

AGRICULTURAL RESOURCE PLAN

■ TODAY'S CONDITIONS

Agriculture is a minor economic activity in Allegheny County, employing only 0.1% of the total workforce. Agricultural uses comprise 5% of the County's total land area, making farming a more significant land use than economic activity.



Photo credit: McCormick Taylor

Allegheny County still retains a significant amount of farmland, despite being heavily urbanized. In the northeastern and southeastern areas of the County, and scattered throughout the southwestern part as well, there are concentrations of:

- Livestock farms (cows, pigs, sheep and chickens)
- Crop land (corn, wheat, oats and soybeans are the predominant crops)
- Nurseries (including greenhouses, floriculture, sod, and Christmas trees)
- Orchards

In 2002, there were 464 farms in the County:

- 250 livestock farms
- 105 crop farms
- 82 nurseries
- 27 orchards

Over 56% of the 33,800 total acres in agricultural production was used for growing crops. Interest in organic gardening and farming is growing and more farms in the County are turning to organic practices.

AGRICULTURAL SECURITY AREAS

Almost a quarter of Allegheny County's farmland, or over 8,100 acres, is within an Agricultural Security Area (ASA). There are currently four ASAs in the County (see Map 4G.1):

- Frazer ASA – 254 acres
- Forward ASA – 2,397 acres
- North Hills ASA – 3,267 acres
- Fayette ASA – 2,186 acres.

While ASAs provide some protection to farming, they do not keep lands permanently in agriculture.

CONSERVATION EASEMENTS

The permanent protection of agricultural lands is best achieved through conservation easements. Such easements, which are written into property deeds, prohibit land development. The most common way to acquire conservation easements is through the sale of non-agricultural development rights by the property owner. In return for keeping a property in agricultural use in perpetuity, owners are compensated for a portion of the development potential.

From 2001 (the first year an easement was acquired in Allegheny County under this program) to the end of 2007, 1,695 acres of the County's farmland had been permanently protected by conservation easements through the Pennsylvania Agricultural Conservation Easement (PACE) program. The Allegheny County Conservation District provides administrative support to the Allegheny County Agricultural Land Preservation Board by processing applications, working with appraisers and other vendors, and coordinating efforts with foundations and community groups.

The PACE program is the best-known program for acquiring easements, but nonprofit conservancies or land trusts also acquire or accept the donation of conservation easements.

EXISTING REGULATIONS

Several state and federal laws have been enacted to protect farmland from conversion to non-agricultural use:



■ Section 658 of Title 7 of the Code of Federal Regulations is the federal Farmland Protection Policy Act (FPPA). The purpose of this act is to "...minimize the extent to which federal actions contribute to the unnecessary and irreversible conversion of farmland to nonagricultural use." The act requires federal agencies to consider alternatives that could lessen adverse effects on farmland and to ensure federal actions are compatible with state and local government farmland protection programs and policies.

■ The Pennsylvania Farmland and Forest Land Assessment Act, Act 319 of 1974 (commonly known as the 'Clean and Green Act'), is designed to preserve farmland, forestland, and open space by taxing according to its use value rather than the prevailing market value. The program is voluntary and generally requires a minimum of ten acres that will remain in the designated use (agricultural use, agricultural reserve, forest reserve). Act 319 is administered by the County Assessment Office.

While it is a good program and should be continued, there are loopholes within the Act that allow for its misuse. Many properties within the County's Clean and Green program are large tracts of land belonging to wealthy landowners, and are not the types of property that the Act was created to protect. In 2006, a local television news station exposed big property tax breaks going to estates, country clubs, and other properties.

■ Pennsylvania Act 100 of 1979 established the Agricultural Lands Condemnation Approval Board (ALCAB). This is an independent administrative board with approval authority over the condemnation of productive agricultural land for certain types of transportation projects.

■ Pennsylvania Act 43 of 1981, the Agricultural Area Security Law, allows landowners to petition local governments to create ASAs. The law provides incentives to encourage farming and disincentives to discourage development in these areas. An ASA must contain 250 acres of viable agricultural land, which may comprise non-contiguous tracts of at least ten acres in size. In addition, Act 43 has established a Commonwealth program to acquire perpetual agricultural conservation easements within an ASA.

Another benefit of ASAs is that they provide some protection from eminent domain in projects using State and federal funding. Farm owners should join together to establish ASAs where there are none.

■ Pennsylvania Act 515 of 1996 enables Pennsylvania counties to covenant with landowners to voluntarily preserve land in farm, forest, water supply or open space by taxing land according to its use value rather than the prevailing market value.

■ Pennsylvania's Agricultural Land Preservation Policy, enacted in 2003, is intended to protect and preserve the Commonwealth's "prime agricultural land" from irreversible conversion to uses that result in its loss as an environmental and essential food and fiber resource.

