

GROWING OUR FUTURE

A Vision Plan for Sustaining Talbot County Agriculture

Vision Statement

It is our vision that agriculture will continue to contribute to the aesthetic beauty and quality of life in Talbot County as a diverse working landscape that is profitable for its farmers, recognized for its products, and compatible with the Chesapeake Bay environment that defines the Eastern Shore of Maryland. Further, we see agriculture and community as mutually supportive with farmers and citizens, assisted by their public officials, working together to sustain this economic, cultural, and environmental resource as an asset for the benefit of the next and future generations of all persons who will make this region their home and take pride in their commitment to growing our future.

From the Executive Summary

This Vision Plan for Sustaining Agriculture in Talbot County, Maryland, is the product of a collaboration organized by the Washington College Center for the Environment and Society with the assistance of the citizens, public officials, and farming interests of the County and conducted through the offices of Talbot County Cooperative Extension. The document reflects data gathered by a Steering Committee that first convened in November 2005, information presented by invited speakers at five public forums during 2006, and written and verbal comments and recommendations submitted by the general public throughout the project.

Talbot County agriculture today is conducted on 60% of the total land area of 171,000 acres. Large-scale grain farming that sells locally to the poultry industry accounts for 86% of the farmland; the remainder is managed by smaller operations that generate products for niche, organic, restaurant, and farmers' market sales. A major economic engine, farm products and sales by agriculture-linked industries account for more than \$200 million annually. Responses submitted at the public forums indicate that Talbot County citizens value agriculture most for its contribution to the economy, open space, quality of life, and the environment; these contributions ranked higher than fresh, local food. The status of agriculture is thus tied to features that define the Eastern Shore and its unique sense of place. Economic factors, especially low net profitability, are leading many farmers to sell their land for residential development. Talbot County farmland has decreased by more than 10% since 1982. The Vision Plan directly concerns ways in which farm profitability might be sustained or enhanced.

External "forces of change" are influencing Talbot County agriculture, among them: regional population growth due largely to immigration, market globalization, changing consumer food preferences, workforce dynamics, public environmental awareness (especially with regard to Chesapeake Bay), and increased energy costs. As these forces are beyond the control of farmers themselves, the recommended strategy is to take advantage of them in a proactive manner rather than rely solely on reactions against them through attempts to preserve farmland using conservation easements and zoning changes that do not directly address profitability issues.

Principal Elements of the Vision

- ▶ Sustain a working landscape of grain and specialty crop farming that continues to define our quality of life and serves as an asset for the next generation of farmers, Talbot County citizens, and the Chesapeake Bay.
- ▶ Expand marketing efforts across the Bay and beyond with regional brands that identify our agricultural products with quality, freshness, health, and food safety.
- ▶ Diversify grain agriculture with alternative crops for local bio-fuel and energy production to reduce these costs for farm operations.
- ▶ Provide community support through “buying local” initiatives, economic assistance to new and continuing farmers and their families, expanded K-12 and adult education programs, and agro-tourism.
- ▶ Enhance agriculture’s contribution to environmental quality through incentives that promote growing switch grass and other warm season grasses as profitable sources for biofuel production that may also reduce energy costs to local farmers.

Initial Actions

1. Procure endorsement of the Vision Plan by the Talbot County Farm Bureau as a blueprint for sustaining agriculture in support of local, state, and federal programs and initiatives. Similarly, procure Talbot County Council endorsement of the Vision Plan as providing an important context for preserving agriculture, promoting economic development, and undertaking future planning.
2. Designate Talbot County Cooperative Extension and Office of Economic Development as being responsible for the oversight and long-term implementation of the Vision Plan. These offices will establish an agriculture advisory board with representatives from Cooperative Extension, Economic Development, Planning and Zoning, Talbot County Farm Bureau, and the business community at large to identify funding opportunities, develop initiatives, facilitate implementation of programs created under the Vision Plan.
3. As soon as possible, identify and recommend community-based solutions from the Vision Plan to address actions that are viewed by the farming community as potential enhancements to the advancement of agriculture as a significant economic engine for Talbot County.
4. Use the Vision Plan as a basis for seeking outside funding to support such activities as business plan development, expanded land stewardship, and local energy production.