

DRAFT

AGRICULTURAL AND FOREST RESOURCES

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INTRODUCTION

Farming and forestry are significant land use activities, important to the economic well-being of numerous Belfast residents. These open space resources are integral to Belfast's rural character and are important to Belfast's residents, who have over the years, indicated a strong preference for preserving the City's rural character. This chapter describes agricultural and forestry resources in Belfast and recommends steps for their protection.

KEY ISSUES

Agriculture and forestry are more important to the community than the small number of those employed in these sectors might suggest. The market for local agricultural products is increasing and Belfast residents could likely support more activity in this sector. Sustainable forestry provides a small but useful supplemental income to large landowners, and helps reduce property tax valuations, allowing residents who work in the local economy or are on fixed incomes to remain in Belfast. Larger scale, traditional agricultural activities have declined, while specialized, small-scale and niche-farming activities have increased, like the raising of alpacas, organic and heirloom crops.

In 2019, there were 1,034.45 acres in the Farmland Protection Program, down from 1,601.68 in 2009. In 2019, 1,524.33 acres were enrolled in the Tree Growth Program, up slightly from 1,515.2 in 2009. In 2019, there were 361.67 enrolled in the Open Space program, up from 271.77 enrolled in the Open Space Program in 2009. Those property owners participating in the farmland and tree growth tax programs are benefiting from reduced tax assessments based on the current (non-residential) use of their property or portions thereof. See figures in C.3 and C.4 below. It is estimated that additional farmland and woodlots might be eligible to participate in these voluntary programs.

The rising value of land for residential uses and the increased valuation of land that could be converted to residential use have reduced the amount of land farmed and forested. Property tax is the primary source of revenue for municipal government services. Residential uses are often sought because of the increased property tax revenue that they will generate. Importantly, however, residential uses consume significantly more municipal services than do farming and forestry activities. Scattered residential development in formerly rural areas breaks up contiguous parcels and facilitates increased residential development. Farming has typically been small-scale; however, niche operations catering to specialized markets can still flourish. No industrialized forest operations (encompassing 500 acres or more per site) are found in Belfast. Voluntary tree growth designation is likely to continue. Although, limited amounts of forestry conservation easements in the City mean that the existing forestry activities may decline as scattered development in formerly rural areas increase.

LAND-USE AND ZONING

Many of the current zoning districts support agricultural and forestry uses, including the General Purpose A, General Purpose B, Residential Agricultural I, Residential Agricultural II, Protection Rural 1, Protection Rural 2, and much of the Residential Growth zoning district. In addition, many of the City's commercial zoning districts allow low scale agricultural activities and the City zoning regulations allow domestic chickens in urban residential neighborhoods.

The City's Future Land Use Plan that was adopted as part of this Comprehensive Plan establishes the Rural Road Class 1 and Rural Road Class 2 zoning districts. These Road Class districts clearly allow and encourage agricultural and forestry uses, and allow home occupations at a scale that can support small agricultural, husbandry, forestry and similar uses. There are many large undeveloped rural parcels in Belfast, and at present, there is minimal pressure to redevelop these parcels for residential use. Most remain open field and forestry lands.

The Future Land Use Plan, like many current zoning districts, also recognizes that many areas in Belfast support a wide range of uses. For example, a furniture store located in the Route 3 Commercial zoning district also supports a horse stable. As such, it is recommended that agricultural activities be allowed in mixed use/commercial zoning districts. The City also will consider policies similar to its domesticated chicken policy for urban areas.

FARMERS' MARKETS AND COOPERATIVES

The City is very supportive of non-regulatory steps to support farming and forestry including farmer's markets, working with the local chamber of commerce to help market agriculture products, and working with local school lunch programs to incorporate local goods. The City actively supports outreach and education on the importance of local farms and forestlands to local schools and the public.

