

## **Agriculture**

### **Importance of Agriculture**

Agriculture remains an important part of the economy in Southampton County. The Middle Coastal Plain, a 40-mile wide swath of land stretching from Colonial Beach through Courtland and to the North Carolina line, contains 40% of the Class I and Class II Prime Farmland in Virginia. This strip's protection for agriculture and forestry uses is imperative to ensure the County's economic future.

Overall, Southampton County remains largely in use for agriculture and forestry outside of the incorporated towns. Less than ten (10) percent of the land base has been converted into uses other than agriculture, forestry, open space or conservation. Recent land use changes in Southampton County have resulted in a citizenry that is determined to preserve the rural nature of the landscape while remaining cognizant of the fact that change is inevitable and is in part necessary to maintain the quality of life in the County, including increases in the industrial sector. The desire to engage the public in open discussions about how to best manage future land development primarily in the residential realm has resulted in the development of a proactive approach that is uniquely tailored to the goals and objectives of Southampton County.

Southampton County has for hundreds of years been defined by the products of its soils, its transportation facilities, and its water resources. Good soils and the availability of water have made farm and industrial production possible. Transportation facilities have enabled the collection and distribution of raw materials and products. In the 1830s railroads gave farmers access to more distant markets, and transportation along the rivers moved goods as well.

The importance of agriculture and forestry extends beyond the farmers and foresters. Many local businesses serve the agriculture and forestry industry, in the form of distributors of products used for agriculture, trucking, maintenance and repair of equipment, processors of goods including a growing number of peanut and cotton processors, financial and insurance institutions that serve the agricultural and forestry community, a State Farmers' Market, industrial processors of forestry goods such as the Enviva pellet plant, several mineral mines, and a variety of other industries.

The 2020 Census indicates (what percent??) of the employment in Southampton County is within the agriculture/mining sector and an additional (what percent??) of the employment in the County is in the manufacturing/warehousing/transportation sector, most of which serve the agricultural and forestal community as well. The Virginia Employment Commission Employment and Wages Report for the second quarter of 2020 indicates that of the 50 largest employers in the county, thirteen (13) are connected to agriculture, forestry, or the movement of those goods, the largest group of employers dedicated to one industry in the county. Agriculture, forestry, and the movement of the goods produced by those industries is an important part of the economy, and protection of those industries is vital.

Beyond the products of agriculture and forestry, the protection of such lands provides numerous other benefits to County residents. Southampton is home to three navigable rivers that provide opportunities for recreation. Two of those rivers, the Nottoway and the Blackwater, are noted as State Scenic Rivers for their entire length in Southampton. Protecting those rivers from visual intrusion or pollution degradation is an important part of role of agricultural and forestal property. There are numerous hunt clubs that use such lands, providing the opportunity to promote tourism. Forestal lands reduce soil erosion and create wildlife habitats. Agricultural and forestal lands are a visual manifestation of the rural lifestyle residents have

sought in Southampton County for generations. Besides the products such lands provide, they are what makes Southampton County the home County residents seek.

### **How to protect agriculture and forestry**

A number of programs are available to protect the agricultural and forestal interests in Southampton County. In 1977, the Virginia General Assembly adopted the Agricultural and Forestal Districts Act that allows the creation of districts to encourage the development and improvement of Virginia's agricultural and forestal lands for production of food, fiber, and fuel.

The Board of Supervisors has adopted a number of tools to protect agriculture and forestal interests. The Land Use Program, through the Commissioner of the Revenue's Office, is a state program which provides for the assessment of land based on use value rather than market value. To qualify, land must be in production for five (5) years prior to entering the program, and be in use for agriculture, horticulture, forest use, or open space. This helps property owners maintain the property in agriculture and forestal use.

In June 2017, the Southampton County Board of Supervisors created the Voluntary Agricultural and Forestal District (VAFD) program. These districts are rural conservation zones reserved for the production of agricultural products, timber, and the maintenance of open space as an important economic and environmental resource. Since that time, 38 such districts have been created in the County, encompassing over 160,000 acres. These property owners agree not to convert their farm, forestland, and other open space to more intense commercial, industrial, or residential uses for the term of the district, which are overwhelmingly ten (10) year terms. In return for creating a VAFD, the County and the Commonwealth agree not to take actions or make infrastructure investments that will place increased pressure on landowners to convert land in the VAFD to more intense land uses for the term of the district.

The Virginia Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services Office of Farmland Preservation provides the Virginia Farm Link Program. This program is designed to connect farmers and landowners who are facing retirement and wish to see their businesses continue and their land stay in production with beginning and expanding farmers who seek to acquire land, equipment, and experience from those with long roots in the agriculture and forestal community. No current land owners in Southampton appear in the program database. However, almost 40% of the active farmers in the County are over the age of 65, and this program may become useful to help maintain the agricultural economy.

