

WORKING LANDSCAPE

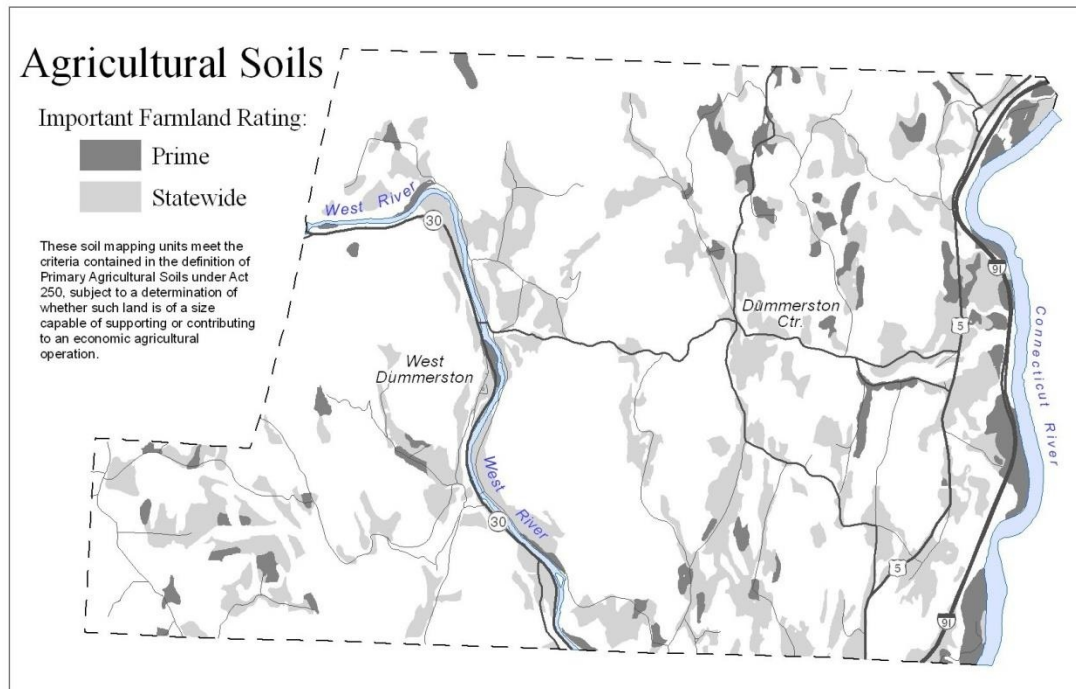
Agriculture

Agricultural land, or farmland, is defined as any land used for agricultural activities by a farm. Usually farmland is cleared, although some forestry practices are considered agricultural, such as the cultivation of maple sugar bushes. Natural and human-influenced factors determine viability of farmlands, both economically and in the ability to produce crops. Soil, slope and climate conditions are examples of natural factors. Accessibility by roads, distances to services, development and markets, and proximity to other agricultural land are human-influenced factors.

Agricultural Soils

The US Department of Agriculture Soil Conservation Service has identified soil types that are best suited to crop production based on soil quality, growing season and moisture supply. Important farmland inventories identify soil map units including prime farmland and farmland of statewide importance. Prime agricultural soils are likely to produce the highest crop yields using the least amount of economic resources and causing the least environmental impact. Soils with an important farmland rating of 'prime' or 'statewide' have the potential to be Primary Agricultural Soils under Act 250. Dummerston's agricultural soils are mapped below and on the Natural Resources Map.

Figure 6: Agricultural Soils



Dummerston's Farmlands

Dummerston's farmlands can be found all over the town, as well as in the fertile Connecticut River Valley. By rough estimate, in 2016, there are over a dozen farms in Dummerston, of various type, including livestock, produce, dairy, orchards, hay, sugaring, and Christmas tree. The diversity of products from these agricultural operations is available to our local community as well as the larger market. It is estimated that about 10% of the town, or 2,000 acres, remains

in fields as hay, pastures and cropland. Orchards and sugarbushes total many more hundreds of acres. Agricultural land in Dummerston is both owner-operated and leased. This patchwork of farmland throughout Dummerston is an important element of the working landscape.