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Belfast has a long established food co-operative that has over 3,000 members and which offers locally grown foods, and access to a fish purchasing cooperative. In addition to providing a market for local farmers, the Co-op provides advocacy and education regarding healthy living and foods. In addition, in 2011, a group of residents broke ground on the Belfast Co-Housing and Eco-Village project, a 38-unit residential subdivision that features net zero energy housing, community gardens, and sustainable development. The housing development is clustered on 3 acres with over 40 acres of surrounding open space and fields. The Co-Housing and Eco-Village project is a significant accomplishment for its founders, particularly at a time when the housing market was very depressed. In 2018, the last unit offered for sale in the Belfast Co-Housing and Eco-Village project was sold. The City role in this project was to use local zoning standards that allowed this type of development.

The Maine Farmland Trust (located in Belfast) and the Coastal Mountains Land Trust work with landowners who wish to conserve their properties for the continuation of sustainable agricultural and forestry operations. See the map titled Public Facilities and Services for land under conservation easements.

MANAGEMENT PRACTICES

Clear-cutting has only arisen as an issue in Belfast twice in the past 15 years. Off the Route 1 bypass, about 30 acres were cleared on property adjacent to and under the same ownership as a mobile home park. Maine DEP fined the owner and they have paid restoration fees, which were likely in excess of the revenue made from the timber sold. The cleared lot has yet to be developed. Another 15 acres were cleared in 2012. Selective cutting has occurred as part of regulated woodlands management throughout the rural portions of the City. To date, clear cutting has not been a major concern. The City can advise farmers and woodlot owners on best management practices and put these persons in contact with state officials for further guidance.

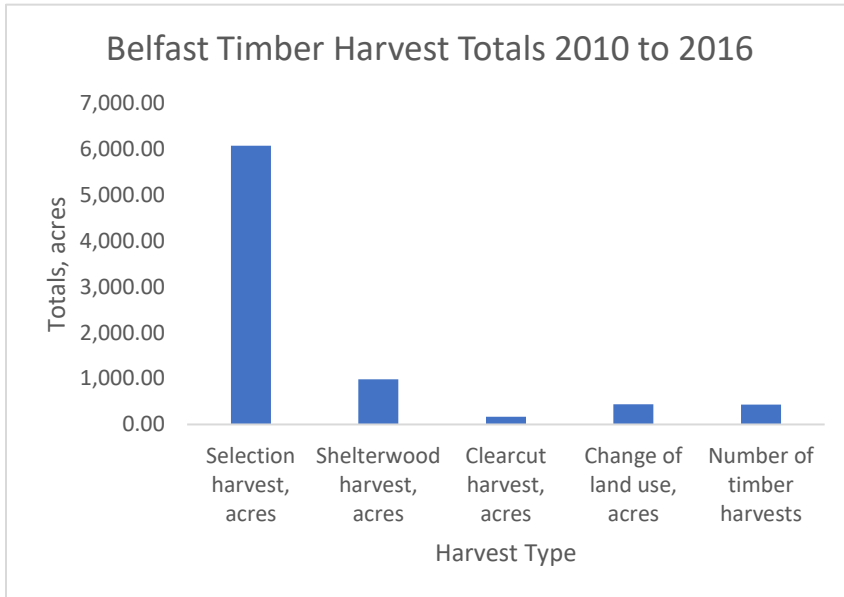
WALDO COUNTY AGRICULTURAL SALES

| Year/Item | 1978 | 1982 | 1992 | 1997 | 2007 | 2017 |
|-------------------------------|--------------|---------------|---------------|--------------|---------------|---------------|
| All crops | \$ 1,257,000 | \$ 1,850,000 | \$ 2,796,000 | \$ 2,796,000 | \$ 5,002,000 | \$ 8,479,000 |
| Livestock/Poultry | \$46,202,000 | \$ 34,681,000 | \$ 14,336,000 | \$12,229,000 | \$ 17,818,000 | \$ 14,476,000 |
| Nursery & Greenhouse Products | \$ 130,000 | \$ 185,000 | \$ 541,000 | \$ 1,211,000 | \$ 1,613,000 | \$ 2,539,000 |
| Fruits, Nuts, & Berries | \$ 393,000 | \$ 723,000 | \$ 1,511,000 | \$ 650,000 | \$ 1,284,000 | \$ 1,005,000 |