GROUPS INVOLVED IN FARMLAND PRESERVATION

The Allegheny County Farm Preservation Board is the primary group engaged in farm preservation in Allegheny County. Several other organizations and agencies are working to achieve sustainable agriculture in the Commonwealth and the County, including the Pennsylvania Association of Sustainable Agriculture and the PennState Cooperative in Allegheny County. One particular program of the Cooperative Extension in Allegheny County is Grow Pittsburgh, which supports the sustainability of urban farms in the highly urbanized areas of the County. Further, there are programs to support efforts of individuals interested in farming on vacant lots for the purpose of producing food, ornamentals and biofuels.

Pittsburgh History & Landmarks Foundation (Landmarks), through its Historic Rural Preservation Program, protects the County's historic and/or architecturally significant rural buildings and properties threatened by commercial and residential development. Landmarks does this primarily by placing easements on these properties that help to maintain the agricultural focus of the property or permit an appropriate adaptive reuse of the property. The organization has purchased easements on farm building façades as well as entire farms. Landmarks has played a significant role in the protection of five historic farm complexes in the County and over 850 acres of adjoining woods and farmlands.

■ ISSUES AND ANALYSIS

In this section, we examine what can be done to better preserve the agricultural heritage of Allegheny County.

KEY CHALLENGES

In developing the Agricultural Resource Plan, the Environmental Quality Resource Panel helped to identify these key challenges:

- Loss of active productive farmland to development
- Loss of prime farm soils
- Decreasing number of farm workers
- The economic and sustainable aspects of farming in an urban county

The following provides an understanding of these issues.

LOSS OF ACTIVE, PRODUCTIVE FARMLAND TO DEVELOPMENT

In 1997 there were 522 farms in the County, while in 2002 there were 464 farms, an 11% decrease. Yet the average size of farms increased during that time from 68 acres to 73, indicating that the County lost its smaller farms. The number of acres farmed in the County decreased by 5% between 1997 and 2002.

There are several reasons for the loss of farms and farm acreage. One is the increased demand for land for residential and commercial development that has driven up land values to the point where it is more profitable to sell than to farm the land. Another reason is the increased productivity of agriculture due to technology; farms are becoming more productive and need less land to produce the same yield.

Between 1997 and 2002, the market value of agricultural production in Allegheny County dropped 20%, from \$11.7 million to \$9.4 million a year.

Due to the net loss in farm land and the fact that many of the lost farms were architecturally significant as well as more than a century old, the Pittsburgh History and Landmarks Foundation (PHLF) and the Richard King Mellon Foundation created the Landmarks' Historic Rural Preservation Program.

The program involves the protection of Allegheny County's historic and/or architecturally significant rural buildings

and properties threatened by commercial and residential development. The primary form of protection is done by placing easements on these properties that help to maintain the agricultural focus or permit an appropriate adaptive reuse of the property.

The program also informs farmers about ways they can realize the value of their historic farms without having to sell their property. Options include:

- The sale or donation of their farm development rights
- Donating the property to PHLF in return for a life-income arrangement
- Employing creative development strategies that allow the historic property to be integrated into a "rural-friendly" environment.

The Historic Farm Preservation Program has played a significant role in the protection of five historic farm complexes and more than 1,000 acres of adjoining farmland.

LOSS OF PRIME FARM SOILS

There are approximately 36,000 acres of prime agricultural soils in Allegheny County, a figure that exceeds the acreage of land in productive agricultural use. As farmland – and land that could be farmed – is developed, prime farm soils – an irreplaceable resource – may be lost forever.

DECREASING NUMBER OF FARM WORKERS

In recent years, the number of farm workers has been steadily decreasing. According to a PennState report, *Agricultural Impacts: The Role of Production Agriculture in the Allegheny County Economy*, Allegheny County has seen a 40% decrease in the number of farm workers between 1969 and 2000. Much of this decrease is believed to be due to agriculture technological efficiencies. Some of this loss of workers may also be due to the decrease in the numbers and sizes of farms. It should be noted that the workforce data is from the Bureau of Economic Analysis (BEA). The BEA considers forestry employment as part of agriculture.

Agencies that currently work with local farmers (such as the Farm Service Bureau, the Natural Resource Conservation Service and the County Conservation District) will work with Allegheny County farmers to determine if there is a shortage of farm workers. If so, then an action plan will be developed



by one or a combination of these agencies to address the problem.



Photo credit: Kevin Smay

THE ECONOMIC AND SUSTAINABLE ASPECTS OF FARMING IN AN URBAN COUNTY

Agricultural trends in Allegheny County echo national trends in the loss of farmland acreage and decreases in the number of farms in operation.

Still, maintaining land in agricultural use is important for Allegheny County's future. Agriculture provides a viable economic activity, a local source for food and other goods derived from agricultural production, and open space. Additionally, locally-grown food is more sustainable and energy-efficient. Purchasing locally-grown food:

- Keeps money in the community
- Strengthens the local economy
- Increases the profitability of farming
- Makes the selling of farmland for non-agricultural uses less attractive
- Reduces energy and transportation costs

Locally-grown food does not need to be shipped as far or stored as long, and therefore requires less fuel and electricity. This has the added benefit of reducing pollution through less carbon dioxide emissions, due to decreased travel and less packaging needed.

