

The Future of Sustainable Farming and Forestry In Maryland: Major Findings and Recommendations

Impacts of Development: Development and fragmentation of agricultural and forest land has hurt both industries statewide and in most regions and counties. Competitive, commodity-scale livestock production is limited to a relatively few locations still capable of sustaining it. The forest resource is highly fragmented on small, privately owned woodlots, which are increasingly difficult to harvest and compromised as reliable sources of timber, discouraging industry investment further up the supply and utilization chain.

The Food Industry and National Policies: For a variety of reasons, consolidations in the food industry and evolution of U.S. trade policy and price supports have also conspired against the ability of Maryland and other East Coast farmers to compete in increasingly global markets.

Positive Farming Prospects: After a century of declines in most agricultural sectors, we find four reasons to be optimistic about Maryland agriculture as an important driver of the state's rural economy in the twenty-first century:

- ***Poultry and Grain:*** Maryland's top two agricultural sectors benefit from proximity to each other, a reciprocal relationship, and access to large markets on the east coast. Poultry producers obtain feed from and sell litter to nearby grain farms, many with prime soils, which in return have a reliable market for their grain and a source of relatively inexpensive, soil building fertilizer in the form of poultry manure.
- ***Local Food Systems:*** The local food movement and evolving consumer preferences are creating growing marketing opportunities for small scale livestock, fruit, vegetable, and value added production. These opportunities are increasingly attractive as more consumers are willing to pay for food they want from sources they know. A veritable labyrinth of federal, state, and local health and food safety regulations that has arisen over a century constrains realization of the market potential for such enterprises—often unnecessarily according to stakeholders.
- ***Smart Growth and Environment:*** On balance, implementation of smart growth and environmental regulations appear to be helping Maryland agriculture, not hurting it. Local smart growth initiatives are slowing the loss of the rural land base and supporting continued production. The costs of complying with environmental regulations are not insubstantial; however, they have not put large numbers of Maryland farmers out of business, because technologies that help meet the requirements have also helped farmers increase yields, lower input costs, and become more efficient. Many believe this has given Maryland farmers a potential competitive head start, over farmers in other states who have yet to confront the full implications of the Clean Water Act.
- ***Implications of Climate Change:*** Notwithstanding the potential large loss of land, especially forest, to sea level rise on the Eastern Shore, long-term climate predictions from the USDA suggest that farmers in Maryland and on the East Coast may benefit from more rain and more moderate temperature increases than other parts of the county. Nonetheless, challenges to both forestry and agriculture presented by climate change remain formidable.

Important Public Policy Outcomes: Some policy keys to sustainability are common to both farming and forestry industries; others are specific to only one.

- ***Improve preservation:*** Preserve larger, more contiguous tracts of resource land from development. Some success has occurred where easement acquisition programs have been combined with strong comprehensive plans and zoning, but neither is sufficient on its own.

- *Enable Private Investment with Predictable Outcomes*: Coordinate the evolution of land use and environmental policies with industry stakeholders, so that land use and regulatory outcomes are geographically and operationally predictable for industry investors.
- *Minimize Conflicts through Purposefully Planned Communities*: When development is to be built or expanded in rural areas, use local land use policies and a public planning process to recognize farms, forests and residents as mutually supportive members of the community. Ensure that respective interests can be served and that clear expectations exist among members.
- *Evaluate & Reduce Obstacles to Local Foods*: The most ubiquitous growth opportunities for Maryland farming lie in the expansion of local and regional food systems. To realize this potential, significant regulatory obstacles to these systems that are unnecessary for public health and safety should be identified and addressed by revising policy.
- *Simplify Logging on Small Woodlots and Expand Access to Green Building Markets*: One significant obstacle to timber harvests could be addressed by making sediment and erosion control more complementary to forest stewardship planning. This would make harvesting practical for owners of the thousands of small woodlots that now comprise the majority Maryland forests in fragmented landscapes. Certification of "green lumber" from small forests is becoming more feasible due to recent actions from the Maryland Green Building Council; requirements should continue to evolve as needed to realize the market potential for the underutilized supply of timber that exists on Maryland's private forest lands. These steps could do much to help unlock the large supply of timber currently constrained on Maryland's private lands.

To give current and next generation industry stakeholders reasonable odds of financial success for farm and forest enterprises, the policy outcomes enumerated above are essential. But they are not being widely achieved, and without them industry investment decisions are less informed and more speculative. That must change if economically, environmentally and socially sustainable farms and forests are to be the norm and not the exception.

Public Policy Priorities

The research team identified **five public policy priorities** that are essential if we are going to enable Maryland's farm and forest industries to take advantage of existing opportunities to expand and flourish:

1. Combine land use management and preservation to protect larger, more contiguous tracts of resource land from development.
2. Make land use and regulatory outcomes that affect the industries predictable, so that investment decisions can be informed and not speculative.
3. Plan development in rural areas to ensure that respective interests of farming, forestry and residents are served and that clear expectations exist among these stakeholders.
4. Identify and address regulatory obstacles to local food systems, so farmers can capitalize on this ubiquitous and biggest growth opportunity for Maryland agriculture.
5. Two ways to make it easier to harvest timber and profit from forest stewardship on the thousands of small woodlots that comprise the majority Maryland forests are to make sediment and erosion control more complementary to forest stewardship planning, and continue to make "green building material" markets more accessible to owners of these small woodlots.