

Chapter 11: Agriculture, Forestry, And Fisheries

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Chapter 11 : Agriculture, Forestry, and Fisheries

Goals and Objectives

- 11.1 Protect the land resources necessary to support the County's agricultural industry.
- 11.2 Maintain a productive forestland base and forest resource industry.
- 11.3 Promote and protect agricultural and natural resource industries, including opportunities for eco-tourism, value-added agricultural product processing, and the commercial seafood industry.

Agriculture

The 2012 United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) Census of Agriculture, which is based on a sample of farms, reported 46,659 acres in farm use in Charles County, on 382 farms, for an average farm size of 122 acres.

At the same time, data from the US Department of Agriculture's Farm Service Agency differs from the Census of Agriculture data. The Farm Service Agency lists 1,250 farm or forest parcels in Charles County, comprising 140,380 acres, of which 35,000 acres are cropland. The Farm Service Agency figures are based on a closer knowledge of Charles County and are likely more accurate. That said, the figures for land cover in Charles County is cited elsewhere in Table 2-3 of this Comprehensive Plan as 164,610 acres of forest, 46,784 acres of agricultural land, 6,770 acres of wetland and 2,783 acres of extractive or barren land. Given all these various figures, it is perhaps instructive to note that most of the farms in the County have both cropland and forestland, and sometimes wetland and extractive land. It is also important to note that much of this land is privately owned. The total amount of "farmland" is more likely somewhere between 52,000 acres and 212,000 with a realistic figure closer to 212,000 acres.

The Census reported the market value of all Charles County's agricultural products sold at approximately \$8.9 million, with 74 percent of the farm income derived from field crops and 26 percent from livestock enterprises. Agriculture, particularly the farming of tobacco, remained the economic engine of Charles County from colonial days until the 1960's. Tobacco itself, once the County's most valuable crop, while still grown, has become statistically insignificant. However, as a result of the heritage of tobacco growing, Charles County is characterized by relatively small farms compared to the large grain farms of the Eastern Shore or the dairy and livestock farms of Central and Western Maryland. Over half the farms in the County are smaller than 70 acres. The 2012 Charles County Land Preservation Parks and Recreation Plan also includes a detailed profile of agricultural land.

While no longer a major employer of residents, agriculture in Charles County and Southern Maryland occupies a special economic and cultural niche in the state's agricultural base. A number of Amish-owned farms exist in eastern Charles County, which is part of a larger community that extends into St. Mary's County. The Amish community is an important part of the local agricultural economy.

Farming is a business, and it needs to be viable from an economic standpoint in order to continue in Charles County. Simply put, farmers need to earn more in revenue than they expend in costs. They need to have a remaining level of profit sufficient to justify the risks of that business, such as: crop loss, unanticipated costs for equipment, building repairs and replacement; as well as changes in demand or pricing between planting and harvest. As part of this Comprehensive Plan update, the County commissioned an evaluation of Charles County Agriculture¹. The evaluation included the following statements:

- Charles County agriculture is likely to continue to be driven by a small number of large farms that produce grain and a growing number of small farms that produce nursery, greenhouse, and vegetable crops and provide agri-tourism opportunities. Charles County has the advantage of proximity to the Washington, DC metro region, which features affluent consumers who value fresh-grown produce and horticultural plants.
- The profitability of the farming industry is essential to the preservation of agricultural land that the County hopes to achieve. The County can help the farming industry through: 1) removing land use regulatory barriers to on-farm enterprises; 2) marketing; and 3) farmland preservation, including both the transfer of development rights and the purchase of development rights and preservation of property value of agricultural land.

The Southern MD Agricultural Development Commission (SMADC), a unit within the Tri-County Council for Southern Maryland and funded with tobacco settlement funds, is coordinating the transition away from the tobacco heritage to new market-driven agricultural enterprises. The Commission's key strategies include training, promoting the importance of buying local agricultural products, and encouraging alternative crops.

Priority Preservation Area (PPA)

The requirement to establish a Priority Preservation Area (PPA) was created by the Agricultural Stewardship Act of 2006. The intent is to support the ability of working farms to continue to engage in agricultural activities. It is a requirement to designate a PPA in the Comprehensive Plan in order to apply to the State of Maryland to establish a certified Agricultural Land Preservation Program. This certification has the financial benefit of allowing the County to retain 75% of agricultural transfer tax revenue to fund its local preservation programs.

