

# Planning for Agriculture: Land Use Tools to Protect Farmland

A photograph of a farm scene. In the foreground, there is a lush green field. In the middle ground, there are several farm buildings: a prominent red barn with white trim, a white building with a grey roof, and a long white building with red vertical accents. In the background, there are several tall, cylindrical silos, some with domed tops. The sky is a clear, light blue.

**Julia Freedgood**

**Senior Fellow & Senior Program Advisor**

**April 22, 2026**



*Failing to  
Plan is a Plan  
to Fail!*



## What is Public Sector Planning?

- Planning is a public process to maximize health, safety, and well-being of people in communities
- There are many kinds of plans from economic development to housing, hazard mitigation, transportation, and more
- Land use plans serve as the road map for orderly development and local policies like zoning

# Planning for Agriculture

- Protects farmland for farming for current and future generations
- Directs growth toward existing infrastructure, reducing fiscal impacts, and preserving rural character
- Supports agricultural viability and rural prosperity
- Encourages conservation and ecological farming practices



An aerial photograph of a rural farmstead with various fields, barns, and a road. Overlaid on the center of the image is a Venn diagram consisting of three overlapping circles. The top-left circle is labeled 'Protect Farmland', the top-right circle is labeled 'Promote Conservation', and the bottom circle is labeled 'Sustain Agriculture'. The circles overlap in the center, and each overlaps with the other two.

**Protect  
Farmland**

**Promote  
Conservation**

**Sustain  
Agriculture**

An aerial photograph showing a large, calm body of water in the center, surrounded by lush green fields and dense forests. The foreground features rolling hills with various agricultural fields, some in shades of green and others in a golden-brown hue. The background is dominated by a thick, continuous forest. A dark green banner with white text is overlaid on the middle of the image.

# Why Plan for Agriculture?

# Agriculture Supports Our Basic Human Needs



---

Community Resilience

---

Economic opportunity

---

Environmental quality

---

Fiscal balance

---

Food security

---

Legacy and heritage

---

And more ... so much more



We can't just rely on federal policies that drive farmers to  
“Get Big or Get Out!”

