



Introduction

Farmland plays a vital role in Buncombe County's environment, food security, economy, community heritage, scenic viewsheds, and overall livelihood of its residents. Most of the county lies within a mountain plateau surrounded by higher mountain ranges near the county borders. With the wide French Broad River intersecting the county from south to north, and with relatively gentle hills and gradual elevation changes, Buncombe County has historically been blessed by large acreages of fertile farmland.

Agriculture in Buncombe County today is significantly different from what it was a generation ago. Tobacco and dairy, which once dominated the agricultural market, have declined significantly, with tobacco being almost entirely gone from the market today. However, agriculture continues to play a strong economic role and be a major player in influencing the culture and identity of the county. Small farms, agricultural non-profits, and local farming programs continue to thrive and are held within resident's hearts as a point of pride.

Development pressure will continue to create obstacles to working lands. But as development continues in Western North Carolina, Buncombe County recognizes the importance of agriculture from a policy level and is diligently working toward preserving farmland. The County Soil & Water Conservation District, in the Agriculture and Land Resources Department of Buncombe County, leads agricultural preservation, is on the cutting edge of conservation methods and providing financial assistance for conservation.



Working lands in Buncombe County may be under more of a threat than ever before. Housing and commercial developments have shown to be the greatest factors contributing to this threat. The County is providing research and prioritization of land as well as actively enacting policies and programs to curb these threats from development.

Photo courtesy Buncombe County

OVERVIEW OF TRENDS & PLANNING INFLUENCES



GROWTH &
DECLINE



SUPPORTING
FARMERS



AGRICULTURAL
PRESERVATION



STEWARDSHIP

Working Lands

- From 2002 to 2007, North Carolina lost approximately 600,000 acres of farmland to development, the fastest rate of farmland loss in the country.
- The 2017 Census of Agriculture listed over 72,000 acres of farmland in Buncombe County, comprising over 17% of county lands.
- Since 1995, the County has preserved over 8,000 acres of farmland through conservation easements.
- The 2020 Buncombe County Farmland Protection Plan will serve as guidance for future farmland conservation efforts.
- The importance of agriculture and farmland is very apparent in the minds of policy makers in Buncombe County, as local funding for projects has received a steady increase since the statewide passage of the 2005 Agricultural Development and Farmland Preservation Act, with a very significant increase for 2021.
- The Farmland Preservation Program, administered by the County Agricultural Advisory Board, serves as a national model for promoting and preserving farming and agricultural lands throughout the county.
- Local non-profit organizations play key roles in furthering the mission of providing outreach, training, and education to existing and emerging farmers as well as preserving land for agricultural uses.
- Educational outreach programs on the importance of working lands, trainings for new farmers, and diversification of agriculture in the county continues to be a focus of Buncombe County policy makers.



Image courtesy of Buncombe County

FINDINGS FROM ANALYSIS

A Current Snapshot of Agriculture in Buncombe County

Currently, Buncombe County has slightly over 1,000 farms which cover more than 72,000 acres. Between 17% and 22% (depending on the methodology) of the county is farmland (*Buncombe County 2020 Farmland Protection Plan*). The county's agricultural economy was historically dominated by tobacco. As recently as 1997, tobacco, dairy, and cow-calf production were the main market drivers. However, by 2017 tobacco was almost completely gone from Buncombe County's agricultural market. While the local dairy market continues, there has been a significant decline from 31 dairies in 1997 to only five in 2017.

The current dominant agricultural products, in order of market value, are as follows: livestock and poultry-related products, vegetables, dairy, cattle and calves, and fruits and nuts. Small farms, such as community supported agriculture (CSA) programs that sell food locally are a dominant part of this market. However, croplands have seen a 12% decline and farmer income has seen a 13% decline from the years of 2007 to 2017.

There has been some agricultural market growth in the county. From the years 2012 through 2017, food sold directly to consumers has seen a 39% increase and the sale of berries has increased by 158%. Strong agricultural communities and active farms still exist in Sandy Mush, Barnardsville, Alexander, Cane Creek, Avery Creek, and Hominy Valley. The massive Biltmore Estate contains the largest single tracts of land in both agriculture and horticulture.

