

# **Delmarva Conservation Corridor**

## Demonstration Program

June 20, 2003

State of Delaware  
State of Maryland  
Accomack County, Virginia  
Northampton County, Virginia

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## I. The Delmarva Peninsula Today

*“Carpeted with farms, stitched with forests, and buttoned with rural fishing villages.....”*

Congressman Wayne T. Gilchrest, Fall 2002

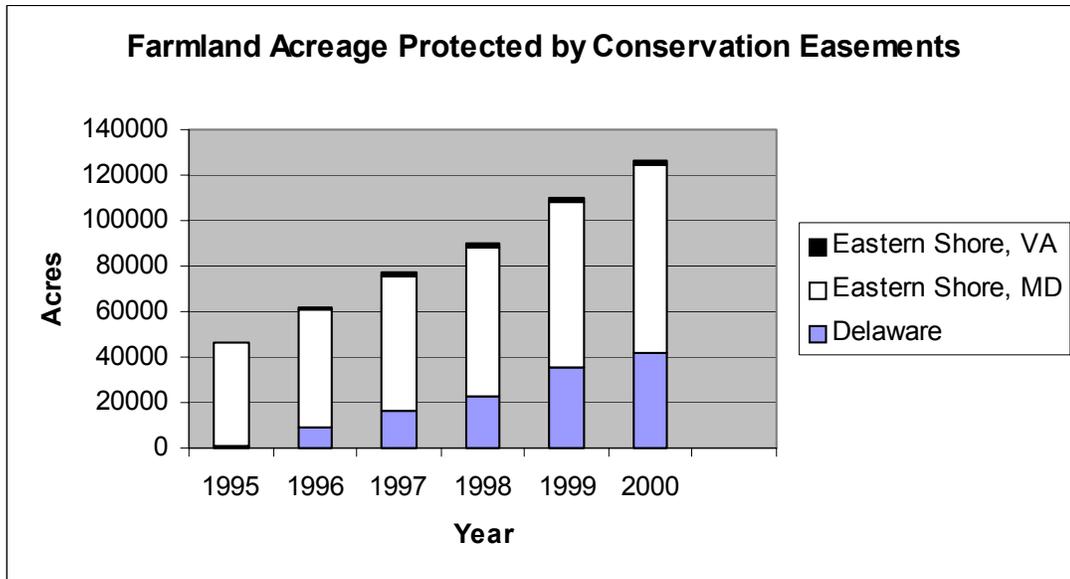
Congressman Gilchrest’s image of the Delmarva Peninsula is one shared by many. Stretching nearly 200 miles north to south, comprised of Delaware and portions of Maryland and Virginia, and nearly surrounded by sea and estuary, the Delmarva Peninsula has been a dominant agricultural and maritime center on the East coast for centuries.

### **Farming**

Agriculture on the Delmarva Peninsula has been the backbone of the economy for hundreds of years and it remains so today. A flight over or drive through Delmarva confirms vast acreages of highly productive farmland interspersed with working forests. This area is the largest contiguous block of productive farmland on the East coast from Maine to the Carolinas. This abundance of productive land is situated within an overnight’s drive of 60 million or one-third of America’s consumers.

The availability of productive land within an easy drive of tremendous markets is well known by policy makers and farmers in the region, and both have been at the forefront in efforts to protect natural resources and conserve the land base on the Peninsula. Maryland and Delaware have highly successful farmland preservation programs with a combined 126,759 acres protected in permanent conservation easements through 2001. In both states there are also long waiting lists of additional farmers eager to participate in preservation programs. Maryland’s total (83,110 acres) and Delaware’s total (41,806 acres) were protected largely with significant infusions of state funding, although several counties in both of these states are now adding local preservation programs. In Virginia, state government has not operated a farm preservation program, but several counties or municipalities are engaged in this effort including Northampton County at the southern tip of the Delmarva which is considering a county funded preservation easement program. Of particular note, the six northern counties on Maryland’s portion of Delmarva recently signed a regional land use agreement, called *Eastern Shore 2010*, committing them to a goal of permanently preserving 50% of all rural

lands by 2010 in voluntary easement programs (approximately 25% currently preserved).



