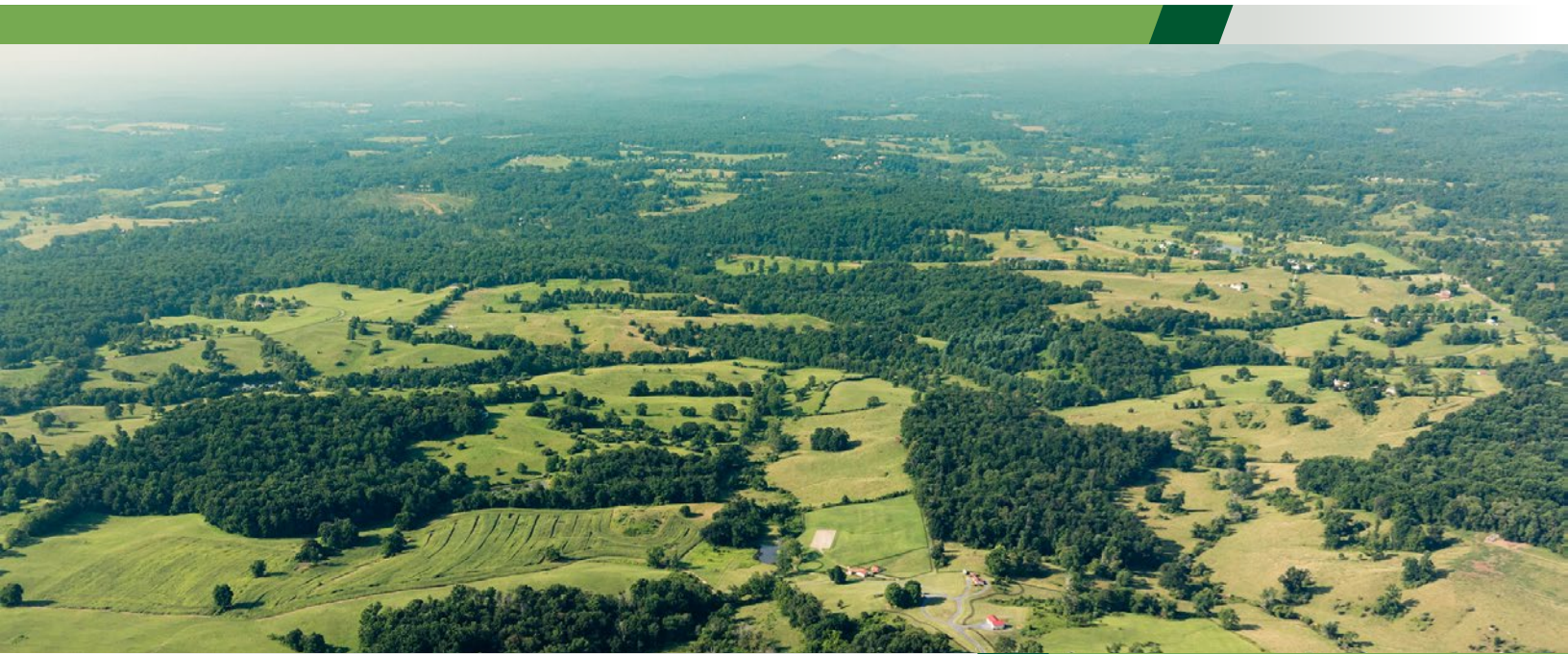
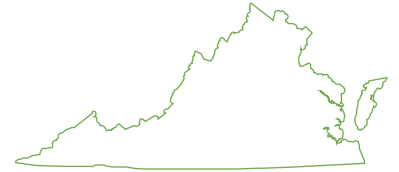


Zoning to Protect Farmland



WILL PARSON/CHESAPEAKE BAY PROGRAM

Many communities have large-lot rural-residential or rural-agricultural zones that allow farming activities but do not prioritize them. While some small farms may survive in these zones, they do not protect agricultural land. Instead, they often fragment the agricultural land base and lay the ground for future urbanization.

Zoning to protect farmland defines agriculture as the preferred land use and limits activities that interfere with commercial farm production. It sets performance standards for accessory and ancillary uses and may or may not regulate lot size. The following approaches can be used to protect farmland for farming and promote thoughtful growth.

Agricultural Protection Zones

Intended to protect high quality soils and support the farm economy, Agricultural Protection Zoning (APZ) directs new development away from areas with working farms and towards settled areas with community infrastructure.

