

# Agricultural & Forest Resources

## Overview

### *Agricultural Resources*

Agriculture has historically played a central role in the life of Brunswick residents. However, as was the case in many rural Maine towns, agriculture in Brunswick began to decline in the late 1950s. In 1950, there were an estimated 50 working farms. By 2002, this had declined to 10 working farms, and in 2023, there were five remaining working farms documented in Brunswick (this figure does not include those which may be taking advantage of the Farmland Tax Program but where the primary source of income is not farming).<sup>1</sup> Historically, dairy farming and poultry farming were prevalent though most farmland operations today are smaller organic operations focused on vegetables, herbs, meats, and cheeses.

There is a limited correlation between the soils which are ranked as prime agricultural land and the actual sites of working farms in the community. Indeed, a large percentage of the best soils for cropland is underneath the most densely developed areas of town. A further description of soil types, and a soils map of the community, is provided on the following pages.

A 2019 report prepared by Cooper Dart, the Town's Bowdoin Fellow (*Emphasizing and Preserving Working Rural Landscapes*), found through personal interviews with local farmers that there are various levels of frustration with the Town's agricultural policies and planning. While Brunswick is known regionally for its farmer's markets, farmers interviewed as part of the study indicated that they do not view Brunswick to be a "farming-friendly" community.

Rising land values and increased development pressures have likely had an unfavorable impact on the economics of farming for the smaller-scale operations present in Brunswick today. However, as food insecurity rises and climate change impacts continue to disrupt the supply chain, the community may need to rely more on local food production. In addition, local food production contributes to a sustainable and circular local economy, protecting the local economy in times of regional or national turmoil.

### *Forest Resources*

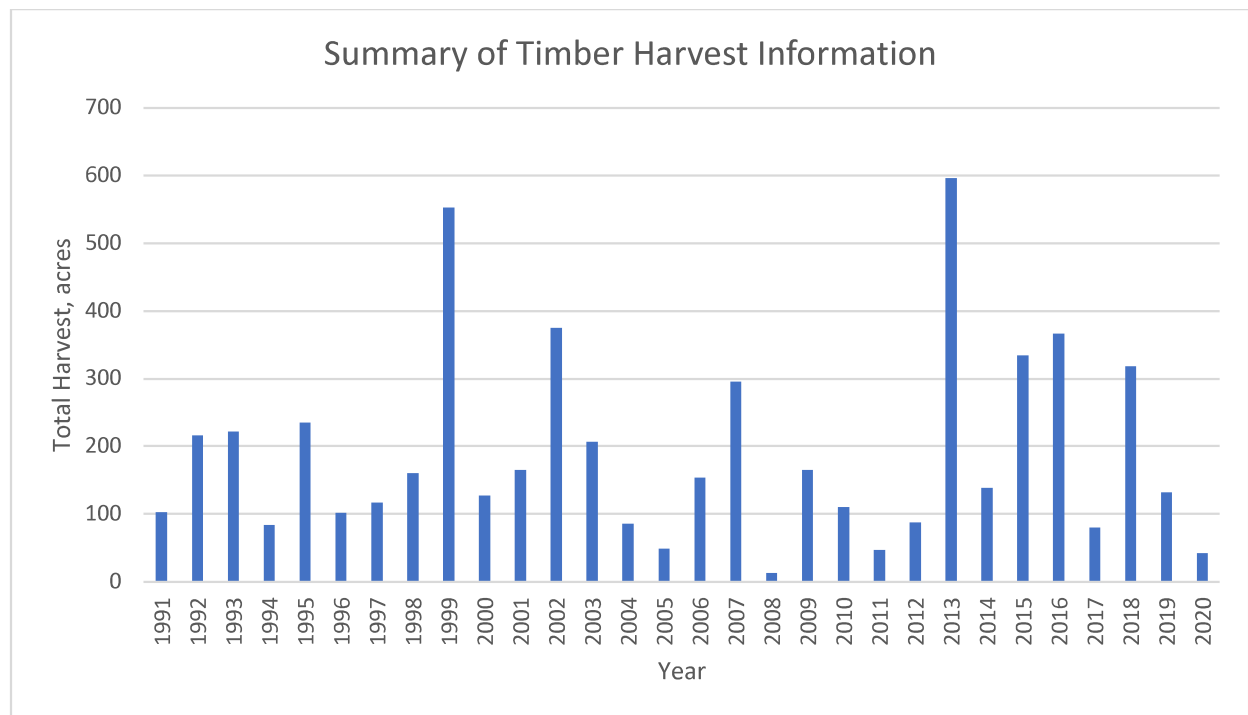
In general, Brunswick includes approximately 16,000 acres of forested land across the community (or about half of the total acreage of Brunswick). Privately owned forests provide economic opportunity for landowners in the rural zoning district, as well as opportunities for hunting and other recreation. Forests also provide important habitats for a variety of plant and animal species. Habitats are described further in the Natural Resources section of this Plan.