Under state law (Annotated Code § 2-518) a PPA is an area that:

1. Contains productive agricultural or forest soils, or is capable of supporting profitable agricultural and forestry enterprises where productive soils are lacking;
2. Is governed by local policies, ordinances and procedures that i) stabilize the agricultural and forest land base so that development does not convert or compromise agricultural or forest resources, and ii) support the ability of working farms to practice farming;
3. Is large enough to support agricultural and forestry activities in conjunction with development, and;
4. Is accompanied by the County's acreage goal for land to be preserved through easements and zoning in the PPA equal to at least 80 percent of the remaining undeveloped land in the area.

¹ An Evaluation of Charles County Agriculture and Recommendations for Agricultural Economic Development, July 2011. Thomas Daniels, PhD, Professor of City and Regional Planning, University of Pennsylvania.

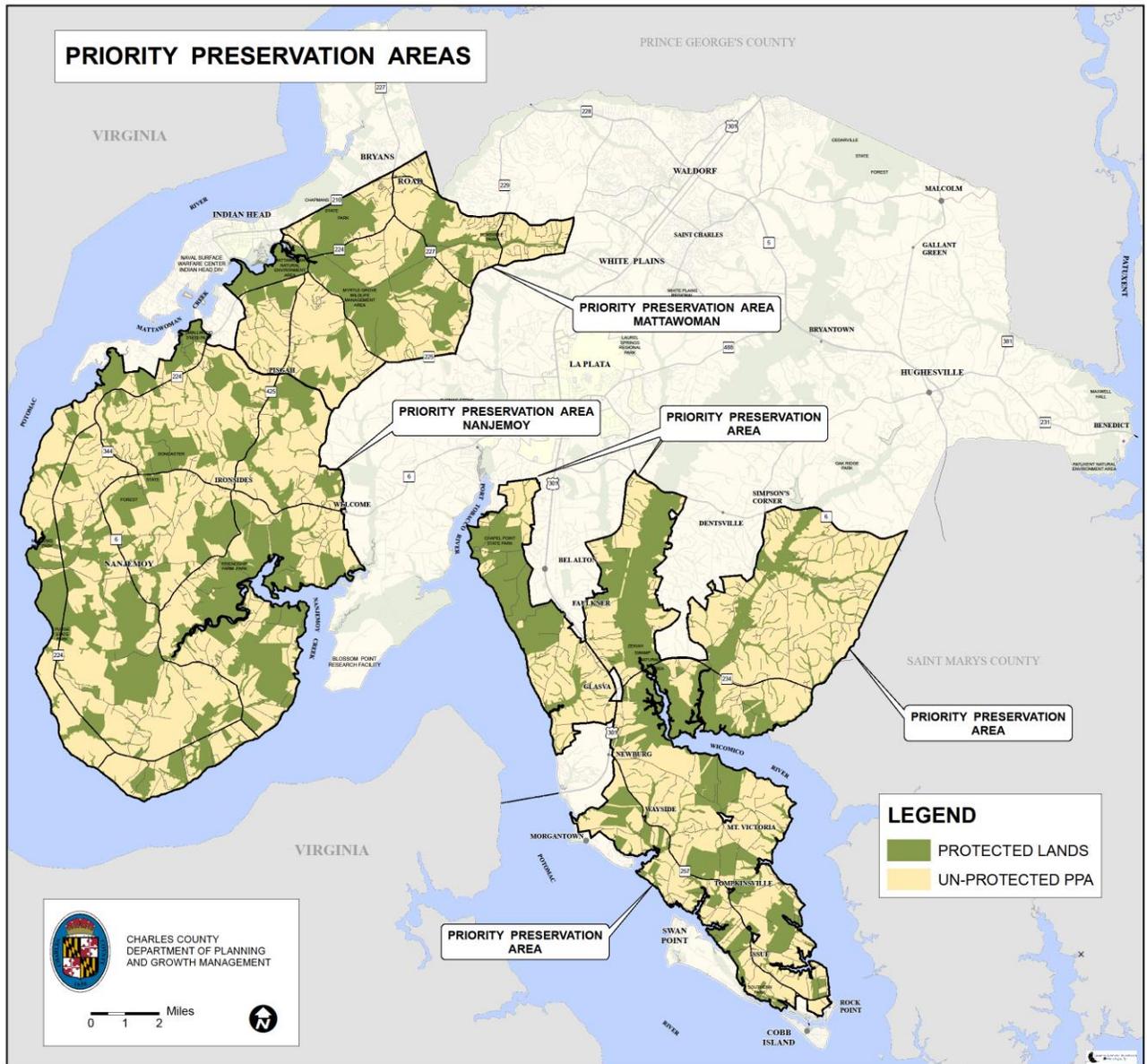
Creating a PPA in the Comprehensive Plan is a public policy statement that the County's intent is to maintain and support agricultural activities. In addition, the PPA needs to consider the location of the most productive farm and forest lands based on soils data and knowledge of those resources. Designating a PPA establishes a goal to preserve 80% of the remaining undeveloped lands within that area for agricultural and forestry uses.

