

9. AGRICULTURE

Introduction

This chapter articulates the county's policy framework for sustaining agricultural land and industry. Despite the intensive urbanization of Ocean City and commercial and residential development of the northeastern portion of the county, Worcester County remains a largely rural community, with a landscape dominated by cropland and forest. Agriculture is second to tourism in sustaining the local economy.

According to the 2010 Land Use/Land Cover data produced by the Maryland Department of Planning, Worcester County contains 89,000 acres of cropland and 145,000 acres of forested land¹; 30% and 49% of the county, respectively. The 2022 Census of Agriculture, which collects data in a different way, notes that the county's 361 "farms" covered 104,121 acres or 34 percent of Worcester County (a negligible change from the 2017 census).² Average farm size was 288 acres (average farm size has been trending upward for decades), and median size was 63 acres.³ 92% are characterized as family farms.

Over 67,000 acres in Worcester County are classified as "prime farmland" with another 40,000 acres "prime farmland if drained or irrigated". According to the US Department of Agriculture (USDA)⁴, prime farmland is defined as land that has the best combination of physical and chemical characteristics for producing food, feed, forage, fiber and oilseed crops. In addition, prime farmland has an adequate and dependable supply of moisture from precipitation or irrigation, a favorable temperature and growing season, acceptable [pH], acceptable salt content, and few or no rocks. When treated and managed properly, these soils have the capability to produce sustained high yields of crops. In order to classify the various levels of soil quality, USDA Soil Surveys include a Land Capability Classification system to group and prioritize soil classifications according to their limitations for field crops, the risk of damage if they are used for crops, and the way soils responds to management. Prime agricultural soils are considered to include Soil Capability Classes 1 and 2.

In the 17th and 18th centuries, tobacco was the mainstay agricultural commodity in Worcester County. This gave way to grain crops and livestock grazing by the early 20th century. Today, grains for poultry feed (corn, soybeans and wheat) are the mainstay crops, and Worcester County ranks fifth in the state in broiler production. According to the Census of Agriculture, 8.61 million broilers (meat type chickens) were sold in 2022.⁵ Worcester County ranks eighty-seventh among *all counties nationwide* in broiler production⁶. The total value of all agricultural products sold in Worcester County in 2022 was over \$289 million (ranking fifth in the state and a +16% change from 2017).⁷ The average market value of products sold per farm was over \$800,000 in 2022 (a +19% increase from 2017).⁸

¹ <http://www.mdp.state.md.us/OurWork/landuse.shtml>

² Census of Agriculture, USDA. 2022.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ United States Department of Agriculture, Natural Resources Conservation Service; Soil Survey of Worcester County, Maryland. 1997.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ *Ibid.*

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The poultry industry is a staple element of the economy on the Delmarva Peninsula as a whole. Overall, on Delmarva, chickens outnumber people 390 to 1⁹. Not only chicken production itself, but also locally produced grains for feed are essential for the continued success of the chicken industry; the large base of local farmers is an important part of the “three legged stool” (poultry growers, poultry companies, and grain farmers) needed to sustain the industry. Contiguous farmland that is minimally disrupted by other types of development is also important for the continued success, and flexibility of farming industries. When residential and other development fragments farmland, it not only results in loss of farmland, but creates traffic, adjacent landowner complaints and other conflicts with agriculture which at some point becomes detrimental economically to farming on a larger scale.

Value-added agriculture includes not only the production and /or processing of agricultural products, but an associated public educational or interactive component, also known as “agritourism”. With increased interest from the public, value-added products and agritourism has become a more viable economic option for farmers and processors in Worcester County, but it is still a small part of the overall agricultural economy in the county. According to the 2022 Census of Agriculture, farm-related income was over \$5.3 million in 2022, a 62% increase over 2017.¹⁰

