

G. AGRICULTURE AND FORESTRY RESOURCES

The purpose of this section is to:

1. Describe the agricultural and forestry resources in Whitneyville including farmlands and forestlands in terms of their extent, characteristics, and importance to the economy and character of the town and region; and
2. Predict whether the viability of important agricultural and forestry resources will be threatened by the impacts of future growth and development.

FINDINGS

Blueberries, wreath production and timber harvesting are the major agricultural and forestry uses in Washington County. These uses are all present in Whitneyville and support a significant number of jobs in the local economy.

Whitneyville also has a number of smaller scale agricultural producers. Small farms in Whitneyville and surrounding communities are supported by a local farmers market and community supported agriculture (CSA) programs. The extent of soils rated as prime farmland in Whitneyville is limited, but soils rated as highly productive for forestry uses are extensive throughout the community.

AGRICULTURAL AND FORESTRY ECONOMY

Whitneyville is a town that was literally built on the strength of its forestry-based economy. Since the end of the river drives in the 1970's forestry and agriculture has played a more limited role in the local economy.

According to Maine Forest Service Reports, timber harvesting plays a relatively minor role in Whitneyville's economy. However, many local residents rely on small wood operations as a sideline income and/or alternative heating source.

One of the most economically significant uses of forestry resources in Whitneyville today is wreath making. Whitney Wreaths, currently the largest employer in Whitneyville, employs a small year-round staff that swells to several hundred people seasonally. Other local residents find seasonal employment collecting balsam tips for use in wreath making and in home-based wreath making operations.

The largest agricultural crop in Whitneyville, as in much of Washington County, is blueberries. Blueberry barrens in Whitneyville are largely clustered along Route 1 from the Machias town line to the Jonesboro town line and in central Whitneyville at the end of Canal Road. In recent years, the extent of land actively managed for blueberry production in Whitneyville has grown. The University of Maine Cooperative Extension also maintains a small blueberry growing area in Whitneyville north of the village.

Some local residents continue to find seasonal work harvesting the blueberry crop, however mechanization and migrant labor have reduced the number of local residents directly employed in the blueberry industry in recent years.

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In addition to commercial blueberry farms, there are also a handful of small farms. Firm figures are not available, but the town is aware of several small farm that raise vegetables, fruit and livestock. Small farms in Whitneyville make their products available to customers through direct sales as well as through a local buying cooperative operated weekly in Machias.

FARM AND FOREST LAND

The U.S. Department of Agriculture defines prime farmland as the land that is 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 produces the highest yields and requires minimal amounts of energy and economic resources. It is also often targeted for low-density residential development due to the suitability of well drained soils for septic systems. Very few of the soils in Whitneyville are listed as Prime Farmland. The only soil in Whitneyville identified as prime farmland is a small adjacent to the village along the Machias River. The location of “Prime Farmland” is depicted on *Map 4: Soils Suitability*.

Woodland Productivity

Maine's forests and forest industry play a vital role in the state's economy. Forested areas provide an abundant and diverse wildlife population for the use and enjoyment of all Maine citizens. Furthermore, the forest protects the soil and water and contributes to a wide variety of recreational and aesthetic experiences. The forest provides a wide variety of wildlife habitats for both game and non-game species. Loss of forestland can be attributed to development and to irresponsible harvesting techniques. When forestland ownership is fragmented, public access becomes more restricted due to increased land posting. To optimize forestland use, forests should be effectively managed and harvested.

Soils rated with a woodland productivity of medium or above are qualified as prime forestland soils. This designation does not preclude the development of these lands but only identifies the most productive forestland. These soils are rated only for productivity and exclude management problems such as erosion hazard, equipment limitations or seedling mortality. Soils rated as very highly productive, highly productive or moderately productive for forestry uses are extensive throughout Whitneyville. Important forest lands are shown on *Map 4: Soils Suitability*.

Traditional timber harvesting is a relatively minor economic activity in Whitneyville today. Local timber harvesting is conducted mostly through selection harvests but also by shelter wood and much less frequently through clear cut harvesting. According to Maine Forest Service reports, timber harvesting activities in Whitneyville have averaged less than 30 acres per year over the last decade.

In Whitneyville, as through Washington County, local residents selectively harvest timber for firewood on a small scale, providing sideline income for some and a means of heating their homes for others.

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SUMMARY OF TIMBER HARVEST INFORMATION FOR WHITNEYVILLE

YEAR	Selection harvest	Shelterwood harvest	Clearcut harvest	Total Harvest	Num. Active Notifications
1991-1995	191 ac.	65 ac.	25 ac.	281 ac.	9
1996	508 ac.	0 ac.	0 ac.	508 ac.	5
1997	185 ac.	0 ac.	25 ac.	210 ac.	5
1998	127 ac.	0 ac.	0 ac.	127 ac.	3
1999	163 ac.	0 ac.	0 ac.	163 ac.	9
2000	5 ac.	0 ac.	0 ac.	5 ac.	9
2001	18 ac.	0 ac.	0 ac.	18 ac.	11
2002	8 ac.	23 ac.	0 ac.	31 ac.	5
2003	2 ac.	0 ac.	0 ac.	2 ac.	4
2004-2005	20 ac.	0 ac.	0 ac.	20 ac.	4
2006-2007	65 ac.	0 ac.	0 ac.	65 ac.	4
2008-2009	5 ac.	53 ac.	0 ac.	58 ac.	4
Total	1,297 ac.	141 ac.	50 ac.	1,488 ac.	72

Source: Year End Landowner Reports to Maine Forest Service, 2009

In addition to traditional timber harvesting, harvesting balsam fir tips (brush) for wreath production is a major use of Whitneyville's woodlands. Heavy cutting of timber is sometimes used as a method to increase the economic productivity of woodlands for brush used in wreath-making.