From 2002 to 2007, North Carolina lost approximately 600,000 acres of farmland to development, the fastest rate of farmland loss in the country. Working lands in Buncombe County may be under more of a threat than ever before. Housing and commercial developments have shown to be the greatest factors contributing to this threat. The County is providing research and prioritization of land as well as actively enacting policies and programs to curb these threats from development.

County Land Conservation Services

Soil and Water Conservation District

The Soil & Water Conservation District's (SWCD) mission is to conserve the soil, water, and related natural resources of the county by providing education, information, technical assistance, and economic incentives to residents. The District oversees the programs and services related to land conservation in the county and administers a County agricultural conservation easement program.



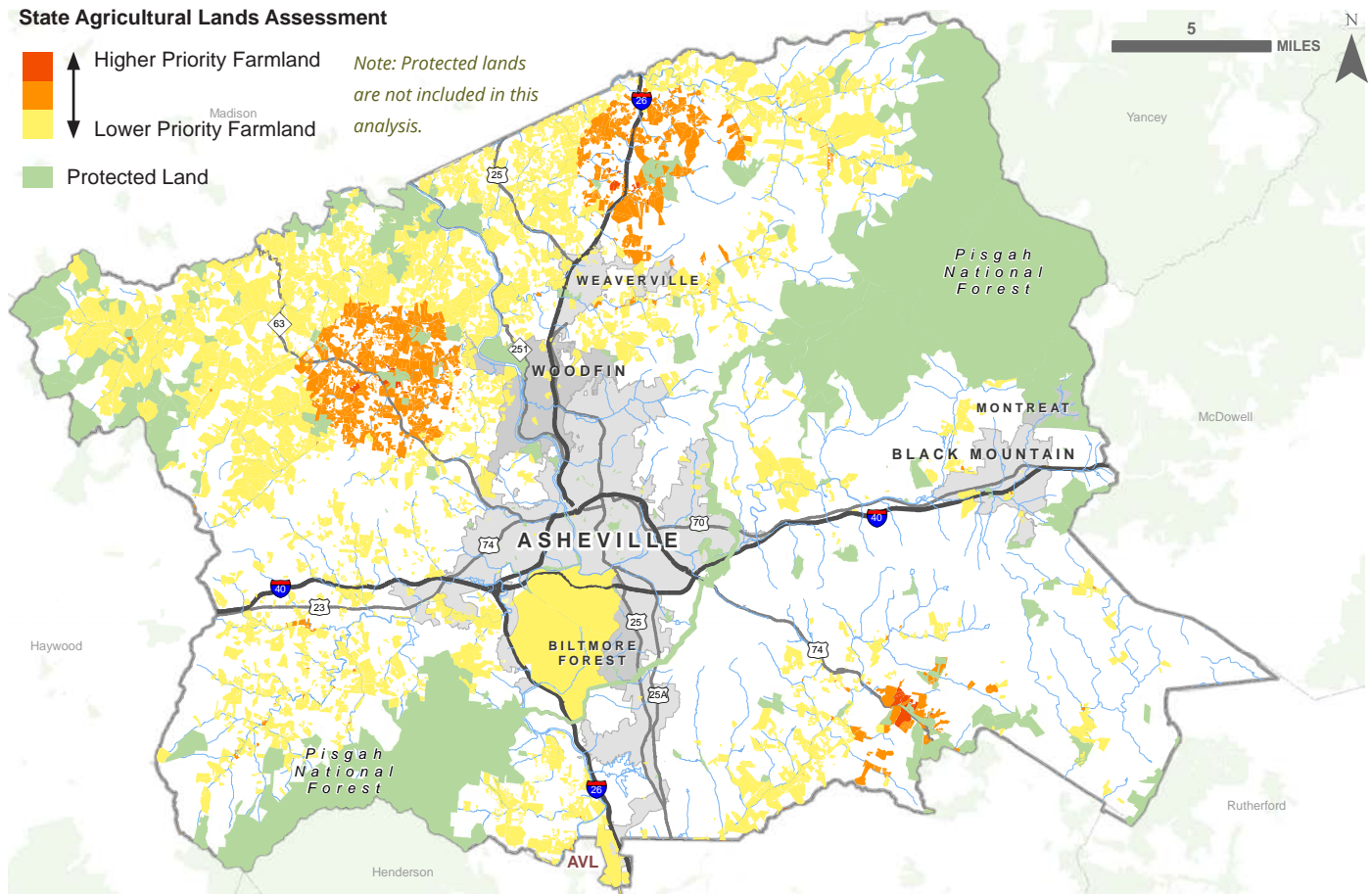
Image courtesy of Buncombe County

Agricultural Advisory Board

The Agricultural Advisory Board is composed of nine county residents appointed by the County Commissioners. A minimum of five of the Board members must be actively engaged in farming. Those five are selected from candidates recommended by the Agricultural Advisory Board, the SWCD, and the NC Cooperative Extension Service. The board's responsibilities are to:

- Review and make recommendations concerning the establishment of the Voluntary Agricultural Districts (VAD) or Enhanced Voluntary Agricultural Districts (EVAD)
- Review and make recommendations concerning any ordinance or amendment adopted or proposed for adoption.
- Hold public hearings on public projects likely to have an impact on agricultural operations, particularly if such projects involve condemnation of all or part of any qualifying farm.
- Advise the governing board of the County or city on projects, programs, or issues affecting the agricultural economy or way of life within the county.
- Perform other related tasks or duties assigned by the governing board of the County or city.

State Farmland Preservation Priority Map Buncombe County, NC



Agricultural priority ranking of all parcels in unincorporated Buncombe County based on the farmland preservation priorities determined using a statewide mapping model, with currently protected lands overlaid. Data source: North Carolina Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services. <https://www.ncmhtd.com/EnvironmentalPrograms/AgAssessment/>

Land Conservation Advisory Board

