



United States Department of Agriculture

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**Natural Resources Conservation Service**  
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An open letter to Massachusetts municipalities ...

Revised 11/29/2022

Subject: Potentially increasing federal funding eligibility for farmland preservation by recognizing Farmland of Local Importance

My name is Al Averill. I served as the USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) State Soil Scientist for Massachusetts for several years. NRCS provides technical and financial assistance to help agricultural landowners and others implement conservation. In my semi-retirement, I'm working under an NRCS/American Farmland Trust partnership to facilitate the recognition of important farmlands at the local level in Massachusetts. The purpose is to ensure all applicable lands may be considered for NRCS farmland preservation funding into the future.

The NRCS Agricultural Land Easement (ALE) program ([Agricultural Conservation Easement Program | NRCS \(usda.gov\)](#)) works with a partner such as the state agricultural agency, land trusts, and municipalities. The development value is paid to willing landowners in exchange for an easement that stipulates the agricultural value can't be lost to other uses. NRCS and the partner each provide half the funding. The program provides the landowner an alternative and contributes to future agricultural capacity along with the benefits of open space.

Eligibility is based, in part, on soil types as depicted in NRCS Soil Survey mapping; [Web Soil Survey - Home \(usda.gov\)](#). A parcel must consist of at least 50 percent important farmland soils. The Soil Survey categorizes important farmland soils such as Prime Farmland, and Farmland of Statewide Importance, but it doesn't capture all. There are limitations to the Soil Survey. Designating Farmland of Local Importance acknowledges the fact there are additional soils that are suited for crop production. This acknowledgment increases the potential for expanding ALE eligibility.

NRCS must adhere to the Code of Federal Regulations (CFR) for identifying important farmland soils. Per CFR, a local agency designates Farmland of Local Importance. A town official is needed to sign the designation. NRCS can't act alone but serves to verify the designation so it can be applied to the ALE program.

How it's done ...

- I review the soil mapping and land use in the town remotely via the Soil Survey maps and aerial imagery.
- Soils with evidence of crop production (including hay and fruit) but not recognized as important farmland soils in the Soil Survey are listed as Farmland of Local Importance.
- There may be areas where I'm not confident about the land use. Local knowledge may help verify history of crop production.
- A town official and the NRCS State Conservationist sign the list. The official can be anyone duly recognized as representing the town regarding agriculture, open space and/or small business; Conservation Commission Chair, Agricultural Commission Chair, Select Board Chair, Mayor, Town Administrator, Open Space and Recreation Plan Committee Chair, Planning Board Chair, etc.
- The list is housed on the NRCS Field Office Technical Guide where it is available for consideration when a landowner applies to the ALE program. [Massachusetts | Field Office Technical Guide | NRCS - USDA](#)

The first Massachusetts municipality to recognize Farmland of Local Importance was Hatfield in January 2021 followed by Northampton, Belchertown, Deerfield, Williamstown, Pepperell, Whately, Montague, Sheffield, Hadley, Shirley, Southwick, Brewster, Fitchburg, Cheshire, Savoy, Townsend, North Adams, New Ashford, North Andover, Sandisfield, Alford, Lenox, Monterey, Windsor, Buckland, Stockbridge, Egremont, Lanesborough, Pittsfield, New Marlborough, Plainfield, Great Barrington, Richmond, Rehoboth, and Westport.

In response to frequently asked questions ...

- There is no cost to the town to designating Farmland of Local Importance; the NRCS funds this initiative. NRCS's objective is to ensure all land that is eligible for ALE funding is recognized.
- There is no regulatory association with listing soils as Farmland of Local Importance.
- Inventories of important farmland soils do not constitute a designation of any land area to a specific land use.
- The designation does not require boots on the ground; it applies and enhances the existing Soil Survey information.
- The designation of Farmland of Local Importance in of itself does not affect property tax rates. The establishment of a farmland easement does not affect the tax rate for parcels under Chapter 61A. The rare agricultural parcel not under Chapter 61A, that comes under a farmland easement could be assessed a lower tax rate depending on the development value.
- The designation may not make a difference in preserving farmland. There are many factors in addition to soils, starting with landowner willingness. Recognizing Farmland of Local Importance only addresses the 50 percent important soils eligibility requirement.

This is a simple process that assumes the town values agricultural capacity, landowner choice, small business, and open space. If so, all that is needed from the town is a signatory and possibly local knowledge to help confirm crop history on areas where I'm uncertain.

A locality's recognition of Farmland of Local Importance is a formality that enables NRCS to adhere to federal policy and consider these lands for farmland easement funding. It is an acknowledgment of fact; there are additional soils with verifiable evidence of crop production. It may result in a willing landowner's eligibility to participate in a program that is bought and paid for.

Please feel free to contact me with any questions and/or to initiate the process. Thank you for your time and interest.

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