Characteristics of the PPA

The PPA contains 134,168 acres and includes three major rural parts of the county. The Cobb Neck Area is predominantly farm and forest land. Row crop farming is the focal agricultural use in this area. Dominant soil types include Beltsville Silt Loam, Annemessex Silt Loam and Dodon Fine Sandy Loam soils, which are considered productive class II soils by the USDA Soil Survey. Historically, these areas were prime lands for tobacco production, but have since transitioned to small grain, livestock and direct farm marketing of produce and agri-tourism. The Nanjemoy Peninsula area is the second area where the largest hardwood forests are located and contains other large tracts of land, some of which are in State ownership as parks and conservation lands. The third area is the Mattawoman Creek, which includes a majority of the watershed except for the eastern end which is developed. These three areas constitute the Priority Preservation Area policy for Charles County, with a focus on saving a majority of our rural resource farm and forest lands for the future. (See Figure 11-1)

A portion of the Cobb Neck PPA contains a significant Amish community which extends into northern St. Mary's County. This community has a long history of land ownership within this area, retaining its farm and forest land and rural character. This community continues to expand and is expected to continue to be a stabilizing force to the land base and agricultural economy of the area.

Figure 11-1 Priority Preservation Area



PPA Program Evaluation

Table 11-1 shows the current land status of the PPA. As of 2016, approximately 107,523 acres are undeveloped. The protection goal is 80% of this remaining undeveloped land, or 86,018 acres. Approximately 52,201 acres are already protected, leaving 33,817 acres to be protected to meet the 80 percent goal.

The total land base (or pool of land) from which this 33,817 acres must be protected is 55,322 acres (107,523 acres undeveloped minus 52,201 acres protected). In other words, the goal must be to protect 61 percent of this area.

Table 11-1 Priority Preservation Area Land Status

	Land Category	PPA
1	Total Area	134,168
2	Developed + Committed (subdivided)	26,645
3	Not Developed (1-2)	107,523
4	Protection Goal (#3*0.80)	86,018
5	Already Protected	52,201
6	Remaining Acreage that needs to be Protected to Meet Protection Goal (4-5)	33,817
7	Pool of Land Available for Protection (3-5)	55,322
8	Percent of Pool to be protected (6/7)	61%

The adoption of the Tier Map in 2014, designating the PPA as Tier IV, enabled the County to stabilize the land base in this area by limiting subdivisions on septic systems within the PPA to minor subdivisions. This will allow for the time necessary to preserve land through conservation easements, the transfer of development rights and purchase of development rights programs before land is converted to uses other than agriculture and forestry. As a part of this plan, and to further stabilize the land base, the County will downzone major stream valleys to a density of one unit per ten acres and also establish a density of one unit per twenty acres for the Watershed Conservation District (which contains the Mattawoman Priority Preservation Area).

The County will develop criteria to focus the use of farmland conservation funds and various programs (including the newly formed Purchase of Development Rights, PDR Program) as a priority area for those properties within the PPA. Targeting the use of conservation easement funding opportunities to PPA lands can help limit the rate of agricultural lands being converted to other land uses. The County’s “Right to Farm” Ordinance, adopted in May 2000, will protect agricultural uses from residential nuisance complaints and support the ability of working farms to practice farming.