Timber harvesting occurs within forests throughout Brunswick's rural zoning districts, with an average of 190 acres harvested annually since 1991. The highest harvest in recent years

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<sup>1</sup> Per the University of Maine's Cooperative Extension's *Maine Farm and Seafood Products Directory*, available online [here](#). The number expressed above does not include aquaculture or seafood farms, which are discussed in greater detail in the Marine Resources section of this Plan.

occurred in 2013 with almost 600 acres harvested. Since then, however, the number of acres harvested annually has been far less.



*Data compiled from Confidential Year End Landowner Reports to Maine Forest Service.*

As described further in the Recreation section of this Plan, the Town owns or maintains a variety of public wooded areas. However, the extent of the Town's management of forest resources on these parcels is generally limited to the elimination of hazard trees, invasive species management and occasional prescribed burns for the protection of rare or natural communities (e.g. prescribed burns at the Capt. William A. Fitzgerald Preserve).<sup>2</sup>

In 2014, the Town's Conservation Commission completed an Inventory of Town-Owned Open Spaces and recommended that the Town consider taking on a more active role in managing and maintaining certain town-owned forested parcels, for purposes of both forest health and revenue generation. According to the report, many municipalities (including neighboring Bath) actively manage and harvest town forest properties and can be contacted to further discuss the issues surrounding municipal forest management.<sup>3</sup> Bath's City Arborist is also responsible for the management of their community forest. Of course, a town actively managing its forests could attempt to achieve other objectives, such as carbon sequestration, through its management program.

Brunswick also has a Public Tree Program which provides for the management and care of the Town's Street and park trees. The Town Arborist makes periodic inspections of public trees along

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.pressherald.com/2015/11/11/conservationists-get-fired-up-to-regenerate-brunswick-preserve/>

<sup>3</sup> This report is available on the Town's website here: <https://www.brunswickme.org/DocumentCenter/View/683/Town-Owned-Open-Space-Inventory-Part-1-PDF?bidId=>

Town-maintained streets and within public parks. Pruning and removal work is based on these inspections. The Town also receives complaints or concerns submitted by the public related to public trees and responds accordingly.

The Brunswick Parks and Recreation Department implemented a street tree planting program in 1999 and since then more than 500 street trees have been planted in the Town. The Parks and Recreation Department operates a nursery and strives to plant and maintain a diverse mix of tree species along Brunswick's streets. This diversity will bolster the resilience of Brunswick's street trees if faced with insect or disease outbreaks. The Department has created a brochure which contains a list of all the different tree species and where they are located in Town.<sup>4</sup> The Town's Tree Committee, comprised of five members appointed by the Town Council, works closely with the Town Arborist in disseminating information to the community about the selection, planting and maintenance of trees and shrubs. The Tree Committee is also tasked with evaluating and making recommendations related to proposed changes to the municipal code of ordinances that advances the goals of tree preservation and tree propagation within public spaces and elsewhere as applicable, in consultation with the Town Arborist.