**Figure 1. Delmarva Farmland Protected by Conservation Easements, 1995 to 2000**

From: "Agricultural Situation and Trends of the Delmarva Peninsula." Source data: Maryland Agricultural Land Preservation Foundation Annual Report 1995, 1996, 1997, 1998, 1999, 2000, Delaware Agricultural Land Preservation Foundation, Virginia Outdoors Foundation.<sup>1</sup>

In addition to land protection, significant government, private, and public / private partnerships are in place and focused on improving the local economies of agriculture and forestry. Improved marketing of Delmarva products to Mid-Atlantic consumers and to processors has been the focus of the Delaware Department of Agriculture and the "Shore to Store" program operated by the Delmarva Advisory Council's Council on Agricultural Profitability. Research and development of higher value crops such as identity preserved grains has been advanced by the Maryland Grain Producers Association and the Maryland Center for Agro-Ecology and others. Research and application of models that extend producer ownership into processing, distribution and sales has been championed by the nonprofit Chesapeake Fields Inc., which is also developing an agricultural business park aimed at utilizing local grains for on site food production including snack foods and baked goods. And significantly, Atlantic Biofuels Group and others are in the development stage of a facility to produce ethanol and/or other

<sup>1</sup> "Agricultural Situation and Trends of the Delmarva Peninsula: Summary Report." American Farmland Trust, 2003. 30 pgs. This report contributed significantly to the background for this application.

energy products from local grains including possibly even trees and grasses.

Despite decreases in recent years, farming and linked industries such as food processing and transportation provided 120,270 jobs on Delmarva in 1997.<sup>2</sup> This accounts for more than 16 percent of all jobs on the peninsula and does not include other resource based industries such as forestry, fishing, and their linked industries. In addition, the American Farmland Trust study identified a new labor force for agriculture that is emerging on the peninsula. Migrant workers from Central and South America now make up a considerable portion of the labor force in Northampton and Accomack counties and their influence is growing significantly in other counties as well. This emerging labor force is vital to the long term viability of many farm industries including dairy, vegetables, fruits, and nursery products.

### **Natural Resources**

Equally important as Delmarva's agricultural strength and heritage is the Peninsula's natural heritage. Due to its mid-coastal location, the Delmarva Peninsula provides critical migratory and wintering habitat for vast numbers of waterfowl within the Atlantic flyway. And similarly, Delmarva provides critical migratory and summer breeding habitat for much of the East's neotropical and temperate migrant songbird population. The Delmarva's mid-latitude location also provides habitat for a rich intermingling of northern and southern non-migratory plant and animal species

Regarding songbirds and birds of prey, the Delmarva Peninsula represents an extremely important migratory corridor for juvenile songbirds in the fall where migrants rest and feed before resuming their migration. The southern tip of the Delmarva Peninsula also serves as a major fall migration funnel for raptors because of prevailing winds and habitat requirements for mostly juvenile accipiters and falcons. It is for these reasons that the lower Delmarva Peninsula is considered hemispherically important to a wide variety of migrants. In addition, the federally threatened Bald Eagle thrives on Delmarva with 23 known breeding territories on Virginia's Eastern Shore, a similar number in Delaware, and over a hundred on Maryland's Eastern Shore.