# These Policies Separated Crops from Livestock

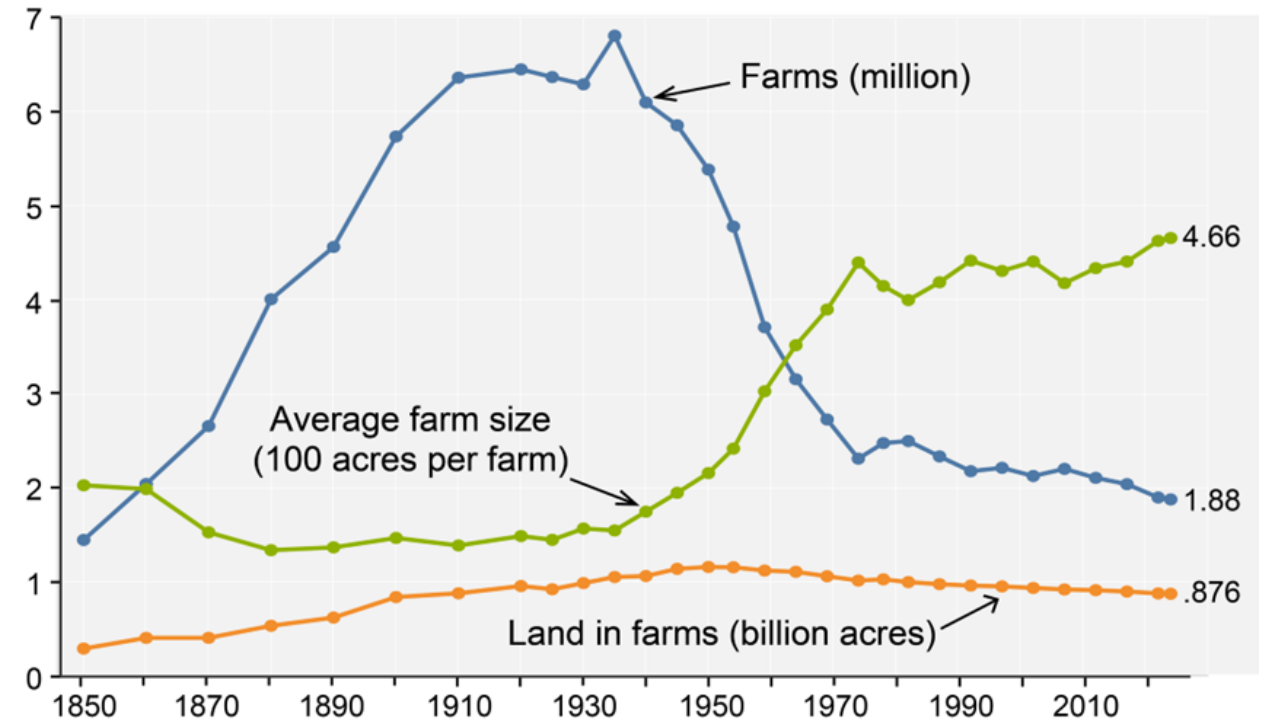


# Farms got larger and farm numbers fell

- Between 2017 and 2022 the total number of farms declined by 7% while
- Large farms increased 40% and very large farms increased 65%!
- Farms of all land sizes declined except the 5,000+ acre land class

## Farms, land in farms, and average acres per farm, 1850–2024

Million farms, billion acres, or 100 acres per farm



Source: USDA, Economic Research Service using data from USDA, National Agricultural Statistics Service, Censuses of Agriculture (through 2022) and *Farms and Land in Farms: 2024 Summary* (February 2025).



# Today Farmers Face Even Stronger Headwinds

- Farm bankruptcies surged 46% nationally in 2025
- Financial stressors are rising
- Farm debt is projected to reach a record \$625 billion in 2026



# Development Pressures are Accelerating

- Data centers
- Scattered, large-lot residential development
- Utility-scale solar arrays
- Warehouses ...

*Farmland values increased 32% over the past 5 years!!*





**Let's Meet the Challenge!**

# Guiding Practices

1. Engage early, often and throughout – including a wide range of farmers
2. Assess trends and conditions – and ground truth findings with the community
3. Envision the future and establish shared goals – strategize together on how to achieve them
4. Focus on assets not deficits – identify and leverage community resources
5. Choose the tools for implementation – adjust tactics as needed