Southampton County is home to a number of conservation easements held by various groups, including the Virginia Department of Conservation and Recreation (DCR) and the Virginia Outdoors Foundation (VOF). The Enviva Forest Conservation Fund, along with groups such as Ducks Unlimited, the Atlantic Coast Joint Venture, the Virginia Department of Game and Inland Fisheries, and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, help landowners meet their goals of protecting valuable natural resources.

The Virginia Land Conservation Foundation (VLCF) has worked with the Nature Conservancy to protect areas within Southampton including 415 acres along the southern portion of the Blackwater River and the 443 acres Byrd's Point Tract which is an addition to the 287 acre privately owned South Quay Natural Area Preserve. The Flowers Easement protected 845 acres of forest and farmland along the Nottoway River. The BLD Farms Rose Hill protects 242 acres of forestland near Drewryville. The White Easement protects 545 acres of forest and farmland along the Meherrin River, while the Ridley Easement protects 567 acres of forest and farmland along the Nottoway River. VLCF, along with a number of various partners, works to protect farm and forestland throughout the County.

## **Agriculture today**

Every five (5) years, the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) provides a Census of Agriculture. The most recent census took place in 2017, with outcomes available in late 2019. The census provides information regarding changes in the agricultural community since the 2012 census, including:

- The number of farms has decreased 23%, while the acres in farm use has decreased 8%. The average farm size, however, has increased 20%, to 552 acres.
- In total, the market value of products sold has decreased 5%, the government payments have increased 9%. The farm-related income has decreased 31%, and the net cash farm income has decreased 10%.
- However, the per farm average of market value of products sold has increased 24%, and the net cash farm income has increased 18%. The average government payments per farm increased 48%, to \$36,615, while the per farm farm-related income has decreased 22%, to \$19,662. The net cash income per farm has increased 18%, to \$81,949.

These numbers indicate farms are fewer in number but larger in size per farm, the total farm income has decreased, but the per farm income has increased. Fewer farms, but the ones that remain have an increased income since 2012.

The median farm size has increased from 155 acres to 170 acres since 2012, with almost 30% of the farms in the County being between 50 and 179 acres. The acres in farmland have decreased 8% since 2012, from 153,831 acres in 2012 to 141,942 acres in 2017. Almost 70% of the agricultural land is in cropland, and 26% in woodland.

As far as the market value of products of the County agricultural land, Southampton ranks first in the Commonwealth in the market value sales of cotton and cottonseed, and ranks 54<sup>th</sup> in the United States as a whole. The County ranks fourth in Virginia in the production of grains, oilseeds, dry beans, and dry peas, as well as hogs and pigs. The market value of all agricultural products sold in Southampton was over \$75M in 2017.

Southampton has 38,000 acres in production of cotton, 24,000 acres in soybeans for beans, almost 16,000 acres in corn for grain, 11,000 acres in peanuts for nuts, and 3,000 acres in wheat for grain.

With regard to the farm producers themselves, almost 40% are over 65 years of age, while only 3% are under 35 years of age. 93% of the County's farms are family farms, and 35% hire farm labor. Over 50% of farmers have farming as their principal occupation.

With over 50% of the County farmers having farming as their principal occupation and a market value of agricultural products sold over \$75M in 2017, agriculture is a strong contributor to the overall well-being and economy of Southampton County. Protection of the agricultural and forestal assets of Southampton is of paramount importance for our future.

## **Balancing economic development with agriculture and forestry**

Over 90% of the land mass in Southampton County has a zoning designation of A-1 or A-2, Agriculture district. With the exception of areas along US 58/Southampton Parkway, SR 671/General Thomas Highway, US 460/General Mahone Boulevard, and the areas near and within the town limits of the incorporated towns, A-1 and A-2 zoning districts predominate Southampton. This requires property owners to seek zoning map amendments to develop their property with higher density and non-residential uses. These requests have, in recent years, generated intense scrutiny from residents and property owners, regardless of the planned development or the Plan designation in the adopted Comprehensive Plan. The public perceives such development as decreasing the amount of farm and forestland needed to sustain the agricultural economy. Development is seen as intruding into the rural landscape of Southampton County, and decreasing the desirability of nearby residential property. Issues include increasing traffic, noise, air pollution, the loss of businesses that serve the agricultural community, and limited positive financial contributions to Southampton.