The forest products industry is also important in Worcester County. Like farmland, all forestland is not equally productive. Forested riparian areas, critical area buffers, wetlands and certain hydric soils are important to protect for habitat and water quality, but not as critical to the forestry industry. The lower eastern shore has experienced a significant loss of local timber mills over the past several decades, mirroring a wider trend across Maryland’s eastern shore with only a few remaining mills today. Market consolidation and other factors have contributed to this decline. Regardless, forestry contributes significantly to the economy and supports jobs. In the eastern shore region, in 2019, forestry contributed nearly \$203 million in direct economic impact to the state economy and supported 2,309 jobs¹¹. Direct contribution in Worcester County was \$25 million and 69 jobs directly involved in forestry¹². Beyond timber, forests provide essential ecological services such as clean air and water, habitat for hundreds of species of birds and other organisms, and contribute to the health of the Chesapeake and Coastal Bays. The more acres of forestland available in the future, the more likely Worcester’s forests can be managed sustainably.

Goals and Objectives

It is important to note that farmland and forested land do much more for a community than provide for a specific industry. Cost of Community Service Studies carried out across the nation consistently find that farmland, forested land and other agricultural land use generates a fiscal surplus for a community, even when the land is assessed at its current agricultural use. In this way, farmland is similar to other commercial and industrial uses. In contrast, residential land use does not cover its costs to local government, it must be subsidized by the aforementioned land uses. Conversion of agricultural land to

⁹ *Ibid*

¹⁰ *Ibid*.

¹¹ Hickman, John and Guy, Sarah. The Impact of Resource-Based Industries on the Maryland Economy. October 2022. Business Economic and Community Outreach Network (BEACON) at Salisbury University.

¹² *Ibid*.

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residential land, therefore, should not be seen as a way to generate more revenue for local government and balance local budgets.¹³

Given the imperative to protect agricultural land, Worcester County will aim to target the following goals and recommended actions:

- 1. Protect and promote private farming and forestry by accommodating inevitable population growth through appropriate planning and zoning.**
 - *Action Item 9.1.1:* Continue to support DNR forest service and other entities that provide technical assistance to private forest owners.
 - *Action Item 9.1.2:* Promote cooperative work between farmers/landowners and other stakeholders to balance water quality and productivity and other environmental challenges facing farmers and owners of forested land.
 - *Action Item 9.1.3:* Work with the state and other partners and entities to balance commercial solar development in rural areas with protection of farmland.
- 2. Establish a Priority Preservation Area within which protection efforts will be focused and non-agricultural development will be discouraged. Specifically, in the long term, protect at least 85,808 acres through conservation easements and restrictive zoning.**
 - *Action Item 9.2.1:* Continue purchase of Rural Legacy and Maryland Agricultural Land Preservation Fund (MALPF) easements using a system that prioritizes land most at risk for development and/or purchase of the best bargains.
 - *Action Item 9.2.2:* Cooperate with the Lower Shore Land Trust in their efforts to preserve farmland.
 - *Action Item 9.2.3:* Pursue other agricultural land conservation programs and funding, when available.
 - *Action Item 9.2.4:* Maintain State certification for the county's agricultural land preservation program, which allows access to additional agricultural transfer tax funds that are collected in the county.
- 3. Prioritize prime farmland for permanent protection.**
 - *Action Item 9.3.1:* Continue to support the Soil Conservation District, the Extension Service and other entities that provide technical services, support innovation as well as promote environmental protection actions on agricultural land.
 - *Action Item 9.3.2:* Establish a farmland conservation fund as a source of local matching funds for land protection.