# Common Land Use Policy Tools



Ag Conservation Easements

Ag District Laws

Mitigation Ordinances

Transfer of Development Rights

Urban Growth Boundaries

Zoning

# Ag Conservation Easements

Voluntary deed restrictions to limit development on farmland

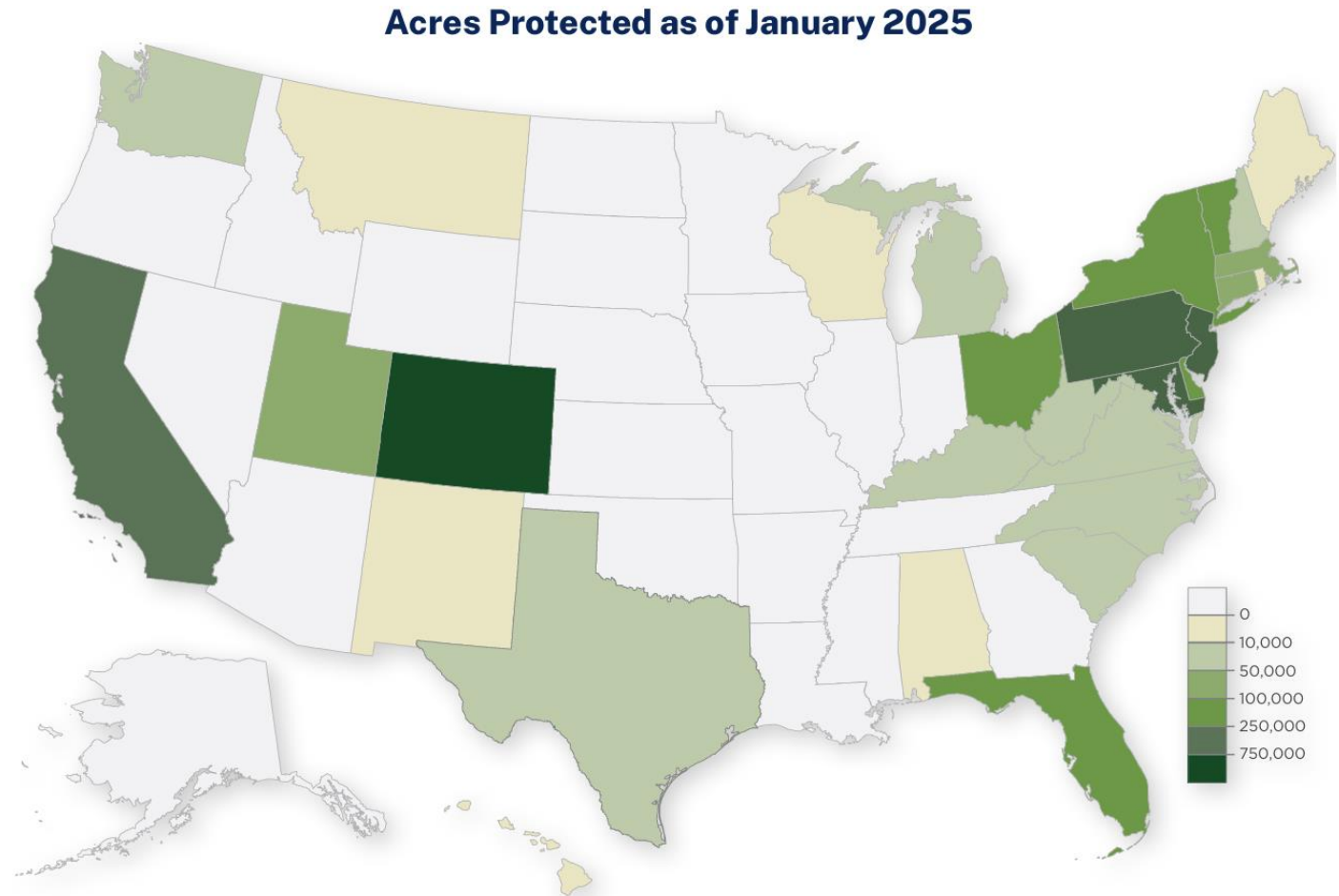
## Public Policy Tools:

- Purchase Ag Conservation Easements (PACE) aka Purchase of Development Rights (PDR)
- Ag Conservation Easement Program- Ag Land Easements (ACEP-ALE)
- Transfer Development Rights (TDR)

