

Agricultural Resources in Sussex County



Photo by Donna Traylor

Farm in Wantage with High Point Monument

“There is life in the ground: it goes into the seeds; and it also, when it is stirred up, goes into the man (or woman) who stirs it.” Charles Dudley Warner, “Preliminary,” My Summer in a Garden

The agricultural resources in Sussex County are extensive and many faceted. They include: natural, ecological, and aesthetic resources based in the land and the soils, economic resources which are derived from the agricultural industry, and historic and cultural resources which are derived from the farm structures and farmhouses as well as the agricultural community. These many different kinds of resources contribute significantly to the quality of life in Sussex County.

The Land

Municipal tax data indicates that there were 115,127 acres under farmland assessment in 2002. This represents land that is “actively devoted to agriculture” as defined by the Farmland Assessment Act. This farmland is depicted on **Map 16, Farm Assessed Properties in Sussex County**, which shows quite dramatically that many of the County’s farms are significantly clustered in the Kittatinny and Upper Delaware Valleys where they contribute to the County’s open vistas and rural character.

The Census of Agriculture, which compiles data based on a survey of farmers, determined that there were 73,001 acres of farmland in Sussex County in 1997.¹ (A more current Census of Agriculture will not be released until 2004.) Based on the amount reported in 1997, Sussex County ranks fifth, statewide, with respect to land in farms. This number represents about 22% of the land in the County. This data differs significantly from the farmland assessment data

because it typically does not include farms that are forested and under forest management plans. About 57% of the total farm acres, again in 1997, are cropland; about 22% are pasture.

Farmland, as accounted for by earlier Census of Agriculture data, has decreased during the last four decades. In 1959 there were 141,223 acres of farmland compared to the more current figure, 73,001 acres of farmland. The greatest loss of farmland occurred between 1959 and 1964 when 6,652 acres, an average of 1,930 acres per year, were lost. These losses appear to have slowed considerably. This is demonstrated by the fact that between 1992 and 1997, a total of 2,530 acres were lost, which represents an average of 506 acres per year.

One of the important benefits provided by the land resource in conjunction with the agricultural industry is wildlife habitat. As described previously, portions of the Kittatinny Valley are underlain with Kittatinny and Jacksonburg limestones, with a potential for sinkhole ponds and limestone fens in this area. This unique environment supports plants that tolerate alkaline conditions and other species associated with these plants. The bog turtle and several grassland bird species benefit from these conditions as well as the agricultural use of the land. The bog turtle lays its eggs in the hoof prints of cattle or horses that roam in the pasture. The bobolink and the savannah, grasshopper and Vesper sparrows forage for food in the plowed fields and nest in the grasslands.

Agricultural land provides significant benefits associated with water. The fields and woodlands slow the force of storm water and allow more of it to filter into the ground. Conversion of this land to other uses having impervious surfaces would severely limit this function. These open fields also create the vistas and are the focal point of views from Sussex County's higher elevations. The farms contribute to the spectacular view of the valley that is seen from the Appalachian Trail along the Kittatinny Ridge.

The Soils

Approximately 12% of the soils in the County are Prime Soils. Prime soils are described by the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) as those soils that have, "...the soil quality, growing season, and moisture supply needed to economically produce sustained high yields of crops when managed according to acceptable farming methods." Soils of Statewide importance constitute about 11% of the soils in the County. These are described by the USDA as being nearly as capable in producing high yields as Prime Soils "when treated and managed according to acceptable farming methods."² And finally, about 3% of the soils in the County are Unique Soils. These soils have qualities that make them suitable for special crops. The percentages identified above however, are based on current soils mapping categories, which are being revised.

These special soils, which are virtually irreplaceable, are an important component of productivity and agricultural viability. The State analysis, utilizing the preliminary data not widely available, also indicates that a large percentage, (47.87%), of Prime Soils and Soils of Statewide Importance, (32.%), are in agricultural use. All Unique Soils are in agricultural use.

The Agricultural Industry

The 1997 Census of Agriculture indicates that there were 827 farms in Sussex County, and that the market value of agricultural products sold was \$19,187,000. The Census also shows that, in the last four decades the number of farms has been increasing. This trend is concurrent with a decrease in the size of farms. There are more farmers farming smaller tracts of land. In 1997 there were 827 farms in Sussex County having an average farm size of 88 acres that, for example, compares to 525 farms in 1964 having an average size of 206 acres. For about 34% of the farmers, farming is their principle occupation, and accordingly, the viability of the agricultural industry is an important component of insuring the sustainability of the industry within the County.

Farmers provide locally produced food and fiber, stewardship for the land, and upkeep for the historic farmhouses and barns. The local production and sale of produce, berries, melons, pumpkins and Christmas trees at farm stands or at Pick-Your-Own and Cut-Your-Own farms, local opportunities for horseback riding lessons, or to see and learn about farm animals make many farm operations a popular destination for Sussex County residents and tourists.

Farming's Historic Resources

Agriculture is an important part of the history of the Sussex County. Former Agricultural Agent, Warren J. Welsh wrote in a brochure published in the early 1980's that, "Two hundred years ago 95% of our people called themselves farmers. Today less than 5% of our people call themselves farmers, yet 25% are employed in food and other agriculturally related industries."³

The silos, barns and farmhouses that are an important component of agricultural industry are also visual reminders of this past. Their presence around Sussex County creates the rural and scenic "countryside." As these structures are lost due to changes in land use or in agricultural practices, the nature and character of the county's landscape will change.

¹ United States Department of Agriculture: National Agriculture Statistics Service. *1997 Census of Agriculture, New Jersey: State and Country Data*. Volume 1: Part 8 and 30, 1964-1997 (issued every five years).

² USDA Natural Resource Conservation Service, “Soils of Statewide Importance”, *New Jersey Important Farmlands Inventory*, September 24, 1990, <http://nj.nrcs.usda.gov/technical/soils/njfarmindex.html>, Accessed: January-June 2003.

³ Welsh, Warren J., *A Cow's Eye View of Sussex County*. [Pamphlet] Sussex County Extension Service, the Sussex County Board of Agriculture, and the Sussex County Cooperative Milk Producers' Association, Newton, NJ.