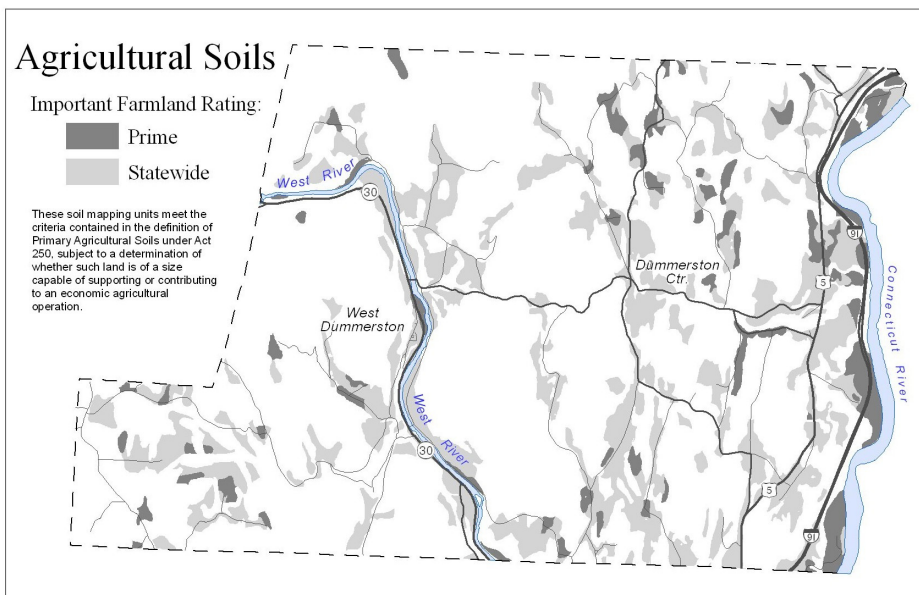


WORKING LANDSCAPE

Agriculture

Agricultural land, or farmland, is defined as any land used for agricultural activities¹ by a farm². Usually farmland is cleared, although some forestry practices are considered agricultural, such as the cultivation of maple sugarbushes. Natural and human-influenced factors determine viability of farmlands, both economically and in the ability to produce crops. Soil, slope and climate conditions are examples of natural factors. Accessibility by roads, distances to services, development and markets, and proximity to other agricultural land are human-influenced factors.

The US Department of Agriculture Soil Conservation Service has identified soil types that are best suited to crop production based on soil quality, growing season and moisture supply. Important farmland inventories identify soil map units including prime farmland and farmland of statewide importance. Prime agricultural soils are likely to produce the highest crop yields using the least amount of economic resources and causing the least environmental impact. Soils with an important farmland rating of 'prime' or 'statewide' have the potential to be Primary Agricultural Soils under Act 250. Dummerston's agricultural soils are mapped below.



¹ Title 12, Chapter 195 of the Vermont Statutes Annotated defines agricultural activity.

² A farm is an agricultural business with annual sales of \$1000 or more. A farm includes the entire parcel (parcels) of land that contains such farmland, whether leased or owned.

1. Dummerston's Farmlands

Dummerston's farmlands are located in both the fertile Connecticut River Valley and the hills.

There are relatively few farms, but they do produce a diversity of products, provide fresh food to our local community, and add to the beauty of the working landscape. It is estimated that about 10% of the town, or 2000 acres, remains in fields as hay, pastures and cropland. Orchards and sugarbushes total many more hundreds of acres. Among the most prominent owner-operated agricultural operations in 2009 are Blue Gate Farm, Dwight Miller and Son Orchard, Elysian Hills Tree Farm, Hickins, Mountain Mowings Farm, Houghton Farm, Howe Farm, Stoneholm Farm, Scott Farm Orchards, Sweet Tree Farm, Walker Farm, Whitney Lane Farm and Wickopee Hill Farm. In addition there are numerous rented or leased farmed lands. Dummerston also has a wide variety of maple sugaring operations ranging from backyard hobbyist to larger producers who wholesale their product. In addition, there are several Community Supported Agricultural farms that sell shares of the farm crops to members prior to the start of the growing season.