The Land Conservation Advisory Board (LCAB) was created by the County Commissioners in 2004 to promote the use of voluntary land conservation easements to preserve the beauty and ecology of Buncombe County. The responsibilities of this Board are to review and recommend local nonprofit land trusts to establish and hold conservation easements on eligible properties, including farmland, mountain lands, ridge tops, heritage sites, riparian buffers and viewsheds. LCAB makes recommendations to the County Commissioners regarding county funding of conservation easements held by private land trusts, working like a grant program. The primary focus of conservation efforts by this board are scenic and ecological, rather than agricultural.

NC Cooperative Extension County Center

The NC Cooperative Extension has offices in every county of the state and partners with communities to support agriculture, horticulture, conservation,

nutrition, and health. The Buncombe County Center is located right outside of Asheville and hosts programs to support farmers through education, technology, and other resources.

Prime Agricultural Lands for Farming

Farmland Preservation Prioritization

Buncombe County has employed a statewide mapping model to prioritize lands to conserve based on a tool that determines the most important agricultural working lands in North Carolina. This tool is maintained by the NC Department of Agriculture and Consumer Service and known as the Agricultural Lands Assessment. The data within Buncombe County can be seen on the "State Farmland Preservation Priority Map" shown above.

This method of analysis prioritizes the rural and farming communities that currently have no protections from incompatible development. The state overall agricultural assessment is comprised

of three separate evaluations: government policy, agribusiness infrastructure, and soils. The County is currently in the process of creating its own criteria and analysis for this prioritization.

Buncombe County Farmland Preservation Program

The Farmland Preservation Program encourages the voluntary preservation and protection of farmland from non-farm development. This is in recognition of the importance of agriculture to the economic and social life of North Carolina. The SWCD assists with the administration of the County's Voluntary Agricultural District (VAD) and Enhanced Voluntary Agricultural District (EVAD) programs as well as develops and holds permanent conservation easements on working farms and conducts other activities that support and promote local agriculture. The SWCD is researching the potential use of transfer of development rights (TDR) for a future policy tool for farmland preservation.

The first Farmland Preservation Ordinance, adopted by the Board of Commissioners in 1989 and tailored to meet the needs of Buncombe County, was the first of its kind in the state. The ordinance created the Agricultural Advisory Board to administer the Farmland Preservation program. The Board acts as support for local farmers by reviewing and approving applications for VADs and EVADs.

