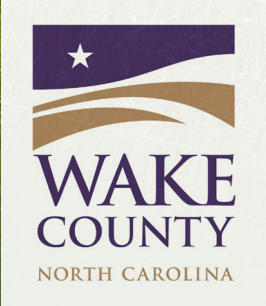


WAKE COUNTY, NC

# FARMLAND PRESERVATION PLAN



# 2026





## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The Wake County Soil & Water Conservation District and Equinox extend sincere appreciation to the members of the Advisory Committee for their time, expertise, and leadership in shaping the Wake County Farmland Preservation Plan.

Their insight and collaboration were essential in developing the content and recommendations ensuring it reflects the needs of farmers and the agricultural community amid growing development pressures. This group's dedication helped create a unified strategy to protect farmland, maintain local food production and the agricultural economy, and sustain agriculture as a vital part of Wake County's future.

This plan was funded by the Wake County American Rescue Plan Act and the North Carolina Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services (NCDA&CS).

### WAKE COUNTY SOIL & WATER CONSERVATION DISTRICT FARMLAND PRESERVATION PLAN TEAM

Teresa Furr – *Director*

Loren Hendrickson – *Farmland Preservation Coordinator*

Winifred Dorer – *Administrative Coordinator*

### FARMLAND PRESERVATION PLAN ADVISORY COMMITTEE MEMBERS

David Adams – *Wake County Planning Board, Local Farmer*

Don Belk – *Friends of Wake Soil & Water Conservation District*

Joanie Bowden – *Wake Agricultural Advisory Board, Local Farmer*

John Burt – *Wake County Farm Bureau President, Local Farmer*

Evan Davis – *North Carolina Agricultural Development & Farmland Preservation Trust Fund*

Beth Pugh Farrell – *Chair of Wake County Soil & Water Conservation District Board of Supervisors, Local Farmer*

Leigh Ann Hammerbacher – *Triangle Land Conservancy*

Patrick Johnson – *Chair of Wake County Agricultural Advisory Board, Local Farmer*

Timothy Maloney – *Wake County Planning*

Terry Nolan – *Wake County Planning*

Sharon Peterson – *Wake County Planning*

Eric Regensburger – *Wake County Agricultural Advisory Board*

### EQUINOX CONSULTANT TEAM



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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

*“Farmland isn’t just open space—it’s our food, our water, our health, and our heritage.”*

– Wake County Public Survey Respondent

Wake County’s Farmland Preservation Plan (FPP) establishes a clear and collaborative strategy to protect agricultural land, maintain local food production and the agricultural economy, and preserve the county’s prime farmland soils amid rapid growth and development pressure. Developed jointly by the Wake County Soil and Water Conservation District (Wake SWCD) and Equinox, a North Carolina based consulting firm, the FPP provides a roadmap for maintaining the economic, environmental, and cultural values of agriculture while positioning farmland preservation as essential to a resilient and prosperous future.

### EXISTING CONDITIONS

Farmland in Wake County is not only utilized as a business enterprise but also a form of land stewardship that provides food security, jobs, open space, clean water, and community identity. However, the American Farmland Trust (AFT) *Farms Under Threat 2040* report identifies Wake as **one of the three most threatened counties in North Carolina for farmland loss**. The report also says that **over the past nine years, the county has lost over 23,000 acres of farmland. That is more land than the total area of Knightdale and Fuquay-Varina combined.**

Due to these existing realities, the Wake County government, specifically Wake SWCD, has taken proactive measures to protect agricultural lands and become a statewide leader in farmland preservation, demonstrating how proactive land-use policy and strategic partnerships can protect working lands in one of **North Carolina’s fastest-growing counties.**

The most significant investment in Wake County’s farmland preservation history came in 2023, when the Board of Commissioners voted to dedicate annual rollback tax revenues from the Present Use Value (PUV) Program, which accumulate with deferred taxes paid when a landowner leaves the program, to fund permanent agricultural conservation easements. **In just two years, this innovative financing mechanism has generated over \$8 million in local funding, which Wake SWCD has leveraged to secure an additional \$6 million in federal and state grants—a total of roughly \$14 million dedicated to protecting farmland.**

Wake County joins a growing number of North Carolina counties that recognize the long-term benefits of farmland protection. Having an adopted farmland preservation plan strengthens the County’s eligibility for additional funding resources for conservation easements, farmland protection projects, and agricultural economic development initiatives.

### KEY ENGAGEMENT FINDINGS

Extensive engagement with landowners and residents revealed overwhelming support for farmland protection and a deep concern about development pressure. Two complementary surveys—the Landowner Survey and the Public Survey—captured the perspectives of more than 1,000 individuals across Wake County.

- Of 371 landowner respondents, 89% reported being contacted recently about selling their land for development, underscoring the urgency of policy action to support those wishing to keep their land in agriculture.
- Of 679 public respondents, 96% said that preserving farmland, forests, and agricultural operations in Wake County is critical to the County’s future.

These findings demonstrate that both landowners and residents view farmland as a shared public value essential to local identity and rural heritage, food system security, ecosystem services, and recognize farmland is a vital contributor to the local, regional, and state economy.



## KEY FOCUS AREAS & RECOMMENDATIONS

The Plan's best practices and policy recommendations are organized into four major focus areas that together create a comprehensive framework for farmland protection and agricultural sustainability in Wake County:

### Farm-Friendly Land-Use Policies

Ensure that land-use decisions and growth areas protect priority farmland and guide development toward existing centers with public infrastructure. Strategies may include agricultural zoning as voluntary options for property owners, promoting conservation subdivision design, broadening permissible agricultural uses, and aligning PlanWake, OneWater, and municipal comprehensive plans to reduce development pressure on productive soils and contiguous tracts of farm and working lands.

*Recommendations include:*

- Address concerns from extraterritorial jurisdiction (ETJ) and future land use by conducting a future land-use overlay audit;
- Explore agricultural compatibility buffers adjacent to permanent farmland operations;
- Consider creating an agricultural zoning district as a voluntary option for property owners;
- Integrate farmland protection into transportation planning by creating a stakeholder working group;
- Evaluate existing Open Space Subdivision Ordinance.

### Farm Ownership Support

Support farm viability and generational continuity by streamlining permitting, expanding access to land, capital, and equipment, allowing a range of housing types on farmland, incentivizing beneficial agricultural practices, and offering programs for succession planning and sustainable agricultural practices.

*Recommendations include:*

- Allow flexible subdivision for family and estate needs;
- Support and promote agritourism by revising regulatory processes that streamline approvals;
- Offer counseling and education on estate planning;
- Support incubator and accelerator farms.

### Agricultural Protection Funds

Secure resources to support a dedicated farmland preservation fund. Leverage state, federal, and philanthropic resources to permanently protect strategic parcels and strengthen partnerships. Collaboration with municipalities, land trusts such as the Triangle Land Conservancy, and other nonprofit partners will help build capacity and maximize conservation impact.

*Recommendations include:*

- Continue the success of Wake County's PUV rollback funding;
- Explore an endowment fund for farmland preservation;
- Expand direct funding mechanisms for operational farms;
- Add staffing capacity to the Wake County Farmland Preservation Program;
- Support conservation partnership organizations;
- Advocate for state and federal recognition of historic farmland;
- Consider a farmland protection bond referendum.

### Environmental, Economic, & Social Benefits of Farmland

Recognize farmland as critical infrastructure that supports ecosystem services, water quality, community health, and offsets expenses from residential development. Use data-driven analysis, mapping and tracking of land use changes, and public education to elevate farmland's role in wildlife connectivity, climate resilience, food security, cultural preservation, and fiscal sustainability.

*Recommendations include:*

- Produce an Annual State of Farmland report;
- Leverage the Farmland Preservation Plan as a countywide framework;
- Recognize and celebrate heritage, legacy, and emerging farm enterprises;
- Create a coordinated data and engagement platform;
- Conduct an ecosystem services valuation study for farm and working lands.

## TAKING ACTION

Wake County should use the next three years to build countywide and municipal consensus around the shared value of agricultural lands. By facilitating a series of stakeholder roundtables and workshops, community leaders can have an opportunity to come together, collaborate, and align on how growth, infrastructure, and farmland preservation can coexist through coordinated, data-driven planning.

By using data and key messaging on the environmental, economic, and social values and benefits of farmland, Wake County can reinforce that farmland is essential infrastructure that supports local food systems, prime soils, water quality, resilience to changing climates, habitat integration, and cultural heritage. Through collaborative mapping, shared data platforms, integrated County and municipal planning, and targeted investment, stakeholders can work collectively toward farmland protection that balances community and economic development and builds a prosperous future.

*“It is very important to maintain a sufficient amount of farmland and open space that is not sold for commercial and residential development. Many of our current problems associated with extreme weather events, such as large amounts of rain in a short period of time, is the current inability of the infrastructure to deal with intense rain events that endanger lives and property.”*

— Public Survey Respondent

### KEY ACRONYMS IN THIS PLAN

**ACE** — Agricultural Conservation Easement

**ADFPTF** — Agricultural Development and Farmland Preservation Trust Fund

**AFT** — American Farmland Trust

**AGZ** — Agricultural Growth Zone

**APA** — Agricultural Priority Areas

**COCS** — Cost of Community Services

**CSA** — Community-Supported Agriculture

**EVAD** — Enhanced Voluntary Agricultural District

**ETJ** — Extraterritorial Jurisdiction

**FPP** — Farmland Preservation Plan  
(*this document*)

**GIS** — Geographic Information System (*mapping*)

**NCDA&CS** — NC Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services

**PACE** — Purchase of Agricultural Conservation Easement

**PDR** — Purchase of Development Rights

**PUV** — Present Use Value

**SSURGO** — Soil Survey Geographic Database

**SWCD** — Soil and Water Conservation District

**TLC** — Triangle Land Conservancy

**VAD** — Voluntary Agricultural District

**USDA NRCS** — United States Department of Agriculture Natural Resource Conservation Service



## INTRODUCTION

*“We cannot underestimate the collective voice of farmers; these are the only ones left with that voice”*

— *Farmland Preservation Plan Advisory Committee Member*

This Farmland Preservation Plan (FPP) for Wake County was developed to guide the County and its partners in protecting agricultural resources, supporting the viability of farming, and preserving the rural landscapes that have generationally defined the region’s identity. The plan reflects a shared commitment among the Wake Soil and Water Conservation District (Wake SWCD), County planning departments, local municipalities, farmers, and community partners to sustain working lands and farming legacy, ensure food security, and safeguard natural and cultural heritage for future generations.

Wake SWCD, along with consulting firm Equinox, led the planning process with the understanding that a countywide FPP provides not only a strategic framework for local decision-making but also tangible benefits for

implementation. Counties with current, state-approved plans are eligible for reduced match requirements through the North Carolina Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services’ (NCDA&CS) Agricultural Development and Farmland Preservation Trust Fund (ADFPTF), which supports conservation easements, programs that reduce farmland loss, and projects that enhance the economic viability of farming and agritourism.

For the purposes of this Plan, “agriculture” includes forestry and horticulture and is defined as the practice of cultivating land, growing crops, raising livestock, and managing forests.

*“Once this farmland is gone, it will never come back. The County needs to decide right now if farming still matters here.”*

— *Wake County Landowner Survey Respondent*

## PLANNING PROCESS AND ADVISORY COMMITTEE

At the onset of the project, the Wake County SWCD convened an FPP Advisory Committee composed of representatives from the County's Agricultural Advisory Board, County planning and environmental staff, local conservation nonprofits such as the Triangle Land Conservancy (TLC), and community organizations like the Capital Area Food Network. The Advisory Committee played a central role in shaping the plan's direction, reviewing data, and providing ongoing feedback throughout the process. Early in the project, the FPP Advisory Committee developed a **Vision and Goals** statement to guide the planning effort and establish shared priorities. This collaborative visioning process emphasized the need for a countywide, actionable strategy that aligns land-use planning, farmland protection, and economic development.

## IMPORTANT THEMES THAT EMERGED FOR THE ADVISORY COMMITTEE

- Identify where development pressure is infringing on farmland by overlaying land-use projections and existing farmland data.
- Ensure an actionable and implementable strategy rooted in clear policy direction and realistic steps.
- Appreciate and market the value of agriculture as part of the county's economy and identity.
- Elevate education and stewardship of farmland.
- Use data-based, economic evidence to communicate the fiscal and community benefits of preserving farmland.
- Preserve the county's farming legacy and natural and rural heritage.
- Streamline and improve the conservation easement process.
- Build a cohesive strategy across county and municipal boundaries.
- Reinforce the connection between farmland preservation and food security.

## VISION FOR WAKE COUNTY

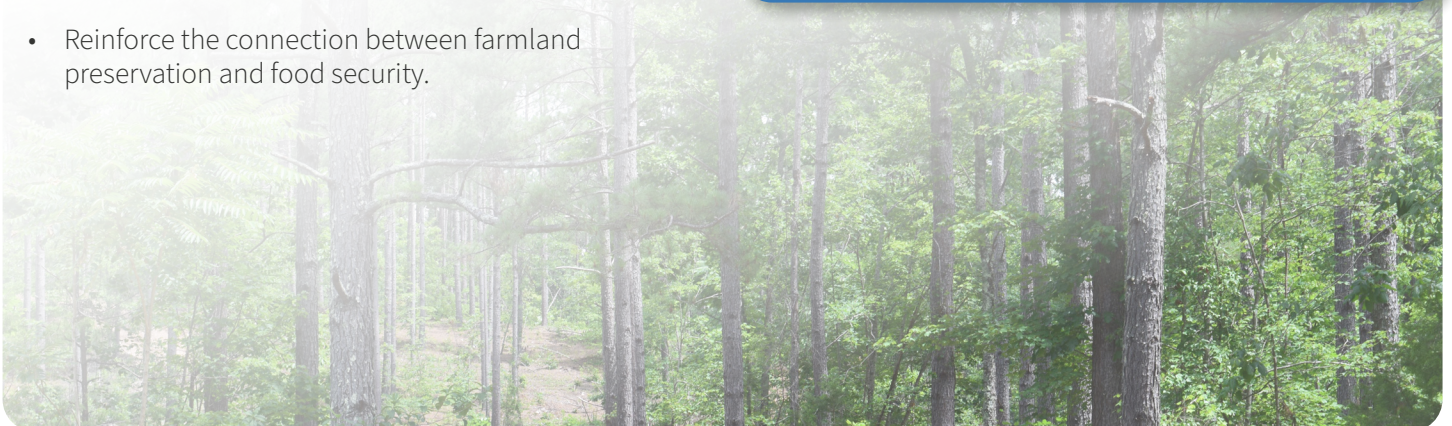
The remaining farmland in Wake County is prioritized now and for generations to come.

## VISION FOR THE PLAN

The Wake County Farmland Preservation Plan identifies actions the County can take to protect local farmers and agricultural resources – farms, working lands and forests, prime soils, and other natural resources – to ensure sustainable business operations and preserve rural character.

## GOALS

- Highlight the existing conditions of farmland in Wake County.
- Analyze county and municipal land-use patterns and identify priority areas for long-term farmland and rural preservation.
- Identify which planning tools and funding sources are best suited to advance farmland preservation, preserve rural character, and strengthen the local agricultural economy.
- Provide policy recommendations that protect agricultural resources and support farmers in long-term agricultural planning.
- Educate on social, environmental, and economic values of farmland and help inspire future generations of farmers.
- Foster a cohesive message with municipal partners and other stakeholders on the value of farmland preservation.
- Sustain and increase funding for farmland protection.



## RESEARCH AND ASSESSMENT

Following the establishment of the FPP Advisory Committee, the project team launched a research and data collection phase. This effort assessed the existing conditions of farmland in the county, analyzing trends such as farmland loss, acres under Present Use Valuation (PUV), and areas already in conservation. The team reviewed past plans and policy documents, including the 2006 Consolidated Open Space Plan, the 2013 Agricultural Economic Development Plan, PLANWake (2023), and OneWater Plan (2026). See **Summary of Existing Plans & Policies** in Appendix for more information on these plans.

The team also analyzed countywide Geographic Information System (GIS) datasets, agricultural census data, and conservation easement inventories. Mapping layers were compiled to visualize agricultural soils, Voluntary and Enhanced Voluntary Agricultural Districts (VAD and EVAD), lands in conservation, and the spatial overlap between active farms and areas of development pressure and encroachment. Together, these datasets provided a foundation for prioritizing preservation efforts and identifying the most at-risk farmland.

## COMMUNITY AND STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT

Engagement played a central role throughout the planning process. In addition to the FPP Advisory Committee's ongoing guidance, the project team worked with the Wake SWCD to distribute a landowner survey to farms enrolled in PUV, conduct a public survey open to all residents, and hold a stakeholder workshop in July 2025. These outreach methods helped identify community priorities, opportunities for collaboration, and challenges facing local farmers. The team also conducted eight in-person farmer interviews, offering valuable insight into the lived experiences of Wake County's agricultural community—their economic realities, land management challenges, and aspirations for the future. Together, these engagement methods ensured that the FPP reflects a diversity of voices and is grounded in experience.

## PLAN STRUCTURE AND OUTCOMES

The FPP synthesizes data, community perspectives, and policy analysis into a cohesive framework for farmland protection and agricultural vitality. The document includes an Executive Summary, Data Collection and Assessment, Stakeholder Findings, and Policy and Funding Strategies that align with the County's broader planning efforts, including PLANWake and the OneWater Plan. The FPP culminates in a set of recommendations and measurable actions designed to help Wake County sustain agricultural lands, strengthen local food systems, and build a more resilient farming legacy, rural economy, and heritage for generations to come.

## HISTORY OF THE WAKE COUNTY FARMLAND PRESERVATION PROGRAM

In October 1989, Wake County adopted its original Farmland Preservation Program. The voluntary program established criteria for designating Agricultural Priority Areas (APA), based primarily on protecting the most productive soils. Owners of agricultural land within the APAs were eligible to apply for purchase of development rights (PDR).

This older model for the program transitioned first to the Voluntary Agricultural District Program, then later the re-branded to the Farmland Preservation Program in 2023. The current **goals** of the program are:

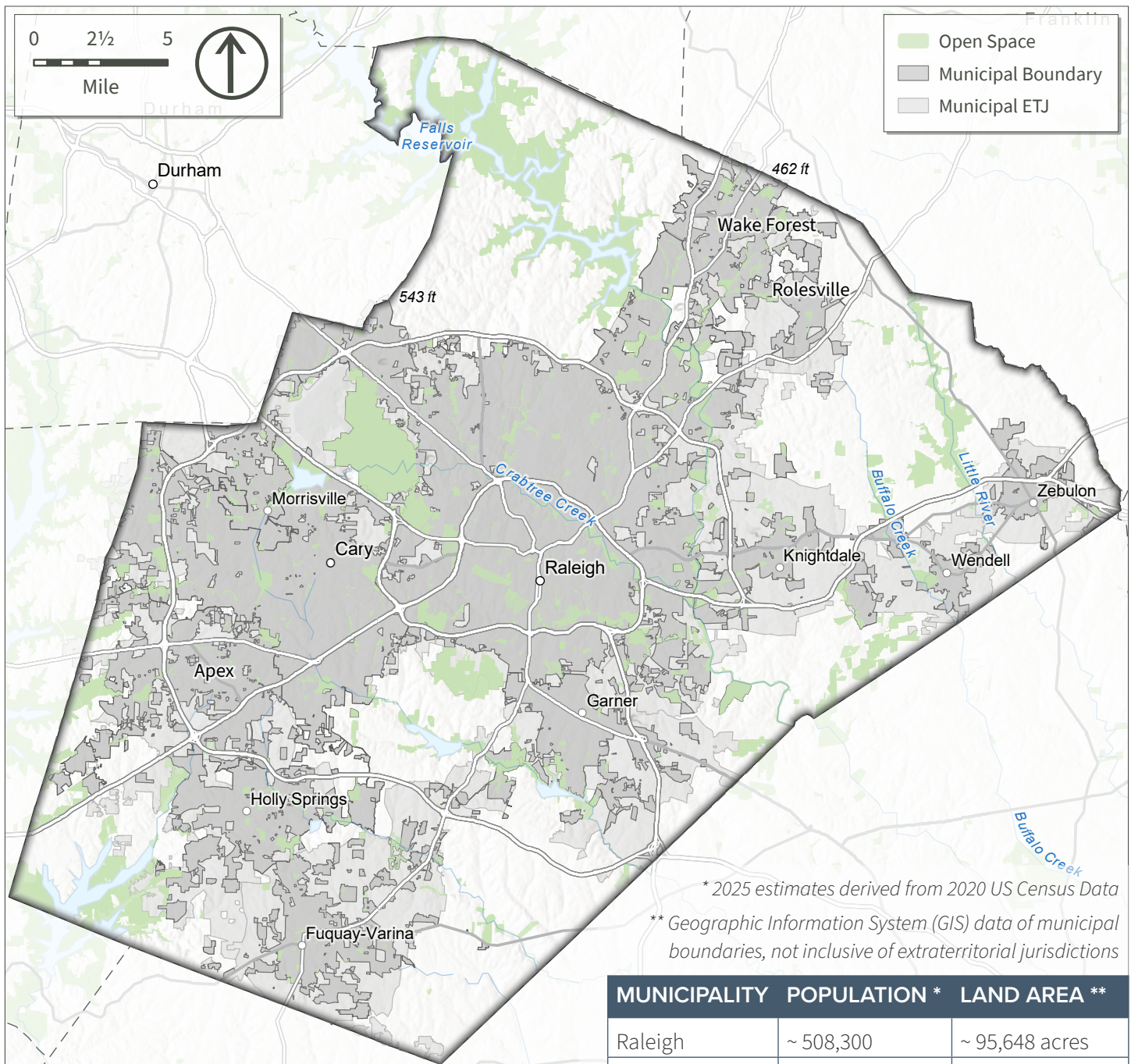
- Promote agricultural values and the general welfare of Wake County.
- Promote agriculture as an integral part of the county's economy.
- Increase identity and pride in the agricultural community and its way of life.
- Encourage the economic and financial health of agriculture, horticulture, and forestry.
- Reduce land-use conflicts between agriculture and other land uses.
- Place permanent protections on agricultural land to preserve precious resources for future generations.

The statewide NC Farmland Preservation Enabling Act [N.C.G.S. § 106-735 et seq. (1986)] suggests that a county-wide farmland protection plan be formulated with the assistance of an agricultural advisory board. Counties that have completed plans are subject to reduced match requirements to receive state funds allocated on a competitive grant basis by the ADFPTF. Such funds can be used to purchase conservation easements, implement new projects that will reduce loss of farmland, and support projects that increase the economic viability of farming in a county.

The Wake County Board of Commissioners appoints Agricultural Advisory Board Members to advise them on issues affecting the local farm community. The Agricultural Advisory Board reviews and approves program applications and makes recommendations on agricultural conservation easement purchases.