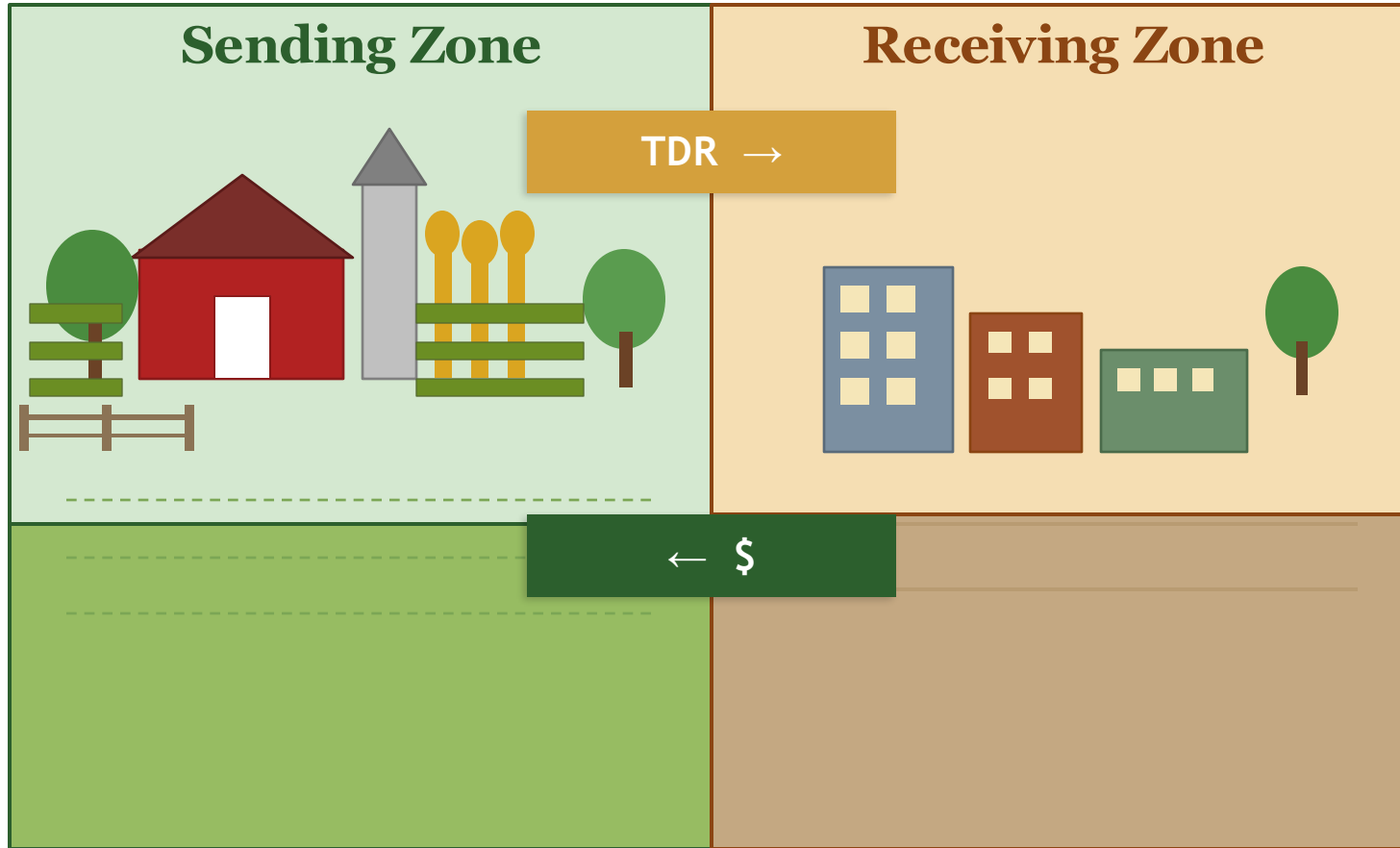


# State PACE Program Activity

As of January 2025,  
29 states had used  
PACE to protect  
agricultural land



# Transfer of Development Rights (TDR)



TDR programs combine zoning and easements to advance a community's goals for growth and farmland protection

They leverage the private marketplace to pay landowners to protect farmland and incentivize developers to build in designated growth zones

*Development rights transfer from protected farmland to designated growth areas*

# Zoning

- Zoning regulates the what, where, and how of different land uses
- It sets standards for development
- It is the most common land use policy



Lots of kinds of zoning



Lots of ways it can support or thwart agriculture



Ordinances define scale, scope and intensity of uses

# Ag Protection Zoning Designates Ag as the Preferred Use

---

Fixed Base or Existing Use

---

Area Based Allocations

---

Sliding Scale

---

Effective/Exclusive Ag

---

Intensive Ag

---

Ag Overlays

---



# Zoning Also Can Promote Farm Viability

---

Accessory Uses

---

Agritourism

---

Composting

---

Farm stands

---

Value-Added Processing

---

Wineries and Breweries

---

Signage

---



# Growing in not Out in Fayette County Kentucky



# Tools They Use

- Urban Services Boundary
- PDR program that partners with private land trusts
- Comp Plan has goals for farmland protection
- Exclusive Agricultural Zoning
- Local food marketing program