RECOMMENDATIONS

GOAL OF THE PLAN

Agriculture is a viable industry and sustainable land use in Allegheny County.

OBJECTIVES OF THE PLAN

The objectives of the Agricultural Resource Plan are to:

- Support agriculture as a viable industry.
- Locate new infrastructure outside of identified agriculture areas.
- Promote the use of the County's Agricultural Land Preservation Program.
- Promote sustainable agricultural practices.

The following provides an understanding of the objectives.

A. Support Agriculture as a Viable Industry

The challenges to continued agricultural production in Allegheny County include many market factors outside the purview of local governments. Nonetheless, conservation of agricultural lands can be addressed using a multi-faceted approach including local, county and State actions.

Easements acquired through the PACE program, the Allegheny County Agricultural Land Preservation Program and through private conservancy actions can only preserve a portion of the County's farmland. A number of land preservation techniques must be used if most of the remaining farmland in the County is to continue in agricultural use.

Local governments can implement agricultural zoning to retain lands for agricultural use. The Municipalities Planning Code, in fact, requires municipalities to zone to preserve prime agriculture land, which is defined as “land used for agricultural purposes that contains soils of the first, second or third class as defined by the United States Department of Agriculture Natural Resource And Conservation Services county soil survey”.

Additionally, the Pennsylvania Agricultural Security Areas Law prohibits municipal governments from passing ordinances that restrict “normal farming operations or practices”.

Effective agricultural zoning must take into account all legal requirements, and restrict the land to agricultural and agricultural-related uses. It must also strongly limit the density of residential development (for example, to one dwelling unit per 20-50 acres).

B. Locate New Infrastructure Outside of Identified Agriculture Areas

Although infrastructure is not the only factor that makes an area desirable for development, it does play an important role in the decision to develop a particular property. State agencies need to be aware of the areas planned for conservation and preservation so that they can make informed decisions regarding proposed permits for infrastructure extensions and additions. Relevant agencies include:

- Pennsylvania Department of Transportation (roadways)
- Pennsylvania Department of Environmental Protection (water and wastewater systems)
- Pennsylvania Public Utilities Commission (utilities extensions)

State agencies are now required by law to consider a proposed action’s consistency with local and County plans before granting permits, and have pledged to issue permits only if they are consistent.

Local municipalities and water/sewer authorities should make efforts to limit the expansion of utility services into agricultural areas. Municipalities and authorities should identify agriculturally significant areas in their communities and use the information when reviewing

plans for utility expansions. Utility expansions into agriculturally significant areas should be limited to only those absolutely necessary for reasons such as public health and safety.



Photo credit: Kevin Smay

C. Promote the Use of the County’s Agricultural Land Preservation Program

The Allegheny County Agricultural Land Preservation Program enables the acquisition of conservation easements on farmland. Through the program several municipalities – Fawn, Frazer, Forward, North Fayette, Plum, South Fayette and West Deer – have been identified as important agricultural areas. Although the Future Land Use map (see Map 4A.1) has identified Places within these municipalities to be targeted for future development, the agricultural areas have been avoided.

Other municipalities within Allegheny County that have substantial agricultural areas are encouraged to apply for protection under the County’s Agricultural Land Preservation Program.

D. Promote Sustainable Agricultural Practices

Several organizations are working toward the promotion of sustainable agricultural practices. To support and spread the word about the efforts of these



groups, the County will provide links from its website to the websites of these organizations:

Buy Fresh, Buy Local: <http://www.buylocalpa.org/splash.html>

Food Routes: <http://www.foodroutes.org/>

Pennsylvania Association for Sustainable Agriculture (PASA): <http://www.pasafarming.org/>

Additional links to other agencies that can help with sustainable agriculture efforts are located on PASA's website at: <http://www.pasafarming.org/links.html>.

One particular program of the Cooperative Extension in Allegheny County is Grow Pittsburgh, which supports the sustainability of urban farms in the highly urbanized areas of the County. Further, there are programs to support efforts of individuals interested in farming on vacant lots for the purpose of producing food, ornamentals and biofuels.

The transfer of development rights (TDR) could be a key strategy for preserving farmland and other conservation areas in the County. TDR programs allow landowners to transfer the right to develop one parcel of land to a different parcel of land.

TDR programs are established by local zoning ordinances. In the context of farmland protection, TDR is used to shift development from agricultural areas to designated growth zones closer to municipal services. The parcel of land where the rights originate is called the 'sending' parcel. When the rights are transferred from a sending parcel, the land is restricted with a permanent conservation easement. The parcel of land to which the rights are transferred is called the 'receiving' parcel. Buying these rights generally allows the owner to build at a higher density than ordinarily permitted by the base zoning.