

Agricultural Land Use on Cape Cod:

Looking to the Future

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APCC Farm Inventory Executive Summary

Like many areas across the country, Cape Cod has lost thousands of acres of farmland over the past half-century or more, mostly to residential development. This conversion of agricultural lands to subdivisions has led to several deleterious consequences. Among these are the:

- loss of a rich cultural heritage of working landscapes, long a part of the Cape Cod allure (e.g., fields of Eastham turnips, East Falmouth strawberries);
- decline in economic diversity;
- disappearance of important meadow habitats for wildlife;
- inability to purchase locally grown foods and the human health impacts associated with the industrialization of agriculture and the long-distance transport of foods; and
- intensification of the disconnection of people from the land upon which they are utterly dependent.

APCC created this inventory of farms and farming activity on Cape Cod to draw attention to the status of agriculture on Cape Cod, to identify the impediments to farming, and to make recommendations for increasing the amount of farming on our peninsula.

In developing this inventory, APCC discovered that it is very difficult to estimate the number of farms, farmers, and acres in agriculture for a variety of reasons. Among these are differences among the federal, state and local governments in the definition of farming and methods of counting and identifying land upon which agriculture takes place. Other confounding factors are the use of multiple land use codes on one parcel, lack of a land use code identifying a farm parcel, the fact that one farmer may farm more than one parcel, the size of a parcel is not the same as the amount of acreage under cultivation or upon which livestock are reared. For these and several more reasons, the results of this inventory must be considered simply an estimate of agricultural activity on Cape Cod.

Findings

Given the above caveats, our study estimates:

There are about 4,250 acres that are categorized as farm lands on Cape Cod and an additional 600 acres where shellfish are cultivated on aquaculture grants.

There are approximately 300 farms on Cape Cod, and about 235 aquaculture license holders.

Although some farming activity occurs in each of the 15 towns on Cape Cod, 70% occurs in the towns of Barnstable, Bourne, Falmouth and Sandwich.

Eleven towns have commercial aquaculture grants; 70% of the aquaculture acreage is in the coastal waters of Wellfleet and Barnstable.

About 40% of the land-based agriculture is cranberry bogs worked by about 65 farmers. Another 35% percent is general farming activity (vegetables, livestock, pasture) undertaken by about 140 farmers. The remainder is wood lots, tree farms, garden centers and greenhouses.

Farms on Cape Cod range from a few tenths of an acre to one parcel that is more than 200 acres. The average size of a Cape farm is 14 acres. Thirty percent of the farms on Cape Cod are 1– 5 acres; 23% are 5 –10 acres and 15% are 10 – 20 acres in size. By and large the smaller farms are those in the general category. The larger farms are cranberry bogs, wood lots and tree farms.

About 23,000 acres or about 9% of Cape Cod is considered to be on Prime Agricultural soils, soils identified by the state as being ideal for agriculture activity. Eighty percent of these prime agricultural soils are located on the Upper Cape. With the exception of several thousand acres of prime soils on the Massachusetts Military Reservation, the vast majority of this land has been developed mainly as residential subdivisions.

Only about 3000 acres of undeveloped land or underdeveloped residential land on prime agriculture soils remain on Cape Cod. Most of this is in very small parcels.

Of the approximately 4,250 acres of agricultural land, about 60% is under state programs Chapter 61 and 61A, which offer financial incentives to property owners to retain their land in agriculture.

A 228-acre parcel in Sandwich is only one on Cape Cod that is under the state Agriculture Restriction Program. Yet, this parcel has not been actively farmed for about a decade.

Farming activities, including aquaculture, brought in close to \$14,000,000 in sales in 2007. The majority of that came from cranberries (40%), garden centers and greenhouses (28%) and aquaculture (25%).

There has been a dramatic increase in the number of farmers' markets and community-supported agriculture programs on Cape Cod in recent years. There are more than a dozen farmers' markets and 9 community-supported agriculture programs on Cape Cod.