Farmland Protection Plan

The *Buncombe County Farmland Protection Plan*, approved by County Commissioners in 2020, provides the County with updated analysis of loss of farmland, types of farming in the county, and recommendations for next steps to move the Farmland Preservation Program forward. The plan provides surveys on existing farmland, input from county farmers, threats to agriculture, and other pertinent information that will inform multiple County plans and goals.

Voluntary Agricultural District (VAD) Program

A Voluntary Agricultural District (VAD) provides benefits to eligible private landowners who participate in the voluntary preservation of farmland from non-farm development. Being enrolled as a VAD comes with many benefits to the farm business, including legal protections and tax benefits, if the property qualifies based on the management practices that are employed.

The volunteering farm is subject to a conservation



Image courtesy of Buncombe County

agreement between the County and landowner that prohibits non-farm development for a period of 10 years. The agreement may be revoked by written notice sent to the County during that 10-year period.

Enhanced Voluntary Agricultural District (EVAD) Program

An Enhanced Voluntary Agricultural District (EVAD) works similarly to a VAD but comes with additional benefits to the farm business operating on the participating property.

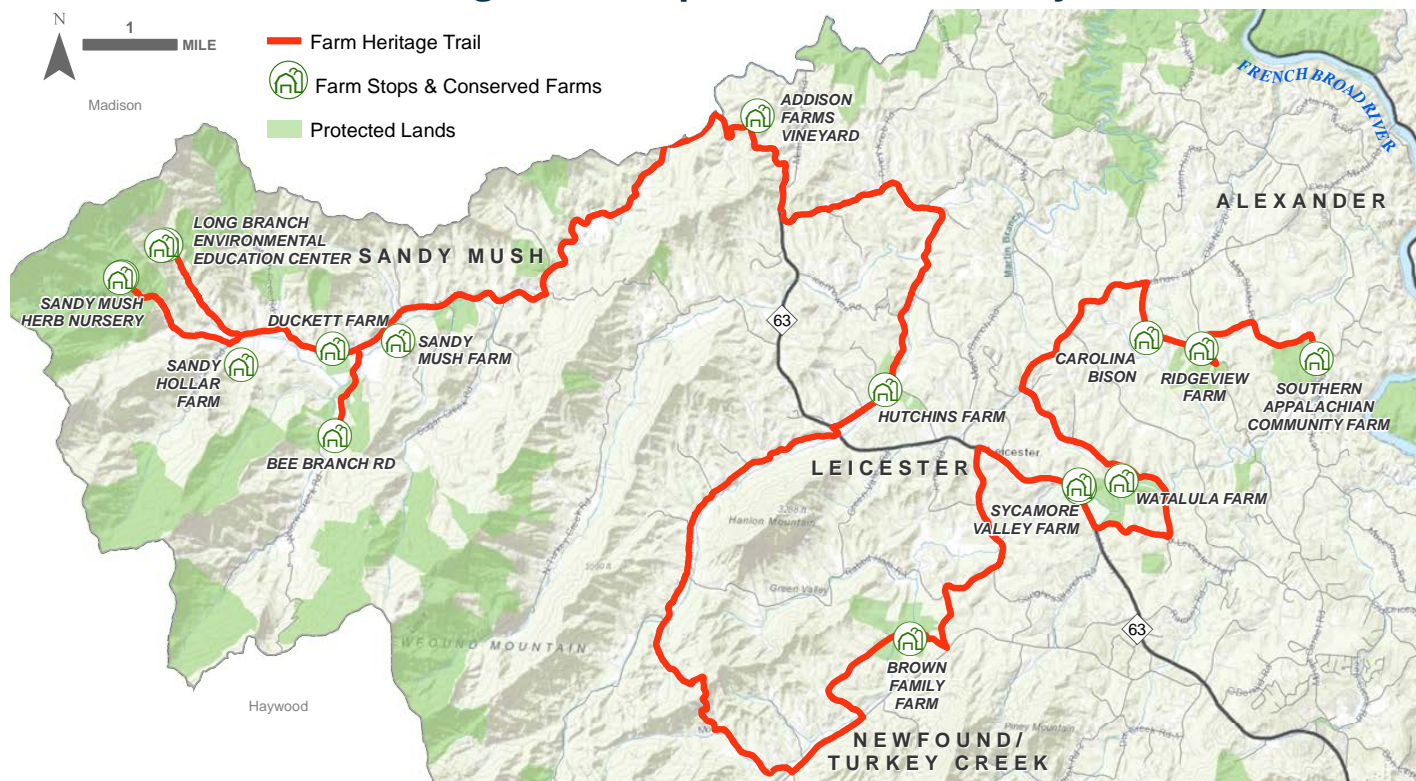
The volunteering farm is subject to a conservation agreement between the County and landowner that prohibits non-farm development for a period of 10 years. Unlike with a VAD, the agreement may not be revoked during the period of 10 years. A conservation deed is recorded at the register of Deeds protecting the property for 10 years.

