

J. AGRICULTURAL and FOREST RESOURCES

1. Purpose

This section presents an overview of Orland's Agricultural and Forest Resources. Specifically, this section will:

- a. describe the extent of Orland's farms and forest lands;
- b. predict whether the viability of these resources will be threatened by the impacts of growth and development; and
- c. assess the effectiveness of existing measures to protect and preserve important farm and forest resources.

2. Key Findings and Issues

While blueberries are an important source of income for some residents, there is relatively little farmland in Orland. Forest is the primary land use cover in town, but the amount of land held in tree growth taxation is decreasing. This is probably due to more restrictive state requirements for participation in this program than to land being developed for other uses. Orland's farm and forest resources, however, are presently largely unprotected from development.

3. Public Opinion Survey and Community Workshop Results

About 59 percent of respondents favored the development of ordinances or other measures such as voluntary conservation easements to protect farmland. Sixty-five percent favored such measures for forest land. There were also some general comments expressing concern about crop spraying and the need to support working farms.

4. Agricultural Resources

Orland has relatively little agricultural land. According to the 1979 Orland Land Use Data Base, there were only 504 acres in agricultural production, which represented about 1.5 percent of all land in town. About 88 percent of this farmland was used for blueberries, which are still a major crop in town. As of 1997, Hancock County USDA (United States Department of Agriculture) records show that there are 30 farms in Orland that participate in USDA-sponsored programs. Department officials believe that this figure is low since there are other farms in town that do not participate in their programs. Beef animals and horses with their hay fields and pastures comprise most of farm land not used for blueberries.

The United States Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS, formerly the Soil Conservation Service) has an estimate of prime agricultural soils. This estimate is based on the suitability of the soils for farmland, rather than their actual use. The rating is derived from factors such as types of soils, drainage and the absence of rocks. Some of these parcels may not be farmed. Similarly, some farms in Orland may not be on prime agricultural soils.

The NRCS records show that there are 4,800 acres of prime agricultural soils in Orland. This represents about 15 percent of Orland's approximately 32,930 acres of land area. As seen in Table J.1, some of these soils are considered prime only if they are drained and others only if they are irrigated.

Table J.1 Prime Agricultural Soils in Orland		
Category	Acreage	Percent of Total Land Area
Prime Farmland	1,276	3.87
Prime Areas If Drained	3,146	9.5
Prime Areas If Irrigated	378	1.1
Total	4,800	14.5
Source: USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service, May 1997		

Another way to estimate current amounts of agricultural land is through the acreage of land held under the Farm and Open Space Act. This act allows owners of farmland property tax breaks for parcels over five contiguous acres if they meet certain conditions such as a minimum farm-derived income. Normally, qualifying farmers with a long-term commitment to farming would participate in this program. A review of state records, however, indicates that no land in Orland has been held under this classification since at least 1990 (see Table J.2).

Table J.2 Farm and Open Space Taxation Parcels in Orland, 1990-1995				
	Farmland		Open Space Land	
	Number of Parcels	Acres	Number of Parcels	Acres
1990	0	0	0	0
1991	0	0	0	0
1992	0	0	0	0
1993	0	0	0	0
1994	0	0	0	0
1995	0	0	0	0
Source: Municipal Valuation Return Statistical Summary, Maine Bureau of Taxation Property Tax Division, Part IV				

5. Forest Resources

Forest is the primary land use cover in Orland. The 1979 Land Use Data Base indicated that 84 percent of the land in town was forested. Given the slow rate of development in most of the town since 1979, it is unlikely that there has been any significant decrease since that time. It is more likely that some abandoned fields have

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reverted to forest, thereby increasing the proportion of forested land.

The forests are a mix of temperate deciduous and northern coniferous trees. Broad-leaved deciduous trees - maple, oak, elm, and beech - are found together with northern coniferous trees, spruce, fir, pine, and larch. Abandoned fields, forest fires, and timber harvesting have combined with the process of succession to produce diverse forests of mixed age.

One source of information on Orland's forest resources is data on land held under the Tree Growth Taxation Act. This classification is similar to the Farm and Open Space Act in that owners of forested parcels meeting certain conditions may have their property assessed as forest land rather than for its potential developed value. These conditions became more restrictive in 1989 and were further amended in 1993.

Under the most recent amendments, the definition of forest land no longer includes parcels of less than 100 acres managed solely for personal use. If such properties are to remain in tree growth, the owner must manage the parcel according to a commercial forest management and harvest plan. These changes may reduce the acreage held under tree growth in Orland in future years.

Tree growth acreage trends from 1990 to 1995 in Orland are shown in Table J.3. There was a decrease in the number of parcels held after 1993. This may be due in part to the changes in the tree growth law that were described above. Fifteen parcels were withdrawn in 1994 and the total acreage held in tree growth decreased from 8,038 in 1993 to 7,417 in 1995. In 1995 about 38 percent (2,816 acres) of the land was in mixed wood. Another 2,086 acres (28 percent) were in soft woods and the remaining 2,515 acres (34 percent) were in hardwoods. These proportions were roughly the same as those of earlier years.

Year	Number of Parcels	Softwood Acres	Mixedwood Acres	Hardwood Acres	Total	Parcels Withdrawn
1990	71	2,285	3,061	2,429	7,775	0
1991	71	2,285	3,095	2,659	8,039	1
1992	73	2,274	3,101	2,663	8,038	0
1993	72	2,274	3,103	2,661	8,038	0
1994	59	2,086	2,816	2,562	7,464	15
1995	56	2,086	2,816	2,515	7,417	1

Source: Municipal Valuation Return Statistical Summary, Maine Bureau of Taxation Property Tax Division, Part III

6. An Analysis of Threats to Farm and Forest Land from Projected Development

While there are no immediate threats to Orland's farmland, it is possible that

more will be developed for other uses. Open fields are particularly attractive to developers since less site preparation is required. One of the major factors influencing the decision to sell farm land for development is the potential values of crops. Blueberries have remained an important crop throughout Downeast Maine.

Given the large amount of forest land in Orland, it is unlikely that development would pose a serious threat to forest resources. Rather, small areas may be cleared for house lots. It is unlikely that the remote, forested areas that are not served by year-round roads would receive any significant development. Another threat is excessive clear cutting. There have been reports of such harvesting in some parts of town.

7. Adequacy of Existing Measures to Protect Farm and Forest Land

The only measure presently in effect to protect forest land is tree growth taxation. As mentioned above, no Orland farmers are presently participating in the state's farmland taxation program. The town's land use regulations offer no specific measures to protect farm or forest land.

Some towns have enacted land use ordinance measures to increase protection of agricultural and forest resources. As Orland formulates its forest and agricultural policies, it may want to review what other towns have done. Some towns have enacted farm and forestry districts, in which relatively large lot sizes are set (as much as ten acres) and the use of cluster development is encouraged. The clusters can allow houses to be built on those portions of the parcel that are not farmed.

Other communities have worked closely with local land conservation groups in identifying farm parcels from which voluntary easements could be acquired from interested farmers. While a parcel under conservation easement will have a lower tax value, such parcels are usually a long-term tax advantage to a town. First, the value of properties adjoining a conservation parcel normally increases. Second, the tax revenue produced from the parcel if it were developed would probably be less than the cost of the providing municipal services such as schools to the new homes built on the site.

8. Regional Issues

Since Penobscot is considering measures to protect farmland along Route 15, Orland may want to coordinate its efforts with Penobscot. There are also county-wide efforts underway to find new markets for local farm produce. These could increase local farm income. Similarly, more attention is being paid regionally to low-impact forestry.