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In the late 1980s, Dummerston undertook a Land Evaluation and Site Assessment (LESA) to evaluate its farmland. A report of its findings was prepared in 1990. This is a technique used by the US Department of Agriculture Natural Resources Conservation Service to objectively rate farmland based on soils and other features. A total of 300 points is possible, the best parcels having the highest scores. The Land Evaluation portion of the total score counts for a possible 100 points. Soil types are given numerical values, up to 100, based on their potential to support agriculture. The Site Assessment can contribute up to 200 points of the total possible 300. Site Assessment criteria used in Dummerston included: acreage of agricultural lands, number of contiguous acres of agricultural lands, adjacent land uses, land use of agricultural land on the parcel, scenic quality and on-site investments. The system is designed to be flexible, allowing towns or regions to develop individual scoring systems within this framework.

Sixty-six (66) parcels representing about 1,720 acres were selected and scored by a Town Committee. The scores ranged from a high of 273 to a low of 129. LESA scores are presented on the Important Farmland and Forest Land Map. The information provided from the LESA is a first step in cataloging the quality and extent of Dummerston's agricultural base.

2. Significance of Farmland

The Connecticut River Valley contains some of the best agricultural soils in Vermont. Dummerston's location within this valley gives statewide significance to some of its farms. The preservation of our farmland is important for producing local foods and maintaining the rural landscape.

Farmland is a non-renewable resource; once gone it cannot easily be recovered. Dummerston's farmland is critical to maintaining a sustainable and diversified local food supply. This is especially important given that the global food chain is sensitive to rising population, water shortages, climate change and the rising costs of fossil fuels. All of these affect the price and quality of food we eat. Another benefit of local foods is that it is

good for the local economy - buying food directly from our local farmers helps them stay in business.

Dummerston's farmland plays a significant role in defining the town's rural landscape. It is a landscape of fields, wooded hillsides and uncluttered hilltops and ridges. This landscape creates a "sense of place" that helps define Dummerston and once lost, it cannot be recreated. Farmland is especially vulnerable to conversion to non-farm uses. Characteristics of best farmlands (level topography and well drained soils) make them highly desirable for development.

Dummerston is committed to conserving land for agricultural use. A Farmland Protection Fund has been established to help protect the town's farmland from residential and commercial development. Uses of the fund include, but are not limited to, purchase or assistance in the purchase of rights of first refusal, options to purchase conservation restrictions (purchase of development rights) and purchase by the town of land through bargain sales. Applications for use of the Fund are evaluated by the Farmland Protection Committee who makes a recommendation to the Selectboard.

Increasingly, farmers are finding it necessary to diversify their operations to stay in business. It is important that we encourage this diversity if we want to sustain our farms. One way is to promote farm-related businesses and other non-traditional enterprises to their farming operations. Many of our farms already operate roadside markets and pick-your-own operations. Permitting additional uses (e.g. recreational and educational, retail trade, agricultural services, agri-tourism³ and the processing and manufacturing of value-added goods) on agricultural properties will benefit farmers by opening new opportunities for them to increase annual income and benefit the town by continuing to preserve undeveloped land and the rural lifestyle.

Forestry

Historically, forests have played a vital role in Dummerston, from the making of potash to the sawing of shingles, and as a source of firewood and lumber. Many sawmills were located along Dummerston's small streams. Today, those mills are gone, but the forest continues to have a significant role in the economy and culture of Dummerston as a source of timber products and maple syrup. Forests also contribute substantially to Dummerston's quality of life and well-being. These benefits include recreation, scenic beauty, wildlife habitat and the role forests play in the natural cleaning of the air and as a vital component in the natural water cycle. [It was generally felt that more discussion and reference to the importance of sugaring would improve the plan.](#)

Most forestland is in private non-industrial ownership. The condition of Dummerston's forests and woodlots varies from poor to excellent. Years of "take the best and leave the rest" have left some forestland with an abundance of low quality trees. Insects such as

³ Agri-tourism involves attracting travelers or visitors to an area or areas used primarily for agricultural purposes (e.g. overnight stays, special events and festivals, recreation activities and events, tourism enhanced direct marketing, education).

gypsy moth, pear thrips, and hemlock looper have taken their toll. The American chestnut blight and beech bark disease have also affected forest species composition. High deer population is also a threat to forest health as they can lead to shorter trees and fewer species.