Agricultural Zoning

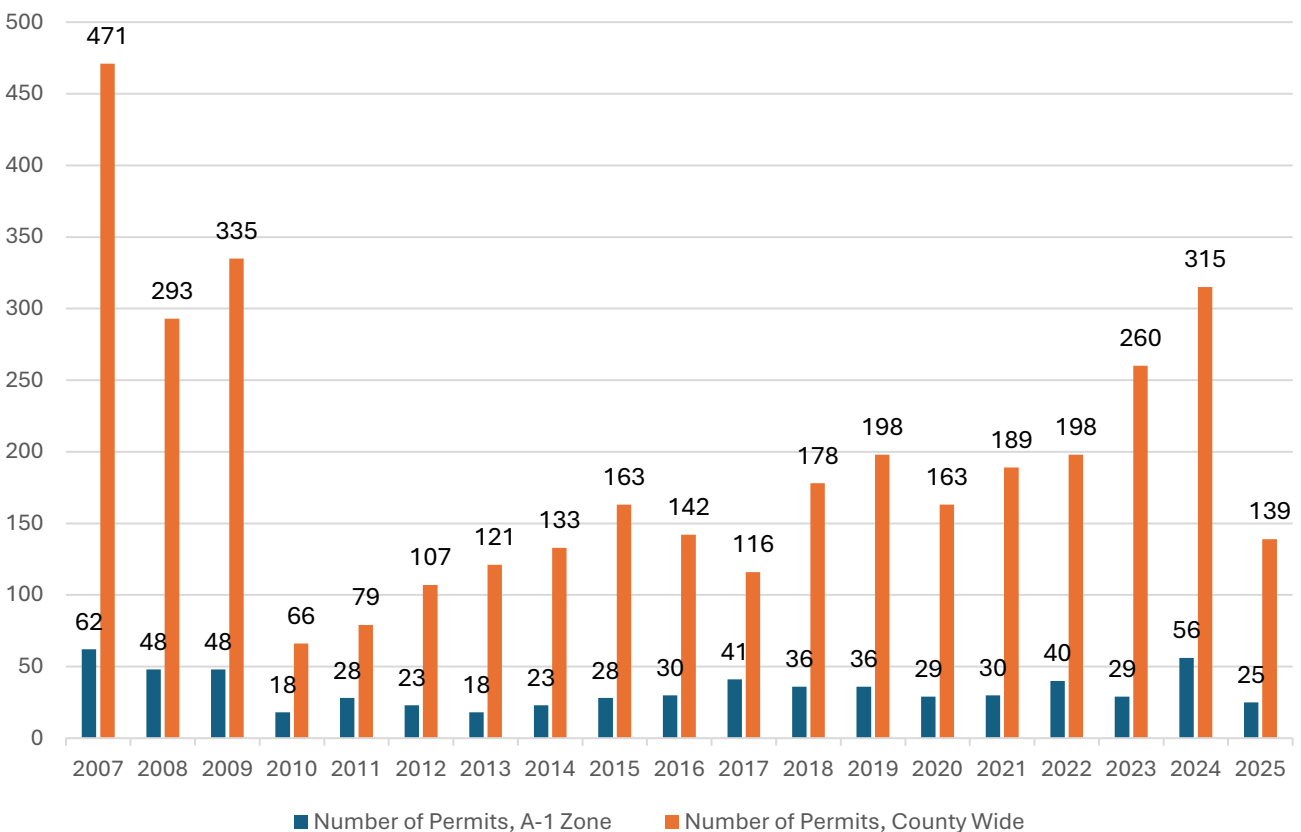
Approximately 84% of the county is currently zoned A-1 (Agricultural) or RP (Conservation); 169,158 and 87,463 acres respectively, after Worcester County underwent comprehensive re-zoning in 2009. In these zones only five lots may be subdivided from what was an entire parcel of land in 1967. In the A-1

¹³ American Farmland Trust. Fact Sheet: Farmland Information Center, Cost of Community Services Studies. September 2016.