Regarding other plant and animal species, the Delmarva Fox Squirrel was listed as federally endangered in 1967 and currently occupies less than 10% of its historical range. However, federal and state agencies and non-governmental partners have undertaken many efforts on behalf of this species including a total of 16 attempts to establish new squirrel populations (11 in Maryland, two in Virginia, two in Delaware, and one in Pennsylvania). At least ten of these efforts have been successful in establishing new reproductive populations. Also, many existing source populations are thought to be stable or increasing in size. The

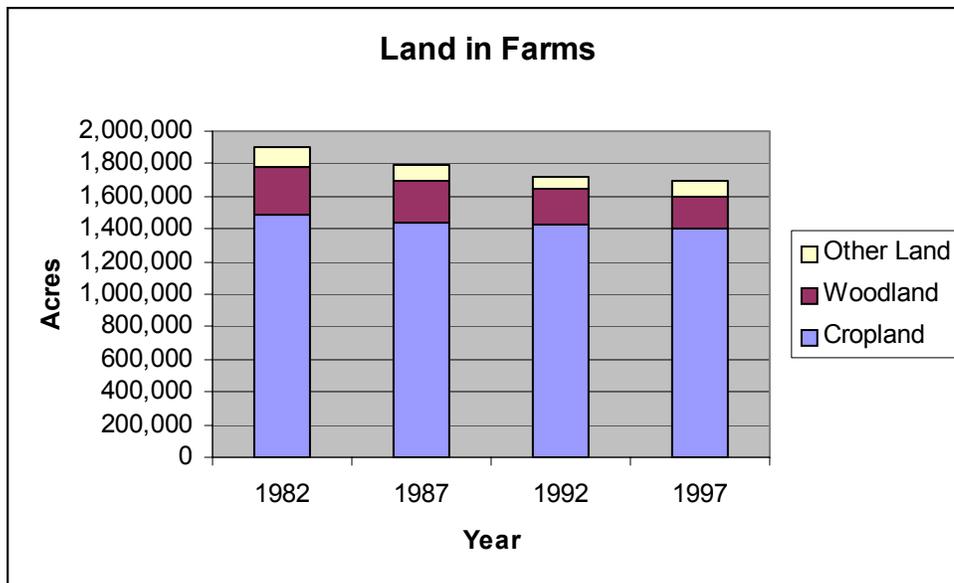
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<sup>2</sup> USDA Economic Research Service, 1997.

continued recovery of this species depends on the protection of the remaining large forested blocks on Delmarva and connecting forests between those blocks.

### Threats

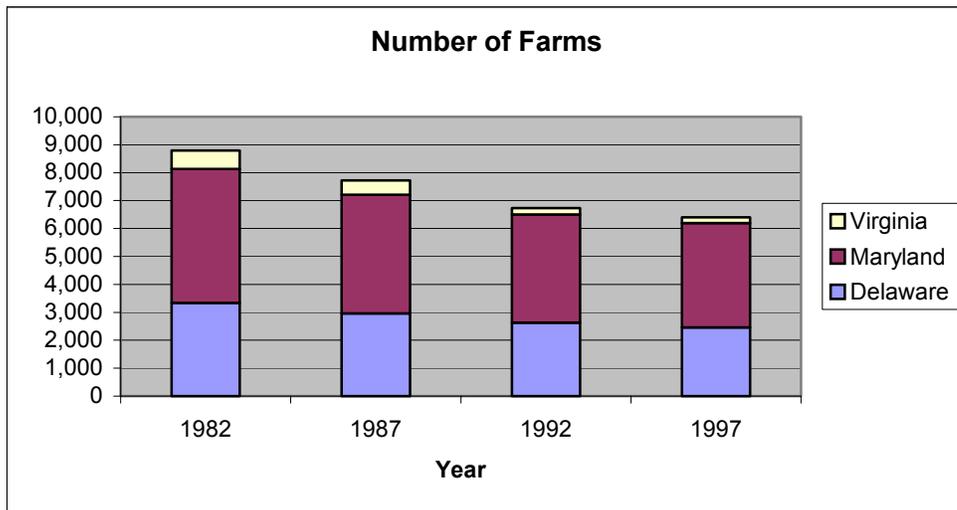
While Delmarva's Mid-Atlantic location is an asset for agriculture and natural resources, it is also a potentially disastrous vulnerability. Urban and suburban expansion on the Mid-Atlantic Coast is rapidly creating a megalopolis of development from Boston south to the Carolina's. Delmarva Peninsula land in farms decreased by 11 percent or 203,445 acres between 1982 and 1997 (see Figure 2). The rate of loss has been accelerating with 4,620 acres/year lost between 1982 and 1992, and 7,140 acres/year from 1992 to 1997. Although these losses are being felt throughout the Peninsula, they are acute in northern Delmarva, near the Chesapeake Bay Bridge where commuters are a short drive from Washington and Baltimore, and near the Chesapeake Bay Bridge Tunnel (CBBT). The recent commuter toll reduction at the CBBT increased traffic 36% in the first month, compared with 2-3% per year normal annual increase. Also of particular note, in New Castle County in northern Delaware, where suburban expansion is most rampant, several farmers have sold their farms for upwards of \$20,000 per acre only to re-invest in farms for less than \$5,000 per acre in nearby Maryland. On the Maryland side of the state line the growth pressure is not as severe and preservation activities and growth controls are more successful.



