

Why Plan for Agriculture?



AUGUSTA COUNTY, VA (USDA/BOB NICHOLS)

From the Chesapeake Bay to the Blue Ridge Mountains, nearly 40,000 farms on over 7 million acres sustain Virginia's abundant agrarian landscape. The Commonwealth's largest private industry, agriculture sustains a wealth of economic, environmental, and cultural benefits. It provides food, fiber, and other basic needs. It supports fiscal balance. It boosts recreation and tourism. And it connects us to our history.

The Founding Fathers praised small farms for building a stronger and more independent nation. They promoted sound stewardship by rotating crops and using compost to improve soil health and increase production. But today, Virginia's farms are under threat, challenged by competition for land and markets and the uncertainties of volatile weather. "Planning for agriculture" is a way communities can leverage their rural and agricultural assets to prosper and thrive.

Agriculture is an Economic Engine

Agriculture is the cornerstone of Virginia's economy. Among the nation's most diverse farming sectors, its 38,995 farms produced a market value of nearly \$5.5 billion in 2022. Leading the way are its top three

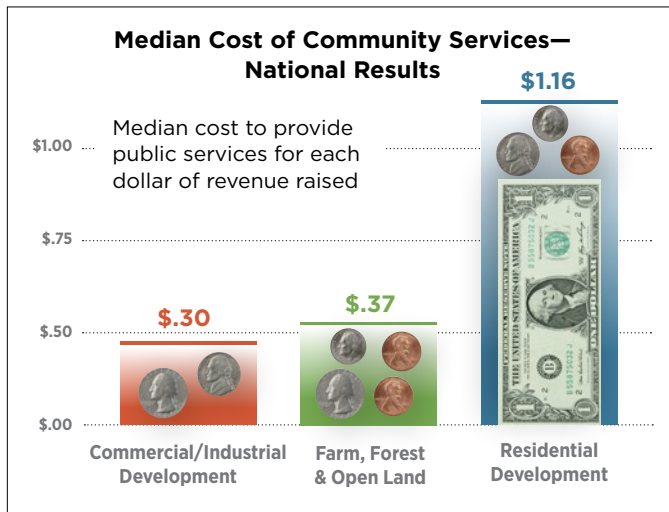
commodities: broilers with \$1.6B of farm cash receipts, cattle and calves with \$482M, and turkeys with \$454M.¹

Including the added value of goods and services, agriculture has a total annual economic impact of over \$80 billion—about 7.4% of Virginia's GDP. It supports over 380,000 jobs from the farms themselves and the support businesses that process, market, and distribute farm products.² In addition, for every dollar invested on the ground, federal conservation dollars added value of about \$1.10 to Virginia's economy.³ And a study of the total economic activity stimulated by Virginia's agritourism sector estimated it at approximately \$2.2 billion.⁴

As the Commonwealth's largest private industry, the health of Virginia's cities, counties, and towns depends on a thriving agricultural economy.

Farmland Supports the Local Tax Base

Virginia's farmland supports the local tax base. On average across seven counties, every dollar of property tax revenue generated by working and open lands required only 42 cents back in community services, whereas a dollar from residential development required \$1.20 back in services.



These findings are consistent with those from more than 150 Cost of Community Service Studies (COCS) from across the country that find farmland contributes more property tax revenue than it receives back in public services, even when land is enrolled in Use Assessment programs. In contrast, residential development costs more in services than it provides in revenues. Like commercial/industrial land uses, farmland helps balance community coffers and keep property taxes down.

Farmland is an Essential Natural Resource

Virginia's 7.3 million acres of farmland⁵ are an essential natural resource. They absorb and filter stormwater and help defend against a changing climate. A California study found that farmland emits 58–70 times fewer greenhouse gases (GHGs) per acre than developed land;⁶ in New York, a similar study found that farmland emits 66 times fewer GHGs per acre than developed land.⁷

Diversified farming systems and conservation practices offer many ecological benefits—from soil fertility and pollination to wildlife habitat, clean drinking water and fire suppression. In short, well-managed farmland enhances biodiversity without diminishing yields.^{8 9}

Farming is Important to Virginia's History and Character

Farms and farmers have had an indelible impact on local communities.