# DATA COLLECTION, RESEARCH, & ASSESSMENT



\* 2025 estimates derived from 2020 US Census Data  
 \*\* Geographic Information System (GIS) data of municipal boundaries, not inclusive of extraterritorial jurisdictions

## MUNICIPAL STATISTICS

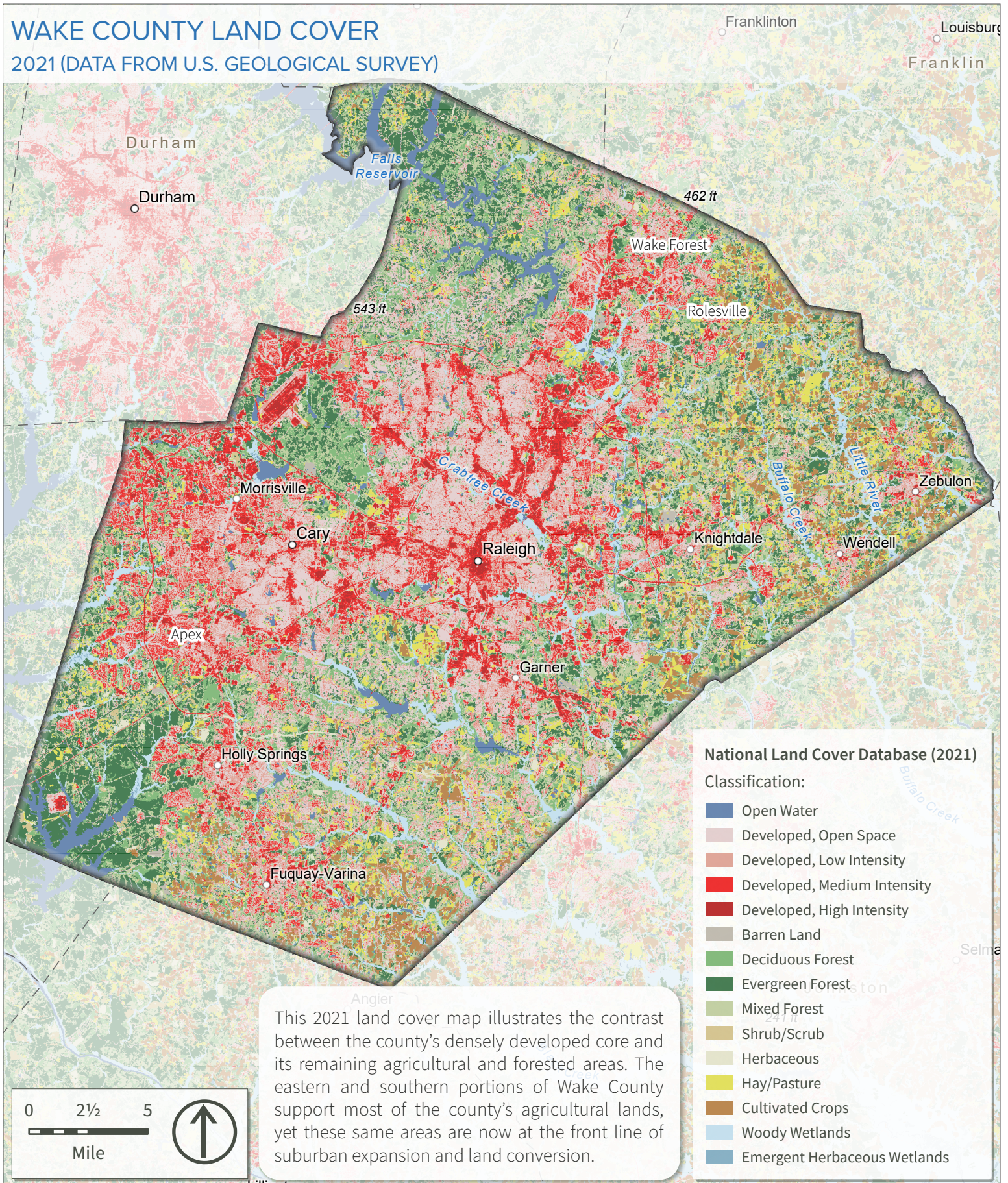
Wake County contains approximately 538,560 acres of land, or 842 square miles. There are 12 municipalities within the county, shown in the table to the right with their approximated populations and land areas.

Although this table estimates the area of incorporated land, it does not include land in the municipal extraterritorial jurisdictions (ETJs). Therefore, these acreages are an underrepresentation of how much land may be annexed into the municipalities in the next few years as they expand. These expansions are a reflection of rising populations. As one example, **Raleigh has added tens of thousands of residents since 2020** (US Census).

MUNICIPALITY	POPULATION *	LAND AREA **
Raleigh	~ 508,300	~ 95,648 acres
Cary	~ 180,000	~ 38,400 acres
Apex	~ 72,200	~ 16,038 acres
Wake Forest	~ 54,300	~ 12,493 acres
Holly Springs	~ 46,300	~ 9,664 acres
Fuquay-Varina	~ 36,700	~ 11,936 acres
Garner	~ 31,000	~ 9,408 acres
Morrisville	~ 29,600	~ 5,651 acres
Knightdale	~ 19,400	~ 9,600 acres
Rolesville	~ 9,500	~ 3,891 acres
Wendell	~ 9,793	~ 4,448 acres
Zebulon	~ 6,903	~ 3,898 acres

# WAKE COUNTY LAND COVER

2021 (DATA FROM U.S. GEOLOGICAL SURVEY)



## WAKE COUNTY LAND COVER

Wake County's landscape today reflects the rapid urbanization of one of the fastest-growing counties in the United States. Land cover is a mosaic of urban development, agricultural working lands, and remaining forested and natural areas, with distinct spatial patterns shaped by growth pressures and rural heritage.

### URBAN AND DEVELOPED USES

As of 2021, the most concentrated development is located in and around Raleigh and the interconnected municipalities of Cary, Apex, Morrisville, and Garner. These areas display extensive **medium- and high-intensity development**, including residential neighborhoods, commercial centers, employment districts, and transportation corridors. Suburban growth extends outward along major highway corridors, supporting continued conversion of historically rural lands to subdivisions and mixed-use development.

**Low-intensity and open-space development** surrounds these core areas, indicating active residential expansion and landscape fragmentation along the rural-urban edge.

### AGRICULTURAL WORKING LANDS

In contrast, the eastern and southern portions of the county—particularly around Wendell, Zebulon, Rolesville, Knightdale, Fuquay-Varina, and the county line with Johnston and Franklin Counties—retain cultivated crops and hay/pasturelands as their most prevalent type of land cover. These areas represent the county's primary remaining agricultural land base.

However, these **rural working lands are highly intermixed with encroaching residential development**, reflecting increasing pressure from subdivision conversion and loss of contiguous farm blocks.

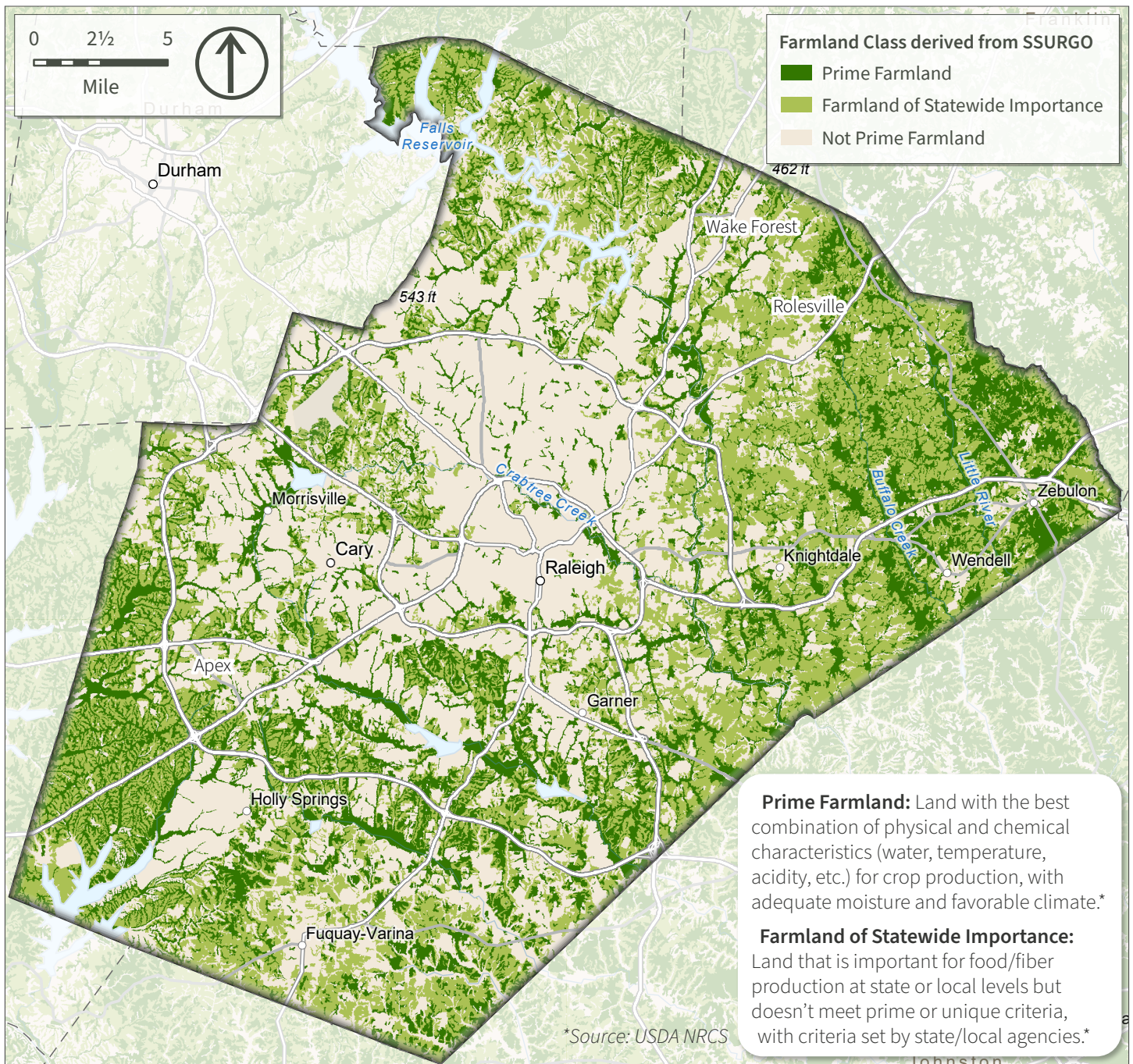
## FORESTS AND NATURAL AREAS

Significant forest cover remains in the northwestern and southeastern regions of the county, as well as along riparian corridors such as the Little River, Neuse River, and Crabtree Creek. These forests include combinations of mixed, evergreen, and deciduous cover, which provide wildlife habitat, water quality benefits, flood mitigation, and carbon storage capacity. Forests, both wild and managed forestry lands, compose one of the main land cover types in the drinking water supply watersheds of Falls and Jordan Lake.

### KEY TAKEAWAYS FOR FARMLAND PRESERVATION

- **Development pressure is strongest along the edges of smaller towns that were historically rural**, where agricultural fields are transitioning most rapidly to subdivisions.
- **Wake's remaining farms are clustered primarily in the eastern and southern regions of the county**, where development is projected to expand next, heightening urgency for farmland preservation action.
- **Forested and riparian areas form natural green infrastructure corridors** that can complement agricultural conservation efforts by reinforcing landscape connectivity.
- **Land fragmentation**, rather than complete loss, **is now the largest threat**, creating operational challenges for farmers, such as dangerous conditions to move farm equipment on public roads, and removing efficiency/economies of scale.





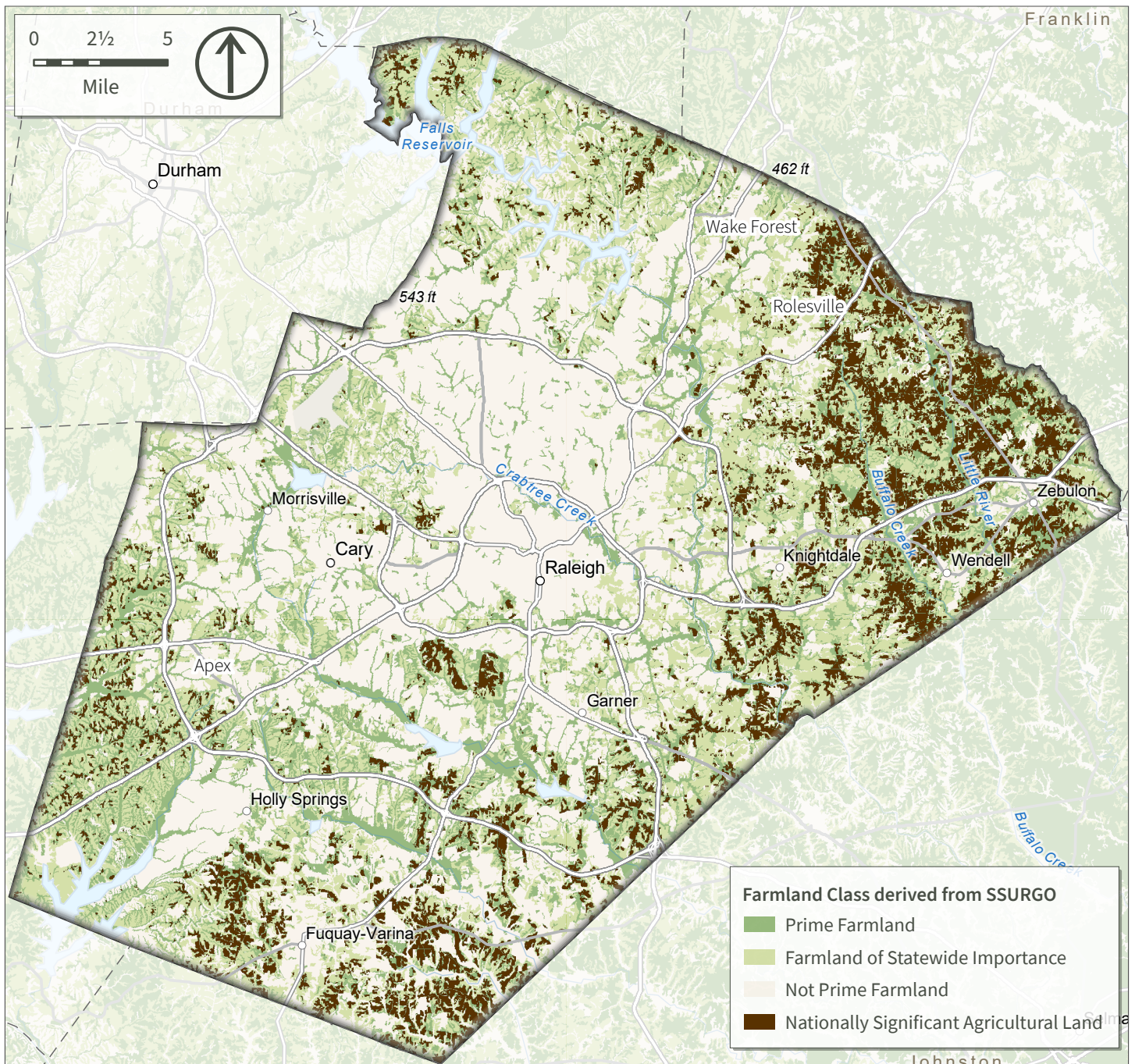
## WAKE COUNTY SOILS

The Farmland Protection Policy Act, part of the 1981 Federal Farm Bill, is intended to limit federal activities that contribute to the unnecessary conversion of farmland to other uses. The law applies to construction projects funded by the federal government such as highways, airports, and dams, and to the management of federal lands.

As part of the implementation of this law, the United States Department of Agriculture Natural Resources Conservation Service (USDA NRCS) identifies high quality agricultural soils as prime farmland, unique farmland, or farmland of statewide or local importance.

The classification is based on soils data from the USDA NRCS **Soil Survey Geographic Database (SSURGO)** which contains information about soil as collected by the National Cooperative Soil Survey over the course of a century. State and local farmland preservation policies use this federal data as a basis for their programs, such as agricultural districts and conservation easements.

The map above defines and shows where prime farmland and farmland of statewide importance exist through Wake County, based on the NRCS classification. To assess the suitability of agricultural land for long-term cultivation and food production, American Farmland Trust's (AFT) **Farms Under Threat** report includes an analysis of pro-



ductivity, versatility, and resiliency of land across the country. The three factors AFT used for this analysis are: 1) soil suitability, 2) crop type and growing season length, and 3) land cover/use type.

AFT’s analysis mapped **Nationally Significant Agricultural Land**, the land best suited for long-term, intensive crop production. According to AFT, “This land—the nation’s most productive, versatile, and resilient—can produce the highest yields of crops and livestock with the least environmental impacts. This is the land Americans will rely on to keep growing food even as the warming climate makes it harder to farm and the growing global population puts ever higher demands on agriculture.”

The map above shows in brown where Nationally Significant Agricultural Land is found throughout Wake County. Understanding the location of this land may help inform priorities for farmland preservation as well as the County’s goal to protect 30% of the County’s land area as permanently protected open space. This data is already driving conservation efforts across the nation.

According to AFT models, across the country, Nationally Significant land is 57% more likely to be converted by 2040 than the rest of the agricultural land. In Wake County, there is significant overlap between development pressure and high-quality land, as modeled by the *Farms Under Threat 2040* development scenarios on the next few pages.

## WAKE COUNTY LAND USE

Beginning in the 1960s and accelerating through the 1990s and 2000s, Wake County and the surrounding Piedmont region experienced significant population growth. Much of this growth was driven by the expansion of higher education institutions and the emergence of research and technology employment centers, particularly the creation of Research Triangle Park. As the region attracted new residents and businesses, development expanded outward from Raleigh and nearby municipalities. New subdivisions, commercial centers, and road networks were built along major transportation corridors and in areas with access to utilities and public services.

As summarized in the Appendix: **Summary of Existing Plans & Policies**, the American Farmland Trust (AFT) and USDA NRCS *Farms Under Threat 2040: Choosing an Abundant Future* report uses a set of development scenarios to model how land could be converted through 2040. Most areas throughout the United States are modeled under three scenarios. However, ten specific metropolitan regions—including the Raleigh-Durham-Cary metropolitan area—were also analyzed under a fourth scenario: the “Farmland Protection” scenario.

AFT selected these ten metropolitan areas because they represent:

- Areas with rapid development pressure.
- Regions where urban and rural land uses are closely connected.
- Places where strategic, coordinated farmland preservation programs are most needed and most likely to succeed.
- Areas where AFT is actively working to create or strengthen the **purchase of agricultural conservation easement** programs.

### PURCHASE OF AGRICULTURAL CONSERVATION EASEMENT (PACE) PROGRAMS

These programs pay farmers for the development rights on their land, permanently protecting the land from farmland conversion through development and keeping the land available for agriculture.

Wake SWCD implements its own PACE Program through the County’s Farmland Preservation Ordinance as well as works with federal, state, and non-profit partners to pay landowners for agricultural conservation easements.

### ABOUT LAND USE / LAND COVER DATA

The *Farms Under Threat* future development projections rely on 2016 land use and land cover data derived from the National Land Cover Database (NLCD), which provides a standardized, nationwide classification of how land is being used and what physical features are present on the ground. This data is shown for Wake County on the following page.

Differing from standard “land cover” data (i.e. forest, cultivated crops, developed areas), this dataset also incorporates “land use” characteristics—meaning it distinguishes how land is being actively managed and occupied. The data differentiates between working agricultural lands, developed residential or commercial areas, forests, and other natural lands.

The rates and patterns of conversion documented from 2001 to 2016 were used to train the model’s projections of future development from 2016 to 2040.

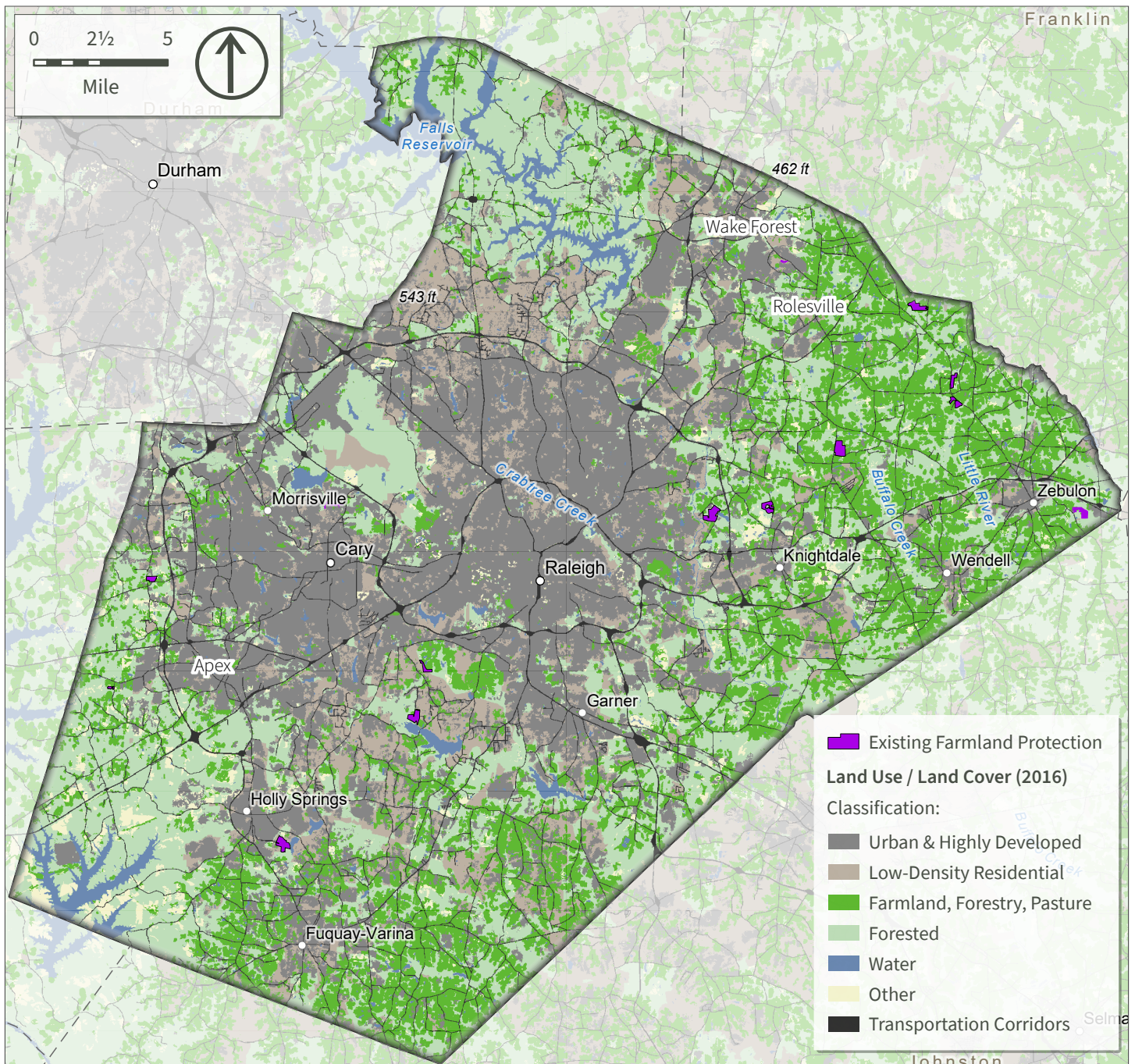
In the Raleigh-Durham-Cary region, which includes all of Wake County and eight neighboring counties, the Farmland Protection scenario models the impact of significantly increasing permanent farmland protection alongside smart-growth planning strategies. In other words, it projects what the future could look like if counties and municipalities take stronger action to preserve farmland now.

To model these scenarios, AFT used the **2016 Land Use / Land Cover dataset** as the baseline. This dataset was selected by AFT to be used in the modeling because:

- It is consistent and standardized nationwide.
- It distinguishes agricultural lands from developed and natural land types.
- It supports land-use forecasting, not just land-cover mapping (whereas the 2021 dataset is more current but does not differentiate land use as precisely).

This allows the model to simulate how different policies—such as farmland preservation funding, zoning regulations, utility service boundaries, and growth management systems—could influence patterns of land conversion over time.

The projections modeled development scenarios from 2016 to 2040. The projections build on past rates and patterns of agricultural land conversion documented by AFT, covering 2001-2016.



