purchase of Agricultural Conservation Easements Program.
- Establish Transfer of Development Program within a municipality or across municipal boundaries (development rights of properties in agricultural areas could be transferred to properties in those areas designated as residential growth areas).
- Promote the inclusion of farms in Agricultural Security Areas.
- Support measures to relieve property tax burden for farmers
- Limit extension of public sewer and water facilities to agricultural areas
- Permit businesses which support agricultural operations, such as farm equipment sales and service, farm supply stores, and businesses which market or process farm products
- Allow farmers to supplement incomes through home businesses, home occupations and farm related businesses
- Permit appropriate recreational activities, such as hayrides, corn mazes, and festivals.
- Limit non-farm uses which could cause conflicts with agricultural practices and/or require buffers for non-farm uses around the perimeter of farms. Direct any non-farm development to parcels least suited to farming.

- Allow conservation development (Growing Greener) as an option (typically 50 to 80% of the tract remains in open space and development occurs on the remaining land, allowing for the protection of some farmland)
- Promote enrollment in Clean and Green tax relief program
- Allow and give incentives to compact development and higher densities where public sewer and water are available in areas designated for development, and give disincentives to inefficient development techniques
- Support establishment and continuation of farm-related programs and organizations
- Discourage construction of roads through and within agricultural areas
- Work to improve relationships between farmers and non-farm neighbors.
- Make information available on the Pennsylvania agricultural loan program which permits farmers to borrow funds for land, buildings, machinery, or equipment bought, built or renovated for the benefit of the business.
- Encourage farmers to utilize the Pennsylvania Farm Link program created by the Center for Rural Pennsylvania. This program is designed to help match farmers planning for retirement, and other interested landowners, with farmers hoping to work into farm ownership on long-term leasing.

Alternatives to "Traditional Agriculture"

Often agriculture has been equated with "traditional" methods such as dairy farming, raising of steers, and cultivating such crops as corn, hay, wheat, alfalfa, soy beans, barley, and oats. Increasingly, there are a number of alternatives which can be practiced to supplement farm income or utilize smaller parcels of land, including:

- Nursery/Greenhouse
- Horse Farm
- Equestrian Center
- Orchard
- Winery

- Christmas Tree Farm
- Pick-Your-Own Operation
- Contracting Organic Farm
- Herb Farm
- Wildflower/Flower Farm
- “Gentleman’s” Farm
- “Agritainment” (using crafts, corn mazes, petting zoos, entertainers, hay tunnels, and hayrides to generate income and attract purchase of produce).
- Deer Farm
- Meat Goats
- Hydroponics
- Ornamental Crops