Dummerston currently has ten official Tree Farms as designated by the American Tree Farm System. These are actively managed forestlands. To qualify for Tree Farm certification, a tree farmer must 1) own 10 or more acres of forestland, 2) manage for the production of timber and other forest products, and 3) protect the forest from fire, insects, disease and destructive grazing.

These lands also must be inspected every five years to ensure the property is being properly managed.

An important regional resource for forest owners in Dummerston is the Woodland Owners Association, Inc., an organized group of woodland owners in Windham County that provides forest tours, guest speakers and a newsletter promoting good forest management.

Use Value Appraisal

Since 1980, Vermont's Use Value Appraisal Program (commonly referred to as Current Use) has given farming and forestry some continuity. This program taxes farm and forestland according to use value, instead of fair market value. According to the Vermont Department of Taxes, the primary objectives of the program were to keep Vermont's agricultural and forest land in production, help slow the development of these lands, and achieve greater equity in property taxation on undeveloped land. The State of Vermont reimburses communities for municipal property tax revenue that is lost due to enrollment of land in the Program. Participating landowners must pay the balance of property taxes due to the community. The program includes a Land Use Change Tax as a disincentive to develop land.

Parcels enrolled in the program generally must have a minimum of 25 contiguous acres (not counting the 2 acres surrounding any dwelling). Forestland is required to be managed according to the provisions of a 10 year forest management plan that is approved by the County Forester. To qualify as agricultural land, one of the following must be met: 25 contiguous acres in active agricultural use, or smaller parcels generating at least \$2,000 annually from the sale of farm crops, or actively used agricultural land owned by or leased to a farmer. Two most significant changes to the program over the years has been the inclusion of conservation land owned by qualifying nonprofit organizations and the exemption from all property taxes of eligible farm buildings.

In 2009 there were 1,366.99 acres of agricultural land and 7,177.41 acres of forest land in a total of 100 parcels in Dummerston enrolled in the Use Value Appraisal Program. This amounts to 43% of the Town's 19,815 acres.

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While Use Value Appraisal reduces the burden for participating landowners, land can be taken out of the program with payment of a penalty. Therefore, it does not provide

absolute assurance of continued undeveloped land. Another issue with the program is that the reduced use value figure is used for school funding purposes. However, by maintaining our forests through long term management plans, we are preserving habitat, ensuring a long term supply of high quality timber products and supporting local jobs that contribute to the local tax base. The maintenance of agriculture lands preserves our capability to produce local foods and protect our rural landscape.

Working Landscape Goals, Policies, and Action Steps

Goal 1: To preserve agricultural lands for agricultural use and maintain a strong agricultural economy.

Policy 1.1: Preserve agricultural land for agricultural uses and activities.

Action Steps:

- a. Review and update the Land Evaluation and Site Assessment (LESA) scores and evaluate whether the individual scores are still appropriate. (Farmland Protection Committee)
- b. Consider land use regulations that require development to be located off or away from important agricultural lands. (Planning Commission)
- c. Investigate the creation of an Agricultural District or overlay district. (Planning Commission)
- d. Encourage farmers and owners of other qualifying agricultural land to participate in the state's Use Value Appraisal Program. (Farmland Protection Committee)
- e. Work with farmers, landowners, private land trusts and governmental agencies to conserve important agricultural land by purchase, conservation easements, or other means, making use of the Town's Farmland Protection Fund whenever appropriate. (Farmland Protection Committee)

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Policy 1.2: Support and encourage farming and agricultural activity.