## Soils

### *Prime Farmland Soil*

The Maine Department of Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry defines prime farmland soil as follows: *"Land that has the best combination of physical and chemical characteristics for producing food, feed, forage, fiber, and oilseed crops, and is also available for these uses. It has the soil quality, growing season and moisture supply needed to economically produce sustained yields of crops when treated and managed, including water management, according to acceptable farming methods."*

In addition, the National Soil Survey Handbook notes that "prime farmland" are soils which have "either no water table or have a water table that is maintained at sufficient depth during the cropping season to allow cultivated crops common to the area to be grown."<sup>5</sup> Twenty-four inches or deeper has been determined sufficient to meet this criterion. The soil can also be drained and still qualify if the ground water table is at a depth of less than 24 inches.

Soils of Statewide Importance are those that are nearly prime farmland, according to the above definitions, and that economically produce high yields of crops when treated and managed according to acceptable farming methods.

Nearly half (45.8%) of the Town's total land area is composed of Soils of Statewide Importance. However, only 3.1% of the Town's total land area is identified as prime farmland.<sup>6</sup> Aside from some areas located within the existing Growth Area along the Androscoggin River, most of the prime farmland is located in the west and southwest parts of the Town.

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<sup>4</sup> For more information, visit: <https://www.brunswickme.org/194/Community-Forest-Tree-Care>

<sup>5</sup> National Soil Survey Handbook (NSSH) and 7 CFR 657: Prime and Unique Farmlands.

<sup>6</sup> Brunswick Agriculture Map (September 2022), produced by the Municipal Planning Assistance Program within the Maine Department of Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry.

### *Prime Woodland Soil*

Cumberland County soils have been categorized into 24 distinct “woodland groups” according to their characteristics that affect tree growth and the management of woodland stands. Each woodland group is assigned a “woodland productivity class” between one (highest potential productivity) and six (lowest potential productivity). Maine is located too far north to have soils in woodland productivity classes one and two. Therefore, woodland productivity class three is considered “excellent,” and class four is considered “good.”<sup>7</sup> Slightly more than one-third (34.4%) of the Brunswick’s total land area is composed of excellent or good soils for woodland productivity.<sup>8</sup>

## Protection & Support of Productive Farming and Forestry Lands

### *Regulatory Protection*

In 2002, the Town adopted the *Parks, Recreation, and Open Space Plan*, which included a variety of strategies related to maintaining the community’s rural character. One of these strategies was to “Work to promote and maintain farming.” Since then, Brunswick has adopted a “right-to-farm” provision within the Zoning Ordinance which absolves farmers from nuisance complaints (such as those related to noise or odor) so long as they are complying with applicable state and federal laws, rules, and regulations.

Urban Agriculture as a primary land use is expressly permitted in the majority of zoning districts within the Town’s Designated Growth Area, without any additional review by the Planning Board, ensuring a faster permitting process through administrative review. Urban Agriculture includes the raising, keeping or production of fruit, vegetables, flowers, and other crops (excluding cannabis), or farm animals, poultry and bees. Further, farming as a primary land use is expressly permitted within the majority of the Town’s Rural zoning districts (without further review by the Planning Board). Cannabis cultivation is not a permitted use in any zone, though it is a conditional use in the following zones: I2, I3, and RBTI zones.

In addition, where new residential development is proposed to abut an existing agricultural use, the Review Authority shall require the applicant [for the new development] to issue and distribute the following written disclosure to potential purchasers of lots or dwelling units: *“This property adjoins lands used for agricultural purposes. Farmers have the right to apply approved chemicals and organic fertilizers, pesticides, and herbicides and to engage in farming operations which may generate dust, odor, smoke, noise and vibration.”* This disclosure shall be required as a note on a subdivision or site plan.

Finally, the Town’s Property Development Standards within the Zoning Ordinance (Sec. 4.3.1.B) requires that any active farmland be mapped and that the proposed development avoids these areas or incorporates them into the proposed development’s overall site design to the extent

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<sup>7</sup> United States Department of Agriculture. *Soil Survey Cumberland County, Maine*. U.S. Government Printing Office, 1972. p. 48

<sup>8</sup> *Forestland Productivity table for Androscoggin, Sagadahoc and Cumberland County, Maine*, United States, Natural Resources Conservation Service, National Forestry Manual.

practicable. Farms are also exempt from minimum parking requirements as outlined in Table 4.9.1.A.

