

Designating Farmland of Local Importance

in Massachusetts



What is Farmland of Local Importance?

Farmland of Local Importance is land that is locally important for crop production, but not categorized as prime farmland, unique farmland, or farmland of statewide importance.

- **Prime Farmland** is that land which is best suited for agriculture and defined by national soil property and climatic criteria.
- **Unique Farmland** has characteristics distinctive to the production of a specific crop such as cranberries.
- **Farmland of Statewide Importance** is suited to crop production but lacks all the criteria required for prime. The applicable state agricultural agency sets the criteria for this category.
- **Farmland of Local Importance** is defined in the Code of Federal Regulations as follows:

In some local areas there is concern for certain additional farmlands for the production of food, feed, fiber, forage, and oilseed crops, even though these lands are not identified as having national or statewide importance. Where appropriate, these lands are to be identified by the local agency or agencies concerned. In places, additional farmlands of local importance may include tracts of land that have been designated for agriculture by local ordinance.

These important farmland designations are based on land and soil characteristics, and availability for agricultural use. The designations may apply to cropland, pastureland, hay land, or forest land, but not urban built-up land.

How are important farmlands identified?

The USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) maintains the Soil Survey, which is the inventory of the nation's soil resources. The Soil Survey is comprised of maps depicting predominant soil characteristics, soil property information, and interpretations as to suitability for various land uses. The map delineations are referred to as Soil Survey map units.

Prime farmland and farmland of statewide importance criteria are applied to soil property information to generate a list of the Soil Survey map units for these important farmland classes throughout the state. Soil Survey map units that have the specialized characteristics for crops with distinctive needs are designated unique farmlands in applicable areas within the state.

A local agency has the role of identifying locally important farmland, per the Code of Federal Regulations. The term "local" is not specifically defined. Precedent suggests a municipality or town would fulfill that role, but it could include other politically defined areas.

NRCS provides leadership for inventories of important farmlands and ensures criteria are met. In Massachusetts, NRCS is proactive in recognizing all important farmlands.



The American Farmland Trust, in partnership with the NRCS, is facilitating the identification and recognition of Farmland of Local Importance.

We can assist with identifying those Soil Survey map units that may have potential for designation as Farmland of Local Importance and facilitate the process.

Why designate Farmland of Local Importance?

Recognizing Farmland of Local Importance may help save farms!

The USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) is charged with the inventory of the Nation's important farmlands, information that is crucial to ensuring the productive capacity of American agriculture.

The important farmlands inventory is applied to farmland preservation programs. To qualify for the Agricultural Land Easement component of the NRCS Agricultural Conservation Easement Program (ACEP), a farm must have more than 50 percent important farmland soils. The recognition of farmland of local importance may help landowners, land trusts, and other entities protect working farms.

"The Nation needs to know the extent and location of the best land for producing food, feed, fiber, forage, and oilseed crops." – Code of Federal Regulations



The Farmland of Local Importance designation process

Action	By whom?	More info
1. Recognize agricultural lands not classified as prime or unique farmland, or farmland of statewide importance.	Any town official or commission concerned with farmland protection and open space, land trust, or ACEP program partner may appeal to NRCS for assistance.	Important farmland classes are provided at Web Soil Survey https://websoilsurvey.sc.egov.usda.gov
2. Compile evidence of suitability to produce food, feed, fiber, forage and/or oilseed crops. Crop production includes cultivated crops, perennial fruit and nut crops, hay and other feed crops, and improved pasture.	NRCS. Local knowledge may be needed to verify land use.	Evidence may include aerial imagery or other documentation of crop history.
3. Evaluate the Soil Survey map unit associated with the land in question for land use history and mapping accuracy throughout the locality.	NRCS	The evaluation process may extend to multiple map units where the potential for additional farmlands of local importance is recognized.
4. Consider concerns regarding conservation tenets.	NRCS	For example, ensuring that the important farmland designation will not compromise the wetland conservation compliance provisions of the federal Food Security Act.
5. Verify those Soil Survey map units that meet criteria for Farmland of Local Importance, with qualifiers as applicable.	NRCS	For example, Soil Survey map units on steep slopes that are highly erodible if disturbed may be qualified as Farmland of Local Importance where suitable for hay or perennial fruit production.
6. Sign a document identifying the Soil Survey map units as Farmland of Local Importance within the locality.	The NRCS State Conservationist and the local agency/municipal representative	The designation is recorded in the NRCS Field Office Technical Guide (https://www.nrcs.usda.gov/wps/portal/nrcs/main/national/technical/foftg/) which is available to the public.

NRCS inventories of important farmland soils do not constitute a designation of any land area to a specific land use.

For more information and assistance:

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Web Soil Survey:
websoilsurvey.sc.egov.usda.gov

NRCS Massachusetts soils information:
www.nrcs.usda.gov/wps/portal/nrcs/main/ma/soils/

Source of definitions and policy information: Code of Federal Regulations; Title 7 – Agriculture; Volume: 6; Date: 2012-01-01; Title: Subpart A - Important Farmlands Inventory.



Land that does not meet criteria for Prime Farmland or Farmland of Statewide Importance due to limitations such as steep slopes may be suited for orchard or hay production and qualify as Farmland of Local Importance.