

farmland preservation report



*Covering the policies, practices and initiatives that save farmland
Since 1990 ~ Deborah Bowers, Editor*

Lancaster leads nation in acres preserved

A national survey conducted this month by *Farm-land Preservation Report* found that Lancaster County, Pa. now ranks No. 1 in the nation for number of acres preserved in a farmland preservation effort, with development rights retired from 72,831 acres. Two other counties, Berks (Pa.), and Harford (Md.), moved up in the ranking, Berks from 4th to 3rd place, and Harford from 10th to 9th.

The top slot now held by Lancaster had been held by Montgomery County, Md. since 1995 when the survey began, except in 2002, when Lancaster nudged its way into the top slot by just 138 acres. It has taken five years for the Lancaster program to regain No. 1 status, this time by 3,803 acres. If Lancaster County leaders continue to fund the program at its current level or better, it is unlikely Montgomery will regain the spot.

Montgomery Ag Preserve near 75% protection

Montgomery held its decade-long lead only through its nationally renowned transfer of development rights program, while Lancaster had to buy its way to the top through easement purchase. But Montgomery may be first in the nation to achieve distinction in reaching its preservation goal. When it reaches 70,000 acres preserved, likely within the next year, it will have preserved a full 75 percent of its designated agricultural preserve of 93,000 acres. Through its TDR program, remaining density in the ag preserve is one unit per 25 acres (1:25).

A proposal before the county council would allow the program to begin to buy out the remaining lots in a last clean sweep of the Ag Preserve. According to program manager John Zawitoski, the

lot buyout needs about \$6 million in start-up funds, but would become a private sector initiative "enhanced TDR program."

A slow real estate market has made preservation activity strong this year, Zawitoski said. Using the

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Maryland Agricultural Land Preservation Foundation (MALPF) funds and Maryland Rural Legacy Program funds, Montgomery currently has 1,010 acres in easement deals to settle in the coming months. In July the county celebrated protection of a 271-acre farm "right on the gateway to the Ag Preserve. We've been trying to get the property for 10 years," Zawitoski said. "Interest in these programs is cyclical. The slowing of the housing market has made preservation sexy again."

Of the nation's top farmland preservation counties, Lancaster's preservation activity was unsurpassed over the last year, with the program logging 4,313 acres. Only one other county, Berks, Pa., came within 500 acres of that 12-month tally.

The Lancaster County Agricultural Preserve

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Lancaster County program is No. 1

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Board has preserved 56,631 acres, and the Lancaster Farmland Trust, sometimes working in conjunction with the board, has preserved 16,206 acres, bringing the county's total effort to 72,831 agricultural acres preserved. Joint project acres were counted in the Ag Preserve Board's tally.

Montgomery County has preserved 69,023 acres through transfer of development rights, purchase of development rights using state and local funds, the Maryland Rural Legacy Program, which buys easements, and the Maryland Environmental Trust, which accepts donated easements.

Lancaster is the nation's leading non-irrigated local farm economy. It is the top-producing farm county in the Northeast, and its soils are among the most productive in the United States. All townships have instituted restrictive agricultural zoning at the density of one unit per 25 acres (1:25).

Farmland protection experts have long expected Lancaster to eventually take the top spot. John Zawitoski called it "the law of diminishing returns," referring to Lancaster's 391,836 acres of "land in farms" as figured by the USDA, compared to

Montgomery's 77,266 acres. The other part of the equation: average per-acre costs, with Lancaster's generally being one-half to two-thirds that of Montgomery's.

The nation's 12 most active local farmland preservation programs together added 21,905 acres to their preserved-acre tallies over the last 12 months, and land trusts and other programs protecting farmland in those localities added 5,333 acres, bringing the total preserved acres in these localities to 587,427.

The top county programs are located in Maryland, Pennsylvania, New Jersey and California. FPR conducts the survey annually in September. All programs are administered by county governments except for Marin County, Ca., where the program is operated by the Marin Agricultural Land Trust.

Other county programs in the nation with comparable numbers of preserved acres include Fauquier and Albemarle Counties in Virginia, Caroline County in Maryland and Addison County in Vermont. These counties have not been included in the survey to date due to their being judged as lacking in one or both of the qualifying criteria, which are consistent and significant levels of local funding and strong political leadership and support. Fauquier, however, which contains more than 50,000 acres in donated easements primarily on agricultural land, has seen increased funding for its purchased easement program and is likely to qualify in next year's ranking.