Over the past several years, Charles County has experienced the most active and successful agricultural land preservation program to date. During the Fiscal Year 2013 Cycle for conservation easement acquisition through the MD Agricultural Land Preservation Foundation, Charles County preserved 1,091 acres of farm and forest land. For the Fiscal Year 2015 cycle, the County partnered with MALPF to preserve an additional 1,316 acres. This rate of land preserved is among the highest in the State through the MALPF Program, with 89% of the 2,407 acres occurring within the PPA. A similar achievement is anticipated for the Fiscal Year 2017 acquisition cycle as the County continues to experience high levels of voluntary interest from landowners to preserve their productive agricultural and forest land. With an estimated rate of 800 acres per year protected within the PPA through MALPF, the Transfer of Development Rights (TDR) and the Purchase of Development

Rights (PDR) Programs, it would take 14 years to reach the 80% protection goal, which is achievable.

Priority Preservation Area Policies

- Policy 1: Protect and preserve 80% of the remaining undeveloped lands within the designated PPA.
- Policy 2: Prioritize land preservation acquisitions through the MD Agricultural Land Preservation Foundation (MALPF) and County Purchase of Development Rights (PDR) Programs in the PPA.
- Policy 3: Fully fund agricultural land preservation programs to maximize the ability to leverage matching funds from MALPF and to purchase and retire a consistent number of transferrable development rights annually.

Forestry, Timberland

Charles County historically has been, and currently remains the third most forested county by acres in Maryland. The County is one of the leading producers of quality saw timber in the State. As noted in Chapter 2, forested lands are the dominant land use in Charles County comprising approximately 56 percent of the land area. These forestlands are often found on farms. In 2008 Charles County ranked 2nd in the state for industrial hardwood production and 6th in the state for timber production (Table 11-1).

Table 11-1 Industrial Roundwood Production

Industrial roundwood production, (thousand cubic feet)				
	Charles County	Maryland	Charles County as % of State Total	Rank in State
Hardwoods	1,816	19,089	10%	2nd
Softwoods	200	10,010	2%	8th
Total	2,016	29,099	7%	6th

Notes: Industrial roundwood production is the quantity of industrial roundwood harvested in a geographic area plus all industrial roundwood exported to other geographical areas. Roundwood is Logs, bolts, or other round sections cut from trees (including chips from roundwood).

Source: Maryland Timber Industry: An Assessment of Timber Product Output and Use 2008 US Department of Agriculture Forest Service, Northern Research Station Resource Bulletin NRS-64

The promotion and development of the forest industry, in Charles County, could help landowners earn additional income from their property as well as make land preservation options more attractive. One promising activity is the certification of privately-owned forest land through third party organizations such as the Forest Stewardship Council (FSC) and the Sustainable Forest Initiative². Certification means that the wood products are produced sustainably, that is in ways that maintain ecological functions. These certified wood products tend to earn landowners a higher price for their wood. There are currently about 3,000 acres of certified forest land in Charles County. A key need is wood processing facilities. There are currently at least four sawmills in Charles County.

² Daniels, 2011. See prior footnote.

Aside from traditional forestry, forest lands provide a broad range of ecosystem services that benefit the public. In an ecosystem services market, the beneficiaries or consumers of an ecosystem service, often consisting of a business or government entity, financially compensate landowners for environmental actions, products, and performances that result in the desired service. An example of an ecosystem service is carbon sequestration. In determining a dollar value for these services, forest land preservation can provide another source of revenue for landowners. In the future, a broader range of opportunities may exist for landowners to receive compensation for the environmental services that forests provide.

Fisheries

A diverse list of resident and migratory finfish and shellfish species inhabit tidal portions of the Chesapeake Bay and its tributaries. These waters make up an extensive part of the County's shoreline. Many of these species sustain valuable commercial and recreational fisheries. On the commercial side, most notable are the Blue Crab, Eastern Oyster and Striped Bass.

Many of the county's farmers and rural landowners supplement their income from these local fisheries. During the summer months, much time is devoted to crabbing, while winter months are devoted to tonging for oysters and fishing commercially for striped bass. The lower Potomac, Patuxent and Wicomico Rivers have historically provided productive grounds to support these fisheries.