Beyond economics, they provide scenic landscapes and sustain rural culture. Whether in the mountains of Southwest Virginia, the rolling hills of the Shenandoah Valley, the rich soils of the Tidewater area, or the Piedmont's fertile plateaus, they are integral to Virginia's character and history.



USDA/LANCE CHEUNG

American democracy was founded on the principal that people can own property and make a living from the land. From Washington, Jefferson, and Madison—the nation's "founding farmers" who called Virginia home—to the diverse agrarians who farm today, agriculture is the foundation of our food systems and a hallmark of distinctive rural landscapes. Vital to Virginia's heritage, it is a source of pride for its people and a legacy to pass on to future generations.

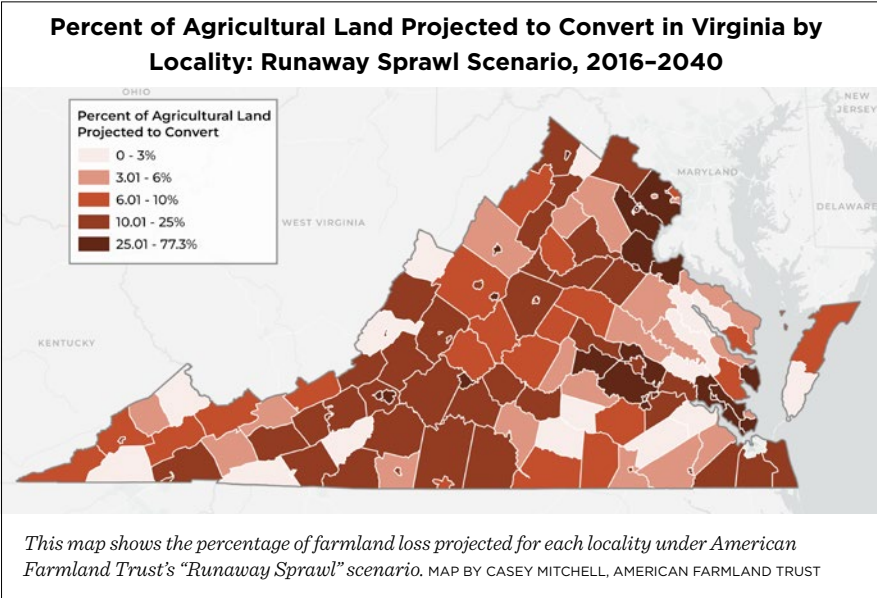


CHESAPEAKE BAY PROGRAM

Virginia’s Agriculture is Under Threat

Virginia agriculture faces an uncertain future. The state lost 18% of its farms between 2012 and 2022; land in farms fell by 1 million acres.¹⁰ While it is unclear what happened to all this farmland, what is known is that the remaining farms are threatened by high land values and real estate development, volatile markets and weather, labor shortages, supply chain disruptions, and consolidation both within agriculture and agricultural markets.

According to AFT research, Virginia ranks sixth nationally in the percentage of farmland converted to low density residential development—and 11th for overall farmland conversion. Nearly half of the conversion occurred on the state’s best quality farmland.¹¹ Beyond scattered, large lot housing development, utility scale solar, warehouses, and data centers are devouring farmland. Dubbed “Data Center Alley,” Northern Virginia is the nation’s largest hub with over 100 data centers which house hardware used to store, process, manage, and deliver large amounts of data. As more people, businesses, and government agencies use Artificial Intelligence and adopt digital technologies, the need for data centers will continue to grow. Without thoughtful planning, these various pressures will drive run-away sprawl and the conversion of



another 836,200 acres by 2040. But with better planning and farmland protection, that number could be reduced by more than half a million acres.¹²

Given these pressures, farm real estate values are rising fast—up 10.4% from 2023 to 2024¹³ and 35.4% since 2014.¹⁴ This makes it hard for young and beginning farmers to secure land and enter the field. With 40% of Virginia’s farmers age 65 and older, and only 8% under age 35, this raises urgent questions about who will farm in the future. While the number of beginning farmers increased almost 8% from 2017, their average age was 48.6—younger than the average of all farmers, but still middle-aged.¹⁵

