

## **Section V.K.**

# **Agricultural and Forestry Resources**

## I. Agriculture

### A. Historic and Current Farming

As in many coastal communities, by the 1850's as much as 2/3 of Islesboro had been cleared for farmland and pasture to produce, grain, and a few animals that supported its residents. Following the Civil War, as many farmers moved west in search of more fertile farmlands, many eastern farms were abandoned and reverted to forests. Islesboro held onto its farms longer than most because coastal, marine trading routes provided steady and convenient markets for surplus island farm products. In addition, with the emergence of the Island summer colonies, a new market emerged for home delivery of milk products, fresh fruits, and vegetables. Landscape materials were also grown and marketed during the turn-of-the-century building boom. As a result, the abandonment of fields and pastures was slower than in other areas. Nevertheless, farmland loss accelerated through the early decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and land that had been cleared, reverted to forest. In 1976, Burr Mitchell established a greenhouse on Derby Road to provide vegetable and flower seedlings and cut flowers.

Today, many "cottagers" still hire Islanders to assist with major landscaping and gardening functions, but the greenhouse is no longer in operation. Most agricultural activities consist of vegetable gardens and a few private orchards. According to the Assessor's records, there is one active agricultural land use, a sheep farm, off West Bay Road. Horses are stabled and/or pastured at the Cowan, Hall-Rivera, Gilder, Wouri, Tucker, and Toby Martin properties off Main Road.

### B. Prime Farmland Soils and Farmland Soils of Statewide Importance

The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) defines prime farmland as land best suited to producing food, feed, forage, fiber and oilseed crops. It has the soil quality, growing season, and moisture supply needed to produce a sustained high yield of crops while using acceptable farming methods. Prime farmland soils produce the highest yields and

require minimal amounts of energy and economic resources. In addition, agriculture on prime farmland soils results in the least damage to the environment. Prime farmland is a limited strategic resource; no more of it is being created. There are 1,491 acres of prime farmland soils in Islesboro, approximately 3% of the area of the community.

In addition to prime farmland soils, farmland soils of statewide importance are significant for the production of food, feed, fiber, forage, and oilseed crops. Criteria for defining and delineating are determined by the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service. Generally, farmland soils of statewide importance produce a high yield as prime if conditions are favorable. There are 2,506 acres of soils of statewide importance, approximately 6% of area of the community.

### **C. Farming in Waldo County**

As in other parts of Maine, the number of people who are engaged in farming as their primary occupation has declined. Between 1978 and 1997, the number of full-time farmers declined by nearly half. Over the same period, the number of male farmers declined nearly 40%, the number of female farmers increased by nearly 60%. Overall, the average age of farmers increased by 10%.

The number of farms in Waldo County decreased by about 1/3 between 1974 and 1997; farms declined nearly 5% from 1992 to 1997 alone. Over the same 23 year period, the total number of acres farmed declined by more than ¼, while the average size of a farm increased approximately 8%. The acreage of all farm products declined over the same period; but the acreage devoted to berries increased nearly 150% from 1974 to 1992.

Between 1978 and 1997, agricultural sales in Waldo County increased for every product, except livestock, poultry and their products, which declined by nearly ¾. During the same period, the sale of nursery and greenhouse products increased by over 800%, likely reflecting growth of new homes in the region.

Statewide market research in 2002 showed that 89% of those surveyed believe that buying locally grown food strengthens Maine's economy.

## **II. Forestry**

As agricultural fields in Islesboro have been abandoned, most have reverted to forest land which now covers most of the Island.

Since 1991, there have been 66 separate timber harvests involving a total of 586 acres. On average, there have been 4 to 5 harvests per year over the same timeframe. Less than 3% were conducted as clearcut harvests.

### III. Current Use Taxation

According to the Assessor's Office, there are 48 parcels listed under the Farm and Open Space Tax Program, Tree Growth Tax Program, or Conservation Easements. No parcels are enrolled under the Farmland Tax Program, although there are 569 acres enrolled in the open space component of the program. 430 acres are enrolled in tree growth. Total adjustment in valuation for these programs is \$12,428,352, or 3.3% of the total 2017 real estate valuation of \$378,534,200. The amount of taxes deferred for current use properties at the FY 2018 mil rate of \$15.80 is \$196,368<sup>1</sup>.

Both the Farm and Open Space and Tree Growth tax laws were enacted to provide property tax relief to owners of farmland, open space, and/or tree growth properties. Properties enrolled in the programs are assessed at current use value rather than fair market value. Inconsistency in state reimbursement of the difference between current use and fair market valuations remains a disincentive for many municipalities. Landowners withdrawing from the program pay a penalty.

### IV. Issues and Implications

1. At the first community workshop, a number of residents expressed interest in developing an agricultural base for the community to provide access to fresh fruits and vegetables, seedlings, and possibly landscape materials. Concern was also expressed that high land values would thwart efforts to re-establish farms.
2. Are there creative ways for the community to support agricultural activities? Might the Town dedicate land to support them? Might underused private orchards and/or surplus products from the community's many oversized gardens offer some kernels around which to expand options for access to locally produced goods? How might capital to provide organizing support and physical improvements be generated?

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<sup>1</sup> Islesboro Assessor Email, August 28, 2017.

Might community supported agricultural (CSA) efforts and/or collaborative efforts offer a way to begin to expand locally grown options?

3. Waldo County data on agricultural sales suggest that most growth in sales has been for nurseries/greenhouses and fruits, nuts, and berries. Are these products and agricultural applications that Islesboro should explore?
4. Only 9% of Islesboro is made up of prime agricultural soils and farmland soils of statewide significance. Should the Town take steps to preserve the most valuable farmland soils to assure their availability at a time when the economics of farming are more favorable?
5. The Town has seen an increase in the number and acreage of parcels that are participating in current use taxation and conservation programs, even as the Town's total property valuation has increased. Is the community satisfied that the impact of this trend on the Town's total property assessment is offset by the environmental benefits of the conservation programs?
6. Many people think that enrollment of land in a current use program means that the land will not be developed in the future. Experience in Maine has taught us that as land values rise, some property owners are willing to pay the penalties associated with withdrawing from the program to sell or develop their property. Are more protective measures desirable or advisable to assure that important open space and forest lands are not developed?