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zone, 6 lots may be created under certain circumstances, including clustering of lots (extremely rare). In the RP zone up to 5 lots per parcel are permitted only by special exception. This has allowed the county to minimize development pressure in these zones. An A-2 zone was created from A-1 and E-1-zoned areas in 2009 (7,253 acres). This zone is intended to foster agricultural use, while also allowing uses of a more commercial nature that require large tracts of land that had been permitted in the entire A-1 zone prior to 2009. Worcester County has not adopted a tier map or otherwise make any changes to zoning regulations following the enactment of the Sustainable Growth and Agricultural Preservation Act of 2012 (the “septics law”). All of this has ensured that development is minimized in the A-1 zone. **Figure 9-1.** depicts the number of residential building permits issued annually, county wide and in the A-1 zone. Within the period of 2007 to 2025, 3,666 building permits were issued in total; 648 in the A-1 zone. This data shows that development is concentrated in designated growth areas, with limited development occurring in the A-1 zone. Subdivisions within the PPA are a similar metric to gauge development impact as reflected in **Table 9-1. Residential Land Use and Land Protected in Priority Preservation Areas.** From 2018 to 2024, approximately 1,158 acres were involved in subdivision for residential purposes and 4,365.67 acres were protected. Protection outstripped development more than 3-fold on a per acre basis in this time period. It’s also likely that some of the acreage involved in subdivision remained in agricultural use. This slow pace of development is anticipated to continue to provide ample time for the acquisition of conservation easements on agricultural and forested land.

Figure 9-1. Residential Building Permits Issued by Worcester County 2007-2025



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Table 9-1. Residential Land Use and Land Protected in Priority Preservation Area (PPA)

Year	Lands subdivided for residential use in the PPA	Residential units constructed in the PPA*	Lands Protected in the PPA
2018	11 lots; 72.41 acres	22	811.4 acres (MALPF) 474.8 acres (Rural Legacy)
2019	6 lots; 22.1 acres	21	800.17 acres (MALPF) 186.9 acres (Rural Legacy)
2020	6 lots; 36.79 acres	24	173.5 acres (MALPF) 137 acres (Rural Legacy) 56.7 acres (CREP Permanent Easement)
2021	11 lots; 120.67 acres	27	458.58 acres (MALPF) 2,046.48 acres (Rural Legacy) 153.56 (LSLT/MET)
2022	10 lots; 117 acres	38	481.46 acres (MALPF) 244.57 acres (Rural Legacy)
2023	19 lots; 578 acres	25	103.98 acres (MALPF) 88.74 (Rural Legacy)
2024	3 lots; 211 acres	39	722.84 acres (MALPF) 113.6 acres (Rural Legacy)

**Data 2022 and prior is relevant to the original PPA

Priority Preservation Areas

To help keep a critical mass of land in farming use, the county established a state certified agricultural preservation program effective July 2004. Certified counties keep 75 percent of the agricultural transfer tax and are eligible for additional state matching funds which are used to fund the program. To remain eligible for this program, the county must establish a Priority Preservation Area (PPA) that includes a strategy for assuring the long-term integrity of the agricultural resources in this area (Agriculture Article 2-518 and State Finance and Procurement Article 5-408, modified by House Bill 2 in 2006).

The county established a PPA in 2010 with adoption of a Priority Preservation Areas Element. The PPA established was 195,332 acres and at that time 53,724 acres, approximately 28% of the PPA, was protected land. In the 15 years since that time over 25,000 additional acres of farm and forested land have been protected. It's also important to note that during that period under 3,000 acres of land were converted to residential use. **Table 9-1. Residential Land Use and Land Protected in Priority Preservation Area (PPA)** shows acres subdivided and acres protected during the period of 2018 – 2024.

Figure 9-2. depicts the boundaries of the updated PPA, which has been expanded to include the entire Bishopville-Showell Rural Legacy Area that was established in 2024. The new PPA is 206,208 acres, 67% of the county's total area. 81,284 acres of the PPA (39%) are "prime farmland".

Table 9-2. provides data on land use in the PPA. Approximately 94% of the PPA is undeveloped. **Table 9-3.** provides a breakdown of protected land in the PPA. Approximately 38% of the PPA is already