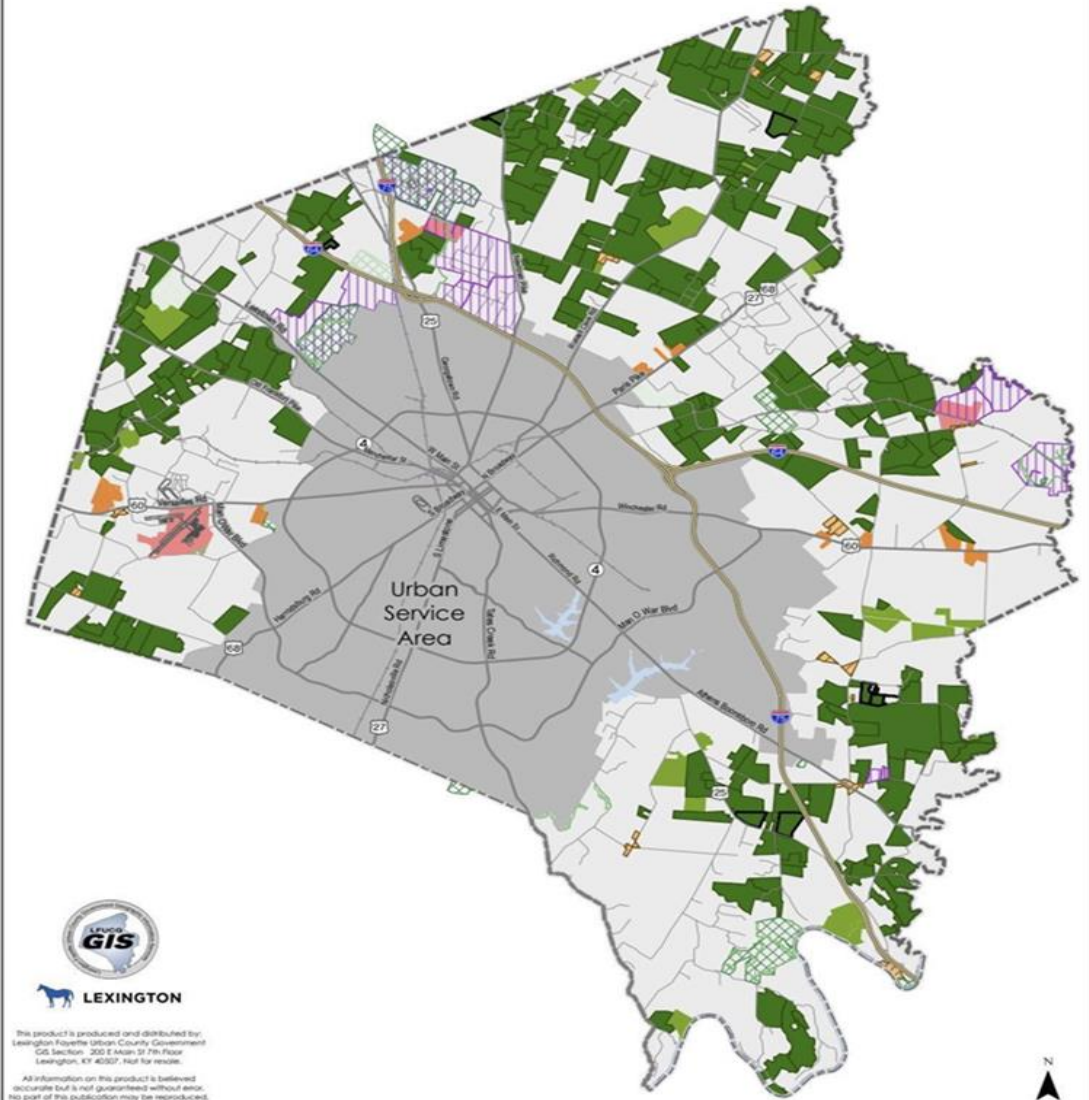
## Conserved Land in Lexington-Fayette County, Kentucky

PDR Protected Farms, Applications Under Contract, Conservation Easements by Others, and Other Conserved Lands

32,375 acres of preserved farmland are now protected by PDR

50,000 acres of preserved farmland is the goal of PDR

646 acres are currently under contract





# Resources

# Is Your Community Farm Friendly?

Visit AFT's Farmland Information Center for information on planning for agriculture and to download this checklist:

[www.farmlandinfo.org](http://www.farmlandinfo.org)