## LAND-USE PROJECTIONS

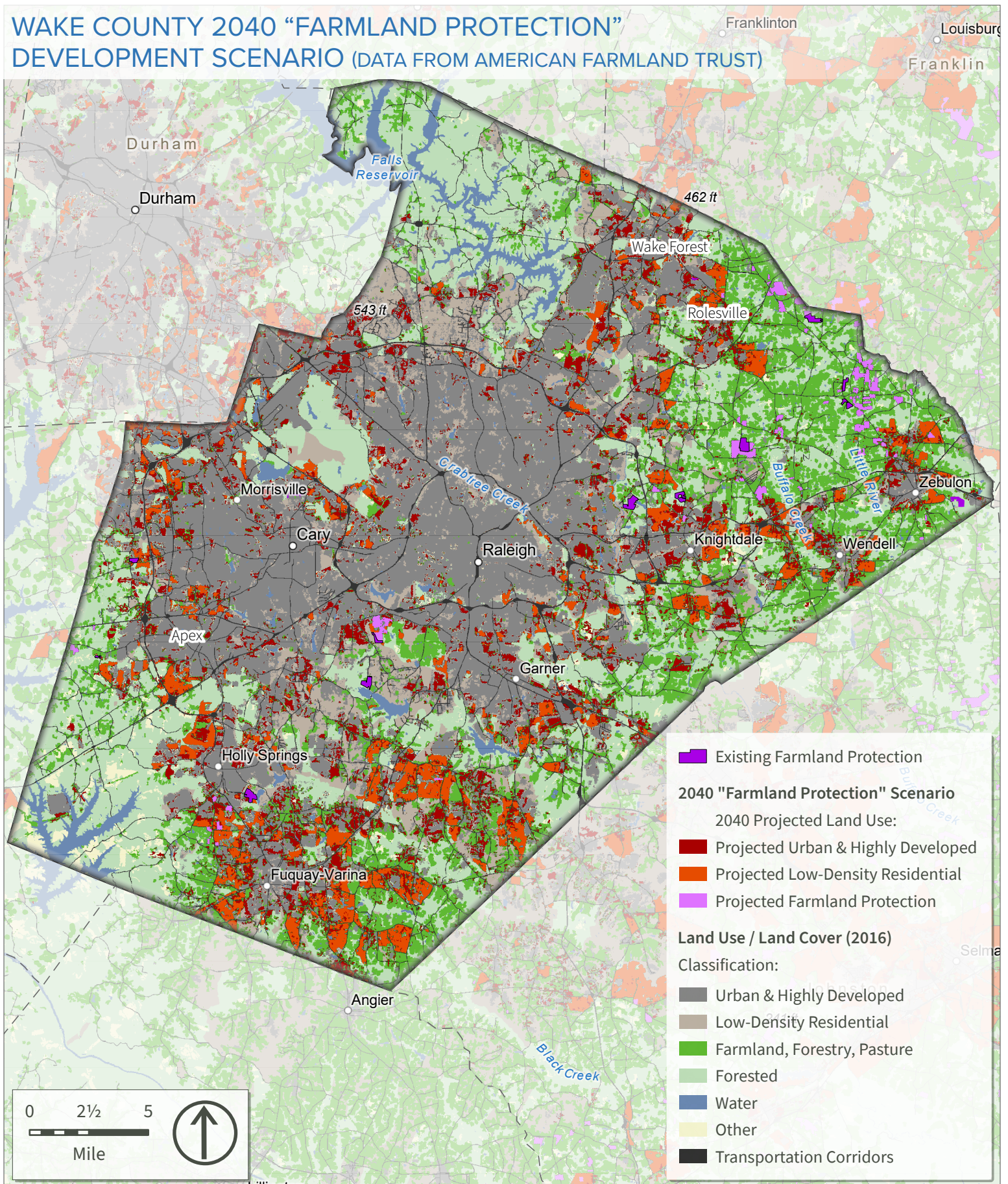
The map above displays the baseline data used in the projections by AFT. The map shown on the next page identifies projected conversion of the 2016 lands to two main land use types:

- **Urban and highly developed** land use includes commercial, industrial, and moderate-to-high density residential areas.
- **Low-density residential** land use includes scattered subdivisions and large-lot housing, which fragment the agricultural land base and limit production.

The other classifications shown on these two maps distinguish natural “Forested” land from land that has been placed into farm/horticulture, forestry, or pasture/grazing uses (“Farmland, Forestry, Pasture”), as well as waterbodies, transportation corridors, and open space impacted by human activity (“Other”).

The “Existing Farmland Protection” parcels shown on the maps represent permanent conservation easements that AFT has compiled nationwide from existing datasets that, at least in part, protect agricultural lands. While these easements may not represent a complete inventory of conserved farmland in the county, these specific easements were used to model AFT’s “Farmland Protection” scenario shown in the map on the next page.

# WAKE COUNTY 2040 "FARMLAND PROTECTION" DEVELOPMENT SCENARIO (DATA FROM AMERICAN FARMLAND TRUST)



## “FARMLAND PROTECTION” LAND-USE SCENARIO

The “Farmland Protection” development scenario from the *Farms Under Threat 2040* report is illustrated for Wake County on the prior page. Note that this map is not intended to predict the future or to show how development should occur. Instead, it illustrates a potential future scenario based on possible land-use planning decisions. The results of this modeled projection is only as accurate as the nationwide datasets and should not be used for specific zoning ordinances in precise locations.

This scenario can, however, offer a picture of what Wake County could look like in 2040 **if intentional policies and growth management practices are put in place** to direct development toward existing built areas and **away from productive agricultural land**. The scenario does not assume stopping growth; rather, it **assumes “smarter” growth**, emphasizing compact, infill, and corridor-based development patterns rather than outward expansion into rural areas. Regarding the policies that can help achieve this projection, they will need to be made with close coordination from the municipalities within the county, and are explored later in this plan.

The primary observations regarding the “Farmland Protection” scenario that can be made from this map are:

### 1. Development is concentrated inside and around municipal centers.

This reflects a **shift toward infill, redevelopment, and vertical growth** rather than outward sprawl. The scenario assumes that new jobs, housing, and services are **accommodated where infrastructure already exists** — reducing pressure on rural landscapes.

### 2. Low-Density Residential expansion is reduced and more directed than present-day development patterns.

The projected Low-Density Residential areas are contained in areas primarily adjacent to current municipal limits and transportation corridors, rather than sprawling in patterns projected in the “Business As Usual” and “Run-away Sprawl” scenarios. This reflects a pattern where:

- Development still occurs in suburban and edge-area housing markets.
- Municipal **expansion is well-planned and buffered** to reduce fragmentation of farmland.
- The most productive farmland areas are **not the first areas targeted for new subdivisions**.

### 3. Large, connected agricultural and forestry blocks are retained.

The map highlights key farmland protection priority areas, especially in:

- **Eastern Wake County** (areas surrounding Wendell, Zebulon, Rolesville)
- **Southern and Southeastern Wake** (McGee’s Crossroads, areas along Johnston County line)
- **Northern Wake County / Falls Lake watershed region**

These areas remain in cultivated agricultural, pasture, or working forest uses, forming:

- Large, unfragmented rural landscapes;
- Ecologically significant habitat and watershed buffers;
- Strong agricultural production zones.

Maintaining connected rural land is crucial because:

- Agriculture becomes economically inefficient when fragmented;
- Forest and stream networks require landscape continuity to function;
- Rural identity and heritage depend on visible landscape scale, not isolated pockets.

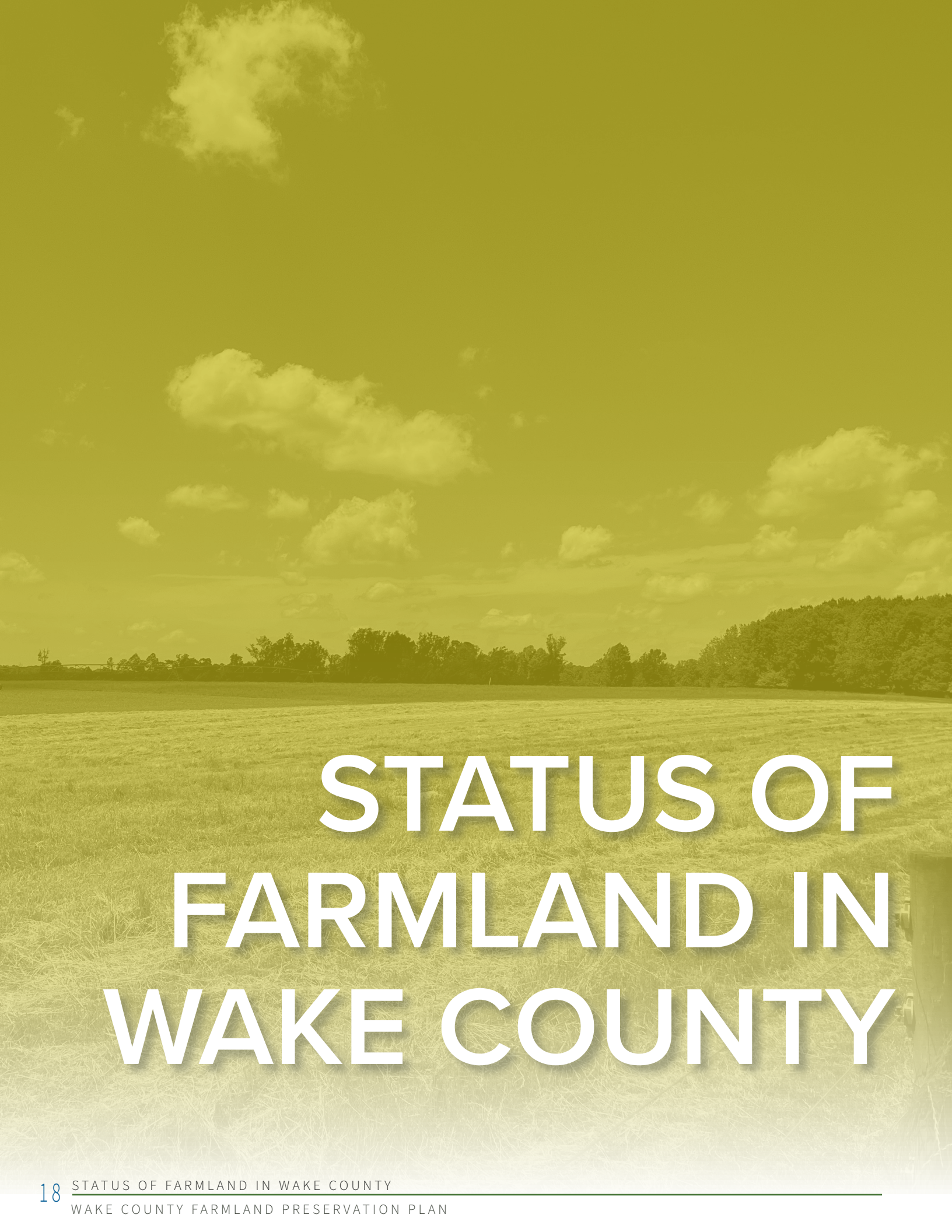
### 4. Conservation and farmland protection are strategically aligned with water quality.

The map shows several protected or priority farmland areas aligning with:

- Riparian corridors (Little River, Buffalo Creek, Crabtree Creek)
- Falls Lake watershed buffers

This scenario reinforces **farmland protection as a water quality strategy** — an especially important point for Wake County’s drinking water supply planning.

The “Farmland Protection” scenario demonstrates that Wake County can continue to grow and prosper while still safeguarding its agricultural lands — if growth is directed toward existing urban areas and supported by deliberate farmland conservation tools. Without such policies, the County is more likely to experience continued outward expansion of development and farmland conversion/loss of productive farmland.



# STATUS OF FARMLAND IN WAKE COUNTY

## CONTEXT

*“As greenspaces are disappearing in Wake County at a rapid pace, we need the respite of farmland and forests for multiple reasons: local agriculture, preservation of historical culture, tree canopy, and environmental protection. Farming is our heritage.”*

— Public Survey Respondent

### HISTORICAL CONTEXT OF AGRICULTURE IN NORTH CAROLINA & WAKE COUNTY

Wake County’s agricultural heritage was built on a legacy of tobacco farming, which provided subsistence, while shaping rural life, local economies, and cultural identity for more than a century. In the 1800s, North Carolina farmers pioneered the production of “flue-cured” tobacco, a golden crop that transformed the Piedmont’s landscape and economy. Eastern Wake towns like Wendell, Zebulon, and Rolesville grew around tobacco markets, their warehouses and auction houses serving as seasonal hubs of commerce and community life. This agricultural system was deeply intertwined with the labor of enslaved people and, later, tenant farmers. By the early twentieth century, Wake County was also home to a significant number of Black-owned farms many of which contributed substantially to the local economy and rural landscape, even as much of that land has since been lost or remains vulnerable to development pressures today.

The industry’s success fueled investments in schools, churches, and agricultural research, particularly through NC Cooperative Extension, embedding innovation into the region’s farming culture and heritage.

The end of the federal tobacco quota system in 2004 marked a turning point. **Federal tobacco buyout payments** helped many family farms transition into new crops, forestry, agritourism, and direct-to-consumer markets. Other family farms transitioned out of agriculture as the state’s economy shifted toward technology, research, and education driven by the rise of the Research Triangle Park and expanding urban centers.

### TOP INDUSTRIES IN NORTH CAROLINA \*

- Agriculture and Agribusiness
- Manufacturing
- Real Estate, Rental, Leasing
- Finance, Insurance
- Professional, Scientific, Technical Services

**Key Insight:** Agriculture remains foundational in both scale and employment, responsible for roughly one in six jobs statewide.

\* North Carolina Department of Commerce, 2025

\* NC State University, 2024

### THE FEDERAL TOBACCO QUOTA SYSTEM AND BUYOUT PROGRAM

#### Background:

The federal tobacco quota system, established in 1938, was a US government program that regulated how much tobacco farmers could grow and sell each year. Through marketing quotas and acreage allotments, it aimed to balance supply with demand, stabilize prices, and ensure a reliable income for farmers.

#### Transition to a Free Market:

In 2004, the Fair and Equitable Tobacco Reform Act repealed the quota system, ending it for the 2005 crop year. To ease this transition, the Tobacco Transition Payment Program, funded by the tobacco industry and commonly known as the “tobacco buyout,” provided ten years (2005–2014) of federal payments to quota owners and producers to help them transition to alternative crops or uses.



## TOP AGRICULTURAL PRODUCTS IN NORTH CAROLINA & RANK IN UNITED STATES\*

- #1 Producer of Sweet Potatoes
- #1 Producer of Tobacco
- #1 Producer of Poultry and Eggs
- #2 Producer of Turkeys
- #2 Producer of Trout
- #3 Producer of Cucumbers
- #3 Producer of Peanuts
- #3 Producer of Hogs and Pigs

These products reflect North Carolina's agricultural diversity and its strong presence in both domestic and export markets.

\* NC Department of Agriculture & Consumer Services, 2024

## ECONOMIC IMPACT AND MOMENTUM IN NC

Agriculture is one of **North Carolina's top industries**, anchoring both its rural economy and statewide prosperity. According to NC State University's Agriculture and Agribusiness Report, North Carolina's food, fiber, and forestry together generated **\$111.1 billion in value-added income in 2022, accounting for almost 16% of the state's gross state product, supporting 777,616 jobs. These statistics demonstrate that agriculture remains the state's number one industry** (NC State University's College of Agriculture and Life Sciences, 2024).

Additionally, North Carolina continues to rank as America's Top State for Business, earning CNBC's top spot three times in the past four years (*Economic Development Partnership of NC, 2025*). This combination of economic strength and livability has fueled rapid population growth, especially in the Triangle region. Wake County alone has absorbed much of this expansion, intensifying demand for residential and commercial development resulting in increased farmland conversion.



## NC AG LEADS: A STRATEGIC PLAN FOR NORTH CAROLINA AGRICULTURE (2025)

In 2023, a coalition was formed to elevate the value of Agriculture and plan for its future. NC Ag Leads is the state's first industry-led, comprehensive roadmap for advancing North Carolina's \$111 billion Agriculture and Agribusiness economy. Developed under the leadership of the Golden LEAF Foundation, NC Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services (NCDA&CS), NC Farm Bureau, NC Chamber, and NC State University, the initiative brought together more than 350 participants across 68 counties, including farmers, educators, lenders, and private-sector partners, to define a unified vision for growth and innovation in the industry.

The Strategic Plan's purpose is to align policy, research, and investment so that agriculture remains both profitable and sustainable amid land loss, rising costs, and workforce shortages.

The Strategic Plan organizes statewide action under the **HARVEST** framework:

**H armonize Land & Resource Use:** Coordinate policies for land preservation, water management, and sustainable growth.

**A lign Ag Tech with Farmer Needs:** Launch a Farmer-Engaged Technology Accelerator to pilot practical innovations.

**R evitalize Extension:** Modernize the NC Cooperative Extension model for faster, region-specific service delivery.

**V alue a Business Mindset:** Build leadership and financial literacy training for farmers and agricultural entrepreneurs.

**E mpower the Workforce:** Develop a statewide Talent Pipeline strategy linking education systems and employers.

**S treamline Market Access:** Expand processing, logistics, and export channels to enhance profitability.

**T eamwork & Leadership:** Sustain an ongoing statewide coalition to coordinate implementation and monitor progress.

The outcome of this effort, "A Strategic Plan for North Carolina Agriculture" published in May 2025, contains a roadmap of priorities and recommendations that counties can align with to make farming more resilient, profitable, and adaptable in the face of market forces driving change.



### KEY RECOMMENDATIONS AND PRIORITIES — NC AG LEADS

Modernize Extension Services statewide with regionally responsive staffing and technology.

Create Value-Added Co-ops and processing infrastructure to increase local profitability.

Launch a Statewide Ag Technology Hub connecting farmers, researchers, and innovators.

Expand Farm Succession and Land Access programs to support generational transfer and new farmers.

Implement a Comprehensive Workforce Strategy connecting K-12, community colleges, and ag. employers.

Institutionalize Collaboration through a permanent public-private steering committee and shared data systems.

## EXISTING CONDITIONS

Over the past decade and a half, Wake County's growth has accelerated dramatically. According to PLANWake (2022), the county surpassed one million residents in 2014, continues to add about 25,000 residents per year, and is projected to gain another quarter-million people by the mid-2030s. US Census data depicted in the Wake County Cost of Community Services Study (2024) confirms this trajectory, showing an increase of more than 228,000 residents between 2010 and 2020, a 25% rise in one decade. This rapid influx of people and businesses has redefined rural landscapes, transforming what were once contiguous agricultural tracts and threatening the County's remaining farmland. The same fertile soils that once grew fields of crops have been converted into residential subdivisions, business parks, and transportation corridors serving one of the fastest-growing populations in the nation.

The American Farmland Trust (AFT) *Farms Under Threat 2040* report identifies Wake as **one of the three most threatened counties in North Carolina for farmland loss**. New rural sprawl patterns driven by remote work, estate-lot subdivisions, and speculative investment are fragmenting farmland blocks and raising the cost of entry for new farmers (AFT *Farms Under Threat 2040*, 2022).

Meanwhile, North Carolina's aging farmer population compounds this challenge: according to NC FarmLink, **over 40% of farmers are 65 or older**, and there is a huge need for more support for farmers in the areas of land access and transition planning (NC FarmLink's *2025 Year-in-Review*, 2025).

### STATUS OF FARMLAND IN WAKE COUNTY

Wake County's agricultural lands are disappearing at a rate which is alarming to those who study agricultural trends. Over the past nine years, the county has lost nearly 23,000 acres of farmland, and projections from AFT indicate that if current development patterns persist, Wake could lose another 46,600 acres by 2040 under "Business as Usual" growth or as much as 56,700 acres under "Runaway Sprawl." Even with the more compact "Better Built Cities" development scenario, the county would still lose approximately 31,900 acres, roughly 27.5% of its remaining farmland. These losses carry profound consequences: diminished food security, reduced local economic contributions from agriculture, and the erosion of natural infrastructure that cleans water, buffers floods, and sustains the County's scenic open and rural landscapes.

## WAKE COUNTY ECONOMIC ACTIVITY & MARKET VALUE OF AGRICULTURE

Agriculture remains a vital economic driver in Wake County. The **2022 North Carolina Census of Agriculture** identified 664 farms (this number does not represent PUV parcels) in the county, which manage approximately **62,000 acres of farmland** and **161,000 acres of forestland** that generate an estimated **\$63 million annually** in market value from crops, livestock, and horticultural products.

According to Wake County's 2024 **Cost of Community Services Study** (see Summary of Existing Plans & Policies in Appendix), farms and forests contribute more in local tax revenue than they cost in public services, helping offset the fiscal burden of residential growth. Preserving farmland is therefore not only an act of protecting rural character, but also a fiscally responsible investment in the local food system, ecosystem services, and quality of life.

Although agriculture now occupies a modest footprint relative to the county's urban and suburban land uses, it continues to sustain local employment, supply chains, and on-farm innovation such as agritourism, direct-to-consumer markets, and value-added enterprises. Nearly **90% of Wake County's farm level agricultural sales** come from crop production—particularly nursery, greenhouse, and horticultural goods—while the remaining share is derived from livestock and poultry operations.

### COST OF COMMUNITY SERVICES STUDIES

A Cost of Community Services (COCS) study is a fiscal analysis that examines the relationship between different land uses and the revenues and expenditures of a local government. These studies can help communities understand how various types of land use, such as residential, commercial, and agricultural, can impact municipal budgets. By analyzing government revenues and expenditures by land use, COCS studies can reveal which land uses generate more revenue than they require in services, and which require subsidies.

These studies can also illuminate more costly land uses—such as large scale mixed-use or large high-end residential uses—that may have unfavorable expenditure-to-revenue ratios for the county, requiring more services than income generated. The data could help justify the County redirecting revenues away from costly uses and toward things like code enforcement, strategic land conservation, or subsidies for other, more cost-efficient land uses, such as agriculture.

Wake County's **average farm size of 94 acres** reflects a predominance of small and family-owned and operated enterprises that remain deeply embedded in the county's economy and heritage. Many farms sell directly to consumers through farmers markets, community-supported agriculture (CSA) programs, or on-site retail operations, demonstrating how small-scale agriculture continues to play a key role in local food systems and community identity.

However, the viability of these farms is increasingly challenged by **high land values**, ranging from **\$75,000-\$200,000+ per acre** in Wake County (*The Coley Group*), and limited access to affordable farmland for beginning farmers. Without farm succession support and targeted investment, these working lands risk conversion to development rather than being maintained in agricultural production. Protecting this remaining farmland base is therefore not just about preserving open space; it's about sustaining Wake County's economic diversity, environmental resilience, and rural heritage for generations to come.

### NEW TRENDS EVOLVING IN THE INDUSTRY

Across North Carolina, farmers are adapting to market shifts, climate pressures, and accelerating development by diversifying production and embracing innovation. Supported by efforts such as the NCD&CS's New and Emerging Crops Program and research from NC State University and NC Agricultural and Technical State University, the state is seeing growth in high-value and specialty crops that can thrive on smaller acreages while maintaining profitability. New and reemerging crops such as sesame, gourmet mushrooms, and local rice demonstrate a renewed focus on resilience, heritage, and market differentiation. These efforts align with a broader statewide strategy to build an agricultural economy rooted in sustainability, local processing, and value-added enterprise.

In Wake County and the surrounding Triangle region, where urban growth and rising land values challenge traditional commodity farming, producers are transitioning toward high-value and niche markets supported by research and ag-innovation partnerships. *Key emerging trends include:*

- **Sesame:** Drought-tolerant and nematode-suppressing, sesame is being studied as a profitable rotation crop for corn, soybean, and sweet potato systems, showing strong adaptability in Piedmont soils.
- **Gourmet Mushrooms:** NC State Extension and local farms are expanding specialty mushroom production—shiitake, oyster, reishi, and truffles—to meet demand from regional restaurants and direct-to-consumer markets.

- **Hops:** Researchers are evaluating commercial hops production to supply North Carolina's rapidly growing craft beer industry, creating new opportunities for small growers.
- **Medicinal & Culinary Herbs:** Wake County farmers are tapping into rising demand for aromatic and medicinal herbs, supported by NC State University's Specialty Crops Program and growing consumer interest in natural wellness products.

Wake County also anchors the state's agricultural technology (AgTech) corridor, connecting research institutions, startups, and producers to pilot innovations in precision agriculture, controlled-environment systems, and data-driven farm management.

*“Increased land values and competition for land for non-agricultural uses have been a threat to farmland over the past several years. Taking steps to preserve and protect agricultural lands in Wake County is beneficial to agriculture as well as the long-term well-being of the entire region.”*

*— Teresa Furr, Wake County Soil & Water Conservation District Director*





# EFFORTS TO PRESERVE FARMLAND & FARMING

# EXISTING FARMLAND PRESERVATION TOOLS

*“There needs to be more of a financial incentive for landowners to keep their property in farm use. The next generation will probably sell if they can’t afford the property taxes and there’s not really anything you can grow that will generate a profit on a yearly basis.”*

— Wake County Landowner Survey Respondent

Wake SWCD has become a statewide leader in farmland preservation, demonstrating how proactive local policy, innovation, and partnership can protect working lands in one of North Carolina’s fastest-growing counties. For more than six decades, the District has combined technical expertise with community collaboration to safeguard Wake County’s agricultural heritage and sustain its economic and environmental vitality.

