Farmland classification of soils identifies land that has the best combination of physical and chemical characteristics for producing food, feed, fiber, forage, and oilseed crops, and is available for such use. For land to meet the soils eligibility criteria for NRCS's Agricultural Conservation Easement Program – Agricultural Land Easement (ACEP-ALE) program, the parcel must contain at least 50 percent prime, unique, statewide important soils, or farmland of local importance (Conservation Programs Manual, 440-528-M, 1st Ed., Amend. 131, Feb 2020). In Massachusetts, Prime Farmland, Farmland of Statewide Importance, and Unique Farmland are designated by soil survey map unit and recognized in the official soil survey data available on Web Soil Survey (WSS). Farmland of Local Importance (FLI) is not mapped or differentiated as a separate farmland class in WSS. FLI is designated on a municipality basis.

Farmland of Local Importance (FLI)

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 as Farmland of Local Importance (FLI) by the local agency or agencies concerned (Code of Federal Regulations, Title 7, Part 657). For more information about designating FLI, please refer to the Farmland of Local Importance Fact Sheet.

If a municipality has identified FLI, these areas may be included in the calculation of important farmland acres for the purpose of ACEP-ALE eligibility and ranking.

Typically, soil survey map units that are not classed as prime farmland, unique farmland, or farmland of statewide importance represent landscape positions and soils that have significant limitations for crop production. The atypical portions of these soil survey map units that are suitable for crop production are recognized as FLI. Each soil survey map unit listed as FLI has associated qualifiers or qualifying conditions that distinguish areas suited for crop production from those with significant limitations for production. In addition, for some soil survey map units, qualifiers address wetland and erodibility concerns.

After the designation of FLI for a municipality is approved by the NRCS State Conservationist of Massachusetts and posted to the NRCS Field Office Technical Guide (https://efotg.sc.egov.usda.gov/#/state/MA/documents/section=2&folder=62902), areas within the designated soil survey map units may be considered "possible FLI". The

land represented by the "possible FLI" soil survey map units must be reviewed to ensure they meet FLI qualifying conditions. These FLI qualifying conditions are a part of the definition of FLI.

NRCS must verify that FLI qualifiers are met for FLI to be considered as part of ACEP-ALE eligibility and ranking. Verification requests should be routed to Massachusetts NRCS easements staff (Natashi Sawabi at Natashia.sawabi@usda.gov) who can verify or route inquiries to a qualified individual identified by the Massachusetts NRCS State Soil Scientist. This verification ensures that federal farmland protection funding is directed to land that is suited for crop production and compliant with the wetland and highly erodible land conservation provisions of the Food Security Act of 1985 and subsequent amendments. Verified acreage of FLI will be recorded as a spatial data layer, retained for internal NRCS use and may be shared on a parcel basis with the applicable program partner.

The following guidance can be applied to assist in determining if FLI is present on a parcel of land:

1. Determine if the parcel or area of interest includes "possible FLI" soil survey map units.
    a. Has the municipality designated a list of FLI soil survey map units? Refer to NRCS Field Office Technical Guide Section 2 for a list of towns with FLI map units. *(https://efotg.sc.egov.usda.gov/#/state/MA/documents/section=2&folder=62902)*
        1. If the municipality is not listed, FLI is not considered.
        2. If the municipality is listed:
            a. use Web Soil Survey to create a map and legend of the soil survey map units within the area of interest. Refer to the list of soil survey map units designated as FLI for that municipality to determine if the area of interest includes "possible FLI": *(https://efotg.sc.egov.usda.gov/#/state/MA/documents/section=2&folder=62902)*
            or
            b. use the Massachusetts Farmland of Local Importance Screening Tool (FLI Screening Tool)

2. If "possible FLI" soil survey map units are included in the area of interest, read and apply the qualifiers listed in the designation document for the municipality with assistance from the guidance below. Acreage of a soil survey map unit that meets the FLI qualifiers can be included in the calculations of important farmland acres.