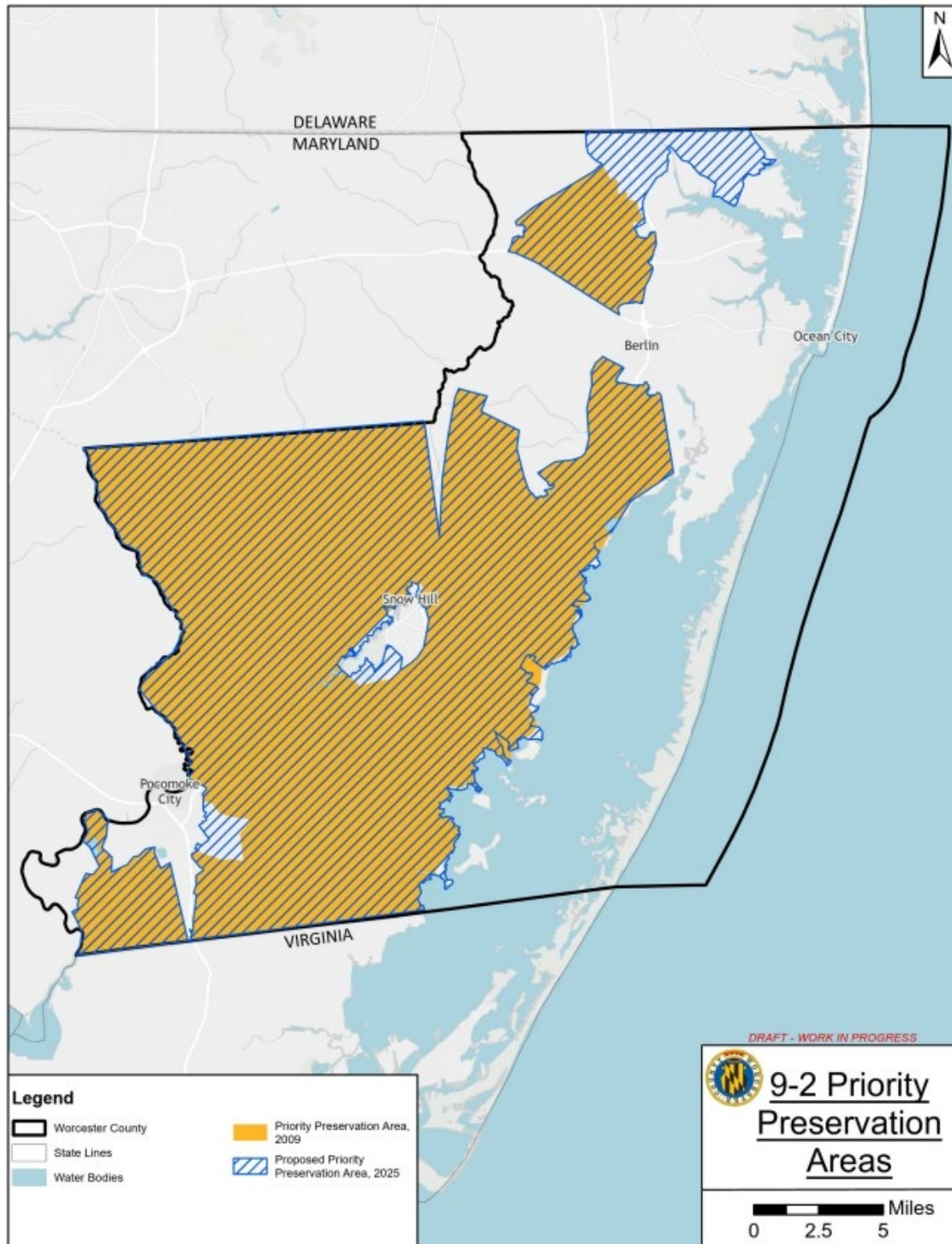
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protected through state-ownership, conservation easements or other permanent mechanisms. The state requires that the acreage goal for land protection within the PPA be equal to at least 80% of the remaining undeveloped land in the area. To meet this goal, at least 165,000 total acres should be protected. Since 79,192 acres are already protected, 85,808 acres would need to be protected in the PPA to achieve 80% protection. Protection of this acreage and minimization of fragmentation is necessary to allow for continued function of the poultry industry, which is increasingly challenged by residential development in rural areas across Delmarva, as well as ensure adequate prime and farmable soils available to meet future market demands for food and other crop products. Dust, odor, chemical applications, noise and other activities associated with farming create conflicts with residential development, which can ultimately harm the industry.