**Figure 2. Land in Farms, Delmarva Peninsula, 1982 to 1997**

From: "Agricultural Situation and Trends of the Delmarva Peninsula". Source data: USDA Census of Agriculture, 1982, 1987, 1992, and 1997

The number of farms and farmers is also decreasing (see Figure 3). Delmarva lost 25 percent or 2,176 farms between 1982 and 1997. Farmer age increased over the same fifteen year period creeping up from an average of 51 years to 54 years. With growing overall populations (1990's increases were 10%-Maryland, 14.4%-Virginia, and 17.6%-Delaware<sup>3</sup>) farmers as a percentage of the total population is decreasing dramatically thus further isolating this population.



**Figure 3. Number of Farms, Delmarva Peninsula, 1982 to 1997**

From: "Agricultural Situation and Trends of the Delmarva Peninsula." Source data: USDA Census of Agriculture, 1982, 1987, 1992, and 1997.

## II. Delmarva Conservation Corridor Demonstration Program

In May of 2002, President Bush signed into law the new Farm Bill. Subtitle G of the Farm Security and Rural Investment Act, "Conservation Corridor Demonstration Program", has given hope to farmers holding on to the industry and renewed vigor to conservation efforts aimed at sustaining natural resources on the Delmarva Peninsula.

Soon after the Farm Bill was signed by the President, the Secretaries of Agriculture from Delaware and Maryland, and the Boards of Supervisors of Accomack and Northampton counties in Virginia appointed individual steering committees to guide their roles in implementation of the Delmarva Conservation Corridor Demonstration Program. Steering committee members represented diverse agricultural and conservation interests and included local, state and federal officials and representatives of non-governmental organizations. Although the process and timing varied, each state steering committee undertook

<sup>3</sup> US Census 2000, 1990.

a comprehensive information gathering and public input process culminating in this application. Along the way the steering committees started a collaboration that has cemented the region together into one application and has already yielded other unexpected benefits including a cross fertilization of economic and conservation programs between Maryland and Delaware.

## **Objectives**

Tracking the language in the Farm Bill, the agreed upon primary and overall objectives of this demonstration program are to:

1. Improve the Economic Viability of Agriculture; and
2. Improve the Environmental Integrity of Watersheds on Delmarva.

These objectives provide a balanced approach to strengthening agriculture and conserving natural resources. Perhaps more importantly, all participating jurisdictions feel strongly that these objectives are mutually dependent. That is, assuring the economic viability of farming and land based industries is essential for long term retention of land and protection of water quality and natural resources. And similarly, protecting the environmental integrity of the region is vital to our health, our quality of life, and a balanced economy for our region.