In recent years, Wake SWCD has significantly expanded its impact through the Wake County Farmland Preservation Program, receiving, along with the Wake County Board of Commissioners, the 2024 Friends of Farmland Award from NC Agriculture Commissioner Steve Troxler for its innovative and community-driven approach. Working closely with the Wake County Board of Commissioners, the District helped design and implement the 2022 Farmland Preservation Ordinance, establishing tools such as **Voluntary Agricultural Districts (VADs)**, **Enhanced Voluntary Agricultural Districts (EVADs)**, and **Agricultural Conservation Easements (ACEs)** to help landowners keep their farms in family ownership and agricultural production. The County established its VAD Program in 2002, when it adopted its first Farmland Preservation Ordinance.

The most significant investment in Wake County’s farmland preservation history came in 2023, when the Board of Commissioners voted to dedicate **annual rollback (deferred) tax revenues to fund permanent conservation easements**. This revenue is generated from landowners who choose to exit the **Present Use Value (PUV)** Program, often when they sell their land or end its agricultural use. The PUV Program is explored more on the following pages.

**In just two years, this innovative financing mechanism has generated over \$8 million in local funding, which Wake SWCD has leveraged to secure an additional \$6 million in federal and state grants—a total of roughly \$14 million dedicated to protecting farmland.** These funds go directly toward conservation easements that permanently protect prime farmland from development while maintaining private ownership and agricultural use.

## KEY DEFINITIONS

- **Present Use Value (PUV):** A voluntary state program that allows farmland, forestland, and horticultural land to be taxed based on its agricultural value rather than market value, helping landowners keep property in production rather than selling under development pressure.
- **Voluntary Agricultural District (VAD):** Provides formal recognition of active farmland, increased protection from lawsuits, and bonus points for state and local cost-share funding.
- **Enhanced Voluntary Agricultural District (EVAD):** Offers stronger protection by requiring a 10-year irrevocable agreement recorded on the deed, making enrolled farms eligible for higher percentages of cost-share funds (up to 90%) and priority in certain grant programs.
- **Agricultural Conservation Easements (ACE):** Permanently restricts development rights while keeping land in private ownership and agricultural use. Easement landowners can access federal and state tax benefits and are eligible for compensation funded by County and other grant partners.

## RECENT FARMLAND PRESERVATION SUCCESS

The annual rollback funding model implemented by Wake County has already produced tangible results. Through collaboration with the Triangle Land Conservancy and local partners, Wake SWCD has preserved 317 acres across 4 farms. The County contributed \$3.2 million to these easement acquisitions matched by state and federal grants, ensuring the properties’ agricultural and cultural values will endure for generations.

Partnerships with organizations such as **Triangle Land Conservancy (TLC)**, the **NC Agricultural Development and Farmland Preservation Trust Fund (ADFPTF)**, the **USDA NRCS**, **NC State University Cooperative Extension**, and **NC FarmLink** have expanded local capacity for conservation and farm transition. These partnerships not only strengthen technical expertise and financial resources but also help connect landowners to statewide networks of support for easements, succession planning, and regenerative land management.

Wake SWCD's work goes far beyond farmland preservation; it reinforces the link between soil conservation, water quality, and community resilience. By treating farms and forests as green infrastructure that provide ecosystem services, the SWCD has elevated working lands as a cornerstone of Wake County's environmental and economic sustainability. Wake SWCD also invests resources in programming and education, which is essential to preserving and promoting a culture of farming and land stewardship.

### 20 YEARS OF KEEPING THE FARM WORKSHOP IN WAKE COUNTY

In addition to land protection, the District celebrated its 20-year anniversary of **Keeping the Farm Workshop** that provides vital education and technical support to landowners, helping them navigate conservation easements, succession planning, and estate management. This outreach connects families to the tools and resources needed to sustain agricultural operations and retain farmland ownership.

## PRESENT USE VALUE IN WAKE COUNTY

Because land values in rapidly growing counties like Wake are heavily influenced by demand for residential and commercial development, market-value taxation would significantly raise property taxes on farm and forest land for reasons unassociated with the agricultural industry. This makes continued agricultural use even more financially challenging for landowners and farmers.

The state's Present Use Value (PUV) Program (N.C. Gen. Stat. § 105-277.3) helps keep working lands in production by lowering annual property tax burdens for eligible landowners. To qualify, land must meet certain minimum acreage and income requirements:

**Agriculture:** 10 acres in actual production (actively engaged in the commercial production or growing of crops, plants, or animals) for the 3 preceding years. Must produce an average \$1,000 in gross farm income per year.

**Horticulture:** 5 acres in actual production (actively engaged in the commercial growing of fruits and vegetables or nursery and floral products) for the 3 preceding years. Also must produce \$1,000 in gross income annually.

**Forestry:** 20 acres in actual production (actively engaged in the commercial growing of trees) for the 3 preceding years. Must have an approved Forest Management Plan.

If the land remains in qualifying use, it continues to be taxed at its lower present-use rate rather than its higher market-value rate.

### LIMITATIONS OF PUV

The PUV Program has significantly slowed the rate of farmland conversion and has been an extremely important farmland preservation tool. Additionally, the Wake County PUV Program rollback funding has enabled the County to make significant investments in farmland protection, providing more local funding than any other county in the state. It should be noted, however, the program does not permanently protect land—it is temporary.

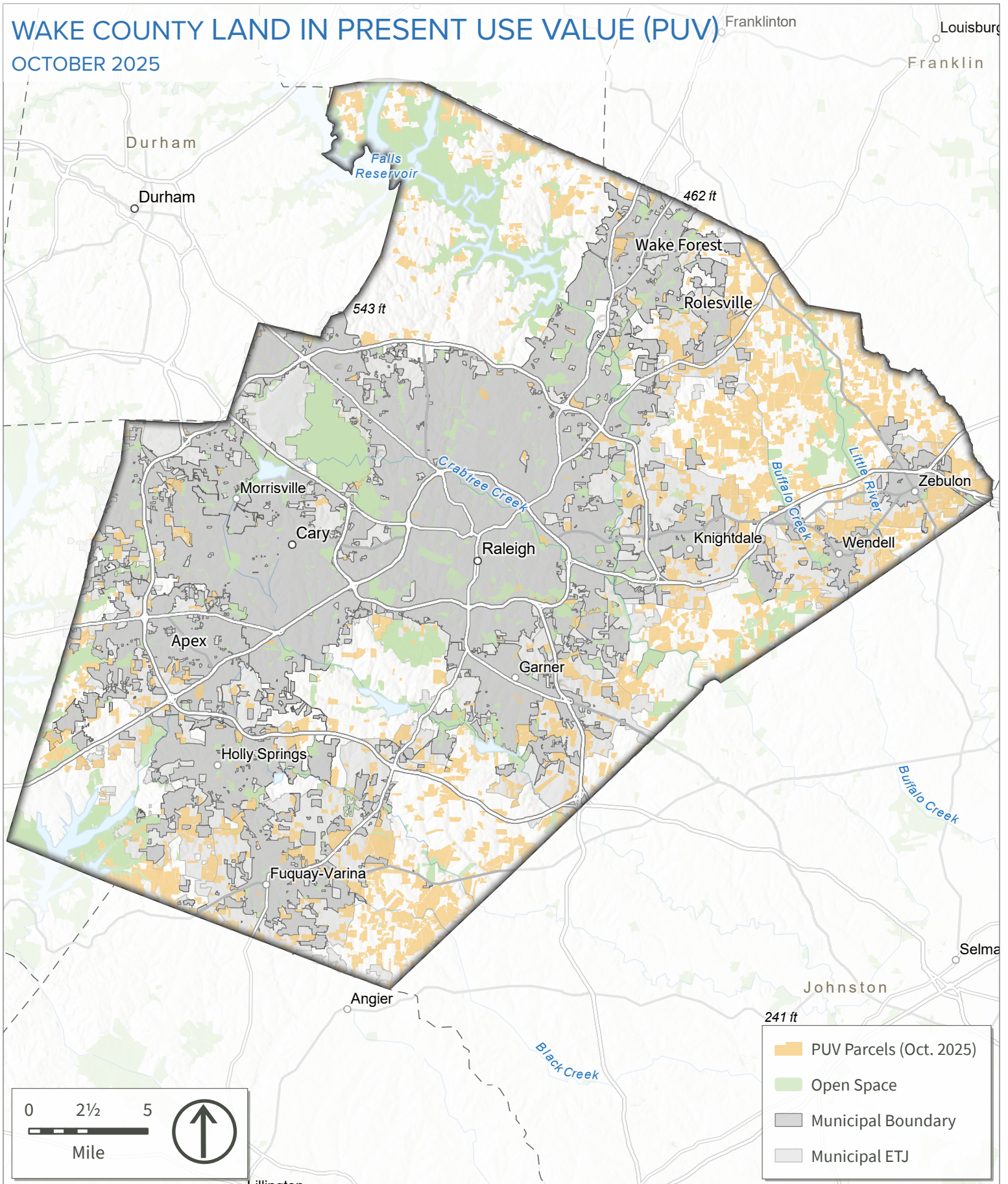
Land remains in PUV only as long as it continues in active farm, horticultural, or forestry use. If the land use changes (for example, if it is sold for development), the owner must repay up to three years of deferred taxes, known as the rollback penalty. As a result, land in PUV can still be considered at-risk of farmland conversion until it enters into a permanent conservation easement.

As mentioned on the previous page, Wake County's innovative use of funding generated from deferred taxes when land exits the PUV Program has created a mechanism for its Purchase of Conservation Easement (PACE) program. This PACE Program in Wake began through collaboration between Wake SWCD and conservation partners. The funding is used to purchase easements on agricultural land for Wake SWCD or a qualified conservation organization to then hold and monitor the easement.

While effective at producing funding for permanent conservation, this PACE model requires land to leave the PUV Program for funding to be generated, so this mechanism requires a loss to produce a gain in terms of farmland preservation. Still, the significance of the achievement by Wake SWCD to create the PUV rollback funding mechanism cannot be overstated.

# WAKE COUNTY LAND IN PRESENT USE VALUE (PUV)

OCTOBER 2025



## VAD & EVAD IN WAKE COUNTY

In addition to the PUV Program, Wake County supports farmland preservation through **Voluntary Agricultural District** (VAD) and **Enhanced Voluntary Agricultural District** (EVAD) programs. These programs are voluntary land conservation agreements designed to support working farms and reduce conflicts between farm operations and non-farm neighbors by recognizing agriculture as a valued, long-term land use in the county. Both programs are administered by the Wake SWCD.

### VOLUNTARY AGRICULTURAL DISTRICT PROGRAM

The VAD Program is the entry-level farmland protection tool. Participating landowners sign a **revocable agreement** to keep their land in agricultural, horticultural, or forestry production **for at least 10 years**, as long as the property continues to meet PUV eligibility requirements.

#### Benefits of VAD Enrollment

- Public recognition of the farm's agricultural value (official district designation and signage)
- Protection from nuisance claims related to normal farm operations (i.e. noise, farm equipment traffic)
- Notification to neighboring land buyers that farmland activities are present
- Local government consideration of farms when planning public infrastructure such as sewer, water, and road projects

#### Limitations / Commitment

- Enrollment is voluntary and can be withdrawn by the landowner at any time.
- It does not prevent development or land sale.
- It is considered semi-protective, but not permanent.

In Wake County, VAD has served as an effective first step for farms signaling their intention to remain in production while evaluating longer-term protection options, such as EVAD or permanent **agricultural conservation easement** (ACE).

### ENHANCED VOLUNTARY AGRICULTURAL DISTRICT PROGRAM

The EVAD Program offers **stronger protection** and **additional financial benefits**, but requires a **stronger commitment**.

Landowners who enroll in EVAD agree to retain their land in agricultural, horticultural, or forestry use for **10 years**, and **cannot voluntarily withdraw during that time** unless the land is no longer eligible for PUV. This agreement is recorded with the property, making it visible in legal title history. All EVAD parcels are also in VAD.

#### Additional Benefits of EVAD Enrollment

- Higher priority eligibility for conservation funding:
  - Farmland preservation grants
  - State and federal cost-share programs
  - Permanent conservation easements
- Up to 90% cost-share reimbursement for qualifying conservation practices through North Carolina Department of Agriculture
- Increased consideration during county and municipal infrastructure and zoning decisions
- Stronger right-to-farm operational protections

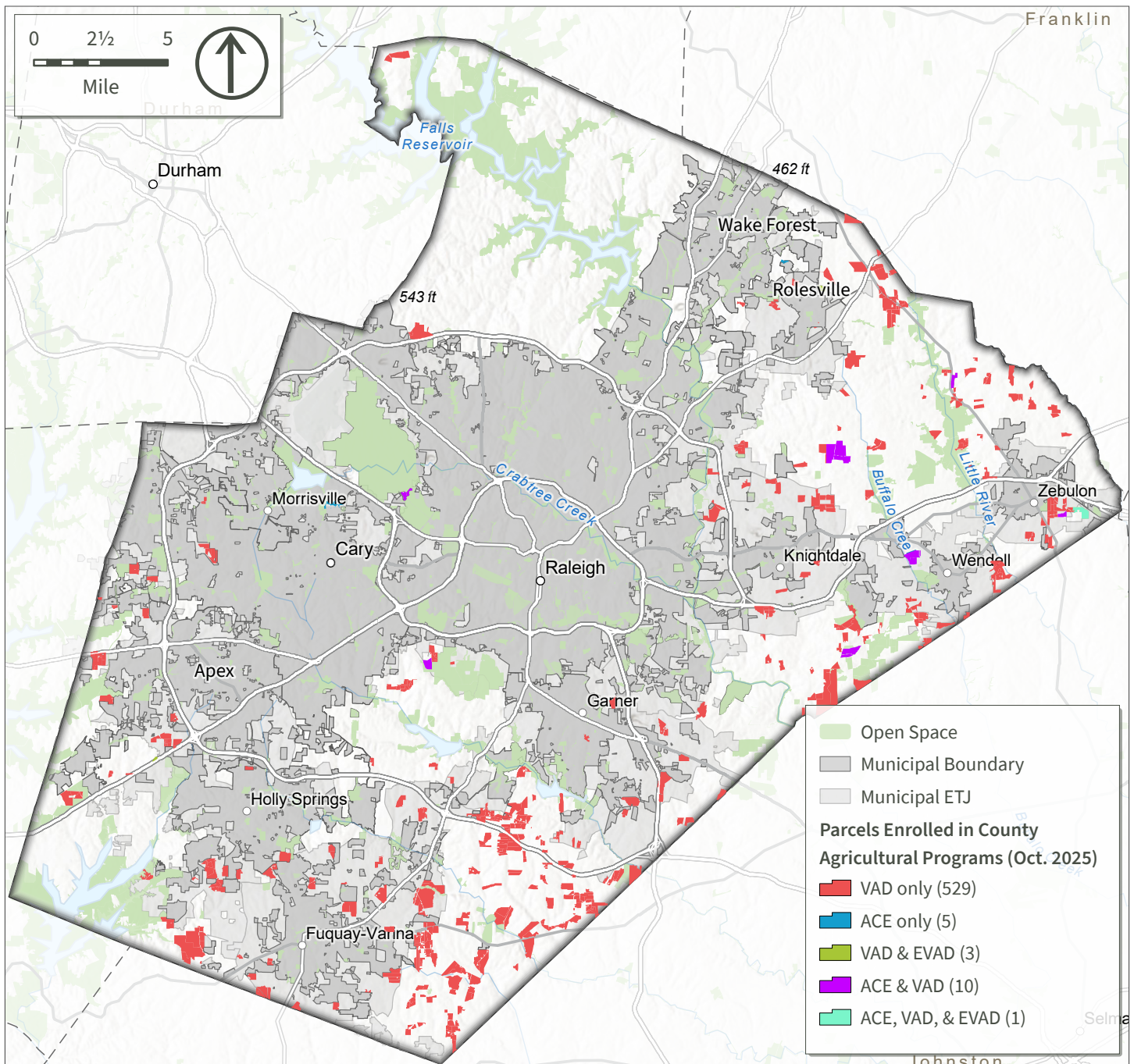
#### Commitment

- EVAD agreements are binding for the full term, helping secure farm stability.
- Still not permanent, but offers a meaningful step toward long-term stewardship.

Many successful farmland preservation efforts across North Carolina follow a ladder approach:

**PUV → VAD → EVAD → ACE**





### WAKE COUNTY LAND IN VAD, EVAD, & ACE

While PUV acreage in Wake County has been decreasing, enrollment in VAD, EVAD, and ACEs has been increasing since the Farmland Preservation Program began in 2023.

In Wake County as of October 2025, there were:

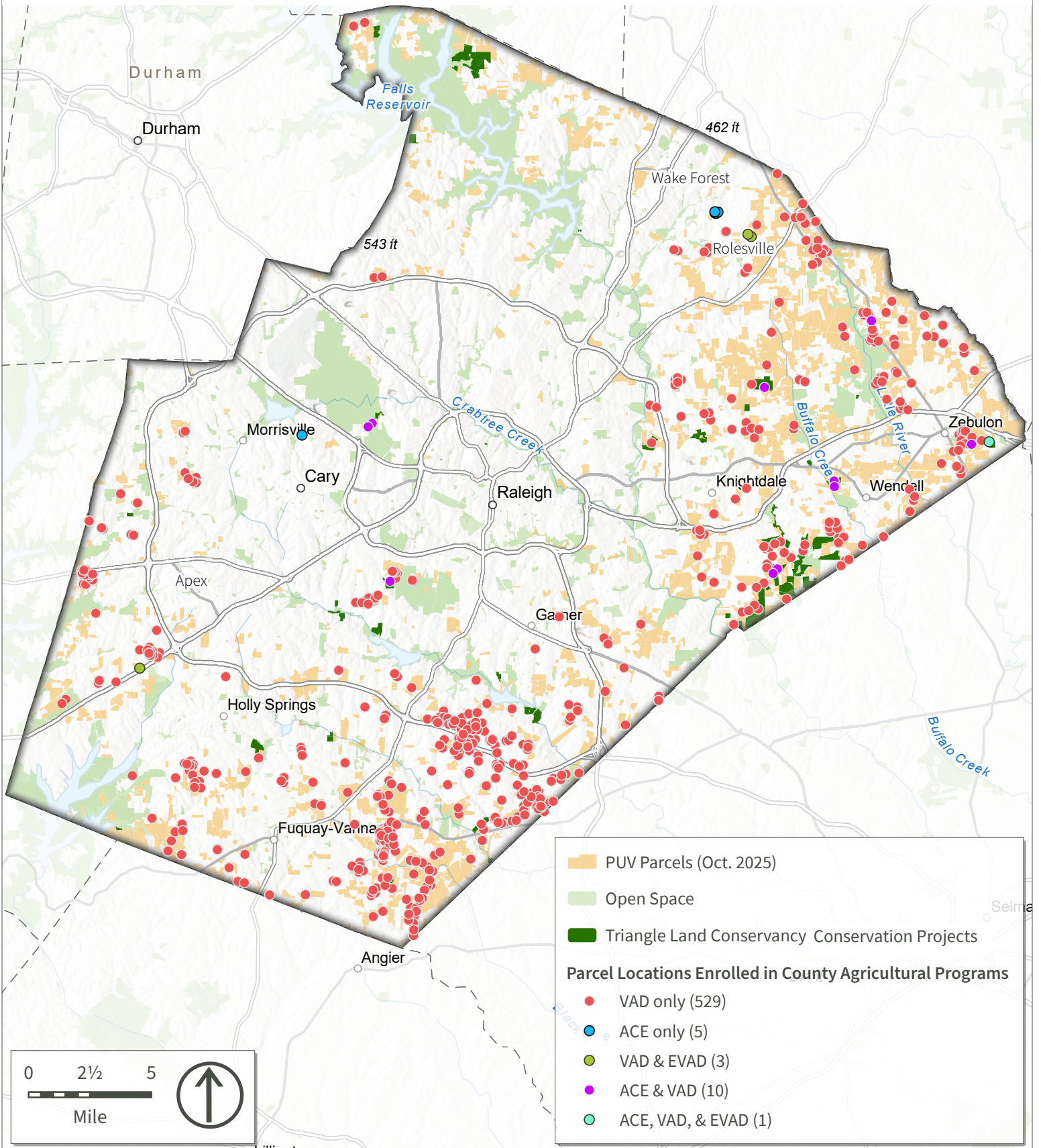
- **543** parcels enrolled in **VAD**, totaling **17,277.38 acres**
- **17** parcels with a County **ACE**, totaling **902.46 acres**
- **3** parcels enrolled in **EVAD**, totaling **40.76 acres**

Distributed by the combination of program enrollment:

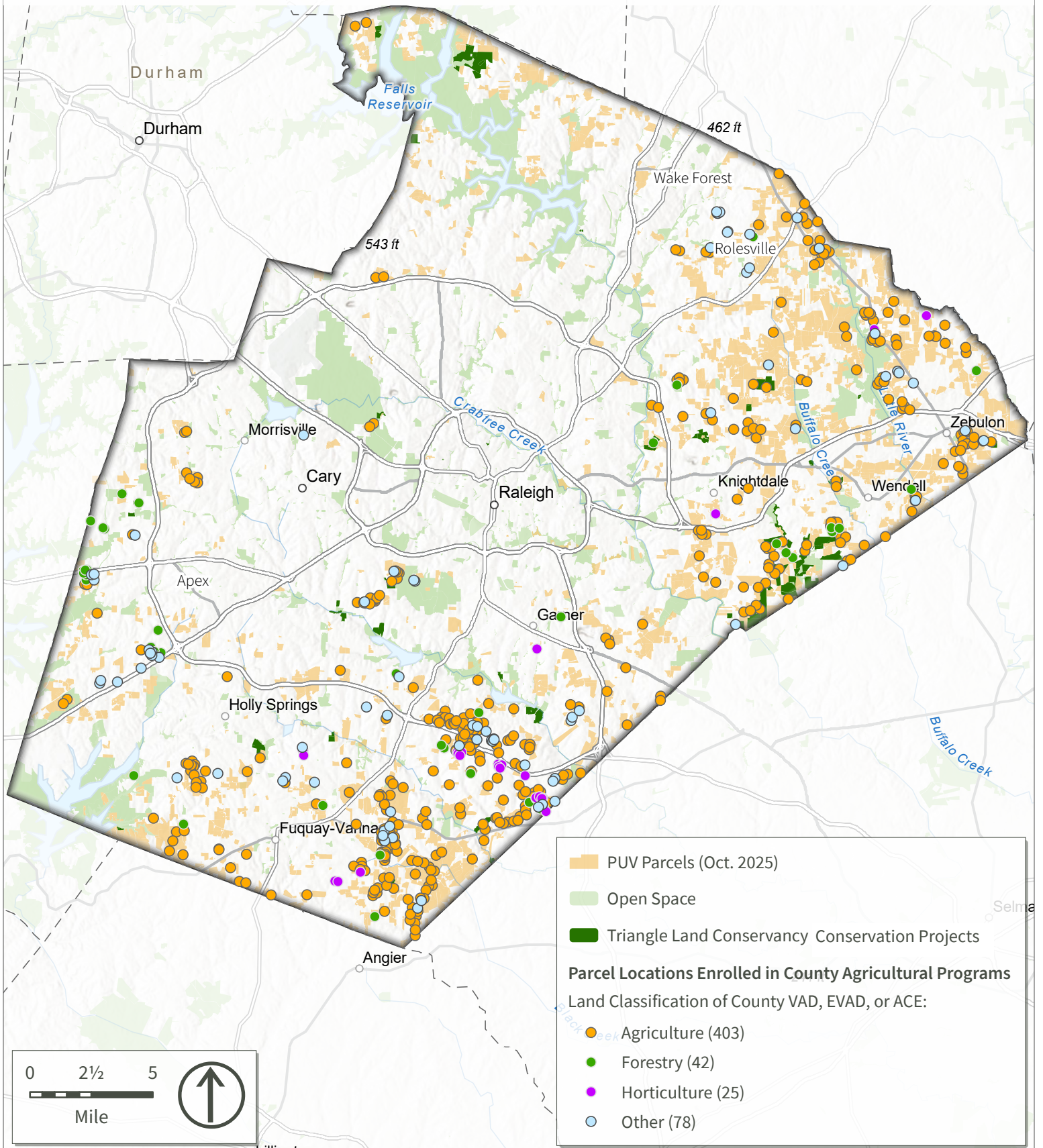
- **VAD only:** 529 parcels, 16,379.64 acres
- **ACE only:** 5 parcels, 45.48 acres
- **ACE & VAD:** 10 parcels, 770.45 acres
- **ACE, VAD, & EVAD:** 1 parcel: 86.53 acres