Six towns have agriculture commissions and right to farm bylaws.

Eighty percent of the 56 farmers who responded to our survey are between the ages of 46-74. Sixteen have identified someone to take over their farm business upon retirement. Sixteen of the survey respondents indicated that they would have to sell their land.

Recommendations:

State:

The Massachusetts Agriculture Preservation Restriction program is purposefully geared to protect farms, and especially farms on prime agricultural soils, that are deemed of statewide interest. The state should instead recognize the benefit of having farming activity taking place in all regions of the Commonwealth. To that end, the state should:

- Reduce the number of acres necessary for participation in the APR program from 5 acres to 2 ½ to 3 acres.
- Create a range of prices that the state will pay per acre that reflects the different costs of land in different areas of the Commonwealth.

The minimum lot size of 5 acres for participation in the state Chapter 61 and Chapter 61A program should be changed to 2.5 to 3 acres. The amount of income that must come from farming activity should remain the same as the current regulations.

Region:

The Cape Cod Commission Regional Policy Plan (RPP) should include as a goal no net loss of farmland.

RPP Land Use goal 3.1 supports activities that "achieve greater food independence for Cape Cod." The Commission should establish a committee to begin working with the agricultural community to determine how the Commission can best implement this goal.

RPP Land Use goal 3.2 states “development unrelated to agricultural operations shall be designed so as to avoid or minimize development on lands capable of sustained agricultural production as evidenced by soils, recent agricultural use, and/or surrounding agricultural use.” This goal should be changed by striking the words “or minimize.”

The Commission should lower thresholds that trigger regulatory review of developments that are proposed for existing farmland or for prime agricultural soils lands. The present RPP mandates Development of Regional Impact (DRI) review for clear cutting land of two acres or greater. The RPP should make any development proposal to alter existing farmland or undeveloped prime soil land of two acres or greater a mandatory DRI as well.

Land Use goal 3.2 states: “development unrelated to agricultural operations shall be designed so as to avoid or minimize development on lands capable of sustained agricultural production as evidenced by soils, recent agricultural use, and/or surrounding agricultural use.” This goal should be changed to state: “development unrelated to agricultural operations shall avoid any development on lands capable of sustained agricultural production as evidenced by soils, recent agricultural use, and/or surrounding agricultural use.”

Towns:

1. Towns should make every effort to identify and protect parcels where farming is occurring, especially larger parcels.
2. Cape Cod towns’ Local Comprehensive Plans should include a goal of no net loss of active farmland and the necessary policies to implement that goal.
3. Town should identify these areas of prime soils and other areas where agriculture is a desired land use and evaluate the use of low-density zoning as a tool to protect these lands.
4. Cluster or Open Space Residential Design Development (OSRD) bylaws should be amended to 1. make cluster or OSRD by right and a grid design available only with a special permit and 2. reduce the number of acres necessary to use cluster or OSRD. These amendments would improve opportunities for agriculture.
5. Other towns should follow Barnstable’s lead and map areas for agriculture redevelopment.
6. All towns should start an agricultural commission to promote local farming.
7. Towns should enact Right-to-Farm bylaws, a general bylaw that acknowledges that farming, and its associated sights, sounds and odors is a legal, accepted and desirable use of land that is of value for cultural and economic reasons.
8. Greater collaboration between the agricultural community and open space community) town Community Preservation Committees and land trusts) on Cape Cod could lead to more protection of farmland.

General:

All efforts should be made to purchase the 228-acre parcel in the town of Sandwich, which is on prime agricultural soils, is under the state Agriculture Preservation Program, but which has not been farmed in a decade.

Massachusetts General Laws Chapter 61 and 61a provide financial incentives to farmers whose land remains in production. Farm advocacy groups, land trusts and other interested agencies should encourage farmers to remain in these programs and for other farmers to participate in these programs.

The towns and agriculture groups should evaluate municipal lands that have not been set aside for conservation and tax title lands for their potential use for agriculture.