

What Our Region Grows:



A look at Agricultural Production and Demand in the Washington Area Foodshed¹

¹Based on the U.S. Food Market Estimator

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Prepared by The Metropolitan Washington Council of Governments (COG) and the Regional Agricultural Workgroup (RAW)

This report is intended to give an informative overview of agriculture in the Washington region. It examines regional agricultural production and estimated local demand, as well as opportunities and limitations facing the 21st century farmer.

Note: USDA and Leopold Center estimates for county production and demand may vary from most recent county data.

Workgroup Members*:

- Frederick County, MD Business Development and Retention Division
- Montgomery County, MD Department of Economic Development
- Montgomery County Soil Conservation District
- Prince George's County, MD (UMD Extension)
- Prince George's County, M-NCPPC
- Fauquier County, VA Department of Agricultural Development
- Loudoun County, VA Department of Economic Development
- Loudoun Soil and Water Conservation District
- Jefferson County, WV Development Authority
- Freshfarm Markets
- Piedmont Environmental Council
- Potomac Vegetable Farms

*Includes participation and support from the Metropolitan Washington Council of Governments (COG)

“The mission of the Regional Agricultural Workgroup is to protect and promote agriculture in the Washington region by investigating potential approaches for sustaining an economically viable regional agricultural system through better support of farms, farmers, farm activities and programs and marketing of local agricultural products.”

To learn more about the Regional Agricultural Workgroup please visit:

