Preserving Farmland with Conservation Easements
Threats to Farmland

- By 2040, NC is 2nd in the nation for loss of farmland-AFT
- NC loses about 55 acres a day
- NC is on track to lose over 1 million acres, roughly 12%
- 48% of the conversion on Henderson’s most productive land
- Henderson stands to lose:
  - Best Case Scenario-7,600 acres=23%
  - Worst Case Scenario-16,900 acres=51%
  - Most Likely Scenario-13,200 acres=40%
Ag Census-2017 to 2022

- 2017-Henderson:
  - 455 farms
  - 41,099 acres
  - Average Farm Size=90 acres
  - Total MV of Ag $77,375,507

- 2022-Henderson:
  - 520 farms
  - 32,743 acres
  - Average Farm Size=63 acres
  - Total MV of Ag $103,390,000
  - Domestic Tourism (2020)- $253,700,000
Why We Need Ag

- Preserve rural character and lifestyle
- Local food production, supply, and access
- Open and green space
- Diverse economy and workforce
- Lower cost of community services and utilities infrastructure
- Natural resource conservation
- Wildlife habitat
- Carbon sequestration
- Less impervious surface/flood resiliency
Question: What can be done about it?
Answer: Farmland Preservation

- VAD/EVAD
- Conservation Agreements
- PUV
- Term Easements
- Permanent Easements
- Cost-Share programs
- Buy/Protect/Sell Programs
- Farm Succession Sessions/Estate Planning
- Farmland Protection Plan
- Ag Growth Zones
Why Conservation Easements?

- Agricultural easements are a tool to help farmers stay viable.
- Agricultural easements tend to increase surrounding property values, thereby adding to the tax base.
- Agricultural easements generally do not remove property from the tax base anymore than the property being in PUV does.
- Agricultural easements are a nice middle-ground of limited development, agricultural operations, land conservation, and financial compensation.
- 2008 COCS showed that for every $1 spent on residential areas, the county receives $0.86, a net loss.
- Same study showed that for every $1 spent on agricultural areas, the county receives $1.03, a net gain even in spite of PUV.
How to Establish a Farmland Preservation Program

- Decide who is going to be doing the work—County, SWCD or Land Trust?
- If not the county or SWCD, what role, if any, will you play?
- If the county or SWCD, create a new position or use existing resources?
- How will it be funded? How much will it be funded?
- Legal representation/legal defense fund? Stewardship?
How to Establish a FP Program cont’d

- SWCD
  - G.S. 139 empowers districts to hold easements
  - Numerous districts statewide hold easements
  - Cost-share programs are somewhat like “temporary easements”
  - Have existing relationships with farmers
  - Has the conservation/agricultural expertise
  - Local board can set direction for land protection priorities
  - Establishing a dedicated position for FP is one thing all of the successful programs have in common
  - Examples: Buncombe, Polk, Wake, Cabarrus, Hyde
Haywood Farmland Preservation Program 2008-2023

- 2008-Participated in ADFP Cycle II, participated in every subsequent cycle
- 2008-County funds established to support FP program
- 2008-Farmland Protection Plan
- 2011-Developed ranking form as interest exceeded applicant spots
- 2015-Part time FP position established
- 2017-Full-time FP position established
  - Position was responsible for VAD/EVAD program, CE program through NCDA/NRCS, CE programs otherwise, grants for FP
- 2023-21 closed easements with ADFP/NRCS-7 easements under contract-5 easements applications approved
- 32 easements-2,398 acres-$5.6 million grant funds
Haywood Cont’d

- Open application period until October
- Ranking through October
- Presentation of results to Ag Advisory Board in early November
- November to December deadline, submission of applications
- Generally, ADFP only, 3 NRCS apps through the years
- District was responsible for BDR, EA, Stewardship, all admin
- District would split funds for project appraisals percentages
- County attorney for legal representation
- Haywood had no stewardship fund*
How to Establish a FP Program cont’d

- Other county departments-Parks and Rec, Environmental, etc
  - Counties can of course hold easements; many already hold an assortment of them
  - Keeps direction of priorities local
  - A number of counties statewide hold ag easements
  - Allows for some costs to be incorporated into existing position’s responsibilities
  - Examples: Chatham, Orange, Durham
How to Establish a FP Program cont’d

- **Partnerships**
  - By partnering with a land trust or other non-profit a county can create a program to share the responsibility and workload.
  - Qualified non-profits can and do hold easements statewide:
    - *Working Lands Trust*: 33 easements, 18,000 acres approx.
  - Wealth of experience and expertise by land trust staff.
  - Partners can potentially bring other private funders to the table.
  - Have the capacity and time to administer the program.
  - Examples: Chatham and Union, Working Lands Trust, Conserving Carolina, Southern Appalachian Highlands Conservancy, etc.
Funding Methods Throughout NC

COUNTY ALLOCATION
BONDS
PUV ROLLBACK
PARTNER FUNDERS
County Allocations

- Numerous counties statewide fund programs through staffing and budget appropriations
  - Alamance-supporting funding through SWCD staff
  - Buncombe-staff and county funding
  - Cabarrus-staff
  - Chatham-staff and county funding
  - Haywood-staff and county funding
  - Hyde-special revenue fund
  - Orange-staff and county funding
  - Polk, Rockingham, Wake, Johnston, Union and others
Bonds

- Buncombe-2022 passed a $30 million-dollar Open Space Bond, a portion of which is dedicated to conservation easements
  - $750,000 annually
- Chatham-2020 Article 46 local sales tax passes, established the Chatham County Agricultural Preservation & Development Trust Fund
  - $325,000 annually
PUV Rollback

- Alamance: $167,000-$186,000 annually
- Cabarrus: $125,000 annually
- Harnett: None currently, though planning for PUV rollback
- Johnston: FY2025 will be the first year, amount unknown
- Wake: $4 million last couple of years, on track for the same amount FY2025
- Union: $960,000 FY2024, another $960,000 due in FY2025
Funding Partners

- NCDA - Agricultural Development & Farmland Preservation Trust Fund
- USDA - Natural Resources Conservation Service
- US Department of Defense
- Private Funding

Independently and through joint projects, these and other agencies partner with the land trusts to fund the acquisition of conservation easements to conserve high-priority lands across the state.