THREATS TO FOREST AND FARMLANDS

Across Maine and the United States generally, low-density residential development is the greatest factor contributing to the loss of productive forest and farmland. Typically soils that are considered prime farmland are also desirable places for residential development because these areas are often clear and the soil characteristics make road construction and installation of septic systems less expensive. The Natural Resources Conservation Service of the USDA has produced a handbook of Soil Survey Data for Growth Management in Washington County.

The NRCS handbook assesses individual soils with reference to the soil type in Washington County that has the fewest limitations to development (depth to water table, bedrock, etc.). This reference soil is given a value of 100 points. Costs that are incurred to overcome limitations to development are developed for all other soils. These costs, as well as costs associated with environmental constraints and long term maintenance, are converted to index points that are subtracted from the reference soil. The result is a comparative evaluation of development costs for various soils in the county. The overall range is large with values between 0 and 100. These numerical ratings are separated into Soil Potential Rating Classes of very low to very high. Thus in the table a soil with a Very High rating has very good potential for development.

NRCS soils rating for low density development are depicted on *Map 7: Soils Classification*. Soils rated as having a "Low" or "Very Low" suitability for low density

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development are relatively extensive throughout Whitneyville. In Whitneyville, as in other nearby towns, the primary constraint on soil suitability for low density development is the high cost of installing septic systems.

Soils rated with “medium” or “high” suitability for low density development are concentrated near the village and along Route 1 and Route 192. One area of soils rated as “Prime Farmland” is rated with a “medium” suitability for low density development. Due to limited anticipated development over the planning period and other constraints, low-density residential development is not considered to be a major threat to soils that support productive agricultural or forestry uses in Whitneyville at this time.

PROTECTION OF FOREST AND FARMLAND

The town of Whitneyville does not currently have any local land use ordinances or other regulatory tools designed to protect agricultural and forestry lands from the negative impacts for development. In order to adequately protect these resources, the town should enact a Land Use Ordinance that limits permitted land uses in rural areas to residential, agricultural, forestry and other compatible land uses. Whitneyville should also adopt appropriate Right to Farm regulations.

In addition to local regulation, a variety of programs provide financial incentives for landowners to keep land undeveloped and managed for long term productivity. They include the following:

- Farm and Open Space Tax Law - (Title 36, MRSA, Section 1101, et seq.) encourages landowners to conserve farmland and open space by taxing the land at a rate based on its current use, rather than potential fair market value.

Eligible parcels in the farmland program must be at least five contiguous acres, utilized for the production of farming, agriculture or horticulture activities and show gross earnings from agricultural production of at least \$2,000 (which may include the value of commodities produced for consumption by the farm household) during one of the last two years or three of the last five years. According to municipal records, there are no parcels currently enrolled in Farmland or Open Space current use taxation in town.

- Tree Growth Tax Law - (Title 36, MRSA, Section 571, et seq.) provides for the valuation of land classified as forestland on the basis of productivity, rather than fair market value.

According to municipal records for fiscal year 2010, Whitneyville had 29 parcels covering an area of 5,062.7 acres enrolled in tree growth tax status.

The total area now enrolled in tree growth is approximately 63% of the forestland in Whitneyville, just over 50% of the total land area. Parcels enrolled in tree growth are widely distributed throughout the community.

These programs enable farmers and other landowners to use their property for its productive use at a property tax rate that reflects farming and open space rather than

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residential development land valuations. If the property is removed from the program, a penalty is assessed against the property based on the number of years the property was enrolled in the program and/or a percentage of fair market value upon the date of withdrawal. In addition farm operators and forestland owners from Whitneyville participate in soil and water conservation programs through the local NRCS office.

Farmland and forestland in Whitneyville are currently adequately protected through land use regulation and current use taxation. Although no official statistics exist for Whitneyville, the town is aware of several additional parcels that have come under active management for farmland and forestry products in recent years. Overall, the town expects a continued increase in the acreage dedicated to farming and/or forestry over the next 10 to 15 years. Whitneyville's land use regulations should continue to permit productive forestry and agriculture operations such as road-side stand, greenhouses, and pick-your-own operations.

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POLICIES AND IMPLEMENTATION

The town has developed the following policies and implementation strategies relative to agricultural and forestry resources in Whitneyville.

Goal: Whitneyville will preserve the agricultural and forestry resources that support its rural economy.			
Policy	Implementation Strategy	Responsibility	Timeframe
Whitneyville will safeguard lands identified as prime farmland.	Whitneyville will include major concentrations of farm and forest lands in the “rural areas” of the Land Use Plan.	Comprehensive Plan Committee	Immediate
	Whitneyville will consult with the Maine Forest Service District Forester when developing new land use regulations pertaining to forest management practices.	Planning Board	As needed
	Whitneyville will consult with Soil and Water Conservation District staff when developing new land use regulations pertaining to agricultural management practices.	Planning Board	As needed
	Whitneyville will amend its land use ordinance to require commercial and subdivision developments in critical rural areas to maintain areas with prime farm soils as open space to the greatest extent practicable.	Planning Board	Short-term
Whitneyville supports farming and forestry and will encourage their ongoing economic viability.	Whitneyville will continue to support the appropriate application of the State’s Tree Growth Tax Law to encourage long-term management of the town’s forest resources.	Selectmen	On-going
	Whitneyville will continue to permit land use activities that support productive agriculture and forestry operations, such as roadside stands, greenhouses, firewood operations, sawmills, log buying yards, and pick-your-own operations.	Planning Board	On-going
	Whitneyville will include agriculture and commercial forestry operations in local or regional economic development plans.	Selectmen	On-going