

Identifying Farmland Protection Areas

The Agricultural, Natural and Cultural Resources Workgroup formed a subcommittee to specifically develop a Land Evaluation and Site Assessment (LESA) process to determine parcels that are most suitable for long-term agricultural use. The results of the analysis are intended to be used by the County and local governments to help identify areas that should be designated for farmland protection in County and local comprehensive plans. The LESA process was developed in 1981 by the USDA - Soil Conservation Service (now the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS)) and is an analytical tool designed to provide a systematic and objective procedure for rating and ranking the agricultural importance of a parcel.

The first step in the analysis was to identify the parcels to be analyzed. Parcels within an adopted sewer service area and parcels with less than 2 percent of the parcel in agricultural use were excluded from the analysis.

Land Evaluation Component (LE)

The land evaluation component of the LESA process was determined by the NRCS, which rated each soil in Washington County based on soil type, slope, agricultural capability class, and soil productivity for producing corn and soybeans. The resulting ratings were then placed into groups ranging from the best to the worst suited for cropland production.

Site Assessment Component (SA)

The Site Assessment (SA) component rates non-soil factors affecting a parcel's relative importance for agricultural use and is separated into 3 classifications. The LESA subcommittee selected the following nine SA factors to be used in the Washington County LESA analysis:

Factors for SA-1 (agricultural productivity)

- size of farm in contiguous management by 1 farm operator
- compatibility of surrounding land uses within ½ mile
- percent of farm in agricultural use

Factors for SA-2 (development pressures impacting a site's continued agricultural use)

- distance from adopted sewer service area
- distance from selected hamlets
- distance from interchanges along US Highways 41 & 45

SA-3 Factors (other public values of a site supporting retention in agriculture)

- primary or secondary environmental corridors or isolated natural resource or natural areas/critical species habitat outside environmental corridors areas present on farm
- floodplains present on farm-using current 100 year floodplain
- proximity to permanently protected land 20 acres or more in size

Parcel Scoring

The LESA system recognizes that some of the factors used to rank agricultural parcels are more important than others. To account for this, the LESA subcommittee assigned the LE component a weight of 0.34, or about one-third of the total weight. The remaining 0.66 weighting “points” were divided among the 9 SA factors. Each parcel analyzed was scored on a scale of 1 to 10. The LESA subcommittee defined lands scoring 6.8 or higher as Tier 1 farmlands, which are areas best suited for long-term protection by County and local officials. Lands scoring below 6.8 were defined as Tier 2 farmlands, which are areas that should be considered for long-term protection. The subcommittee agreed that setting the bench mark at 6.8 left adequate amounts of acreage for development in the next thirty years, yet also protected a suitable amount of land for future agricultural production.

- 117,481 acres, or 73 percent of land in the County, were designated as Tier 1 Farmlands, scoring 6.8 or higher. Of this, 94,589 acres are in agricultural use.
- 43,874 acres, or 18 percent of land in the County, were designated as Tier 2 Farmlands, scoring less than 6.8. Of this, 23,985 acres are in agricultural use.

The ANCR Workgroup recommends that each municipality reference the final LESA map as a guide to help identify farmland protection areas that best suit their local agricultural resource element goals and recommendations outlined in their comprehensive plans.