Increased pressure from the utility scale solar industry is being felt in Southampton. One 100MW project, spanning over 1,400 acres, is in use. One 5MW project failed to gain approval from the Board of Supervisors. Several large utility scale solar projects have been in discussion with County staff since 2018, and at least one has held the required community meetings prior to submittal for a zoning map amendment and Conditional Use Permit. The Board of Supervisors and the Planning Commission continue to seek ways to direct solar development into areas seen as more suitable and more protective of prime farmland, including requiring projects to avoid farmland of statewide importance and prime farmland. Requiring utility scale solar projects to be located no less than one (1) mile from incorporated towns and properties with R-1 and R-2, Residential zoning designations may help mitigate some negative impacts on residents while also permitting the incorporated towns to grow as new suburban-type development is warranted. Southampton County residents in large part see the importance of alternative energy sources, but the sacrifice of important farmland and forestland is seen as too high a price to pay to permit such development on the most productive land. Ways to permit such development while protecting the rural landscape and prime agricultural and forestal land is an on-going discussion.

The County has two industrial parks. Other areas of industrial development have taken place in proximity to the County's parks, and the County has made substantial investments in infrastructure to serve industrial users, current and potential. However, the areas surrounding the parks are in part in agricultural use as well as residential use. As property owners seek to amend the zoning of properties in the area of infrastructure improvements that are designated for industrial use in the Comprehensive Plan, conflicts arise. Seeking balance between the three interests, protecting agriculture, protecting residential property, and facilitating economic development in areas that are served by infrastructure, is an on-going issue for the Board of Supervisors.

## **Agriculture and Forestry Implementation Strategies**

### **Protecting important farm and forest land**

- a. Use information available from sources including but not limited to the USDA and Natural Resources Conservation Service to make decisions regarding requests for Zoning Map Amendments and Comprehensive Plan amendments. Limit changes to said documents to only those that protect the land most capable of producing crops unless other mitigating factors are present.

- b. Direct impactful non-agricultural development to properties that are not indicated as prime farmland and farmland of statewide importance.
- c. Support the recruitment and siting of environmentally compatible industry and commercial establishments in areas that are already similarly developed or in public or private industrial parks to minimize the sacrifice of prime agricultural land for such development.
- d. Support programs and initiatives designed to provide a positive environment for the continuation of the family farm institution, such as the Century Farm program and conservation easements.
- e. Continue to permit the creation of residential lots through the “family transfer” process to permit immediate family members of the farmer to remain on the family land and continue to farm the family land.
- f. Consider initiation of further rural historic district designations to protect agricultural and forestry interests, such as the Sebrell Rural Historic District recognition.
- g. Continue to encourage the creation and addition to Voluntary Agricultural and Forestal Districts.
- h. Encourage the donation of conservation easements and other means of land conservation such as the “Tomorrow Woods” program through the Virginia Department of Forestry.
- i. Encourage careful management of the natural resources of the County to enhance both the environment and the economic base of the County. The production of field crops, the raising of animals, the production of trees as a crop, recreational and tourism uses focused on the environment, as well as preservation of wildlife and natural beauty should be recognized as elements of the management program.
- j. Support programs and initiatives that manage County forests to provide the best combination of recreational uses, wildlife habitat, and forest products production.

### **Education**

- k. Support programs and initiatives to improve agricultural education and forestry management education in the public school system and encourage the development of vocational education programs and facilities to support existing agricultural and timber-related industries.
- l. Support programs and initiatives of the Virginia Cooperative Extension Service and local community college system designed to provide continuing adult education to agriculture professionals and the general public.
- m. Support programs and initiatives to educate current and potential residents about the importance of agriculture to the County and State and warn potential non-farm rural residents of the potential conflict points between agricultural and residential uses, including noise, dust, and the presence of large farm equipment on rural roads.

### **Economic development**

- n. Amend the zoning ordinance to broaden the types of uses considered agricultural in nature to include eco-tourism, agri-tourism, wineries, aqua-culture, farmers’ markets with produce grown elsewhere, and other types of businesses that tie closely to agriculture.
- o. Seek opportunities to promote access to local foods for residents and the school system, including increased opportunities for farmers’ markets not located specifically at the farm on which the food was grown or produced. Amend the zoning ordinance as necessary to permit such markets.
- p. Encourage the installation of alternative energy systems, i.e. solar energy systems, to power individual residences and private businesses.
- q. Encourage the development of alternative energy production, i.e. wind and solar power generation, only on properties that are made up of less productive farm and forest land.

- r. Encourage the installation of alternative energy facilities on brownfields and other non-agricultural, non-productive land.
- s. Seek green industries to capitalize on both the County's abundant wood basket and abundance of sunlight in areas that are made up of less productive farm and forest lands.
- t. Seek a diverse employment base through the economic development program, emphasizing the value of local agricultural and forest products and the occupations dependent on and serving those industries.

DRAFT