www.nationalcapitalfarms.org

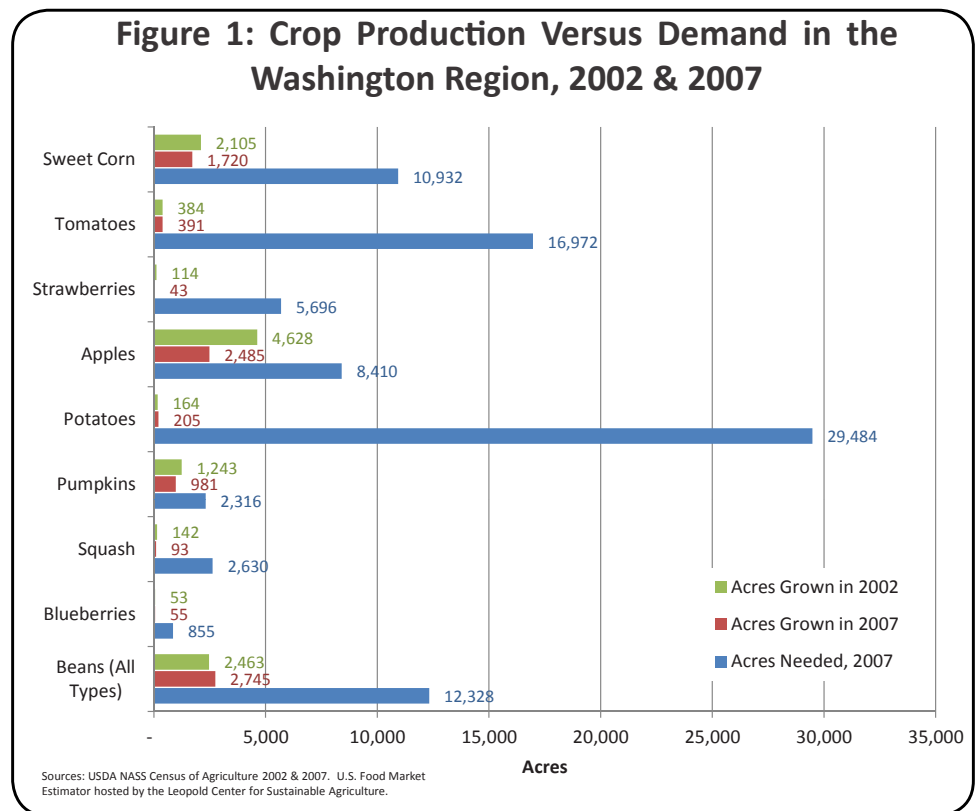


Executive Summary

With a population of 6.52 million people and growing, the Washington agricultural region (a.k.a. Washington region) is geographically, socioeconomically, and culturally diverse. To many of its urban dwellers, it may come as a surprise that the region has a rich agricultural community that provides a variety of products to our region and beyond. In fact, agriculture constitutes approximately 28 percent of the region's land area and contributes approximately \$1 billion annually to its economy. However, with few exceptions, regional agriculture is not meeting local food demands, a situation that is only worsened with an increasing population and decreasing farm acreage. The region does have successful medium-scale production for a variety of products grown for human consumption (apples, pumpkins, beans, sweet corn), but none of these are produced at levels to entirely meet demand (Figure 1). Similarly, dairy almost meets local market demand. There is also a small beef cattle industry, as well as minor pork and chicken production.

The driving agricultural sector for the region is the production of grain feedstock. In 2007, the acreage for corn and soybeans accounted for 17.9 percent of all agricultural land in the Washington region. This is largely due to the nearby Eastern Shore poultry industry, which produced over 550 million birds in 2007. Due to unavailable farm acreage, the Eastern Shore cannot produce enough grain to feed its chickens, and the geographically close Washington region is able to sell large amounts of corn and soybeans to supplement their deficit. Since 1995, the Eastern Shore poultry industry has, due to competition from other parts of the country where production costs are lower, declined. Further decline could have serious implications for agriculture in the Washington region, and state and local officials should consider them in future policy decisions.

Agriculture in the region faces many challenges, and these challenges are taking a toll on current farming enterprises. The most significant of these is population growth and associated urban development. From 2002 to 2007, approximately 118,599 acres (seven percent) of farmland in the region were lost to residential and commercial development. Additional impediments include, but are not limited to, an aging farmer population, not enough new farmers, farmland fragmentation, increasing labor costs, a loss of support services, stringent environmental and health regulations, restrictive zoning laws, and limited water availability.



Despite the challenges that farmers face, many are capitalizing on new market opportunities. The Washington region's relative affluence has resulted in a growing demand for high-end, locally sourced fruit, vegetable, meat, and dairy products, and more and more farmers are responding. While it is not realistic to expect the region to become agriculturally self-sufficient, market deficiencies do provide new opportunities for expanding small-scale, local food production and marketing efforts.

It is recognized that agricultural problems and opportunities in the Washington region are generally best addressed through cooperative regional approaches and initiatives. As such, two new COG region initiatives (Region Forward and Economy Forward) represent potential starting points for greater regional agricultural dialogue and cooperation, as well as further support for local agriculture and related economic planning integration. The Region Forward goal is to maintain 450,000 acres of agricultural lands in the COG region.

Regional Agricultural Workgroup (RAW) recommendations for the support of 21st century agriculture in the Washington region are as follows:

- Political leaders and decision makers in the Washington region need to come together to formulate a strategic agriculture support plan and agree upon those steps and measures that will help sustain local agriculture through the 21st century. This could be accomplished through leadership provided by the COG Board working in partnership with local member and non-member jurisdictions and municipalities;
- Comprehensively examine and, where appropriate, remove and/or modify regulatory-related obstacles to local farmers. For example, fast-track variance and special exception case reviews for typical agricultural-related building requests, and explore the possibility for reducing associated filing/permit fees;
- Inventory public lands that could potentially be used in the near future for the establishment of either a first class, permanent farm incubator training facility or a local processing facility. Note: implementation options include but are not limited to: floating county bonds, creating new public-private partnerships, actively soliciting donations, etc;
- Provide new and additional tax incentives that promote local farming and related support services. This could include new tax deductions for county sponsored farming assistance programs and initiatives;
- Adequately fund agricultural-related technical, educational and marketing services at the county level;
- Support the development of local food aggregation/distribution infrastructure that encourages local food consumption by institutions (such as schools and hospitals), restaurants, and the general public;
- Bring agriculture back to the school curriculum. Consider providing extra high school student service credit hours for cooperating county farmer-certified, agricultural-related work and study;
- Expand lobbying efforts that showcase the importance of and need for sustaining local agriculture. This could be done through the assistance and involvement of county councils, state delegates and senators, the COG Board, and both citizen and farm-friendly groups;
- Expand both farmer mentoring and land leasing opportunities; and
- Work with local and state lending institutions to make farming-related loans easier and quicker to obtain.