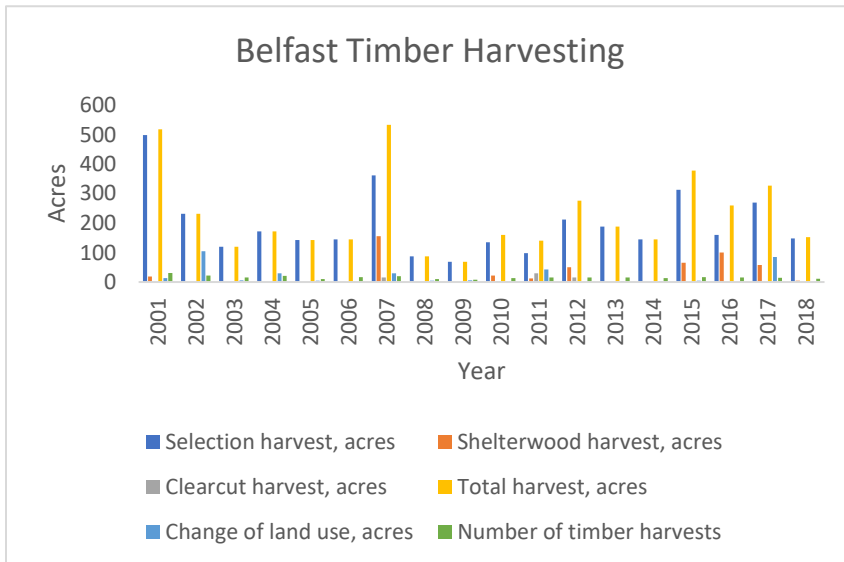
Source: USDA/Dept. of Commerce, Agriculture Census 1978-2017.

Notes: Most agricultural activity in the county occurs outside Belfast. All crops category includes nursery and greenhouse products.

TIMBER HARVESTING



Selection harvesting was the most prominent type of timber harvesting in Belfast, while clearcut harvesting has been the least prominent. Total harvest acres were greatest in 2001 and 2007. Total harvested acres decline significantly after 2007. Since 2012, timber harvesting has had consistent amounts on a yearly basis.



Source: Department of Conservation - Maine Forest Service
 Notes: Data compiled from confidential year-end landowner reports to Maine Forest Service. To protect confidential landowner information, data is reported only where three or more landowner reports reported harvesting in the town.

AGRICULTURE AND FORESTRY PROGRAMS

| Program | Occurrence | Organized/Management |
|-----------------|---------------------|----------------------|
| Farmers’ Market | Year-round (weekly) | Farmers’ Market |
| Garden Club | Spring/Summer | Civic Group |
| School Farm | Spring/Summer | RSU 71 |

The open space provided by farming and forestry activities is important to the rural character that surrounds the Downtown and is found in backland areas away from the highway commercial development that is spreading along Route 1 and Route 3. Only 2.3% of Belfast’s residents worked in agriculture, forestry, fishing and hunting, and mining occupations in 2019. However, the public’s attention on the value of locally raised healthy food has boosted the market for these commodities. Accordingly, grocery stores and supermarket chains are offering more local produce and related goods for sale in Belfast. Belfast’s population could become a larger market for dairy and crops raised within Waldo County and nearby.

In 1997, there were eight active farms in Belfast: one dairy farm, one dairy and sheep farm, and six general agriculture farms. There were 434.59 acres registered in Belfast under the States Farm and Open Space Law: 57.5 acres in crops, 365.09 acres in pasture, 4 acres in orchard and 8 acres in horticulture. All of this land is located in the rural area. In 2019, there were 45 properties enrolled as farmland in Belfast. There were 1,034.45 acres in the Farmland Protection Program and 361.67 acres in the Open Space Program. The increased acreage in crops, pasture, and horticulture from 1997 to 2019 is due to increased participation in the program, rather than an increase in farming activity.

The Tree Growth Tax Law Program allows for the assessment of forestland based on current use rather than market value as long as the land is managed for timber production and remains as forest. In 1997, there were 2,130.6 acres registered in Belfast under the Tree Growth Tax Law Program. All but 23.75 acres of this acreage are in rural locations. Most of this acreage is located on the west side of the City. In 2019, there were 1,524.33 acres registered in Belfast under the Tree Growth Tax Law Program. Most of this acreage is in rural locations.