Agricultural Conservation Easement Program

Conservation easements are used to protect farms, forests, and mountains, and are a very effective way to conserve land in North Carolina. A conservation easement is a voluntary legal agreement between a landowner and a conservation agency or local government in which both parties agree to restrict development. These restrictions are designed to protect the conservation values of the property and the binding agreement stays with the property even as it changes ownership.

The Buncombe County Farmland Preservation Ordinance allows the County, through the SWCD, to purchase and hold permanent conservation easements on farms in the county. These easements are designed to protect rural lands, particularly in the vicinity of urban growth, near high priority waterways and other environmentally sensitive areas. The voluntary easements will either be held in public trust by the County, or transferred to a private non-profit conservation organization.

Farm Heritage Trail Map - Buncombe County, NC



The Farm Heritage Trail is a scenic driving route through the rural agricultural communities of Alexander, Leicester, Newfound and Sandy Mush in northwest Buncombe County. The public is welcome to travel the public roads of this trail and enjoy viewing the conserved family farms, with designated signage, that are along the route. The entire route is a leisurely two hour drive while enjoying a few stops along the way.

Farm Heritage Trail

The Farm Heritage Trail is a County-managed scenic driving route through the rural agricultural communities of Alexander, Leicester, Newfound, and Sandy Mush in northwest Buncombe County (shown in the map above). The public may travel the public roads of this trail and enjoy viewing the conserved family farms that are along the route, which are designated with “Farm Stop” signage. The Trail hosts an ongoing calendar of events, hikes, farm to table dinners, educational opportunities, and activities for families. The Farm Heritage Trail is a grant and donation-based project.

Visit NC Farms App for Agritourism Promotion

The North Carolina Department of Agriculture & Consumer Services piloted the Visit NC Farm app in 2018 as part of its agritourism marketing initiative. The app is expanding statewide by county, and Buncombe County is participating. The app helps consumers find agribusiness points of interest and reflects a wide range of categories including farms and fisheries, pick your own, farmers markets, local food and drink, shop local, farm stays and lodging, tours and trails, and special events.

Organizations & Initiatives to Support Working Lands

Appalachian Sustainable Agriculture Project (ASAP)

The Appalachian Sustainable Agriculture Project (ASAP) is a program based in Asheville serving the entire Western North Carolina region, which helps local farms thrive, links farmers to markets and supporters, and builds healthy communities through connections to local food. ASAP operates multiple programs including cost-shares for agricultural inputs that support farms’ economic viability.

Southern Appalachian Highlands Conservancy

The Southern Appalachian Highlands Conservancy (SAHC) is a local land trust that operates in Buncombe County and operates its Farmland Program to preserve working agricultural lands. Additionally, SAHC owns a 140-acre community farm, acquired through a private donation, that hosts its Farmer Incubator Program, Education Center, and active farming activities that provide a model for environmentally friendly land management and

productive agriculture. The Farm Incubator Program integrates farmer training with access to farmland. The program offers access to land, infrastructure, tools, and training for up to five years for beginner, limited resource, and socially disadvantaged farmers and ranchers.

Conserving Carolina

Like SAHC, Conserving Carolina is a land trust working in the region that works with local government to secure conservation easements of private property. The organization’s geographic area overlaps Buncombe County on the county’s southern end and has worked with the County on agricultural conservation projects.