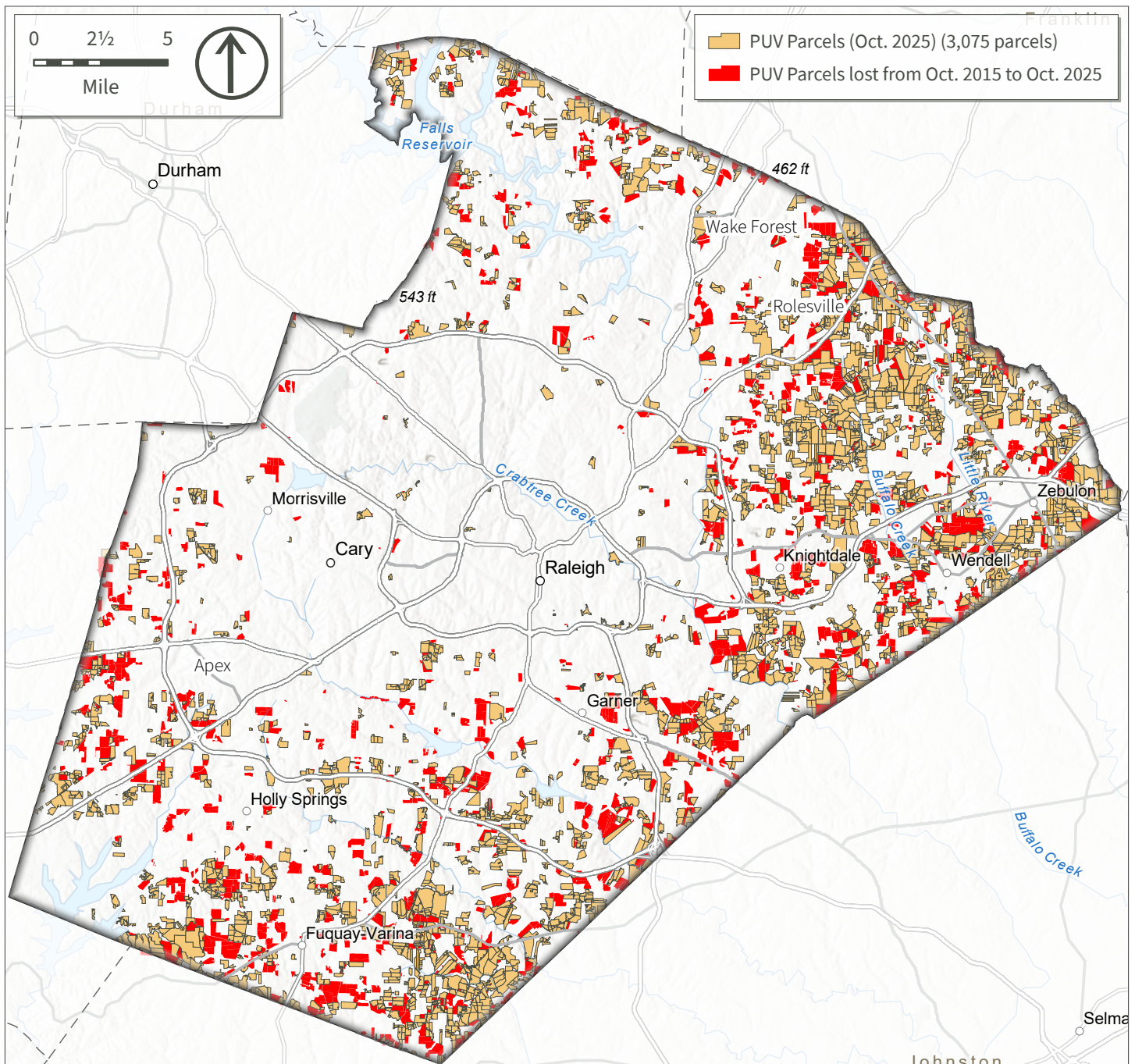
These enrollments are not the only legal mechanisms to preserve farmland. TLC holds several conservation easements on farmland in Wake, which aren't represented in the above numbers, as well as owns and manages active farmland of their own. The next two maps show all PUV land, TLC owned land and easements, as well as County VAD, EVAD, & ACE (as points).

# WAKE COUNTY LAND ENROLLED IN COUNTY AGRICULTURAL PROGRAMS BY PROGRAM TYPE OCTOBER 2025



# WAKE COUNTY LAND ENROLLED IN COUNTY AGRICULTURAL PROGRAMS BY LAND USE OCTOBER 2025





## FARMLAND CONVERSION TRENDS, 2015-2025

Farmland in Wake County has experienced steady and widespread conversion over the past decade, especially in areas experiencing rapid residential and commercial growth.

- In October 2015, there were **3,870 parcels** in Wake County enrolled in the PUV Program, accounting for approximately **118,688 acres**.
- In October 2025, there were **3,075 parcels** in Wake County enrolled in the PUV Program, accounting for approximately **82,084 acres**.

In the decade of 2015 to 2025, there was a **reduction of 795 parcels** in PUV, accounting for approximately **36,604 acres of farmland loss**. This land was converted to various uses but most commonly has become low to medium density residential. In the map above, the parcels shown in red are those which have left PUV since 2015.

In 2015, large contiguous blocks of PUV land stretched across eastern and southeastern Wake County, as well as portions of the county's northern boundary. By 2025, many of these areas show noticeable gaps where farmland has been converted to residential subdivisions, commercial corridors, and public infrastructure.





# COMMUNITY & STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT

## COMMUNITY & STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT

*“Wake County needs to stop treating farmland as the waiting room for development. Once farmland and forests are gone, they’re gone forever.”*

– Public Survey Respondent

Effective community engagement involves collecting feedback from multiple approaches, which is what this project set out to accomplish. From the onset, an Advisory Committee was formed that provided feedback on all components of the project. Other methods of engagement included two surveys: one tailored for landowners in agriculture, horticulture, or forestry, and the second geared toward the general public. Additionally, a key stakeholder engagement workshop was held in July 2025, which helped organize and shape priorities and recommendations. The project team also conducted eight in person farmer interviews to gain a richer perspective on farming culture, the lived experience, and ideas to overcome challenges and support the industry going forward.

*“We need to build up, not out—our future depends on it.”*

– Public Survey Respondent

### ADVISORY COMMITTEE

Upon launching the planning process, Wake SWCD staff selected an Advisory Committee of 14 people representing a diverse cross-section of the agricultural community and local partners, including farmers, landowners, conservation organizations, land trusts, NC Cooperative Extension, Farm Bureau, municipal planners, and non-profit leaders.

Guided by the planning consulting firm Equinox, this core group met consistently over the course of six months where they developed a **Vision and Goals**, provided feedback on the landowner and public surveys, and shared their expertise on priorities and recommendations that the County can take to protect agricultural resources and support local farmers and the industry as a whole. The vision and goals provided a unifying framework for all subsequent engagement activities, surveys, and meetings, ensuring that stakeholders were working toward a shared outcome that preserves the County’s farmland.

*As a reminder, here are the Vision & Goals established by the Advisory Committee:*

### VISION FOR WAKE COUNTY

The remaining farmland in Wake County is prioritized now and for generations to come.

### VISION FOR THE PLAN

The Wake County Farmland Preservation Plan identifies actions the County can take to protect local farmers and agricultural resources – farms, working lands and forests, prime soils, and other natural resources – to ensure sustainable business operations and preserve rural character.

### GOALS

- Highlight the existing conditions of farmland in Wake County.
- Analyze county and municipal land-use patterns and identify priority areas for long-term farmland and rural preservation.
- Identify which planning tools and funding sources are best suited to advance farmland preservation, preserve rural character, and strengthen the local agricultural economy.
- Provide policy recommendations that protect agricultural resources and support farmers in long-term agricultural planning.
- Educate on social, environmental, and economic values of farmland and help inspire future generations of farmers.
- Foster a cohesive message with municipal partners and other stakeholders on the value of farmland preservation.
- Sustain and increase funding for farmland protection

*“In the case of my conserved farm, I’m surrounded by development. It’s no longer really a farm like it was, but it’s still there and it looks like a farm. We just can’t function like we should”*

– Wake County Landowner Survey Respondent

## STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT WORKSHOP

The Stakeholder Engagement Workshop, held in July 2025, brought together around 35 participants from across Wake County and the State, representing farmers, land trusts, municipalities, conservation nonprofits, business leaders, and planning professionals, to validate emerging priorities and shape a collective strategy for farmland preservation.

The workshop was designed to foster open dialogue and collaborative problem-solving through small group discussions and interactive mapping. Participants rotated through three discussion stations, each guided by facilitators and note-takers:

**Station 1:** Policy and Funding Actions

**Station 2:** Intergovernmental Coordination and Municipal Planning Tools

**Station 3:** Countywide Mapping of Agricultural Opportunities, Challenges, and Priority Preservation Areas

### STAKEHOLDERS INVOLVED IN THIS PROCESS:

Wake County Planning

Wake SWCD Board of Supervisors

Wake County GIS Staff

Wake County Tax Administration

Wake County Agricultural Advisory Board

Wake County Open Space

Wake County Planning Board

Wake County Environmental Services

Friends of Wake Soil & Water Conservation District

NC Agriculture Development & Farmland Preservation Trust Fund

USDA NRCS

Wake County Farm Bureau

AgCarolina Farm Credit

NC Cooperative Extension

USDA Farm Service Agency

Triangle Land Conservancy

Good Hope Farm

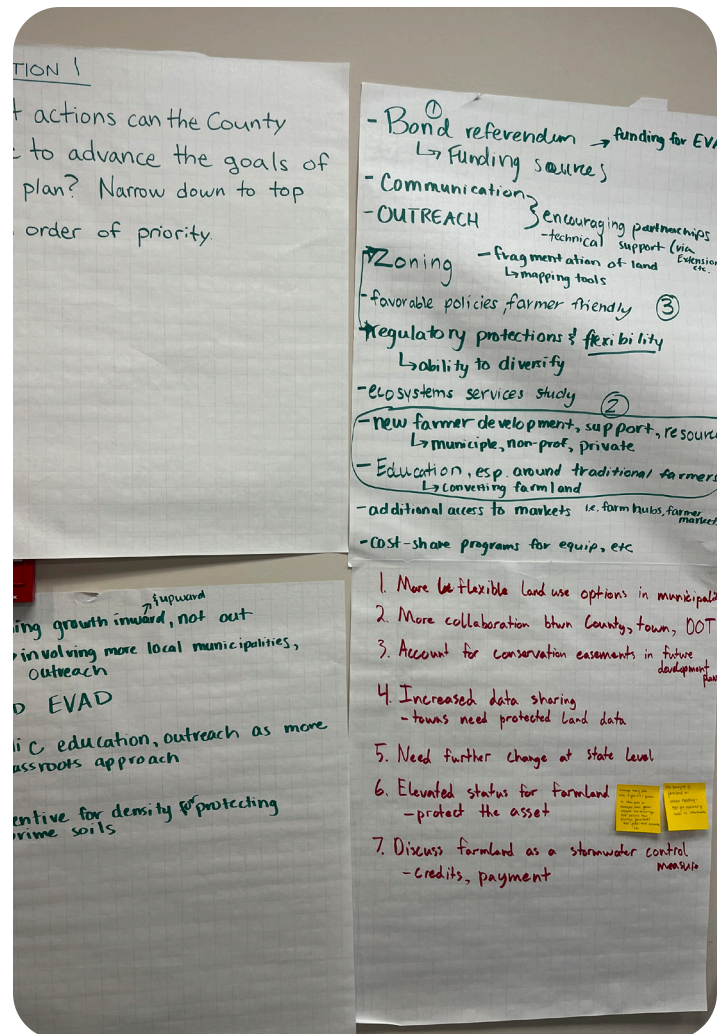
Town of Fuquay-Varina



## EMERGING THEMES & PRIORITIES: ADVISORY COMMITTEE & KEY STAKEHOLDERS

The Advisory Committee and key stakeholders emphasized a shared commitment to protecting farmland, supporting farmers, and coordinating policies between the County and 12 municipalities. The following themes and priorities represent the most consistent and actionable ideas raised with these groups:

- Sustainable, **dedicated funding** for farmland preservation (i.e. mitigation fees, conservation funds, potential inclusion in any future open space funding referendums).
- Valuing farmland as **natural public infrastructure**: local food supply, water quality, stormwater management, climate resilience, wildlife habitat, land-use buffers, and scenic rural character.
- **Collaboration** between municipal and county leadership through joint land-use planning, data sharing, and unified growth management policies.
- **Zoning and land-use tools and policies** that reduce development pressure on prime agricultural soils and rural communities.
- **Farm succession planning and support** for next-generation farmers: education, estate planning, affordable land, and equipment access.
- **Economic viability**: access to local markets, agritourism, value-added enterprises, and marketing.
- **Public awareness and education**: social, environmental, and economic benefits of farmland.
- **Protection of strategic tracts** by identifying high-quality soils, preserving contiguous farming operations and open space, and implementing stormwater management practices.





## PUBLIC & LANDOWNER SURVEYS

The project team collected invaluable information from hundreds of Wake County landowners and residents, which elevated the importance that the County takes action to protect remaining farms and working lands that represent a community legacy.

## TAKING ACTION

Taken together, the Advisory Committee and key stakeholder feedback paired with Landowner and Public Survey findings form a unified message. The landowners, stakeholders, and people of Wake County expressed overwhelming consensus that the County must take deliberate and coordinated action to protect what still remains and preserve its agricultural heritage.

On the following pages, the results and overall findings are summarized.

*“We are literally getting squeezed out of our property, and we hate to think of selling, not because we need the farm income, but because land is so very beautiful, a haven for wildlife, and a learning experience for our children. However, we soon won’t be able to look out our front door without seeing industrial buildings and residential out the back, and the stormwater runoff from surrounding development... There just doesn’t seem to be a way for us to get the value of our land or to move to another farm without selling on the regular market.”*

— Wake County Landowner Survey Respondent

## PUBLIC SURVEY RESULTS

The Public Survey, launched in tandem with the Landowner Survey in the summer of 2025, collected feedback from 679 residents. The purpose of the survey was to gauge community sentiment around farmland loss, the importance of agriculture, and willingness to support policy changes and increased funding to advance farmland preservation. Here are some of the major findings from that survey:

Of the 679 respondents

# 96%

agreed that preserving farmland, forests, and agricultural operations in Wake County is **Very Important.**

### Top 3 benefits of Agriculture in Wake County:

# 1.

Local Food Production

# 2.

Environmental Protection (i.e. clean water, clean air, wildlife habitat)

# 3.

Open Space and Scenic Landscapes/Viewsheds

# 96%

of respondents think Wake County is **losing too much farmland or forestland to development**

# 95%

of respondents **support policies and initiatives to expand protections for farmland** in Wake County

### Top 3 biggest obstacles to agriculture in the county:



## PUBLIC SURVEY RESULTS

Public feedback underscores a shared urgency to protect Wake County’s remaining farmland and rural heritage. Respondents voiced deep concern that rapid urbanization, sprawling subdivisions, and rising land costs and taxes are eroding the county’s agricultural base and its natural systems. Many described farmland as essential to public health, clean water, climate resilience, and local food security; and see farmland preservation not just as an environmental issue, but as a matter of community identity and intergenerational responsibility. There is strong support for incentives that keep legacy farms in production, educational programs that connect youth to agriculture, and policies that prioritize sustainable and locally focused food systems.

### TOP 10 PUBLIC PRIORITIES FOR FARMLAND PRESERVATION

RANK	PRIORITY	FEEDBACK
1.	Overdevelopment & Growth Management	Residents are alarmed by uncontrolled suburban sprawl particularly large-lot ‘well and septic’ subdivisions and urge the County to slow or pause new development. They want stronger rules, coordination with towns, and policies that direct growth inward where infrastructure already exists. Many link unplanned growth to traffic, flooding, and loss of community identity.
2.	Protection of Legacy Farms and Support for New Farmers	Respondents want tax relief, incentives, and cost-share programs to help legacy farms stay viable and to make it easier for young and beginning farmers to access land and capital. Preserving farming as a livelihood and not just as open space is viewed as critical to the County’s agricultural economy and food security.
3.	Tax & Economic Pressures on Farmers	Rising property and inheritance taxes are cited as the biggest reason farms are being sold. Respondents call for reducing or deferring taxes for heirs, rewarding land kept in agriculture, and exploring tax credits for donating food or land to local programs.
4.	Environmental Protection, Water Quality, & Climate Resilience	Residents repeatedly connect farmland loss to increased urban flooding following normal rain events, poor water quality, heat, and climate fluctuations. They emphasize that protecting farmland protects clean air, clean water, tree canopy, and public health.
5.	Sustainable Agriculture	Respondents see sustainable farming as essential to long-term soil and ecosystem health, which will enhance business operations, profitability, and longevity of farming practices.
6.	Public Education, Outreach, & Agritourism	People, especially youth, need to reconnect with farming. Suggestions include integrating farm visits into school curricula, expanding agritourism, and highlighting local farmers in the media to build appreciation for local agriculture.
7.	Agriculture & Conservation Easements & Incentive Programs	Public support for expanding Wake County’s easement programs and ‘rollback tax’ funding. Respondents want more investment in permanent protection of high-value soils and priority parcels and streamlined participation for landowners.
8.	Local Food Systems & Market Access	Residents value local food for its freshness as well as community and regional impact. They want stronger farmer’s markets, better visibility for local producers, and more county-level support for local food distribution.
9.	Smart Urban Design & Integrated Open Space	Respondents advocate for ‘build up not out’ approaches and call for compact, walkable communities that provide dedicated land for small- and large-scale food production.
10.	Accountability, Partnerships, & Implementation	Many feel frustrated that ‘developers always win.’ Respondents want stronger political will, enforcement mechanisms, and partnerships with organizations like Triangle Land Conservancy and Good Hope Farm to turn preservation goals into action.

# PUBLIC SURVEY

## KEY TAKEAWAYS & INSIGHTS

- > 1. Development pressure dominates every other concern both in volume and emotional tone.
- > 2. Taxes and land economics are the primary drivers of farmland loss, per respondents.
- > 3. Public trust exists in the County’s farmland preservation programs but is paired with calls for greater urgency, scale, and distrust of municipal planning objectives.
- > 4. Education, awareness, and next-generation farming are viewed as crucial long-term strategies.
- > 5. Environmental and public health framing resonates strongly with residents and may help build broad policy support.



# WAKE COUNTY PUV LANDOWNER SURVEY RESULTS

The landowner survey was mailed to over 1,400 farmland owners enrolled in the County's Present Use Value (PUV) Program, including both in-state and out-of-state participants. The survey was designed to understand landowners' priorities, future intentions for their properties, challenges to maintaining agricultural operations, and perspectives on farmland protection and estate planning.

## AGE OF FARMERS WHO RESPONDED TO THE SURVEY

**86%** of farmers who responded to the survey are over the age of 60

**1.7%** of farmers who responded to the survey are under the age of 40

**24.4%**

of respondents are currently enrolled in **Voluntary Agriculture Districts (VAD)**

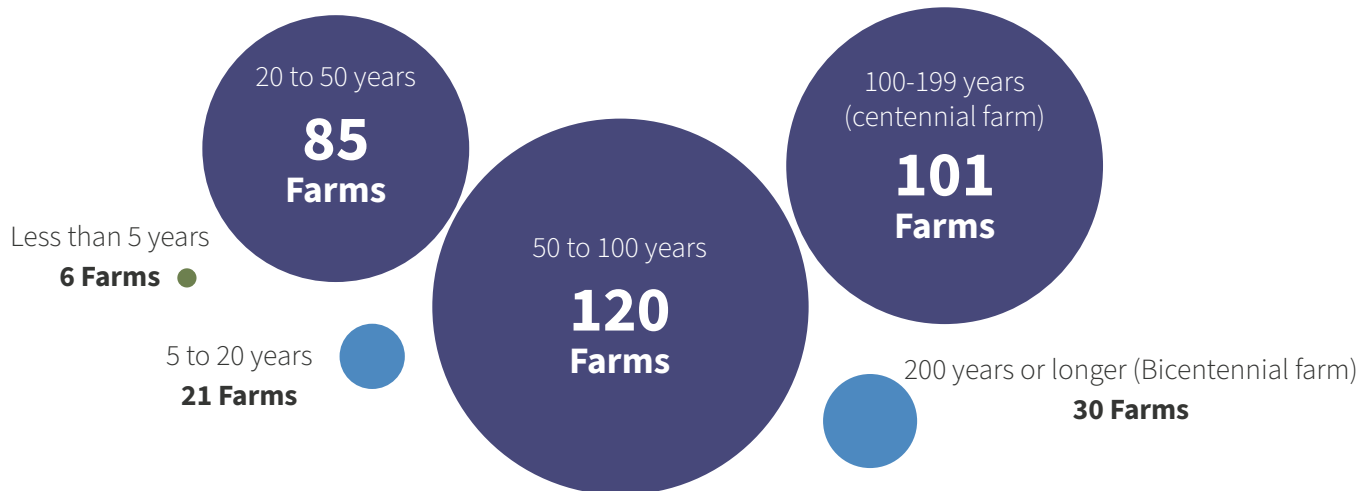
**3.8%**

of respondents are currently enrolled in **Enhanced Voluntary Agriculture Districts (EVAD)**

**10%**

of respondents currently have a **Conservation Easement on their land**

## HOW LONG HAS YOUR FARMLAND BEEN IN YOUR FAMILY?



# WAKE COUNTY PUV LANDOWNER SURVEY RESULTS

## APPROXIMATELY HOW MANY ACRES OF YOUR LAND DO YOU HAVE IN AGRICULTURAL USE?



## WHO PRIMARILY MANAGES YOUR LAND FOR AGRICULTURAL PRODUCTION?

**52%** of farm owners manage their land themselves

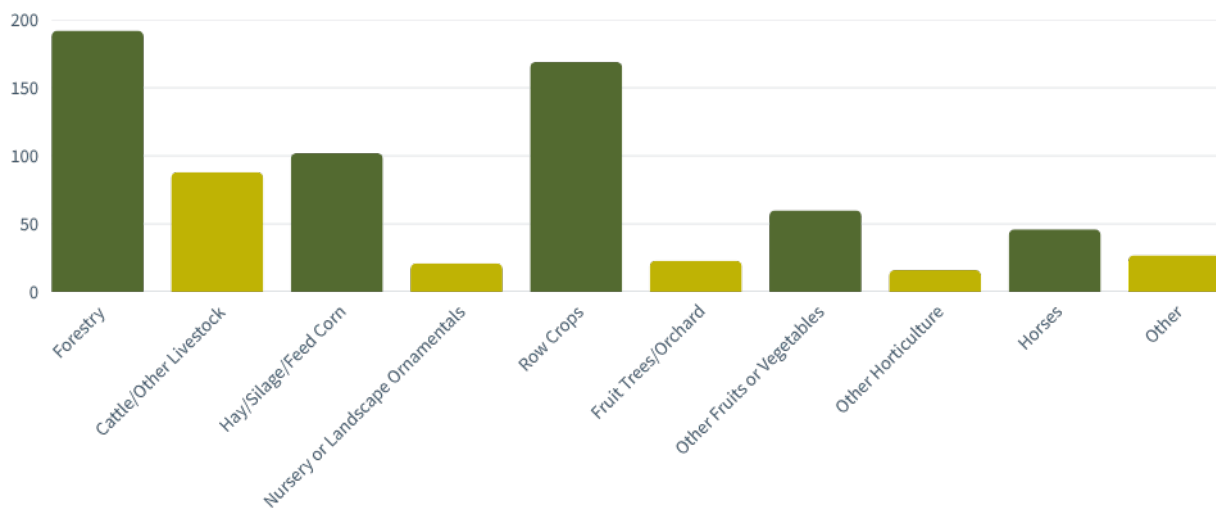
**26%** of farm owners lease their land to someone not in their family

**11%** of farm owners have someone else in their family manage it

**7%** of farm owners contract with someone else to manage their land for them

**5%** of farm owners use some other form of land management

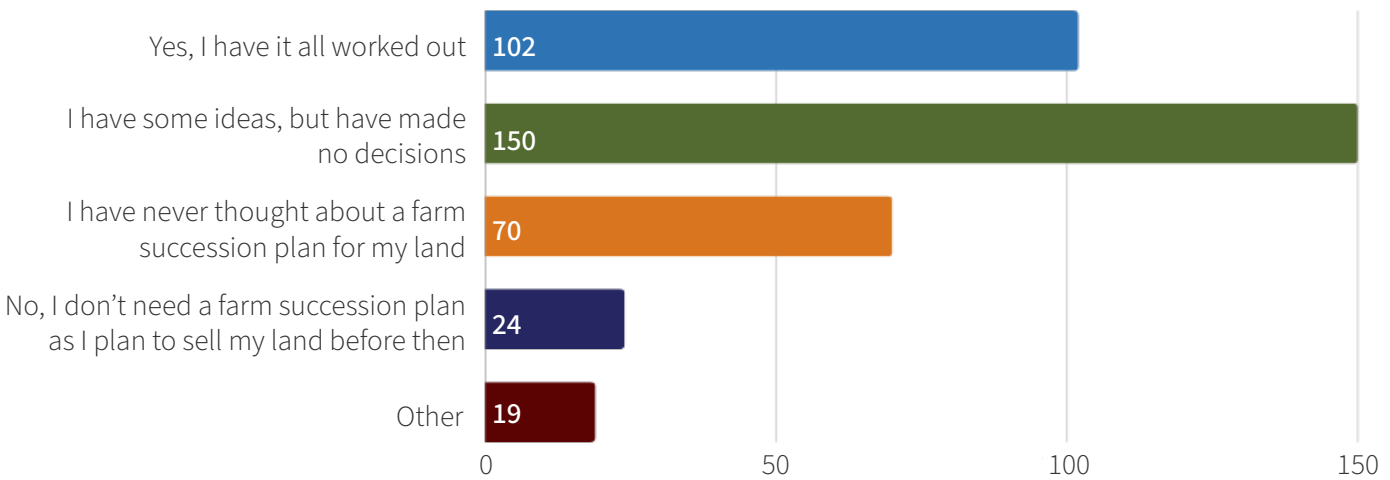
## WHAT ARE THE TOP 3 AGRICULTURAL USES OF YOUR LAND?