The Striped Bass and Large Mouth Bass fisheries also sustain opportunities for recreational anglers. These fisheries draw high-profile tournaments and anglers from all over the country, focused around the tidal Potomac River and its tributaries.

The County is home to some of the most productive spawning areas in the Chesapeake Bay Watershed. Most notable are Mattawoman Creek and Zekiah Swamp Run, which have been recognized by the State as ranking among the highest for biodiversity.

The County's zoning laws designate areas for loading, unloading, and processing finfish and shellfish, as well as docking and mooring commercial fishing boats and vessels. Commercial fishing is permitted in most of the rural zoning districts. Onsite processing is also permitted with conditions in rural zoning districts (not in village zones). Off-site processing is permitted in CC, CV, IG and some mixed use zones. Overall, there appears to be adequate land, especially in the rural areas, for facilities to support commercial operations. This ranges from docks to vessel storage to product processing and distribution.

Policies and Actions

Policies

Agriculture, Forestry, and Fisheries

- 11.1 Agriculture, forestry, and fisheries are core targeted industries essential for job creation and the future quality of life of county residents. Minimize conflicts with other uses, especially residential.
- 11.2 Maintain the farmer's right-to-farm.
- 11.3 Support marketing programs for the County's diverse agricultural offerings.

- 11.4 Assist farmers to maintain an economically viable agricultural and forest industry.
- 11.5 Support the ability of commercial watermen and recreational fishermen to have access to sustainable fisheries.
- 11.6 Focus agricultural preservation programs to those areas with a land use and zoning of Agricultural Conservation and designated Priority Preservation Areas (PPA).

Actions

Agriculture, Forestry, and Fisheries

1. To supplement the existing land preservation programs the County offers, create a county purchase of development rights program using bond funding, a county transfer tax and/or additional sources to insure a dedicated funding source for the program. If a transfer tax is utilized, 50% of the money could be used for land preservation and 50% could be used to fund infrastructure in Priority Funding Areas to promote growth away from resource based industries. Assign the Agricultural Land Preservation Advisory Board authority to oversee and make recommendations regarding operation of the program.
2. Explore the use of a revolving loan fund for land trusts to acquire and protect properties in farming areas. Establish a budget sufficient to start this preservation tool.
3. Revise the TDR program to incentivize their use, including amendments to the Forest Conservation Ordinance to allow TDRs from forested properties to satisfy requirements of the Forest Conservation Act. Continue to designate productive agricultural and forest land as sending areas for TDRs. Establish a workgroup to examine ways to balance TDR supply and demand as related to sending and receiving areas and make specific recommendations.
4. Expand the function and role of the existing Agricultural Land Preservation Advisory Board to monitor issues related to agriculture, forestry and fisheries. Include a charge to the Board to meet with state and local agencies that work with these natural resource based industries and report at least annually to the County Commissioners.
5. Conduct a review of regulations to make it easier for agriculture, forestry and seafood businesses to prosper, including:
 - a. Policies for agricultural worker housing.
 - b. Allowing processing facilities for livestock.
 - c. Promoting the development of Charles County's forest industry.
 - d. Amending the zoning ordinance to specifically allow value-added processing, agri-tourism, and ecotourism uses.
6. Consider developing an area plan for key rural and eco-sensitive areas, to support implementation of the Comprehensive Plan and the Land Preservation, Parks, and Recreation Plan.
7. Work closely with the Southern Maryland Agricultural Development Commission (SMADC) to grow the agricultural, forestry and seafood economies in Charles County and Southern Maryland. Consider hiring a full time Agricultural Marketing Specialist if the role of SMADC diminishes.
8. Review the County's Right to Farm Ordinance to insure it is current and works to retain farm owner's property rights.

9. Work with the Board of Education to encourage agriculture classes in the public schools and the return of the Future Farmers of America Program.
10. Review regulations and recommend changes that would assist in retaining family members who continue farming operations.
11. Explore methods to retain large contiguous tracts of forest and discourage their fragmentation.
12. Promote sustainable forest industries and the use of forest stewardship planning throughout the County.
13. Encourage aquaculture enterprises, including the participation in the MD Department of Natural Resource's Oyster Gardening Program.