### *Regional Coordination*

In the mid-1990s, the Brunswick-Topsham Land Trust (BTLT) purchased Crystal Spring Farm on Pleasant Hill Road for permanent conservation. According to their website, “The farm reflects many core aspects of the Land Trust’s mission including conserving land while also promoting local agriculture and supporting diverse community needs.”<sup>9</sup> Crystal Spring Farm played an important historic role in the region as a dairy that collected milk from surrounding farms. The farm continues to be used as a working farm and is also home to rare habitat.

### *Other Protections & Support Mechanisms*

Landowners in Brunswick rely on three voluntary tax programs in order to reduce their property tax obligation and help keep areas of Brunswick as working farm, working forest, or conserved open space. Lands that are enrolled in the programs are assessed for their current use, as opposed to their potential fair market value for more intensive uses. The property owners receive a reduced tax bill from the Town so long as they are enrolled in the program. If they remove their land from the program, they may have to pay a penalty so that the Town recoups some of the lost tax revenue.

In 2023, 2,031 acres were enrolled in the Farmland Tax Program, and 1,187 acres were enrolled in the Tree Growth Program. Participation in the Farmland Tax program decreased from 2009-2016 and has steadily increased from 2017-2023. Participation in the Tree Growth program has generally been decreasing.

In addition, there are several farmers’ markets throughout the community that help support local farmers.

1. The Town hosts a seasonal farmers’ market on Tuesday and Friday mornings at the Town Mall with 12-15 vendors.
2. In 1999, the Brunswick-Topsham Land Trust (BTLT) established a Saturday morning farmers’ market at Crystal Spring Farm. The market is one of the oldest, and now with over 40 vendors, one of the largest in the state.
3. Waterfront Maine’s Winter Market, located in Fort Andross provides a wintertime market for local agricultural and related products. The market, which currently has 48 vendors, is open on Saturday mornings from November to April.

Brunswick Topsham Land Trust has several community gardens, including the Settlemire Garden, a New Mainer garden, and the Mowita’nej Epíij (Abenaki) garden.

Finally, the Town supports community agriculture through the provision of space for the Senior [Community] Garden on Industry Road (near the Public Works Department), including seasonal water service. The plots are administered through partnership with the People Plus Center.

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<sup>9</sup> For more information, visit: <https://www.btl.org/conserved-lands/brunswick-freeport-conservation-corridor/crystal-spring-farm/>

## Threats and Issues of Concern

The following are known threats to forests and agriculture resources in Brunswick:

- Residential development, which is projected to continue at a rapid pace, can threaten the scenic character of the more rural areas of our community and make it more difficult for farmers to expand or change their operations. The issues here are two-fold. First, rising land values increase the incentive to develop property rather than continue to farm or harvest timber. Second, encroaching residential development can come with increased complaints from neighboring property owners regarding farming operations. As noted, the Town's existing Ordinance shelters pre-existing farms from complaints related to noise or odor, but not from complaints related to impacts (such as traffic) as a result of related business operations.
- To the point above, farming enterprises are often hybrids of several different land uses; ordinances and regulations should allow farm businesses flexibility to adapt to changing markets. For example, many farms host events such as outdoor dinners, weddings, or wine tastings, which would not be allowed under the definition of farm currently outlined in the Town's Zoning Ordinance. Similarly, a dairy farm would need to get special approval from the Planning Board in many zoning districts (including the Rural Farm & Forest Zone) in order to have employees and sell the cheese from the same space.
- Fragmentation of rural forest blocks can reduce the size of remaining stands to the point where they are no longer operationally efficient to manage for forest products.
- Many of the 2002 *Parks, Recreation and Open Space Plan's* agricultural initiatives (such as the establishment of a Farm Advisory Committee, a Land for Brunswick's Future program, and working with local schools/students to participate in the local food system) have not been implemented. Interviews with farmers conducted as part of the 2019 report prepared by the Town's Bowdoin Fellow, *Emphasizing and Preserving Working Rural Landscapes*, continued to emphasize establishing a Farm Advisory Committee to advise the Town Council on issues related to agriculture in the community.