In the late 1980s, Dummerston undertook a project known as a Land Evaluation and Site Assessment (LESA) to evaluate its farmland. A report of its findings was prepared in 1990 and is available at the Town Office. LESA is a technique used by the US Department of Agriculture Natural Resources Conservation Service to objectively rate farmland based on soils and other features. While the soils (Land Evaluation factors) probably won't change appreciably over time, some of the other criteria (Site Assessment factors) considered, such as parcel size and amount of contiguous agricultural land, could have changed since the report.

Significance of Farmland

The Connecticut River Valley contains some of the best agricultural soils in Vermont. Dummerston's location within this valley gives statewide significance to some of its farms. The preservation of our farmland is important for producing local foods and maintaining the rural landscape.

Farmland is a non-renewable resource; once gone it cannot easily be recovered. Dummerston's farmland is critical to maintaining a sustainable and diversified local food supply. This is especially important given that the global food chain is sensitive to rising population, water shortages, climate change and the rising costs of fossil fuels. All of these affect the price and quality of food we eat. Another benefit of local foods is that it is good for the local economy - buying food directly from our local farmers helps them stay in business.

Dummerston's farmland plays a significant role in defining the town's rural landscape. It is a landscape of fields, wooded hillsides and uncluttered hilltops and ridges. This landscape creates a sense of place that helps define Dummerston. Farmland is especially vulnerable to conversion to non-farm uses. Characteristics of best farmlands (level topography and well drained soils) make them highly desirable for development. Dummerston is committed to conserving land for agricultural use. A Farmland Protection Fund has been established to help protect the town's farmland from residential and commercial development. Uses of the fund include, but are not limited to, purchase or assistance in the purchase of rights of first refusal, options to purchase conservation restrictions (purchase of development rights) and purchase by the town of land through bargain sales. Applications for use of the Fund are evaluated by the Farmland Protection Committee who makes a recommendation to the Selectboard.

Increasingly, farmers are finding it necessary to diversify their operations to stay in business. It is important that we encourage this diversity if we want to sustain our farms. One way is to promote farm-related businesses and other non-traditional enterprises to their farming operations. Many of our farms already operate roadside markets and pick-your-own operations.

Dummerston's zoning bylaw now allows for agri-tourism as a conditional use in all districts. This allows for a variety of farm-related enterprises, which might not otherwise be included in the definition of agriculture, for purpose of attracting visitors and generating additional income to the farm. The intent is to support farms in diversifying operations so that they can keep their land in agricultural production as its primary use.

Forestry

Historically, forests have played a vital role in Dummerston, from the making of potash to the sawing of shingles, and as a source of firewood and lumber. Many sawmills were located along Dummerston's small streams. Today, those mills are gone, but the forest continues to have a significant role in the economy and culture of Dummerston as a source of timber products and maple syrup. There are still many sugaring operations in town, large and small, that contribute to the economy and character of the town. Forests also contribute substantially to Dummerston's quality of life and well-being. These benefits include recreation, scenic beauty, wildlife habitat and the role forests play in the natural cleaning of the air and as a vital component in the natural water cycle.

Most forestland is in private non-industrial ownership. The condition of Dummerston's forests and woodlots varies from poor to excellent. Years of take the best and leave the rest have left some forestland with an abundance of low quality trees. Insects such as gypsy moth, pear thrips, and hemlock looper have taken their toll. The American chestnut blight and beech bark disease have also affected forest species composition. High deer population is also a threat to forest health as heavy browsing can lead to lower regeneration and fewer species.

Dummerston currently has a number (ten at last count) of official Tree Farms as designated by the American Tree Farm System. These are actively managed forestlands. To qualify for Tree Farm certification, a tree farmer must 1) own 10 or more acres of forestland, 2) manage for the production of timber and other forest products, and 3) protect the forest from fire, insects, disease and destructive grazing.

These lands also must be inspected every five years to ensure the property is being properly managed.

An important regional resource for forest owners in Dummerston is the Windham Regional Woodlands Association, an organized group of woodland owners in Windham County that provides forest tours, guest speakers and a newsletter promoting good forest management.