A large base of forestland will be important to meet future needs for forest products, as well as protect air and water quality for county residents and visitors. Fortunately, a base of good forestland is already protected in the PPA. Most of the 38,400 acres of state-held land is forested. As noted above, 116,000 acres of the PPA are forested. **Figure 9-2.** depicts the PPA boundary and generalized land cover.

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Figure 9-2. Priority Preservation Areas (PPAs)



Source: Worcester County, MD iMap

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The county's land use plan map found in **Chapter 4 – Land Use** is consistent with the PPA. All growth areas are outside the boundary of the PPA. All areas within the PPA are identified as "Agriculture" or "Green Infrastructure".

Table 9-2. Land Use in the Priority Preservation Area (2010 MDP Land Use/Cover data)

Land Use Category	Acres
Low-Density Residential/Large-lot subdivision	8,702
Medium to High-Density Residential	140
Commercial	369
Industrial	162
Institutional	192
Open Urban Land	501
Wetland	6,020
Bare Ground/Extractive	339
Open water	1,850
Forest or Brush	116,000
Cropland/agricultural use	71,945
Roads	289

Table 9-3. Protected Land in the Priority Preservation Area, as of September 2025

Land Protection Program/Owner	Acres
The Nature Conservancy	5,426
Rural Legacy Program Easement	13,467
Deed Restricted Private Land	412
MALPF Easement	10,740
CREP Permanent Easement	655
DNR-held Conservation Easement	5,285
Forest Legacy	95
State-owned Lands	38,777
Other Lower Shore Land Trust Easement	1,946
County-owned Lands	500
WRE/WRP Easement	1,889
Total	79,192

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Implementation

Worcester County has protected, on average, approximately 12,340 acres of farmland/productive forestland from 2009 to 2025, through the Rural Legacy and MALPF programs, the vast majority within the Priority Preservation Area (PPA). The county's stated goal has been to protect 1,000 acres annually within the PPA and the county protected an average of 823 acres annually.

MALPF

Created by the General Assembly in 1977, Maryland Agricultural Land Preservation Foundation (MALPF) purchases agricultural preservation easements that forever restrict development on prime farmland and woodland. Worcester County continues to have a "certified" agricultural land preservation program (as of July 1, 2004). This allows the county to retain additional transfer tax and access additional state funding match for purchase of agricultural easements through the Maryland Agricultural Land Preservation Foundation.

The pace of land protection increased significantly since 2009. From 2009 to 2025, 5,774+/- acres (37 properties) were protected with MALPF easements, or about 385 acres protected annually. Worcester County's approach to ranking that prioritizes discount offers along with other factors, has increased acreage protected. MALPF's "round 2" funding cycle prioritizes bargain sales, and Worcester County landowners have increasingly received "round 2" offers due to its competitive bid process. Worcester County also provides cash match from the agricultural land transfer tax, revenue collected by the county, as well as allocates funds most years from the county general fund. These funds are matched by MALPF on a 60/40 basis. This has allowed for additional MALPF easement purchases and has been necessary for the county to meet minimum acreage protection goals. The county should continue to provide an annual cash match to MALPF and consider establishing a farmland conservation fund that would support easement purchases.

Rural Legacy

The Rural Legacy Program was created to discourage sprawl development and protect areas, designated by local government, for future generations to enjoy. The Program provides farmers and landowners an alternative to developing (or subdividing) their land or selling their property to developers. The program also supports protection of water quality and habitat through additional protections including vegetative buffers and limitations on impervious surface. Under the Program landowners can sell or donate their development rights and still retain ownership to continue growing crops or limited raising of livestock (similar to the MALPF program). Worcester County's Coastal Bays Rural Legacy Area, which includes the entire Chincoteague Bay shoreline and watershed, lower Pocomoke River watershed, and connects the Chincoteague Bay to the Pocomoke State Forest with a permanent "greenway", is approximately 45,945 acres in size (expanded in FY2019). 18,000 acres+ are permanently protected, either by state ownership or privately owned land under conservation easement. Approximately 10,000 acres are protected with a Coastal Bays Rural Legacy easement as of October 4, 2025. Due to difficulty finding remaining interested landowners, the county is focusing on the other two Rural Legacy Areas: Dividing Creek RLA and Bishopville-Showell RLA.