**Is Your Community Farm Friendly?**  
A Checklist to Gauge Local Support for Agriculture in Your Community

**DOES YOUR COMMUNITY...**

<b>Prioritize natural resource conservation</b> ...have policies or regulations to support access to water for food production (e.g., traditional agriculture, urban agriculture, and/or community gardens)?	YES <input type="checkbox"/> NO <input type="checkbox"/>
...have policies to address food waste and recovery (through strategies such as composting, gleaning programs, and/or food product recycling programs)?	YES <input type="checkbox"/> NO <input type="checkbox"/>
<b>Encourage agriculture and food production</b> ...have a section on agriculture and food production in your comprehensive plan or other community plans (e.g., economic development, strategic, or sustainability plan)?	YES <input type="checkbox"/> NO <input type="checkbox"/>
... support agricultural leadership (e.g., an agricultural ombudsman, advisory board, or commission to represent farmers and ranchers in local decision making)?	YES <input type="checkbox"/> NO <input type="checkbox"/>
...provide public land for farming and food production (e.g., lease land to farmers, provide space for community gardens or urban agriculture)?	YES <input type="checkbox"/> NO <input type="checkbox"/>
...encourage connections between agriculture and residents (e.g., through agritourism, direct marketing, and/or promotion of local farms)?	YES <input type="checkbox"/> NO <input type="checkbox"/>
<b>Protect farmland</b> ...create agricultural protection zones specifically to support working farms and ranches?	YES <input type="checkbox"/> NO <input type="checkbox"/>
...purchase conservation easements (development rights) on agricultural land?	YES <input type="checkbox"/> NO <input type="checkbox"/>
...have urban growth boundaries?	YES <input type="checkbox"/> NO <input type="checkbox"/>
...have a transfer of development rights program or mitigation ordinance to engage private developers in protection activities?	YES <input type="checkbox"/> NO <input type="checkbox"/>
<b>Improve agricultural viability</b> ...have a local right-to-farm ordinance?	YES <input type="checkbox"/> NO <input type="checkbox"/>
...provide tax credits and exemptions (e.g., property tax relief, school tax credits, sales tax exemptions)?	YES <input type="checkbox"/> NO <input type="checkbox"/>
...have ordinances to support agriculture and food production (e.g., accessory use allowances, farm labor housing policies, setbacks and buffers, on-farm processing)?	YES <input type="checkbox"/> NO <input type="checkbox"/>
...create voluntary districts where agriculture is encouraged and protected?	YES <input type="checkbox"/> NO <input type="checkbox"/>
...have livestock regulations to address nuisance, environment, and welfare issues (e.g., regulate number of animals per acre, manure and nutrient management)?	YES <input type="checkbox"/> NO <input type="checkbox"/>
<b>Support markets and infrastructure</b> ...have regulations scaled appropriately to address on-farm marketing and direct-to-consumer systems (e.g., agritourism, CSAs, farm and roadside stands)?	YES <input type="checkbox"/> NO <input type="checkbox"/>
...support marketing infrastructure for local farmers (e.g., farmers markets, food hubs)?	YES <input type="checkbox"/> NO <input type="checkbox"/>
...support value-added processing (e.g., slaughter facilities, cold storage, packing sheds)?	YES <input type="checkbox"/> NO <input type="checkbox"/>
...support farm to school and other institutions' procurement policies?	YES <input type="checkbox"/> NO <input type="checkbox"/>
<b>Promote local farms</b> ...have a "Buy Local" campaign?	YES <input type="checkbox"/> NO <input type="checkbox"/>
...provide promotion materials such as maps, resource guides, and interactive websites?	YES <input type="checkbox"/> NO <input type="checkbox"/>

Adapted from New Hampshire Coalition for Sustaining Agriculture and UNH Cooperative Extension's



# PLANNING FOR AGRICULTURE IN VIRGINIA



- Fact sheets
- Planning checklists
- Data & other resources
- Local success stories
- And more!

  
American Farmland Trust  
SAVING THE LAND THAT SUSTAINS US

FREE TOOLKIT

# Thank You!

**Contact me:**

[Jfreedgood@farmland.org](mailto:Jfreedgood@farmland.org)

**American Farmland Trust**

[www.farmland.org](http://www.farmland.org)

## Planning Sustainable and Resilient Food Systems

From Soil to Soil



JULIA FREEDGOOD



American Farmland Trust