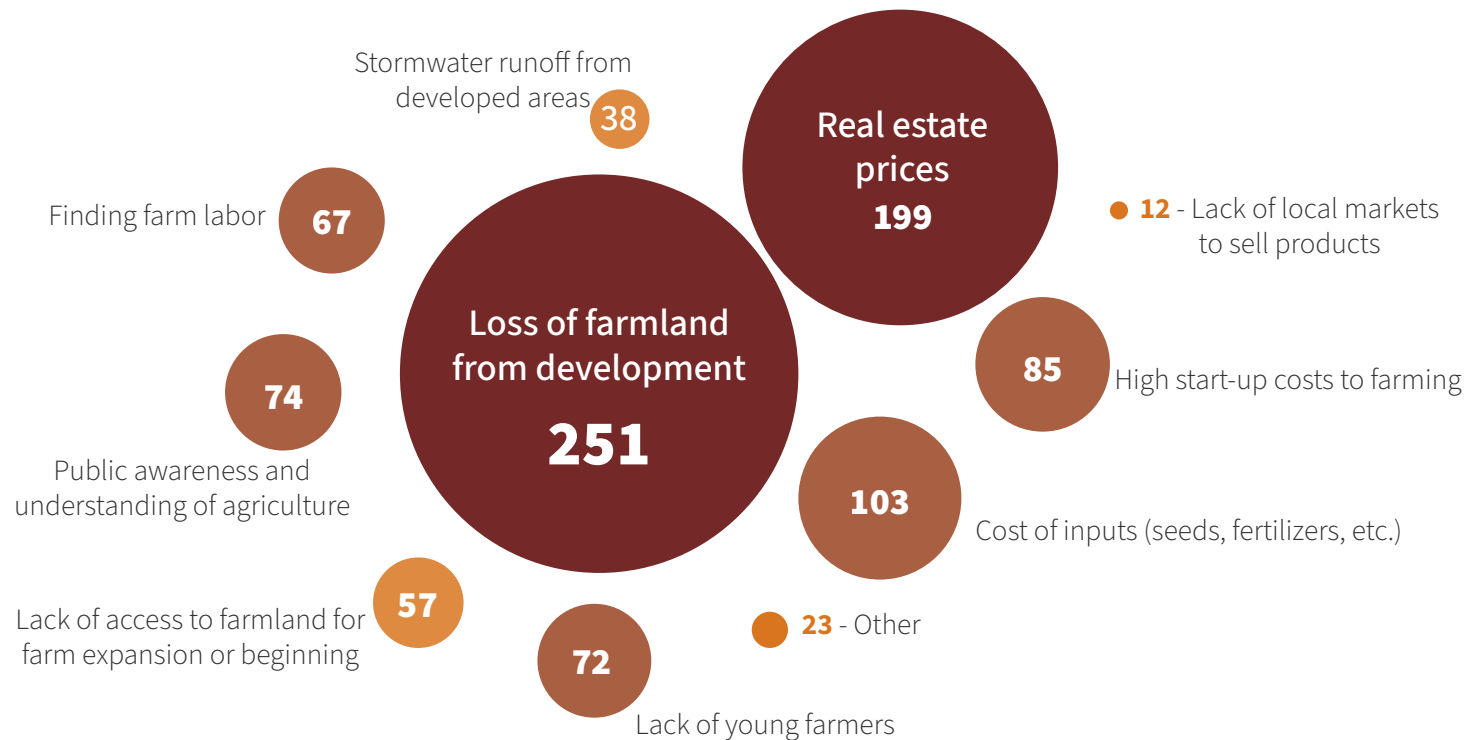
# WAKE COUNTY PUV LANDOWNER SURVEY RESULTS



## DO YOU HAVE A FARM SUCCESSION PLAN FOR YOUR LAND IN THE FUTURE?

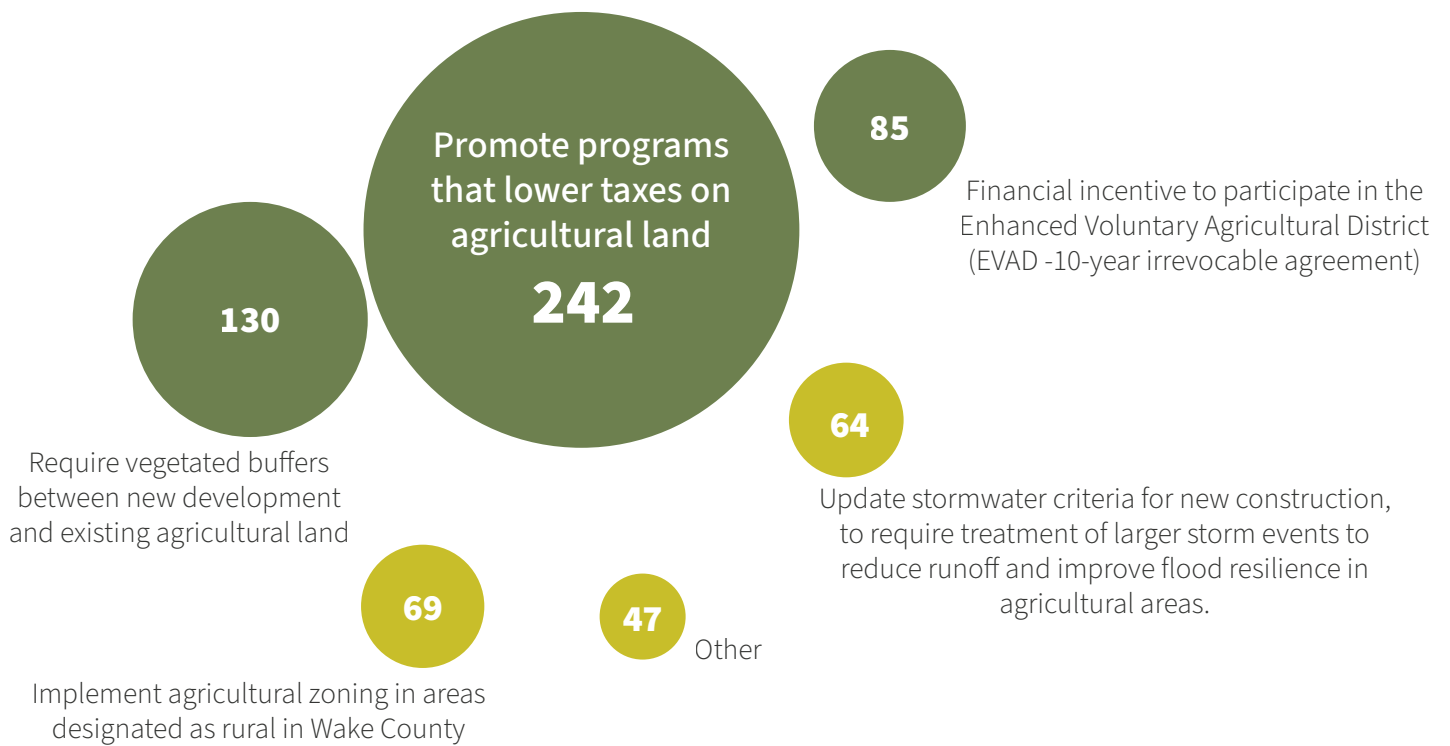


## WHAT ARE THE BIGGEST OBSTACLES TO AGRICULTURE IN THE COUNTY?

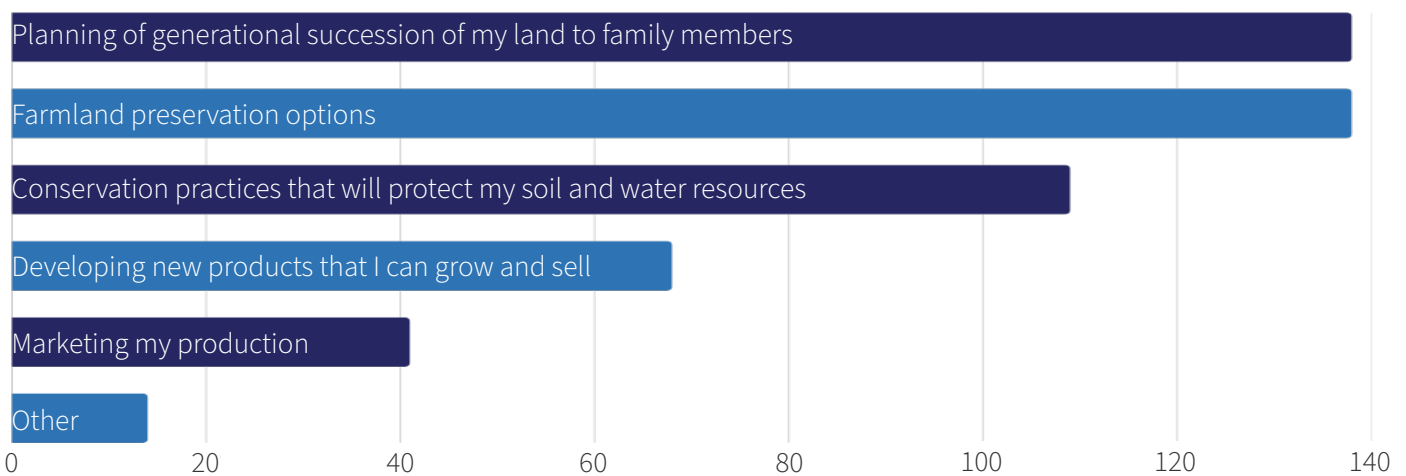


# WAKE COUNTY PUV LANDOWNER SURVEY RESULTS

WHAT ACTIVITIES DO YOU RECOMMEND THE COUNTY ENGAGE IN TO HELP PRESERVE AGRICULTURE, FARMLAND, OR FORESTLAND IN WAKE COUNTY?



## FARMERS EXPRESSED INTEREST IN LEARNING MORE ABOUT:



# WAKE COUNTY PUV LANDOWNER SURVEY RESULTS

## WHAT WAS LEARNED FROM THE FARMERS:

**At the heart of these responses is a clear message: without tangible financial and policy support, even the most committed farmers fear that Wake County’s agricultural landscape and the heritage it represents will not survive another generation.**

Landowners who actively farm or manage working lands in Wake County voiced a strong sense of frustration, fatigue, and urgency about the pressures facing agriculture. Many feel they are being “squeezed out” by surrounding development as new subdivisions, industrial parks, and roads encroach on their boundaries, while stormwater sediment runoff and trespassing from nearby neighborhoods threaten their operations. They described a widening disconnect between those who farm and those making land-use decisions, often pointing to municipal annexations and **ETJ** expansion as direct threats to their property rights and livelihoods. Rising property taxes, unpredictable assessments, and the lack of farm-focused financial incentives have left many farmers questioning whether they or their children can afford to continue. Despite these challenges, a consistent theme emerged: landowners are deeply committed to keeping Wake County’s farm and working lands in production and intact, and they are asking for stronger, more enforceable policies, meaningful tax relief, and visible County leadership that prioritizes agriculture as part of the County’s long-term identity, economy, and culture.

### EXTRATERRITORIAL JURISDICTION

Extraterritorial jurisdiction (ETJ) is the authority of a municipality to apply its land use and development regulations to an area of unincorporated county land just outside of its official city limits. This allows municipalities to guide future growth by enforcing zoning, building codes, and subdivision regulations in these adjacent areas, ensuring that development is compatible with the municipality’s long-term plans and can be smoothly incorporated when the area is annexed in the future.

## TOP 10 PUV LANDOWNER PRIORITIES FOR FARMLAND PRESERVATION

RANK	PRIORITY	FEEDBACK
1.	Address Municipal Encroachment	Limit ETJ expansion; protect farmland from town-driven development and rezoning pressures.
2.	Provide Property Tax Relief & Inheritance Tax Support	Tax support for active farms; maintain Present Use value (PUV) protections and grandfather rates for legacy farmland; consider incentives for intergenerational transfers or sale to other farmers.
3.	Allow Flexible Zoning & Ability to Subdivide	Helps with farm succession, on-farm housing for future generations, and access to capital for reinvestment; enables small adjustments that preserve a farm and keep it in the family versus losing it entirely.
4.	Slow or Regulate Development	Enforce stronger growth management policies; stop rezoning rural land for dense subdivisions until infrastructure can support it; require wider buffers between farmland and residential areas.
5.	Increase Financial Assistance & Cost-Share Programs	Expand access to grants, low-interest loans, and cost-share programs for farm infrastructure, equipment, and soil conservation; prioritize small and minority-owned farms.

# WAKE COUNTY PUV LANDOWNER SURVEY RESULTS

RANK	PRIORITY	FEEDBACK
6.	Expand Conservation & Agriculture Easements & Land Protection Tools	Strengthen partnerships with organizations like Triangle Land Conservancy; streamline the easement process and provide funding or match dollars for voluntary preservation.
7.	Enhance Farm Transition & Beginning Farmer Support	Develop programs that connect aging farmers with new entrants; offer business training, land-link programs, and equipment-sharing opportunities to sustain farming long-term.
8.	Address Trespassing & Safety Concerns	Enforce stricter trespass laws and educate nearby residents that farms are private property; provide fencing and signage support where development borders farmland.
9.	Protect Water Quality, Soils & Wildlife	Integrate farmland protection with environmental planning to reduce runoff, flooding, and habitat loss; preserve prime soils and wooded buffers.
10.	Increase Recognition & Public Education	Promote farming's impact & value through local media, school programs, and community partnerships; celebrate the cultural and economic role of agriculture in Wake County.

## KEY TAKEAWAYS & INSIGHTS

- **1. Municipal expansion and annexation are the dominant threats**, leaving farmers feeling sidelined as development spreads into rural areas.
- **2. Rising property and inheritance taxes are a leading cause of farmland conversion**, making it harder for families to retain or transfer their land.
- **3. Uncontrolled development is directly impacting operations**, through runoff, traffic, and loss of buffers between farms and neighborhoods.
- **4. Landowners seek practical, financial tools—not symbolic support**—including cost-share programs, easements, and start-up assistance.
- **5. Farmers remain hopeful but call for stronger County leadership**, emphasizing the need for visible action and long-term commitment to agriculture.



# ABOUT THE FARMERS

## FARMER & LAND PROFILES

In July 2025, the consultant team and Wake SWCD staff conducted interviews with four farmers, one couple who manage land for forestry, one horticultural business owner, and two farm managers who operate farmland available to the public. Some highlights and summaries of these interviews are discussed in the following pages.



### PORTER FARMS & NURSERY

#### Quick Facts

- **Location:** Willow Spring, NC
- **Owner:** Ashley Porter
- **Founded:** 1997
- **Products:** You-pick strawberries and blackberries, and other produce (in summer), pumpkins and mums (in fall), and homemade ice cream (year round)
- **Distinction:** Operates one of the first commercial-scale strawberry operations in Wake County
- **Type:** Family-owned farm with agritourism and community engagement

Located in Willow Spring, Porter Farms & Nursery is widely known for its strawberries. The farm is owned and operated by Ashley Porter who began leasing small pieces of land “here and there” and opened a farm stand in 1997. In 2005, Porter Farms became Wake County’s **first Certified Roadside Farm Market**. Mr. Porter purchased his first piece of farmland in 2007. The public has been invited onto the land as part of the business model since then. The farm has been built by Mr. Porter “from the ground up” and he now manages 50 acres of produce in dispersed fields and two farm stands: one in Willow Spring and one in Raleigh.



Over the years, Porter Farms has diversified its operations to include you-pick berries (with strawberries being their main product), fall products such as pumpkins and mums, and homemade ice cream; making it a destination for local residents and visitors. Their business model blends production agriculture with agritourism, showing how small farms can remain viable amid suburban expansion.

“Every year is different,” said Mr. Porter. When one crop may not be doing as well, another farmer can lease their land to grow something else on it and diversify the systems and soils to keep the land in production. However, in general Mr. Porter says he has witnessed a downward trend in the general public’s interest.

During this interview, Mr. Porter received a text message asking if he is interested in selling his land. **He said he receives multiple offers on his land nearly every day.**



## PLANT DELIGHTS NURSERY & JUNIPER LEVEL BOTANIC GARDEN

### Quick Facts

- **Location:** Raleigh, NC
- **Owner:** Tony Avent
- **Founded:** 1986
- **Size:** 28 acres
- **Features:** 27,000+ plant taxa; combined nursery and botanic garden
- **Recognition:** Internationally recognized for horticultural research and plant diversity

Few farms in Wake County capture the intersection of science, artistry, and agricultural entrepreneurship quite like Plant Delights Nursery and Juniper Level Botanic Garden. Founded by renowned plantsman Tony Avent in 1986, this 28-acre operation blends commercial nursery production with scientific plant exploration and education. Mr. Avent's family has been in the county since the 1700s. When he and his wife bought their first land for horticulture operations, it was \$5,000 an acre. Mr. Avent said that the most recent land he bought was for \$50,000 an acre.



This business has many unique accolades and it currently houses the **largest fern collection in the world** according to the British Pteridological (Fern) Society. Recognized internationally for its plant diversity and horticultural research, Plant Delights stands as a Wake County success story—proof that agriculture, science, and business can coexist, and that farmland preservation can fuel innovation rather than constrain it.

Although this business is renowned worldwide, it is not without its challenges, especially more recently. An acre of the property was acquired by the NC Department of Transportation for the expansion of the NC 540 toll road in southern Wake County. Additionally, due to inflationary pressures, Mr. Avent had to lay off 20% of his staff in 2024. Farmland loss is one of a multitude of threats facing agriculture.



Nowadays, the site houses more than 27,000 plant taxa and serves as both a working nursery and a botanic garden that attracts visitors from across the world. Pesticides have not been used on the land in 30 years.

Avent's philosophy—"We're plant collectors, conservationists, and teachers first"—reflects a deep understanding that **farmland is not just a production space but a living laboratory**. His work underscores the ecological and educational value of farmland that remains in production. "This horticulture business seeks to conserve plant species through cultivation to keep them from going extinct" Preserving biodiversity is the primary goal of this business.



## JONES FAMILY FORESTRY

### Quick Facts

- **Location:** Holly Springs, NC
- **Owner:** Allen and Susan Jones
- **Focus:** Forestry and conservation land management
- **Practices:** Reforestation, wildlife habitat preservation, managed woodlots
- **Contribution:** Long-term water quality, soil conservation, and wildlife corridors

The Jones family’s presence in Wake County embodies continuity, conservation, and quiet leadership. In 1984, they purchased their first acre of property and built their house in 1987. They are only the third owner of the land since the 1800s.

While much of their land base has been in forestry and managed woodlots, their stewardship goes beyond timber: over the decades, they have actively reforested, preserved habitat, and maintained natural corridors for wildlife. Their approach sees forested land not only as an economic asset but as part of the ecological infrastructure of the county—filtering water, sequestering carbon, and connecting green corridors.



Their biggest concern currently is the Town of Holly Springs annexing their land. Their home in the forest became part of the Holly Springs ETJ over five years ago. Both Allen and Susan agreed on the need to **establish conservation corridors of open space** and for the **municipalities to come on board with each other** to achieve this. “They are all separate entities with their own goals which don’t speak to each other.”

“We’ve spent our lives loving the nature here, and it breaks my heart seeing land destroyed by the development.” The Jones were clear that the land is the only investment they have, and they can’t afford to lose the ability to sell land to the highest bidder.



Even as suburban growth edges closer, the Joneses remains a steadfast example of how working forests contribute to county resilience. Their conservation work helps make the case for funding strong, layered incentives for both crop farmers and forest landowners. For the Jones family, preservation is both legacy and logic, demonstrating that sustainable forestry is a vital part of Wake County’s working lands future.



## BARHAM FAMILY FARMS LLC

### Quick Facts

- **Location:** Wake and Franklin counties, NC
- **Owner:** Bennie and Blake Barham
- **Acreage:** Over 2,000 acres
- **Crops:** Soybeans, tobacco, wheat, canola, and cucumbers
- **Recognition:** 2024 Farm Family of the Year (Wake County SWCD)
- **Practices:** Cover crops, field borders, waterways, and efficient irrigation

Barham Family Farms is a cornerstone of Wake County’s working-lands economy—large enough to feed regional supply chains yet grounded in a stewardship ethic built over generations. Led by Bennie and his son Blake, the family manages more than 2,000 acres (much of it is owned, some is leased) across Wake and Franklin counties in a diverse crop rotation that includes soybeans, tobacco, wheat, canola, and cucumbers.

What was once a patchwork of farms and forest has become a mix of subdivisions, roads, and commercial corridors. Yet amid that transformation, the Barhams have doubled down on conservation-minded management—planting cover crops annually, installing field borders and waterways, and upgrading their irrigation systems to conserve water. Their dedication earned them the 2024 Farm Family of the Year award from the Wake SWCD.

Blake Barham’s primary recommendation for the County is to **educate the public about where their food comes from**. He believes if consumers understood the difference between locally grown produce and food imported from unregulated markets, they might make different choices.



Looking ahead, Mr. Barham sees farming evolving to include greater public engagement through agritourism and education. He believes the next generation of farmers must connect directly with residents to help them understand both the challenges and the value of keeping agriculture part of Wake County’s identity.



## PATRICK JOHNSON / LAZY J RANCH

### Quick Facts

- **Location:** Eastern Wake County, NC
- **Owner:** Patrick Johnson
- **Acreage:** 86 acres
- **Operation:** Sheep farm with permanent conservation easement
- **Partners:** Wake County and Triangle Land Conservancy (TLC)
- **Advocacy:** Supports bond referendum for farmland protection and PUV stabilization

In eastern Wake County near Zebulon, Lazy J Ranch stands as a living reminder of the county’s agricultural roots and a vivid example of what farmland preservation can achieve. Patrick Johnson’s family has stewarded this 86-acre sheep farm for generations.