Common forms of APZ:

- › *Area-based allocations* prioritize agriculture but allow some residential development. The allocations

generally are based on acreage or percentages of the total parcel—for example, a 90/10 ratio of farmland to development.

- › *Sliding-scale zoning* is based on farm size. The larger the parcel, the more buildings allowed. For example, a 20-acre parcel might allow one or two dwellings while a 200-acre parcel might allow 10. Ordinances often reward soil quality, adjust road frontage requirements, and/or require clustering to retain as much farmland as possible.
- › *Effective or Exclusive* agricultural zoning limits land uses to farming and/or ranching and to operations that support it. Some communities reduce property taxes for farms in these zones. *Intensive Agricultural Zones* are the most restrictive, only allowing dwellings related to the farming operation.
- › *Fixed density* agricultural zoning generally is based on current land use patterns. It limits development on very large lots based on typical farm size—for example, one house for every 25, 40, 80, or more acres.

Agricultural Overlay Zones

Agricultural overlay zones (AOZ) are a type of overlay zone specifically designed to protect agricultural resources. Used to create, strengthen, or waive existing

provisions without redrafting entire zoning ordinances, they can be more or less restrictive than the base zone. They often are created to reduce conflicts between farmers and non-farm neighbors and/or to identify priority areas within zones to support the business of agriculture.

Most AOZs protect high quality agricultural soils and support the farm economy. They may be used to sustain farms in zones where agriculture is not a preferred land use, or to allow associated commercial, marketing, and light industrial uses like farmers markets, farm supply and equipment enterprises, value-added processing, and so on. They can be used as a [Transfer of Development Rights sending zone](#).

Buffers and Setbacks

Buffers and setbacks create distance between farms and non-farm neighbors to reduce conflicts, trespassing, and vandalism. They also protect natural resources. Buffers are often vegetative to reduce the spread of dust, noise, smells, and ways working farms may bother nonfarm neighbors. They also can be used to protect soils, waterways, and sensitive habitats from agricultural runoff. *Conservation buffers* include wildlife corridors, greenways, windbreaks, and filter strips. *Riparian buffers* contain perennial plants, shrubs, and/or trees to protect adjacent waterways and can be managed to produce a harvestable crop.

Buffer ordinances may have standards on vegetative materials, require a minimum width or density, or vary requirements based on the type and purpose of the buffer. Ordinances also may require setbacks, which are the distance between a farm and neighboring property, a natural resource like a wetland, or other areas. They often are between 100 and 200 feet.

Ordinances regulate setbacks and buffers in many ways. They may require one, the other, or both between existing farms and abutting new development. They may limit requirements to certain types of farms or development. Some combine them and require a buffer within a setback, while others simply require a minimum buffer distance.



BOB NICHOLS/USDA

Urban Agriculture Zones

Zoning for urban agriculture addresses farming on vacant lots and small parcels, as well as rooftops, hoop houses, and greenhouses. It also may address vertical agriculture which takes place in warehouses, shipping containers, and other buildings—including skyscrapers. Cities often use agricultural overlay zones to indicate what kinds of agricultural activities are allowed in appropriate places, while others have created dedicated urban agriculture zones. Considerations are similar to rural agricultural zoning but are more likely to address the built environment and extend to charitable, educational, and other non-commercial activities.

Enterprise Zones

Enterprise zones are distinct, economically distressed parts of a county, city or town. The Virginia Enterprise Zone Program is a state and local partnership to improve economic conditions within targeted areas designated by the governor. They are intended to encourage private investment and job creation. The Commonwealth offers two grant-based incentives to support Enterprise Zones: [The Job Creation Grant and the Real Property Investment Grant](#).

[The Code of Virginia § 59.1-542](#) allows the governing body of any county, city, or town to apply in writing to the Virginia Department of Housing and Community Development to receive an enterprise zone designation. The law allows Enterprise Zones to include up to three noncontiguous areas, limited according to the size and nature of the jurisdiction, and whether or not it is incorporated. Once designated, local governments are responsible for implementing the program and providing incentives within the context of their overall economic development efforts.

Targeted Development Areas

[Virginia Code § 15.2-2232](#) allows local governments to designate areas for various types of use, density, and overall development. As their name suggests, Targeted Development Areas (TDA) select specific areas for development and growth, based on the jurisdiction's own criteria. TDAs are defined in comprehensive plan policies, depicted on comprehensive plan maps, and can be implemented through zoning and capital facility investment.