Use Value Appraisal

Since 1980, Vermont's Use Value Appraisal Program (commonly referred to as Current Use) has given farming and forestry some continuity. This program taxes farm and forestland according to use value, instead of fair market value. According to the Vermont Department of Taxes, the primary objectives of the program were to keep Vermont's agricultural and forest land in production, help slow the development of these lands, and achieve greater equity in property taxation on undeveloped land. The State of Vermont reimburses communities for municipal property tax revenue that is lost due to enrollment of land in the Program. Participating landowners must pay the balance of property taxes due to the community. The program includes a Land Use Change Tax as a disincentive to develop land.

Parcels enrolled in the program generally must have a minimum of 25 contiguous acres (not counting the 2 acres surrounding any dwelling). Forestland is required to be managed according to the provisions of a 10 year forest management plan that is approved by the County Forester. To qualify as agricultural land, one of the following must be met 25 contiguous acres in active agricultural use, or smaller parcels generating at least \$2,000 annually from the sale of farm crops, or actively used agricultural land owned by or leased to a farmer. Two most significant

changes to the program over the years has been the inclusion of conservation land owned by qualifying nonprofit organizations and the exemption from all property taxes of eligible farm buildings.

In 2016 there were 1,411 acres of agricultural land, 7,404 acres of forest land and 65 non-productive forest acres in a total of 116 parcels and 8,880 acres enrolled in the Use Value Appraisal Program in Dummerston. This amounts to 44.8% of the Town's 19,815 acres.

While Use Value Appraisal reduces the burden for participating landowners, land can be taken out of the program with payment of a penalty. Therefore, it does not provide absolute assurance of continued undeveloped land. Nonetheless, maintaining our forests through long term management plans we are preserving habitat, ensuring a long term supply of high quality timber products, and supporting local jobs that contribute to the local tax base. The maintenance of agriculture lands preserves our capability to produce local foods and protect our rural landscape.

Working Landscape Goals, Policies, and Action Steps

Goal 1 — Preserve agricultural lands for agricultural use and maintain a strong agricultural economy.

Policy 1.1 Preserve agricultural land for agricultural uses and activities.

Action Steps

- a. Consider land use regulations that require development to be located off or away from important agricultural lands. (Planning Commission)
- b. Investigate the creation of an Agricultural District or overlay district. (Planning Commission)
- c. Encourage farmers and owners of other qualifying agricultural land to participate in the states Use Value Appraisal Program. (Farmland Protection Committee)
- d. Work with farmers, landowners, private land trusts and governmental agencies to conserve important agricultural land by purchase, conservation easements, or other means, making use of the town's Farmland Protection Fund whenever appropriate. (Farmland Protection Committee)
- e. Consider updating the LESA report, especially with regard to the Site Assessment factors.

Policy 1.2 Support and encourage farming and agricultural activity.

Action Steps

- a. Reduce the potential for conflict between farmers and non-farming neighbors by promoting understanding of the States right-to-farm law. (Farmland Protection Committee)
- b. Continue to conditionally permit agri-tourism in all districts so that property owners can diversify and bolster income sources. (Planning Commission)
- c. Encourage diversification of agricultural activities. (Planning Commission and Farmland Protection Committee)
- d. Encourage new farmers and the establishment of new farm operations. (Farmland Protection Committee)
- e. Encourage agricultural specialty crop cultivation and innovation.

Goal 2 — Preserve important forest land for sustainable forestry practices and support forest-based industries.

Policy 2.1 Preserve important forest land for sustainable forestry practices.

Action Steps

- a. Identify and map the town's most important forest lands, in consultation with landowners, specifying their significance. (Conservation Commission)
- b. Assist landowners with the following (Conservation Commission)
 - i. Encourage forest management consultation with the Windham County forester, Windham Regional Woodlands Association, Vermont Coverts, Inc. or private consulting foresters;
 - ii. Provide names of professionals capable of helping landowners 1) assess forest land access sites and 2) avoid subdivision and development that will cause unnecessary fragmentation of forest property.
 - iii. Provide information on managing for biodiversity, the Use Value Appraisal Program, the Tree Farm Program and FSC-based certification
- c. Work with landowners, private land trusts and governmental agencies to conserve important forest land by purchase, conservation easements, or other means. (Conservation Commission)

Policy 2.2 Support forest-based industries and enterprises.

Goal 3 — Support the continuation of the Use Value Appraisal Program as a way of retaining large tracts of farmland and forest land.