This ranch, now permanently conserved through a Wake County and Triangle Land Conservancy agricultural conservation easement since 2022, demonstrates how strategic action can preserve agricultural heritage even in the fastest developing areas. His land will remain either in agricultural use or as open space in perpetuity, even as the surrounding land is developed.



Johnson warns that even with legal protections, the landscape is changing fast. He advocates for a **countywide bond referendum to fund permanent conservation easements** and strengthen the PUV program, ensuring consistent funding and long-term protection.

Patrick Johnson expressed the greatest challenge facing the ranch has been the ongoing **habitat and farmland fragmentation** resulting from rapid development in Wake County. As new roads, subdivisions, and commercial projects move closer, the once continuous landscape that supported wildlife movement and viable agricultural operations has become increasingly divided into smaller, isolated parcels. This fragmentation affects everything from pasture management and livestock movement to water quality, wildlife corridors, and long-term farm viability.

For the ranch, this means navigating additional pressures—managing fencing along new property lines, adjusting grazing plans as adjacent lands convert to dense development, addressing increased stormwater runoff from impervious surfaces, and mitigating the impacts of reduced wildlife habitat. Despite these challenges, Mr. Johnson continues to prioritize conservation stewardship, demonstrating how preserved farms can remain resilient even as the surrounding landscape transforms.



## JOHN BURT / IRON HORSE FARMS

### Quick Facts

- **Location:** Fuquay-Varina, NC
- **Owner:** John Burt and family
- **Acreage:** 700 acres
- **Operations:** Beef cattle, hay, timber, and equine boarding
- **Roles:** President of Wake County Farm Bureau; farmland preservation advocate
- **Heritage:** Family land dates to a 1754 British land grant

John Burt stands among the few maintaining agricultural continuity in Wake County. His farm—centered in Fuquay-Varina—is deeply rooted in history, with the Burt family tracing its land to a 1754 British land grant. Today, John and Rachael manage nearly 700 acres in beef cattle, hay, timber, and equine boarding. As development encroaches, Burt has become a leading advocate for farmland preservation, emphasizing the **need for smarter growth and public understanding of agriculture’s broader value.**

As President of the Wake County Farm Bureau, Burt champions farmland preservation in policy circles, reminding decision-makers that once farmland is gone, it’s gone forever. His leadership blends heritage with advocacy, showing how multigenerational farms can adapt while protecting their legacy—and the region’s agricultural identity.

Mr. Burt attributes his success in farming to being **flexible and adaptable** with operations. He studies agricultural trends to ensure that his operation will be viable as the economy constantly changes. He also applauds Wake County’s success of taking 100 percent of the PUV rollback funding and applying it towards the purchase of conservation easements. Looking forward, he believes there needs to be a focus on **creating ways to make farming affordable for startups and new farmers.**



## MUNICIPAL & COUNTY PARTNERSHIP: GOOD HOPE FARM

Once a traditional tobacco farm, Good Hope Farm in Cary has become a flagship example of how municipalities can preserve farmland, foster entrepreneurship, and reconnect residents to local food systems. The Town of Cary purchased the property and integrated it into its Parks, Recreation, and Cultural Resources system, transforming it into a working demonstration farm managed through a public-private partnership.

At its heart is Thomas Saile, who began as the first incubator farmer to lease a plot and later became Farm Manager. Today, he oversees operations across 30 acres, coordinating leases for up to 15 farmers who grow produce for the CSA program and local markets. The farm's infrastructure—irrigation systems, greenhouses, shared equipment, and cold storage—gives new farmers access to resources that are typically cost-prohibitive.



Good Hope Farm's establishment was fueled by strong community partnerships and creative funding. The farm received some private business donations to launch the project, and ongoing operations are funded through the Town's parks budget. Public tours and youth programs invite residents to experience the value of working lands firsthand. Wake SWCD is working with the Town of Cary to enroll Good Hope Farm into the County Voluntary Agricultural District (VAD) program. This would be the first municipal farm in Wake County to do so. *Photo credit for images of Good Hope Farm: Piedmont Conservation Council.*

## HOW A LAND TRUST BRIDGES FARMING, NATURE, AND COMMUNITY: TRIANGLE LAND CONSERVANCY'S WILLIAMSON PRESERVE

The Bailey and Sarah Williamson Preserve stands as a flagship example of how a land trust can turn farmland protection into a community legacy. Spanning 447 acres across Wake and Johnston counties, the preserve unites conservation, farming, and public education under one landscape. What was once a traditional family farm now hosts a mosaic of open meadows, riparian buffers, and active farmland—integrated into a design that protects soil, water, and wildlife while welcoming the public to learn from the land.



TLC spearheaded the project with impactful collaboration, combining a major family donation with county and state funding to create a preserve where working farmland, regenerative agriculture, and recreation coexist. With 16.6 miles of trails and 50 acres of active farmland, Williamson serves as a living classroom demonstrating the balance between conservation and productivity.

With over 25,000 acres conserved, eight nature preserves, and 16 miles of public trails, TLC's leadership has transformed farmland preservation into a regional priority. The Williamson Preserve is proof that preservation is not passive—it is an active investment in a future where farming, nature, and community thrive side by side.



# BEST PRACTICES & POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

## OVERVIEW

This section outlines current best practices, policy tools, funding mechanisms, and collaborative strategies that are meant to help Wake County protect farmland, support farmers, sustain agricultural viability, and preserve both its rural heritage and legacy agricultural businesses. Organized into four focus areas—**Farm-Friendly Land-Use Policies**, **Farm Ownership Support**, **Agricultural Protection Funds**, and **Environmental, Economic, & Social Benefits of Farmland**—these recommendations provide a roadmap for coordinated action among County agencies, municipalities, land trusts like Triangle Land Conservancy and other key stakeholders.

Individual landowners are intended to maintain the right to sell their property. These recommendations are a framework for including current farmland in future plans, as long as landowners wish to remain in production.

# FARM-FRIENDLY LAND-USE POLICIES

## CORE ISSUE & OPPORTUNITY

Development pressure and a patchwork of inconsistent municipal land-use designations remain the greatest threats to Wake County’s active farms and working lands. As the county continues to grow, farmland is increasingly viewed as “future development land,” rather than as a critical component of the county’s economy, food supply, ecology, and identity in its current use. Both general public and landowner surveys confirm that land-use policy is the single most important issue influencing the future of farmland protection in Wake County.

Wake County’s leadership in shaping coordinated land-use policy is therefore essential. By setting clear expectations for how the twelve municipalities plan and grow, all

communities in Wake County can ensure that farmland conservation and economic development work in tandem rather than in conflict. Coordinated infrastructure planning, consistent zoning interpretation, and shared conservation overlays will help direct growth to appropriate areas while safeguarding prime agricultural soils and working lands.

By aligning with recent existing initiatives in PlanWake and the OneWater Plan, Wake County can clearly define where growth should, and should not, occur. These frameworks, when integrated with the Farmland Preservation Plan, position the County to guide infrastructure investments, prevent fragmentation, and maintain the rural landscapes that sustain its agricultural legacy and economy as well as cultural heritage.

NATIONAL BEST PRACTICES	WHY IT MATTERS
Direct Growth Toward Existing Centers	Urban growth boundaries and service areas reduce farmland loss by concentrating development where infrastructure already exists.
Integrate Farmland Preservation into Comprehensive Planning	Embedding farmland protection within countywide growth, housing, and resilience goals ensures it becomes part of the long-term planning framework.
Agricultural Zoning	Establishes clear districts where farming and working lands are prioritized, minimizing incompatible uses and speculative development pressures. It provides predictability for farmers and developers while safeguarding agricultural base and managing buffers between land uses.
Agricultural Growth Zone (AGZ)	AGZ is a program that provides incentives for the permanent preservation of agricultural land through conservation easements.
Conservation Zoning & Cluster Development	Compact development footprints can retain large open-space tracts, preserve working lands and ecologically sensitive areas, like wetlands and streams.
Regional Coordination & Policy Alignment	Cross-jurisdiction collaboration prevents policy gaps and duplication, ensuring farmland protection across municipal boundaries.
Broaden Permissible Agricultural Uses	Outdated zoning limits new farm-based enterprises. Allowing small-scale commercial, educational, and recreation uses on agricultural land, including forests, supports diversified income streams for landowners. Consider an ‘Urban Farms and Gardens’ model ordinance that creates uniformity across County and municipalities.
Allow Mixed-Use Agricultural Structures	Flexible building codes allowing barns and greenhouses to serve both production and community uses enhance farm viability and exposure.
Dedicated Agricultural Planner Position	A staff position focused solely on farmland preservation, agricultural policy and permitting, and inter-jurisdictional coordination would institutionalize long-term support for this work.

\* American Planning Association

## RECOMMENDATIONS

1. **Address concerns from ETJ and future land-use conflicts.** Start with a baseline map. Conduct a **Future Land-Use Overlay Audit** to identify where municipal plans or “future development” designations overlap active farms and forests. Use findings to create a revised baseline map and develop shared “Farmland Preservation” or “Working Lands” categories that can be used consistently within County and municipal comprehensive plans. Assess if a Farmland Compatibility Overlay District is needed to advance preservation and development goals simultaneously.
2. **Consider agricultural compatibility buffers.** Consider the best approaches to realize vegetated and/or spatial buffers between permanent farmland operations and non-agricultural development. These buffers would be focused on reducing visual, noise, and operational conflicts and protecting the long-term viability of working farms.
3. **Consider creating an Agricultural Zoning District** that landowners can opt into. This district would be another tool for interested landowners and could provide advantages that are not provided by other tools.
4. **Integrate farmland protection into transportation planning.** Create a Transportation and Farmland Coordination Group including Wake SWCD staff, NC Department of Transportation (NCDOT), Capital Area Metropolitan Planning Organization, and municipal planners to evaluate farmland impacts early in transportation project design. This proactive coordination will minimize right-of-way conflicts and preserve access to local farms and markets.
5. **Evaluate the existing Open Space Subdivision Ordinance** for opportunities to incentivize protecting prime agricultural lands in developments.

**Expected Outcomes:** Transparent, coordinated planning processes, reduced farmland fragmentation, and integrated farmland considerations in infrastructure development.

### EXTRATERRITORIAL JURISDICTION

Extraterritorial jurisdiction (ETJ) is the authority of a municipality to apply its land use and development regulations to an area of unincorporated county land just outside of its official city limits. This allows municipalities to guide future growth by enforcing zoning, building codes, and subdivision regulations in these adjacent areas, ensuring that development is compatible with the municipality’s long-term plans and can be smoothly incorporated when the area is annexed in the future.

### FUTURE LAND-USE OVERLAY AUDIT

A GIS-based inventory identifying where municipal future land-use and zoning layers conflict with active farms and forests and used to inform coordinated planning tools, such as a Farmland Compatibility Overlay District, and prioritize strategic farmland preservation.



# FARM OWNERSHIP SUPPORT

## CORE ISSUE & OPPORTUNITY

Keeping farmland in production across generations depends on policies that make farming economically viable and operationally flexible. Legacy and family farms in Wake County face increasing challenges from rising land costs, regulatory hurdles, and the complexities of succession planning. Without accessible tools and coordinated support, many multi-generational legacy farms risk being sold or fragmented during ownership transitions.

Wake County can help sustain its agricultural base by adopting policies that reduce the tax and regulatory burden on working farms, streamline permitting, and enable more flexible pathways for inheritance, conservation, and adaptive farm and forest uses. The County can support current and future farmers through targeted programs and technical assistance that contribute to sustainable agricultural practices. Together, these efforts will ensure that farming remains both economically viable and environmentally resilient for future generations.

*“Family farms are being taxed out of existence. I want to pass this land to my children, but the tax bill grows faster than the crops.”*

— Wake County Landowner Survey Respondent

*“We are literally getting squeezed out of our property, and we hate to think of selling, not because we need the farm income, but because land is so very beautiful, a haven for wildlife, and a learning experience for our children. However, we soon won’t be able to look out our front door without seeing industrial buildings and residential out the back, and the stormwater runoff from surrounding development... There just doesn’t seem to be a way for us to get the value of our land or to move to another farm without selling on the regular market.”*

— Wake County Landowner Survey Respondent

NATIONAL BEST PRACTICES	WHY IT MATTERS
Additional Support for Heritage, Next-Generation, & Historically Underserved Farmers	Access to land, capital, and training for heritage and new farmers sustains the agricultural economy. Support programs tailored for heir landowners who wish to keep land in agricultural uses.
Incentivize Beneficial Agricultural Practices	Incentives for soil health, cover cropping, riparian restoration, and responsible renewable energy adoption strengthen resilience and sustainability.
Expedite Agricultural Permitting	Simplified reviews for low-risk agricultural structures reduce time and costs for farmers.
Agritourism and Rural Enterprise Zones	Diversified rural economies sustain farm operations and connect residents and visitors to local agriculture. Create incentives for agritourism that are uniform across County and municipalities
Allow a Range of Housing Types on Farmland	Affordable on-site farmworker and intergenerational housing ensures labor stability and supports succession planning.
Climate-Resilient Agriculture	Healthy soils and riparian buffers sequester carbon, reduce erosion, and enhance resilience to extreme weather. Consider crops that can withstand temperature variations.

\* American Planning Association

## RECOMMENDATIONS

- 1. Allow flexible subdivision for family and estate needs.** Enable limited homesite subdivisions for heirs while maintaining agricultural status through conservation design. This provides flexibility for family succession without encouraging fragmentation or loss of prime soils.
- 2. Support and promote Agritourism.** Revise regulatory processes to simplify and streamline agritourism approvals. Provide technical assistance and business development resources for farmers seeking to expand agritourism ventures as part of a diversified farm economy.
- 3. Offer counseling and education on estate planning.** Explore options to reduce financial barriers for farmers and provide guidance on **navigating federal inheritance tax policy**. This support could make it easier for heirs to retain agricultural operations, keeping land in production.
- 4. Support incubator and accelerator farms** like the programs at Good Hope Farm and Triangle Land Conservancy's Williamson Farm that support the next generation of farmers.

**Expected Outcomes:** Enhanced farm viability, diversified income sources, and coordinated local policies that support long-term agricultural operations.

### NAVIGATING INHERITANCE TAXES TO KEEP FARMS IN FAMILIES

Landowners across Wake County voiced a clear concern when surveyed: inheritance and estate taxes often force families to sell farmland just to cover costs, breaking the continuity of family operations and accelerating farmland loss.

Wake County can provide support for estate planning and align with state partners to make passing down farms more financially viable. Key strategies include:

- Offering financial counseling to navigate the federal system;
- Tax deferrals or exemptions for heirs who keep inherited land in active farming;
- Incentives to sell to other farmers instead of developers; and
- Extending Present Use Value (PUV) protections through inheritance to prevent tax spikes.

Addressing inheritance tax barriers and providing tax education programs can help families retain farmland.

### WHAT IS AGRITOURISM?

**Agritourism** refers to activities that invite the public to experience and enjoy working farms and rural life. These experiences can include farm stays, pick-your-own produce, hayrides, festivals, educational tours, on-farm markets, and events that connect visitors with local food and agricultural traditions.

Agritourism strengthens the farm economy by providing farmers with supplemental income while educating residents and visitors about the importance of agriculture. It also promotes rural heritage, supports small businesses, and builds community appreciation for farmland as both a livelihood and a shared cultural asset.

### AGRITOURISM ZONING PROTECTION

N.C.G.S. § 160D-903(a) provides zoning protection for agritourism activities on bona fide farms, exempting buildings or structures used for agritourism from county and extraterritorial zoning ordinances under certain conditions.

# AGRICULTURAL PROTECTION FUNDS

## CORE ISSUE & OPPORTUNITY

Wake County’s farmland and working lands are under growing pressure from development and land speculation, which continue to drive up land values and fragment agricultural landscapes. Without reliable and sustained funding for conservation, even the most productive and strategically located farms remain vulnerable to conversion.

The County has made significant strides in protecting farmland by leveraging the PUV rollback funds to pay for the purchase of agricultural conservation easements. However, this source is limited because it relies on land to leave agricultural status in order for funds to replenish. Diversification of this funding will create an even more effective tool to be able to actively save working lands from development.

*“Our land has been in the family for over a hundred years. My children only see dollar signs, and I can’t blame them.”*  
 — Wake County Landowner Survey Respondent

Long-term funding is the foundation of farmland protection. Wake County can establish stable and recurring revenue streams through tools such as sustaining the rollback tax funding; supplementing it with annual appropriations or potential inclusion in open space bond funding referenda. Other options include agricultural transfer fees, payment-for-ecosystem-services programs, and by strengthening partnerships with state and federal agencies, land trusts like Triangle Land Conservancy (TLC), and municipalities. Pooling these resources will enable the County to permanently protect high-priority farmland while supporting the continued productivity of working lands.

A strong funding framework for land protection signals the County’s long-term commitment to agricultural resilience and rural heritage. By sustaining and enhancing the existing local funding program, Wake County can leverage outside investment, accelerate the process of establishing agricultural conservation easements, and expand the acreage of protected farmland across the county.

NATIONAL BEST PRACTICES *	WHY IT MATTERS
Stable, Long-Term Funding for Farmland Protection	Dedicated revenue streams, agricultural transfer taxes, payment-for-ecosystem-services programs enable predictable conservation investments.
Strengthen Partnerships for Easements & Stewardship	Land trusts and Soil & Water Conservation Districts provide expertise and capacity for implementing and monitoring conservation easements.
Targeted Farmer Programs to Reduce Tax Burden	Property tax relief, agricultural use-value assessments, and income tax credits for conservation easements reduce operating costs and encourage farmers to keep land in production rather than selling for development.

\* American Planning Association

## RECOMMENDATIONS

- 1. Continue the success of the PUV Rollback Funding.** Wake SWCD should build on the recent successes of its Purchase of Agricultural Conservation Easement (PACE) Program by adding a Farmland Preservation Manager to expand the District’s capacity to independently close, hold, and monitor ACEs on priority farmland. At the same time, the District should continue to maintain and strengthen its partnership with TLC to ensure shared capacity for holding and monitoring easements. Together, these efforts will help ensure that conservation initiatives keep pace with the accelerating rate of farmland conversion.

2. **Explore an Endowment Fund for farmland preservation.** Evaluate the creation of a dedicated Farmland Preservation or Rural Legacy Endowment Fund to support conservation easements, farmland purchases, or tax-deferred agreements that permanently protect high-priority and culturally significant agricultural land. This endowment could be supported through private philanthropy, corporate partnerships, and County investment.
3. **Expand direct funding mechanisms for operational farms.** Continue leveraging success of the PUV rollback tax revenue and County match to secure state and federal funding through programs such as the NC Agricultural Development & Farmland Preservation Trust Fund and USDA Agricultural Land Easement Program. Create a Wake County Farmland Preservation Fund with tiered programs for **Legacy and Heritage Farm** Grants, EVAD Stewardship Payments (approximately \$1,000/acre), and Innovation Mini-Grants.
4. **Add staffing capacity to the Wake County Farmland Preservation Program** to align local, state, and federal investments into a Farmland Preservation Program and to implement policy recommendations from the adopted Farmland Preservation Plan.
5. **Support conservation organizations** such as TLC, which protects farmland and ensures its availability for future generations.
6. **Advocate for state & federal recognition of Historic Farmland.** Partner with the NC Department of Agriculture & Consumer Services and the NC Department of Natural and Cultural Resources to create a State and National Register of Historic Farmlands. Offer tax-credit incentives and technical assistance to landowners seeking designation and long-term protection. Advocate for program funding to achieve outlined objectives.
7. **Consider a Farmland Protection Bond Referendum.** Consider a bond referendum to generate additional funding for land acquisition associated with agricultural conservation easements.

**Expected Outcomes:** Predictable annual returns for preserved farms, increased EVAD enrollment, increased annual closings on ACEs, increased eligibility in tax incentive programs, enhanced support for all types of farmers and agricultural operations, and strengthened cultural preservation.

### AGRICULTURAL PRESERVATION AS A PLACE-BASED ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT STRATEGY

Farmland protection is a core economic development strategy that strengthens Wake County’s agribusiness sector, workforce, and local food systems. Aligning with NC Ag Leads’ vision of agriculture as a top-tier industry, the County can frame farmland preservation as an investment in economic competitiveness rather than simply open space. Key partners should integrate farm viability metrics, business training, beginning-farmer and workforce initiatives, heritage and legacy farm programs, and pilot programs for ag-tech and climate-resilient practices. By positioning Wake County’s urban-edge setting as a model for “agriculture at the metro periphery,” the County can demonstrate how farmland preservation, agribusiness, and managed growth work together to drive sustainable regional prosperity.

### AGRICULTURE IMPACT EVALUATION

An Agricultural Impact Evaluation is a review process that assesses how proposed ordinances, plans, and programs may affect active farming and agricultural land before they are adopted or implemented.

Wake County and other local governments can use this tool to ensure that policies support the long-term viability of agriculture. Regularly evaluating potential impacts helps prevent unintended harm to farm operations, maintain awareness of agriculture’s needs, and reinforce the county’s commitment to protecting its working lands and rural heritage.

### PRESERVING GENERATIONAL RURAL HERITAGE

Wake County’s rural heritage depends on sustaining multi-generational farms that have shaped the region’s landscape and identity. Preserving rural heritage means ensuring that legacy and heritage farms receive predictable annual support, technical assistance, and targeted investment alongside newer entrants to agriculture.

# ENVIRONMENTAL, ECONOMIC, & SOCIAL BENEFITS OF FARMLAND PRESERVATION

## CORE ISSUE & OPPORTUNITY

Farmland in Wake County delivers critical environmental, economic, and social benefits—supporting local food systems, enhancing water quality, sequestering carbon, providing open space, and maintaining the county’s rural character. Yet these contributions are often undervalued in local decision-making and land-use planning.

Recognizing farmland as essential community infrastructure on par with roads, utilities, and stormwater systems reframes it as a public asset vital to resilience and quality of life. Farmland not only anchors the local food economy but also delivers ecosystem services such as flood mitigation, habitat connectivity, and climate adaptation benefits that reduce public costs.

By elevating the environmental, economic, and social value of farmland, Wake County can foster a stronger culture of stewardship and pride. Through education, storytelling, and collaboration with municipalities, nonprofits, and schools, the County can celebrate the people and landscapes that define its agricultural heritage building broad public support for farmland preservation as an investment in the county’s sustainable future.

*“The stormwater from new subdivisions is flooding our pond and fields. We used to irrigate from that water; now it’s full of dirt/silt.”*

— Wake County Landowner Survey Respondent

NATIONAL BEST PRACTICES *	WHY IT MATTERS
Map Ecosystem Services and Natural Assets	Expanding protection beyond prime soils to include forests, riparian buffers, floodplains, and habitat corridors captures broader ecosystem benefits.
Apply Cost of Community Services Study	Use the study as a tool to build consensus on fiscal sustainability generated by agriculture.
Communicate the Environmental, Economic, and Social Values of Farms & Working Lands	Demonstrating how farmland and forests contribute to clean water, carbon sequestration, flood mitigation, food security, rural employment, and cultural identity builds public and political support. Quantifying these benefits strengthens the fiscal and policy case for conservation.
Map and Track Locations of Intact Forests, Farmland Tracts, & Wildlife Corridors	Forests, working lands, and riparian areas contribute to flood mitigation, water quality, and habitat connectivity. In order to preserve them, County staff should work with partners to map locations of large unfragmented working lands and wildlife corridors.
Accountability and Public Awareness	Transparent metrics and community engagement sustain long-term political and public support.

\* American Planning Association

## RECOMMENDATIONS

- 1. Produce Annual State of Farmland Report.** Convene intergovernmental roundtables, and produce an Annual State of Farmland Report to coordinate long-term land-use and economic strategies that support active farms.
- 2. Leverage the Farmland Preservation Plan as a countywide framework.** Unite municipalities, nonprofits, agricultural partners, and the development community around the shared economic, environmental, and social value of farmland. Recognize farmland as essential infrastructure that delivers ecosystem services, food security, and rural identity. Identify key messaging from the plan to build common knowledge and core actions that partners can take to advance multiple priorities in a spirit of collaboration and progress.