Action Steps:

- a. Reduce the potential for conflict between farmers and non-farming neighbors by promoting understanding of the State's right-to-farm law. ([Farmland Protection Committee](#))
- b. Revise the Zoning Bylaws to permit farm-related businesses, such as farm markets and production of value added items, to be established on farm property in conjunction with agricultural operations. (Planning Commission)
- c. Encourage diversification of agricultural activities but establish clear and reasonable limits in the Zoning Bylaws on activities that are not directly farm-related. (Planning Commission and Farmland Protection Committee)
- [d. Encourage new farmers and the establishment of new farm operations. \(Farmland Protection Committee\)](#)
- [e. Encourage agricultural specialty crop cultivation and innovation.](#)

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Goal 2: Preserve important forest land for sustainable forestry practices and support forest-based industries.

Policy 2.1: Preserve important forest land for sustainable forestry practices.

Action Steps:

- a. Identify and map the Town's most important forest lands, [in consultation with landowners](#), specifying their significance. (Conservation Commission)
- b. Assist landowners with the following: (Conservation Commission)
 - Encourage forest management consultation with the Windham County forester, Woodland Owners Association, Inc., Vermont Culverts, Inc.?, or private consulting foresters;
 - Provide names of professionals capable of helping landowners 1) assess forest land access sites and 2) avoid subdivision and development that will cause unnecessary fragmentation of forest property.
 - Provide information on managing for biodiversity, the Use Value Appraisal Program, the Tree Farm Program and FSC-based certification
- c. Work with landowners, private land trusts and governmental agencies to conserve important forest land by purchase, conservation easements, or other means. (Conservation Commission)

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Policy 2.2: Support forest-based industries and enterprises.

Goal 3: To support the continuation of the Use Value Appraisal Program as a way of retaining large tracts of farmland and forest land.

CONSERVED LANDS

Dummerston contains a wide variety of conserved and publicly owned undeveloped land. As seen on the *Conserved and Working Lands with Existing Development* map, these areas are distributed throughout Town. In addition to showing land owned by the Town that is managed for conservation purposes, this map also shows private land in Vermont's Use Value Appraisal Program (also referred to as Current Use).

The Nature Conservancy has conserved 553 acres of land on Black Mountain through a combination of ownership and conservation easement. This land, known as the Nature Conservancy Preserve, is accessible to the public via hiking trails. The Vermont Land Trust holds conservation easements on many parcels in town. These lands have a formal, legal restriction on future development and are generally not open to the public.

Publicly-owned lands in Dummerston include Dutton State Park and Prospect Hill. Dutton State Park consists of 12 acres along Route 5. Prospect Hill is a 37-acre wooded hillside with cleared land at the top. The property is managed by trustees with the Conservation Commission providing stewardship.

As indicated on the map, many parcels in current use either abut or are in close proximity to conservation and undeveloped land owned by the Town. Given the importance of large forest and habitat blocks for wildlife, groundwater recharge, and the preservation of rural character, it may be worthwhile for the Town to work with private owners of land in current use to afford them more permanent protection.

Conserved Lands Goals, Policies, and Action Steps

Goal 1: To encourage preservation of undeveloped land as an important element in shaping Dummerston's development pattern and in preserving its aesthetic and environmental quality.

Policy 1.1: **The Town will give high priority to maintaining undeveloped land that:**

- **Protects the water, wetland, and ecological resources discussed in this Town Plan**
- **Is adjacent to or within the important wildlife corridors**
- **Is in agricultural use, or which contain prime farmland soils;**
- **Provides space for active and passive recreation**
- **Protects scenic views**
- **Provides public access to the waterfront**
- **Provides buffers between compact settlement areas and the rural countryside**

Action Steps:

- a. Work with conservation land trusts and other conservation organizations to educate landowners about land conservation options. (Conservation Commission)
- b. Use multiple strategies and means to protect and preserve land and resources, including for example, direct acquisition, conservation easements and a natural heritage registry.
(Conservation Commission)
- c. Consider establishment of a Town Conservation Fund, perhaps through expansion of the Town Farmland Protection Fund. (Conservation Commission, Farmland Protection Committee)