Dividing Creek Rural Legacy Area was created in 2008 in partnership with Somerset County, The Nature Conservancy and Lower Shore Land Trust. The boundary was expanded in 2019 in both counties. In Worcester County it includes the entire Dividing Creek watershed, portions of the Nassawango Creek watershed, and upper Pocomoke River shoreline and watershed. The Dividing Creek and Nassawango

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watersheds are an area of Maryland recognized by The Nature Conservancy as high in biodiversity. The Dividing Creek Rural Legacy Area is also an area with productive and contiguous farmland. The Area is 55,526 acres in size, including both counties. Protection of the first Dividing Creek Rural Legacy Area easement in Worcester County occurred in 2009. Fourteen (14) properties have been protected in Worcester County to date, totaling over 3,500 acres.

The Bishopville-Showell Rural Legacy Area was established in 2024. The Area is 11,743 acres and contains important farmland under significant development pressure. It includes lands surrounding the unincorporated villages of Bishopville and Showell. Already multiple uses, some not compatible with agriculture have occurred in this area. Many of the farms are small, so unable to participate in MALPF, which requires a minimum of 50 acres to enroll. Protection of the remaining farms in this Area is needed to maintain the rural landscape. To date one easement has been purchased.

Donated Conservation Easements

Worcester County is served by the Lower Shore Land Trust, a non-profit organization that works in cooperation with the Maryland Environmental Trust to obtain donated permanent conservation easements in rural areas. Over 1,900 acres in Worcester County are protected by a donated conservation easement, held by the Lower Shore Land Trust and Maryland Environmental Trust. Landowners who donate have access to certain tax benefits.

Land Use Management

Worcester County's zoning code, and specifically the A-1 and RP zones as currently established, protects rural areas from irreversible, sprawl development that would negatively impact farming and forestry. Worcester County has not mapped any areas where major subdivisions may be developed on septic systems. These policies should continue.

Value-added processing, agro-tourism, continuing education for farmers, and educating county citizens on the value of supporting local farms are supportive actions that can be taken to keep farming viable. Value-added retail and agro-tourism are permitted by special exception in the A-1 zone, there are many roadside farm stands permitted throughout the county in several zoning districts, although exact numbers are not available. The A-1 zoning code allows farm owners to hold special events in their principally agricultural structures, thus allowing temporary/short-term uses that do not impact farming, but provide income, and may also help connect the public to the agricultural landscape and products. Farm breweries have emerged as a new growth area that the county supports through zoning policies.

Challenges

It's important to identify the challenges the agricultural sector/rural land faces and will face in the coming years. Farming is dynamic—the industry is continually affected by economic and regulatory factors, changes in population and land use and innovations in technology. Along with the threat of fragmentation and loss of farmland due to encroachment of other land uses, the poultry and associated feed industry are facing other issues. Saltwater intrusion and land loss is already occurring on the Delmarva peninsula and anticipated to continue to impact low lying land, including in Worcester County. This makes the soil unproductive as farmland or woodland transforms into marsh or open water. Storm surges exacerbate this. Drought conditions may increase in intensity and duration in the future, stressing both poultry and crops. Agricultural practices continue to trend towards intensification and

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higher productivity, with yields per acre up 70% from 1982 to 2022¹⁴. While efficiency has also increased, balancing production with water quality protection will continue to pose a significant challenge. The poultry industry contends with economic issues including inflation, global trade conflicts, and avian influenza. The forestry industry faces declining forest markets. Pests and invasive plants pose threats to native vegetation. Continued parcelization of forested land poses a challenge for forest management, as many private forest owners may not use professional services to assist with sustainable management, and management of smaller woodlots can be more challenging. All of these challenges will require creative solutions, many at the local level.

¹⁴ Delmarva Land and Litter Collaborative.