a. **For areas of "possible FLI" soil survey map units that have historically supported viable crop production**, FLI qualifying conditions may be met where there is evidence of crop production with the following restrictions:
    1. Water table is not shallower than 15 inches during May through October; and infrequent (less often than once in 2 years) or no flooding during May through October. Determination of depth to the water table requires expertise in interpreting soil morphology or monitoring wells.
    2. Land is in compliance with applicable wetland regulations where the crop production is cranberries.
    3. Disturbed areas such as gravel pits, that were reclaimed for crop production should meet soil safety standards for food/feed/forage production to be considered FLI.
    4. Crop production on slopes greater than 15 percent is limited to hay, perennial fruit, or improved pasture.

b. **For areas of "possible FLI" soil survey map units that lack evidence of crop production,** FLI qualifying conditions may be met where the "possible FLI" soil survey map units encompass lands that lack recent evidence of management for crop production, such as reforested pastures and old fields that are now woodland. In these cases, verifying FLI qualifiers requires accurate application of National Cooperative Soil Survey standards for important farmland soils as defined for Massachusetts. Portions of "possible FLI" soil survey map units in woodland that meet criteria for prime farmland or farmland of statewide importance meet qualifiers for FLI. Refer to the standards for important farmland soils found in Section 2 of the NRCS Field Office Technical Guide: https://efotg.sc.egov.usda.gov/references/public/MA/FarmlandSoilClassesofMassachusettsFINAL.pdf

Note: these instructions are intended to assist with an initial assessment of whether "possible FLI" soil survey map units are likely to meet FLI qualifiers on a particular parcel. NRCS must verify that FLI qualifying conditions are met for FLI to be considered as part of ACEP-ALE eligibility and ranking.

In partnership with USDA-NRCS, American Farmland Trust (AFT) has developed a web-based mapping portal called the Massachusetts Farmland of Local Importance Screening Tool. This Screening Tool may be helpful for partner entities and researchers to view "possible FLI" soil survey map units and assess FLI qualifiers. Click here for information about how the FLI Screening Tool was created. Click here to request access to the FLI Screening Tool.

Definitions:

Agricultural Conservation Easement Program-Agricultural Land Easement (ACEP-ALE) – A program of the USDA NRCS that protects the agricultural viability of eligible land. In compensation for limiting nonagricultural uses, the landowner receives the market value, less the agricultural value of the land. USDA NRCS provides matching funding with a partner entity. Program eligibility is based in part on soil suitability for crop production.

Crop production - the process of managing land to grow and harvest food, feed, fiber, forage, and/or oilseed crops including fertilizing, pest control, irrigation, cultivating, and preparation for planting as applicable to the crop, and harvesting to maintain viable yields without causing excessive erosion. In addition to row crops, crop production includes hay and other feed crops, perennial fruit and nut crops, and improved pasture.

Farmland class – The soil survey assigns farmland class based on characteristics representative of each soil survey map unit. Farmland class is applied to ACEP-ALE eligibility. The farmland classes in Massachusetts soil surveys are …

> **Prime farmland** – soils well suited for crop production as defined by national soil property and climatic criteria.
>
> **Farmland of statewide importance** – soils suited for crop production but lacking all the criteria required for prime farmland soils.
>
> **Farmland of unique importance** – soils other than prime farmland and farmland of statewide importance with characteristics distinctive to the production of a specific crop. In Massachusetts farmland of unique importance are those soils suited for cranberry production.
>
> **Not prime farmland** – soils that do not meet the criteria for prime farmland, farmland of statewide importance, or farmland of unique importance.

Farmland of Local Importance - 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. (Code of Federal Regulations, Title 7, Part 657)

Improved pasture - grazing lands that are not in crop rotation and are planted primarily to forage species that receive periodic renovation and/or cultural treatments such as tillage, fertilization, mowing, and weed control.

Soil survey – The mapping and classification of the nation's soil resources. NRCS has the leadership role for soil survey. Massachusetts soil survey areas are separated by county, or parts of county boundaries.

Soil survey map unit - a collection of areas defined and named the same in terms of their soil components, miscellaneous areas, or both, and delineated on soil survey maps.

USDA, Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) - Federal agency that provides technical and financial assistance to agricultural producers to protect natural resources.