NC Extension FarmLink Program

NC FarmLink is a program of NC State Extension that connects farmers, landowners, and service providers across North Carolina, helping to grow the state’s agriculture industry. The program maintains databases of available farmland and farmers looking for land and works with landowners and farmers to ensure an appropriate and lasting match is made. The program’s primary purpose is to sustain a resilient agriculture industry that remains an integral part of the economy, environment, and communities across North Carolina.

Organic Growers School Apprentice Link Database

Organic Growers School provides organic education in Western North Carolina. One of the services it provides is maintenance of the Apprentice Link database. The database is a free service and connects those who are serious about learning the sustainable farming trade with farmers who are willing to teach them. The apprentice programs have a specific

emphasis in the Southern Appalachians. The listings help potential apprentice applicants find farms that are compatible with their farm training needs. The farms made available through this database have been thoroughly vetted through the program.

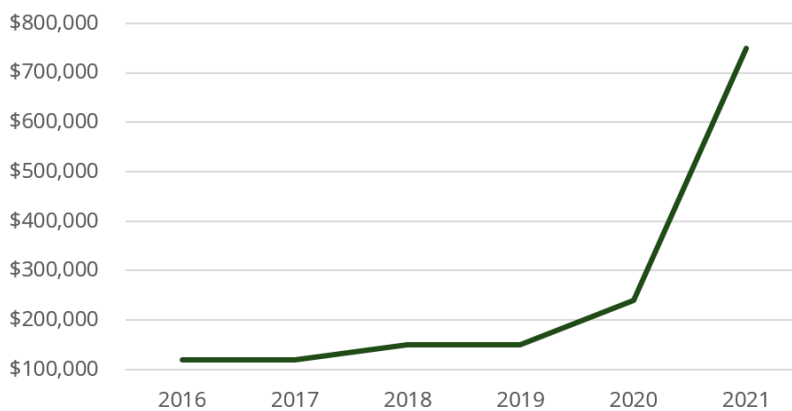
Organic Growers School Farm Beginnings Program

An additional service of the Organic Growers School is the Farm Beginnings Program. This program provides training for the next generation of farmers, focusing on the many skills that are required to start and expand a successful farm business. The program provides one year of farmer-led training, mentoring, and networking, with an emphasis on the topics of equity and justice in the food systems. Students of the program do not need to own land but are encouraged to join the program with some farming or production experience.

Increases in Funding

Land protection continues to be prioritized and increased each year in the County budget. Funding for agricultural projects was increased significantly in 2021. The following chart shows the combined budget of the Agricultural Advisory Board (AAB) and Land Conservation Advisory Board (LCAB) from 2016-2021.

AAB & LCAB Funding Amounts



Source: Buncombe County

CONSIDERATIONS FOR THE FUTURE

Overview

Working lands in Buncombe County—farms, forests, and other forms of leveraging the economic value of natural processes—provide multiple benefits to the community. They are the rural and agricultural areas that people value, a critical component of the local economy, and are an important part of local and national supply chains needed to support businesses and residents. The following policy and regulatory ideas, many taken from the 2020 Farmland Protection Plan, should be considered for inclusion in the comprehensive plan.

Advance Farmland Protection:

- Continue to support farmland protection through existing policies including present-use value taxation, voluntary agricultural districts (VADs), and enhanced voluntary agricultural districts (EVADs).
- Promote and implement outreach and education on land taxation, estate planning, farm-transition planning, conservation easements, and development planning.
- Consider increasing county-level funding to support transaction costs for purchase of conservation easements.
- Work aggressively to leverage county funding for conservation easements and other projects in partnership with state, federal, and private resources.
- Design and implement outreach programs, such as the Farm Heritage Trail to educate and inform visitors, new residents, and residents living in urban areas of the importance of farmland to the region's culture, identity, and quality of life.

- Support marketing and production training and facilitate greater diversity in agricultural enterprises.
- Continue promotion of best management practices for conservation of land and natural resources.
- Strengthen support for agricultural economic development and supporting programs.

Prioritize Farmland Preservation

- The Buncombe Agriculture and Land Resources Department is currently developing an analysis to guide future farmland conservation efforts.
- Buncombe County should continue to work with partners to implement policy tools that can preserve farmland, including tools mentioned previously and transfer of development rights (TDR), among others.



Image by Equinox