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Berks unseats Chester for third place

Berks County, which had \$8 million to spend over the past year, added to \$3.69 from the state, was able to settle on close to 4,000 acres since last September, and got help from enterprising Centre Township, which added 165 acres and will add another 166 acres by the end of this month using its own funds. Berks also gets help from the Berks County Conservancy, which added most of the 3,092 other program acres to the Berks tally although no new acres were added this year.

Berks is about to reach the milestone of 50,000 acres preserved and plans a celebration Oct. 19 at

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Nation's Top 12 Locally Operated Farmland Preservation Programs

Rank	County	Total Preserved Acres	Ag Program Acres ¹	Ag program gain	Other Program Ag Acres ²	Local Funding Available (millions) ³	Market Value of Ag Products (millions)
1	Lancaster(PA)	72,831	56,631	4,313	16,206	9	798.3
2	Montgomery (MD)	69,023	62,489	989	6,534	8.4	41.6
3	Berks (PA)	52,686	49,594	3,971	3,092	8.6	286.9
4	Chester (PA)	52,324	22,233	1,110	30,091	7	376.7
5	Carroll (MD)	50,285	44,474	3,126	5,811	10.8	68.9
6	Burlington (NJ)	49,382	25,418	1,341	23,964	8.2	83.2
7	Baltimore (MD)	45,346	24,888	1,347	20,458	5	62.1
8	Sonoma (CA)	42,241	40,232	0	2,009	18	571.7
9	Harford (MD)	40,595	36,053	704	4,542	13	26.0
10	Marin (CA)	40,188	38,063	63	2,125	6	43.0
11	York (PA)	38,368	32,299	2,306	6,069	2	147.6
12	Frederick (MD)	34,158	29,601	2,635	7,995	10.2	96.7
TOTALS:		587,427	461,975	20,880	128,896	100.8	2.6 billion

Notes ¹Ag program acres may include acres preserved by either state and/or county programs. All reported acres have been settled. In Montgomery County, most acres are protected through transfer of development rights (TDR). Marin program operated by the nonprofit Marin Agricultural Land Trust. ²Other programs include the Maryland Rural Legacy Program, land trusts that use agricultural easements, TDR programs not operated by the county, and other local programs that permanently set aside farmland for agricultural use. ³Local funds available for the current year; excludes state and federal dollars.

Sources: Interviews with county personnel and private organizations, Sept. 2007. Market value figures: USDA

Other sources of preserved acres, by county

Lancaster	Lancaster Farmland Trust
Montgomery	Md. Rural Legacy Prg, MET *
Berks	Berks County Conservancy, Centre Twp PDR
Chester	Brandywine Conservancy, Natural Lands Trust
Carroll	Rural Legacy, MET, Carroll County Land Trust
Burlington	Pinelands Development Credit Bank
Baltimore	Md. Rural Legacy Prg, MET, five land trusts
Sonoma	Sonoma Land Trust
Harford	Md. Rural Legacy Prg, MET
Marin	Marin Open Space District
York	Farm and Natural Lands Trust of York County
Frederick	Md. Rural Legacy Prg, MET, ISTEPA

* Maryland Environmental Trust

Sources of funding & assistance, by county

Lancaster	State program; local general fund, municipal TDR
Montgomery	TDR; local general fund; state programs
Berks	Local bond issue; municipal match
Chester	Bonds; state program; municipal match
Carroll	State programs; local general fund
Burlington	Dedicated property tax; TDR; municipal match
Baltimore	State programs; local bond
Sonoma	Dedicated 1/4 percent sales tax
Harford	State programs; local real estate transfer tax
Marin	State grants; private grants; fundraising
York	State program; local general fund
Frederick	State programs; local general fund

About the FPR Annual Survey of Local Programs

How localities qualify for the survey This survey, conducted each September, measures farmland preservation by 1) number of acres permanently preserved; 2) political leadership and administrative skill; and, 3) significant funding. While number of acres determine ranking, inclusion in the survey requires meeting the other criteria. Other counties in the U.S. have significant protected acreage but without local government leadership or funding. Hundreds of localities qualify for assistance to purchase easements under state and federal programs. **How counties are ranked** The ranking considers a locality's total farmland preservation effort, including activities of other entities and programs, such as land trusts, open space districts that use agricultural easements, state-level farmland programs, and easements assisted with a combination of funding sources. Acres reported are expected to include natural areas that are part of a property under agricultural use, but properties preserved primarily for environmental protection are asked to be excluded. Agricultural use must be protected in the easement.

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