Change in Market Value from 2017 to 2022

MARKET VALUE OF AGRICULTURAL PRODUCTS SOLD AND GOVERNMENT PAYMENTS				
ECONOMIC CLASS	NUMBER OF OPERATIONS 2022	NUMBER OF OPERATIONS 2017	CHANGE	
Less than \$25,000	28,879	33,038	-14%	
\$25,00–\$50,000	3,466	3,524	-2%	
\$50,000–\$99,999	2,110	2,182	-3%	
\$100,000–\$249,000	1,552	1,723	-11%	
\$250,000–\$499,999	879	972	-11%	
\$500,000–\$999,999	811	876	-8%	
\$1,000,000–\$2,499,999	796	677		15%
\$2,500,000–\$4,999,999	351	162		54%
\$5,000,000 or more	151	71		53%
Total	38,995	43,225	-11%	

Data derived from the 2022 Census of Agriculture—State Data, Table 2: Market Value of Agricultural Products Sold Including Food Marketing Practices and Value-Added Products: 2022 and 2017.

Farm economics are tough. For example, on average, farmers only receive \$0.16 of every consumer dollar spent on food.¹⁶ Most of Virginia's farms are small and rely on off-farm income, but even mid-sized farms are struggling. The only farms that are increasing are those with \$1 million or more in market value—especially those with \$2.5 million or more.

The threat to small commercial and mid-sized farms is of particular concern. Representing the vast majority of Virginia's farms, they buy local inputs and equipment and hire local people, supporting local economies. Often the backbone of rural communities, they are associated with civic engagement and more equitable income distribution.¹⁷ And they are more likely to supply food for their communities.¹⁸ Indeed, the Covid-19 pandemic was a wake-up call. For the first time in a generation, American consumers experienced food shortages. Local and regional food systems pivoted quickly to fill gaps, offering communities a hedge against global supply chain disruptions.^{19 20 21}

Finally, Virginia agriculture is already experiencing the effects of an increasingly volatile climate. Farmers are grappling with more intense rainfall and flooding on one hand and more sustained heat and droughts on the other. These trends put pressure on livestock, affect farmers and farm workers, and reduce crop yields. In addition, sea levels are rising faster than in the past, threatening coastal communities, especially Hampton Roads.^{22 23}

Planning for agriculture can address these threats. With community support, vision, and a proactive game plan, Virginia's vital agricultural sector can meet the challenges of the 21st century and continue to provide a wide range of benefits to its people and communities.

Failing to Plan is Planning to Fail

Planning is a process to create a road map for actions and decisions to achieve a future vision. In the public sector, planning is a profession and practice to optimize the health, safety, and wellbeing of people in communities. It occurs at many levels, from cities and towns to counties, states, and regions. And it encompasses a wide range of specialties: from land use, transportation, and housing to economic development, hazard mitigation,



REBECCA DROBIS

and historic preservation, among many others.

Planning for agriculture is a way to sustain Virginia's farms, farmers, and farmland and help them thrive. Addressed either as a stand-alone activity or as an element in other kinds of plans, it offers a path forward to retain and protect farmland, strengthen agricultural viability, and conserve natural resources. Toward these ends, it relies on the active participation of the people it most affects—especially farmers. (See [How to Plan for Agriculture in Virginia.](#))

Plans for agriculture are based on a community's shared vision for the future.

They can steer new real estate development away from working farms, reduce regulatory barriers, identify market opportunities and infrastructure needs, and protect soil and water. They can also respond to the larger social, economic, and environmental issues which affect agriculture. These issues are connected and complex, so it is important to align planning for agriculture with other planning efforts.

NOTES

For a list of references, [click here.](#)

To Learn More

- › [USDA National Agricultural Statistics Service: "Virginia: 2022 Census of Agriculture"](#)
- › [American Farmland Trust: "Why Save Farmland?"](#)
- › [American Farmland Trust: "About Planning for Agriculture"](#)
- › [Julia Freedgood, *Planning Sustainable and Resilient Food Systems: From Soil to Soil*](#)
- › [UVA Weldon Cooper Center for Public Service: "The Economic Impact of Agriculture and Forest Industries in Virginia"](#)
- › [USDA National Agricultural Statistics Service: "Virginia—Historical Highlights: 2022 and Earlier Census Years"](#)
- › [American Farmland Trust: "Regenerate Virginia"](#)