## **Project Criteria**

To advance the above objectives, it is necessary and agreed that all plans, programs and related communication and other activities included herein will provide for the following:

1. Voluntary Actions. Participation in all plans, programs, and any activities related to the Delmarva Conservation Corridor are expressly voluntary and require the consent of willing landowners;
2. Land of High Conservation Value. All conservation programs described herein prioritize lands of exceptionally high conservation value. Such prioritization is described within the various conservation programs;
3. No Effect on Unenrolled Land. The enrollment of any land in any program or activity related to the Delmarva Conservation Corridor will not adversely affect or create any buffer zone on any unenrolled land;
4. Greater Benefits. The conservation and other programs assembled in this plan provide synergies and complementary impacts such that the benefits overall are greater than existing program applications; and

5. Sufficient Staffing. All signatories to this plan have taken necessary measures to ensure that staffing is sufficient to ensure the successful implementation of all programs described.

## **Regional Approach**

Although the various Delmarva jurisdictions are diverse in many ways, collaboration around agricultural and land use issues has been fostered by the common landscapes and shared commitment to the future of farming and natural resource protection. Collaboration on this Delmarva Conservation Corridor Demonstration Program has similarly been fruitful resulting in much common ground. Interest in the following initiatives is shared by all jurisdictions signing this proposal and their application throughout Delmarva will form the core of this demonstration program. More programmatic detail will be provided within Section III of this proposal.

1. Farm and Forest Land Protection. Protecting a land base for the future of farming and wildlife on Delmarva is a vital priority and one whose timing cannot be delayed. Maryland and Delaware have two of the most successful farmland preservation programs in America with over 125,000 acres permanently protected on Delmarva for an investment of over \$80 million. And several counties in Virginia are engaged in early planning for similar programs, including Northampton County on Delmarva. However, waiting lists of farmers eager to participate in these programs are exceedingly long and funding is dramatically reduced due to state budget problems. This combination represents both a significant risk to the prior investment in these programs, and a tremendous opportunity for this Delmarva Conservation Corridor Demonstration Program.

2. Support for Irrigation. Minimizing nutrient losses to ground and surface water is at the heart of our Chesapeake and Coastal Bays cleanups. The drought that ended in 2002 demonstrated that even with state of the art nutrient management, drought will leave significant nutrients unused in the soil. These nutrients then are flushed into receiving waters when the rains return. Efficient irrigation systems allow for more accurate matching of nutrient inputs to crop needs thus reducing risks, increasing yields, protecting and conserving water resources, and improving overall farm viability.

3. Mitigation of Poultry Industry Impacts. Delmarva field crops are overwhelmingly linked to poultry production. Proposed herein is a new program to encourage the planting of tree buffer strips around poultry houses. Tree buffer plantings around poultry houses are an inexpensive way to reduce dust and odors emanating from poultry houses. Preliminary research findings indicate that ammonia emissions can also be significantly reduced providing both health and environmental benefits. These buffers also help cool the poultry houses and provide a visual buffer for improved neighbor relations.

4. Farm Viability Research and Development. A strong dependence on poultry production has been a strength for Delmarva agriculture. However, one downside of this success, and a vulnerability for Delmarva, is a relative lack of diversity of farm operations. Proposed herein are new grant and loan funds for research and development of alternative crops, new technologies, and new farm enterprises and support industries that add diversity to Delmarva agriculture and improve the bottom line for farming.

5. Bioenergy Initiatives. Alternative markets for small grain production on Delmarva is a high priority. There are various projects in the region investigating the feasibility of small grains for fuel production such as ethanol and soydiesel. In addition to improved economies for grain production, these initiatives have the potential to utilize nitrogen capturing fall cover crops thus helping our watersheds and our farm economy.

6. Delmarva Conservation Corridor Committee. All jurisdictions involved agree that some organizational infrastructure with ongoing responsibilities is needed to maintain the momentum and planning for the Delmarva Conservation Corridor Demonstration Program. Thus, a Committee is proposed herein to, at a minimum, host an annual gathering of all involved and coordinate other forms of public and farmer education on the initiative. In addition, discussions are underway for this regional body to coordinate other regional activities for the initiative including regional economic development efforts for agriculture and working landscape type industries, private and public supplemental fundraising, and possibly coordination of item four above on farm viability. Attachment A is a draft Memorandum of Understanding between the jurisdictions outlining this cooperation.