

PRESERVING FARMLAND

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Farmland provides varied and important benefits to all Virginians. Besides the direct food and fiber outputs that form the basis of Virginia's economy, Virginia farms maintain open space, mitigate flood risks, create jobs, support associated businesses, unite vibrant communities, sustain wildlife, and provide opportunities to restore clean water and sequester carbon. These benefits are not guaranteed. Retaining working farms for the future requires commitment and action from the government and citizens to preserve farmland, increase access to land ownership – particularly for marginalized communities, and encourage farming practices that benefit our shared natural resources.

CHALLENGE

Forty percent of Virginia's farmland is considered nationally significant - the category best suited for growing food. However, Virginia nationally ranks 7th for the most acres and 12th for the largest percent of agricultural land to be converted to non-agricultural uses in the US by 2040.¹ Losing productive farmland has an outsized economic impact on the state, as agriculture produced about 8.7% of the state's total economic output in 2021 and accounted for 381,844 jobs. About one of every 13 jobs in Virginia is tied to the agricultural industry.²

Purchase of Development Rights (PDR) programs are a tool for localities to protect highly productive and locally important farmland. Current funding for PDR programs is insufficient to meet demand from localities. Matching fund requirements prevent localities, with limited financial resources and technical capacity, from participating in such programs. Local governments also lack the capacity to monitor and steward conservation easements that they hold. State law currently limits experienced, accredited nonprofit land trusts to the role of co-holders of conservation easements that are established with state funding. This creates an unnecessary burden for local governments and hinders land conservation.

Additionally, current investment in innovation grants are insufficient to support thriving local agricultural networks. Farmland can capture and clean water, sequester carbon in healthy soils, provide wildlife habitat, and build generational wealth in marginalized populations when managed to do so. Policies and programs that encourage the adoption of sustainable farming practices that produce these co-benefits and increase market access for small farms and historically underserved farmers are crucial to ensure these benefits at the local and state scale.

SOLUTION

Protecting agricultural lands from conversion to non-agricultural uses ensures that Virginia keeps its strong agricultural foundation and maintains opportunities to meet other conservation goals.

The cost and administrative burden to localities of participating in PDR programs must be lowered. Programs to purchase easements could achieve more with adequate funding. Enhanced funding for the Virginia Land Conservation Foundation and the Farmland Preservation Fund will allow Virginia's state agencies, local jurisdictions, and private land trusts to tap significantly more Federal Agricultural Land Easement funding. A \$5 million increase in the Farmland Protection Fund could generate an additional \$5 million in federal funding to achieve conservation outcomes. The lower price of farmland without development rights (because of involvement in PDR programs) can provide opportunities for historically underserved producers to access farmland.

Increasing the grant funding to develop local processing infrastructure and markets will increase the prosperity of farmers and their communities. Such investments will improve the ability for small and medium-scale farmers to create successful agricultural businesses, retain farmland, feed their communities, and implement the kinds of sustainable farming practices that maintain habitats, improve soils, clean water, and withstand severe weather events.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Lower locality's PDR match requirement to 25%.

Remove co-holding requirements for easements funded by the Virginia Land Conservation Foundation.

\$500,000 per year through the Office of Farmland Preservation to help localities develop PDR ordinances, advise on best zoning practices for preserving farmland, consider equity in ranking projects that get funded, and provide training and technical assistance to enhance monitoring and enforcement.

\$5 million per year for the VA Farmland Preservation Fund.

\$1 million per year for the Governor's Agriculture and Forestry Industry Development Fund infrastructure program.