3. **Recognize & celebrate heritage, legacy, and emerging farm enterprises.** Develop a coordinated public platform that highlights the vital role of agriculture in Wake County’s economy, culture, and identity. Share success stories across sectors, tourism, economic development, chambers of commerce, local governments, schools, and nonprofits, so all partners speak with a unified voice about the importance of farmland preservation. This shared narrative can strengthen community pride, attract investment, and inspire future generations of farmers.
4. **Create a coordinated data & engagement platform.** Develop a Wake County Farmland GIS Dashboard integrating VAD, EVAD, ACE, prime agriculture soils, municipal land-use layers, and transportation plans. Use this platform to inform planning decisions and track progress toward conservation goals.
5. **Conduct an ecosystem services valuation study for farms & working lands** in partnership NC State Extension, and the Triangle Land Conservancy to quantify the economic, environmental, and social returns of agricultural conservation. The study would demonstrate the return on investment of farmland preservation, helping build policy and funding support for protecting North Carolina’s agricultural landscapes.

**Expected Outcomes:** Greater public awareness, data-driven policymaking, and stronger recognition of farmland’s ecological and cultural value and significance.

### ECOSYSTEM SERVICES PROVIDED BY AGRICULTURAL LANDS

**Ecosystem services** are the natural benefits that healthy and connected landscapes provide to people and communities that support environmental health, economic vitality, and quality of life. Types of services include:



#### PROVISIONING SERVICES

Production of food, fiber, timber, and agricultural goods that support local food systems and farm-based economies.



#### REGULATING SERVICES

Natural regulation of water, climate, and air quality, including stormwater management, carbon storage, erosion control, and temperature moderation.



#### HABITAT SERVICES

Provision of habitat and movement corridors for wildlife, pollinators, and beneficial species; supporting biodiversity and ecosystem resilience.



#### CULTURAL SERVICES

Contributions to scenic landscapes, recreation, agritourism, education, and the preservation of rural heritage and community identity.



# TAKING ACTION

## TACKLING ACTION:

### BUILDING COUNTY–MUNICIPAL CONSENSUS ON FARMLAND PRESERVATION & FUTURE LAND USE

Wake County should use the next three years to build countywide and municipal consensus around the shared value of agricultural lands. By facilitating a series of stakeholder roundtables and workshops, community leaders can have an opportunity to come together, collaborate, and align on how growth, infrastructure, and farmland protection can coexist through coordinated, data-driven planning.

The County should lead this effort by using data and evidence to build a shared understanding of the economic, environmental, and social values of farmland as essential public infrastructure. This unified narrative can serve as the foundation for collaborative planning across jurisdictions.

That message should emphasize:

- **Ecosystem Services:** Farmland delivers measurable public benefits: flood mitigation, water filtration, soil regeneration, carbon sequestration, and biodiversity.
- **Economic Value:** Wake County’s \$63 million agricultural economy supports local jobs, regional supply chains, agritourism, and fiscal sustainability. Findings from the Cost of Community Services Study show farms and forests contribute more in revenue than they require in services.
- **Social and Public-Health Benefits:** Rural open space improves mental health, provides recreation, strengthens community identity, and supports food security reminding residents of the vital connection between land, health, and local heritage.

As part of this collaborative work, Wake County should identify and map the “Future Land Use” and zoning classifications that the County’s twelve municipalities have assigned to existing farms and forests. Aligning these future land-use designations will reveal where development is already planned and where farmland, prime soils, and sensitive ecosystems, such as headwaters and riparian corridors, should be prioritized for protection.

Using science-based mapping of contiguous tracts, soil quality, floodplains, and sensitive habitats, the County can guide growth to more favorable areas while focusing preservation where it delivers the greatest ecological, economic, and social returns. The result should be a shared spatial vision for “where to grow” and “where to conserve,” grounded in data and local values.

**Ultimately, farmland preservation and economic development do not have to be in conflict;** they are complementary goals that should be balanced with proper long-term planning. The next phase of this work is an opportunity to build a collective vision for the future where all parties involved are guided by a mutual understanding of farmland’s immense societal and economic value.

### CONSENSUS-BUILDING STRATEGY

#### Goal:

Use the next few years to align planning outcomes from PlanWake, the OneWater Plan, and the Farmland Preservation Plan (FPP) into a shared county-municipal playbook that balances growth and conservation using a common understanding of farmland’s economic, environmental, and social value.

#### Lead & Forum:

Wake SWCD should be the program lead along with the Planning Department and Manager’s Office. Continue engagement in Municipal Managers Meetings and convene quarterly County–Municipal Agriculture & Growth Roundtables (managers, planning directors, Capital Area Metropolitan Planning Organization [CAMPO], North Carolina Department of Transportation [NCDOT], land trusts, farmer representatives, and other identified stakeholders).

#### Governance & Coordination:

The County should determine who will serve as the primary convening and coordinating body for implementing the FPP’s recommendations. A decision should be made on whether to:

- Maintain the existing Farmland Preservation Advisory Committee;
- Transition oversight to the Wake County Agricultural Advisory Board; or
- Establish a new multi-jurisdictional Farmland Preservation Task Force to coordinate county–municipal policy and track implementation progress.

Once a lead body is identified, the County should define the meeting strategy, whether to integrate farmland preservation into the existing Municipal Managers Meetings, or host dedicated cross-jurisdictional sessions focused on aligning planning, zoning, and investment priorities.

## Core Actions (2025–2028):

- **Add Staffing Capacity to the Wake County Farmland Preservation Program:** Create additional capacity to prioritize and implement recommendations in this plan, support farmers with their unique needs and requests, and elevate key messaging and stories about farmland protection and the players advancing the work. Lead the collaborative planning effort.
- **Future Land Use Alignment:** Conduct a countywide audit of municipal future land-use and zoning classifications to identify overlaps with active farmland and forests. Use findings to assess which planning tools are most effective to guide growth to specific areas and prioritize strategic agricultural tracts for protection.
- **Funding Strategy:** Develop a sub-committee solely focused on enhancing existing funding mechanisms (the current PUV rollback program), exploring new opportunities (potential bond or endowment fund), and determining the strategic partnerships necessary to realize these priorities.
- **Agricultural Impact Review:** Build an integrated data and engagement platform so multiple stakeholders can assess development and infrastructure impacts on farmland and prime soils in real-time and be advised on taking appropriate action.
- **Model Interlocal MOU:** Draft a county-municipal memorandum of understanding (MOU) committing to:
  - Consistent application of agreed upon planning and zoning tools;
  - Application of agricultural impact review and mitigation standards for unavoidable conversion;
  - Deconfliction protocols for transportation projects crossing active farms.
- **Public Reporting:** Publish an annual State of Farmland in Wake scorecard tracking acres protected, EVAD/VAD enrollments, municipal policy adoptions, and transportation project coordination.

## Milestones & Timetable

- **By Q4 2027:** County Status of Farmland Report summarizing acres preserved, percent of priority soils protected, plan amendments that integrate preservation efforts, and success stories.
- **By Q4 2028:** Farmland protection planning/zoning tools and/or policies adopted by County, with four or more municipalities endorsing them via resolution.
- **By Q4 2029:** Interlocal MOU executed with six or more municipalities; Agricultural Impact Review integrated into CAMPO/NC DOT checklists.

## Metrics for Success:

- Number of jurisdictions adopting the farmland protection planning/zoning tools or policies.
- Percentage of major projects completing Agricultural Impact Review pre-NEPA.
- Growth in EVAD enrollments and conservation easement acreage.
- Funds leveraged as a result of new programs, partnerships, and initiatives to increase revenue for farmland protection.
- Number of municipal Comprehensive Plans incorporating “Farmland Preservation” as a future land use category.

## Going Forward

Implementing the recommendations in this plan will help Wake County prioritize and protect farmland in the years ahead. Once the plan is adopted by the County Commissioners, key staff can begin coordinating stakeholders toward incremental actions and progress. By doing so, county and municipal leaders can reinforce the notion that responsible growth that balances farmland preservation with community and economic development, can work together realizing a thriving Wake County.

*Preservation of forest and farmland does not have to compete with development. Rather, it can integrate with it, helping create more enriching, beautiful, and biologically diverse communities that enhance our wellbeing.*

*– Public Survey Respondent*



# APPENDIX: SUMMARY OF EXISTING PLANS & POLICIES

# SUMMARY OF EXISTING PLANS, PROGRAMS, & POLICIES

Wake County has been a leader in North Carolina for proactive farmland preservation planning, creating its Farmland Preservation Program in 1989. However, it is facing the fastest population growth in the state (2023-2024 US Census estimates) and therefore is losing farmland at an accelerated rate. Land planning is especially important with the vast challenges that accompany this rate of growth. The following pages feature summaries of several existing plans, programs, and policies that have implications on the County's ability to preserve farmland.

## WAKE COUNTY CONSOLIDATED OPEN SPACE PLAN (2006)

This plan set a **goal of protecting 30% of the county's land as open space**. "The 30% goal is provided as a minimum target based on the ecological, social, economic, and political realities of Wake County. The goal is designed to help realize the vision of a 22nd century community that includes **farming as a viable way of life**, and is a flourishing community that delivers clean water to more than 2 million residents."

This plan goes into detail about different strategies, legal tools, and programs available to protect open space in the county. The ones that are most relevant to farmland include:

- **Conservation Easements**
- **Purchase of Development Rights (PDR) Program**
- **Voluntary Agricultural District (VAD) Program**
- **NC Agriculture Cost Share Program (ACSP)**



## WAKE COUNTY AGRICULTURE ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT PLAN (2013)

This plan summarizes past and existing conditions of agribusiness in Wake County as of 2013. It contains statistics regarding land use as it applies to agribusiness and demographics of farm operators. More broadly, it outlines:

- A **statement of need** for Wake County's support of agriculture
- An overview of Wake County's **agricultural impact**
- **Challenges** to Wake County's agricultural economic growth
- **Opportunities** to enhance profitability of Wake County's family farms
- **Action steps** to ensure economic viability of the County's agricultural community
- A **schedule** to implement this plan and reevaluate as Wake County changes

A Cost of Community Services study by NC State University found that privately owned farm and forest lands generate more in local tax revenues than they cost in services. To preserve and enhance the profitability of Wake County's family farms, this plan was created to:

1. **Acknowledge agriculture's contribution to the cultural and economic base of Wake County.**
2. **Describe the challenges that hinder the county's agribusinesses.**
3. **Provide strategies and options to increase profitability of family farms.**



**Statement of Need** (*summarized*): It is in the county’s best interest to promote the local agricultural industry and protect farmland. **Enabling farmers who want to continue to farm is a cost effective way of maintaining the quality of life of everyone in Wake County.**

As listed and described in more detail in this plan, the **agribusinesses and diverse agricultural portfolio** that make up the county’s agricultural economy include (as of 2013):

- Tobacco
- Grains and Soybeans
- Fruits and Vegetables
  - Sweet potatoes
  - Directly-to-consumer produce including (farmers markets, farm stands, subscription sales)
- Greenhouse, Nursery, and Floriculture
- Livestock
- Horses
- Hay and Forage
- Apiculture/Beekeeping
- Organic Farming
- Urban Agriculture
- Agritourism
- Forestry
- Agribusiness Partnership

**Challenges** to Wake County’s Agricultural Economic Growth (as of 2013):

- Family heritage and generational flight
- Estate Taxes
- Conservation tax credits
- Transportation of agriculture products throughout a metro county
- Farm transition to younger generation
- Local availability of farm supplies, equipment and seed stock
- Restrictive ordinances and rules on marketing, sales, and farm stands
- Labor
- Maintaining soil quality
- Access to technical assistance
- Competition with overseas imports
- Water quantity and use demand for water
- Varied support of existing agricultural exemption rules
- Assistance to farms for whole farm profitability (horse to manure)
- Available educational classes for maintaining license and certifications
- Right to farm rules
- Excessive acreage requirement to enroll in VAD
- Assistance for permanent easement for legacy farms
- Water quality impacts
- Limited distribution support and export opportunities
- Meeting the supply and demand of consumers in region
- Managing waste from operations
- Meeting regulations guidelines
- Land price, desire for prime farmland

**Opportunities** to enhance profitability of Wake County’s family farms:

- Support of the unity between public and private sectors of agriculture in support of our family farms and local agribusinesses
- Engagement of outdoor/agritourism and equine activities that lead to healthy residents and profitable businesses
- Farm-friendly tax policies
- Continued support of productive and profitable working farms and managed forest lands

The proposed **Action Steps** to ensure economic viability of the County’s Agricultural Community include:

- 1. Integrate economic development** with farmland protection.
- 2. Expand County voluntary land preservation programs** through conservation partnerships.
- 3. Promote understanding and appreciation of agriculture** to the non-farm public.
- 4. Enhance business development programs** to incorporate agriculture and forestry interest.
- 5. Promote opportunities for profitability** of Wake County family farms and agribusinesses.

## PLANWAKE (adopted 2021)

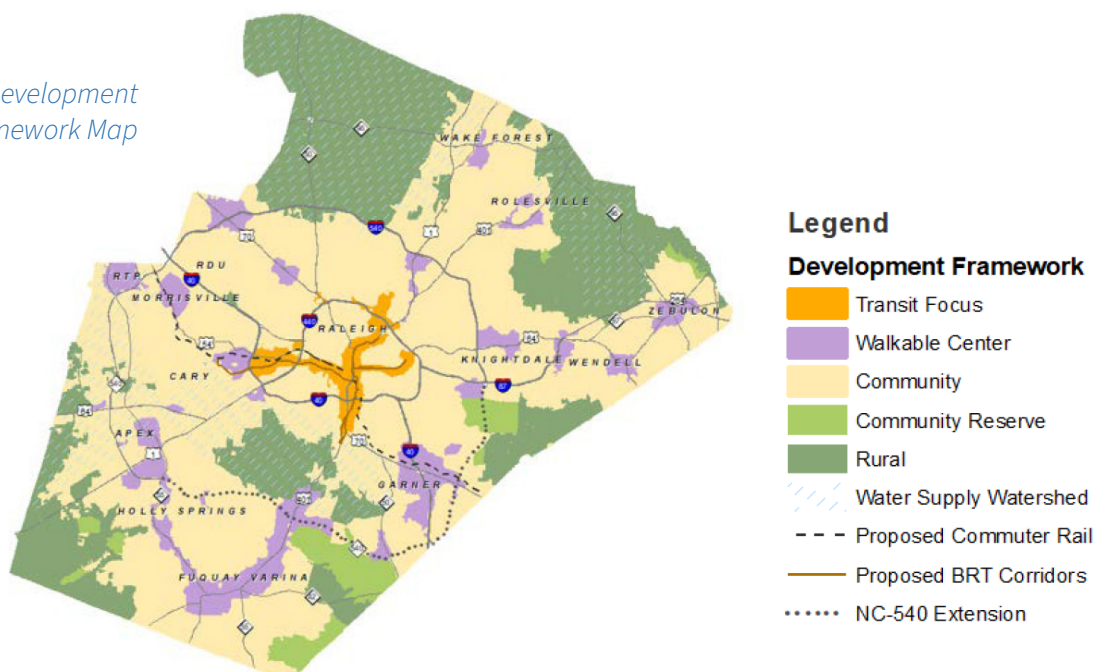


PLANWake serves as a comprehensive plan that sets the priorities and vision for Wake County to achieve in a decade. The plan states that a “healthy and active Wake County” will lead to “less encroachment on local farmers and food systems” and “more preserved open spaces and agricultural lands.” The plan emphasizes the preservation and conservation of farmland, agriculture, and open spaces in Wake County through several key recommendations and actions:

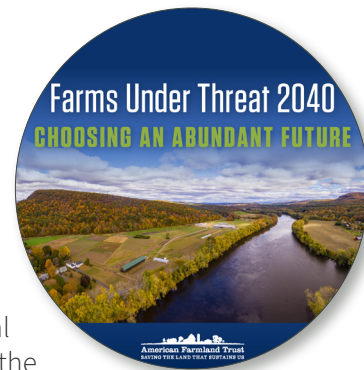
- **Prioritize open space acquisition.** Collaborate with conservation groups and partners to acquire properties in Community Reserve and rural areas for conservation, focusing on connected properties along open space corridors.
- **Foster a vibrant rural economy.** Support rural businesses, including agriculture, through the VAD and EVAD programs, business retention programs, and training for future farmers and rural business owners.
- **Decrease development pressure.** Make development within municipalities easier than in rural areas to reverse “leapfrog” sprawl. Use zoning tools to ensure intentional outward growth and require preservation of natural, cultural, and historic resources.
- **Encourage conservation subdivisions.** Promote or mandate conservation subdivisions in Community Reserve areas to protect open space while allowing development. Ensure new neighborhoods follow complete design principles.
- **Protect water supply watersheds.** Apply stringent development regulations in water supply watersheds to minimize pollution and preserve ecological value.
- **Preserve rural areas.** Limit development intensity in rural areas to retain their natural state, focusing on low-density residential, farming, forestry, and conservation uses.
- **Support agritourism and the rural economy.** Encourage activities like farmers’ markets, wineries, agritourism, and hospitality businesses to strengthen the rural economy.

When thinking about the future, the PLANWake community survey respondents identified the protection of natural areas, farms, forests and meadows as the most important change they would like to see. This plan states the **goal to protect 30% (165,000 acres) of the County’s land area as permanently protected open space** through regulation, public-private conservation efforts, and preservation alongside development. This goal was previously stated in the 2006 Consolidated Open Space Plan and directly supports farmland preservation and should be cited when the County creates future policies and actions related to agricultural activities and land use in the county. PLANWake tracks progress of these efforts online at [wake.gov/strategic-plan/growth-land-use-and-environment](http://wake.gov/strategic-plan/growth-land-use-and-environment).

*PlanWAKE Development Framework Map*



# FARMS UNDER THREAT 2040: CHOOSING AN ABUNDANT FUTURE (2022)



This is a **national report from American Farmland Trust (AFT)** that summarizes the modern land use threats to farmland in the continental United States. American Farmland Trust has been a leader in research to inform policymaking and the practice of agricultural land protection for over four decades. This report is part of a long-term partnership with the USDA NRCS, named *Farms Under Threat*.

In late 2020, AFT, in partnership with Conservation Science Partners and the Center for Sustainability and the Global Environment at the University of Wisconsin, Madison, started a modeling effort to project how development and climate change will affect agricultural land under several different future scenarios. This report summarizes the results of the projection of future development through 2040.

Of interest to Wake County, this report provides data and statistics of projections of how much farmland will remain in the county in 2040 under different land development scenarios. The three future scenarios modeled in this report are displayed at the bottom of this page. This report warns that **North Carolina is projected to be the state with the 2nd most acres and 6th highest percentage of agricultural land converted** to urban and highly developed (UHD) and low-density residential (LDR) uses **between 2016 and 2040**. From the report: “The state of North Carolina stands out with the ignominious distinction of being a sizable state that nevertheless will convert 11.6% of its agricultural land—nearly 1.2 million acres—to subdivisions, strip malls, and scattered rural housing.”

**Wake County has one of the highest number of acres and highest percentages of projected farmland conversion** in the continental US according to the report, therefore it appears in two tables in an appendix. The row from these tables that shows these numbers for Wake County are displayed below with a description:

**Table:** Acres and percentage of agricultural land in Wake County projected to be converted to urban and highly developed (UHD) and low-density residential (LDR) uses by 2040. To explore data for every county in the contiguous US, and to view the breakdown of UHD versus LDR conversion, visit [development2040.farmland.org](http://development2040.farmland.org)

Acres of agriculture in Wake County (2016)	Farmland Conversion by 2040 (in acres and percent change from 2016)					
	Business as Usual		Runaway Sprawl		Better Built Cities	
	Acres Lost	% Farmland Lost	Acres Lost	% Farmland Lost	Acres Lost	% Farmland Lost
116,300	46,600	40.1	56,700	48.7	31,900	27.5

Since the Raleigh metropolitan area, which contains Wake County, is a focus of AFT while it actively works to strengthen Purchase of Agricultural Conservation Easement (PACE) programs, a fourth future development scenario is modeled for Wake: “Expanding Permanent Farmland Protection.” This scenario is a model of what it would look like to add a substantial increase in permanent farmland protection to the “Better Built Cities” scenario.

The methodology of modeling this scenario is detailed in this report. This method could potentially be used to determine priorities for permanent farmland conservation within Wake County, as the *Farms Under Threat* partnership has produced projected recommendations for farmland protection in the Raleigh metro area, which includes Wake.

*Farms Under Threat projected development scenarios (summarized)*



## WAKE COUNTY FARMLAND PRESERVATION PROGRAM ORDINANCE (2022)



The new Farmland Preservation Program Ordinance was approved on June 21, 2022. This ordinance repealed and replaced the “Wake County Voluntary Agricultural District Ordinance,” which was adopted in 2002 and updated in 2016. This new ordinance can be referenced for the current requirements of all of the above listed conservation tools.

There are **3 programs under the ordinance** to protect working land from encroaching development:

- 1. Voluntary Agricultural District (VAD)**
- 2. Enhanced Voluntary Agricultural District (EVAD)**
- 3. Agricultural Conservation Easement (ACE)**

This ordinance:

- Moved the Agricultural Advisory Board (established in 2002) from the Soil & Water Conservation District to a Wake County Advisory Board
  - Duties for overseeing the VAD, EVAD, and ACE programs
- Established Wake County VAD and EVAD
  - Conservation agreements for VAD and EVAD
  - Application and certification qualifying farmland for VAD or EVAD
  - Revocation, renewal, and transfer of qualifying farmland in a VAD or EVAD
  - Condemnation of VAD or EVAD properties
- Established Wake County ACE Program
  - Purchase of conservation easements
  - Donation of conservation easements
  - Baseline documentation and monitoring
  - Farmland preservation ranking system

## WAKE COUNTY FOOD SECURITY PLAN UPDATE (2023)



This plan is the update of the 2018 Wake County Comprehensive Food Security Plan. Some of the strategies explored in this plan attempt to integrate local farmer operations with food banks and farmers markets to ensure a higher percentage of local produce and other farm products become available to the most marginalized communities in the county.

Local foods generally cost more than foods from large streamlined operations, but have much greater nutritional value. The intent of supporting local markets is to increase the sustainability of farms with strong market opportunity and buyer connections which will in turn lead to a more resilient food system that can withstand shocks that disrupt globalized supply chains, but have fewer impacts on localized supply chains. The strategies recommended to accomplish this often include providing additional funding for local partners that help support these goals. The **goals** of the plan are:

- 1. Access to Food:** Eliminate or reduce challenges experienced by specific populations in obtaining safe, nutritious, culturally appropriate food needed for health and well-being.
- 2. Sustainability & Economic Benefit:** Build sustainability and economic benefit across the food system for all individuals, groups, businesses, and communities.
- 3. Understanding & Commitment of Decision Makers:** Cultivate an understanding of the local food system by decision makers and commitment to alleviating the challenges to ensuring food security.

# WAKE COUNTY MULTI-JURISDICTIONAL HAZARD MITIGATION PLAN (2024)

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This plan, updated every five years, analyzes the risks of natural and human-caused hazards to the people and the land, including agricultural land, of Wake County. The importance of farmland protection is discussed throughout the plan. However, it states that **“because of the urbanization of the City of Raleigh, the (plan) did not recommend any projects related to farmland protection” as a mitigation alternative.** Generally, however, open space preservation is recommended as a means of reducing hazard risk throughout the county.

The plan states that “Farmland protection is an important piece of comprehensive planning and zoning throughout the United States. The purpose of farmland protection is to provide mechanisms for prime, unique, or important agricultural land to remain as such, and to be protected from conversion to non-agricultural uses.”

Farmland conversion is discussed as an often negative force of land use change, and examples are given as to why it happens: “Frequently, farm owners sell their land to residential or commercial developers and the property is converted to non-agricultural land uses. With development comes more buildings, roads and other infrastructure. Urban sprawl occurs, which can lead to additional stormwater runoff and emergency management difficulties. Farms on the edge of cities are often appraised based on the price they could be sold for to urban developers. This may drive farmers to sell to developers because their marginal farm operations cannot afford to be taxed as urban land.”

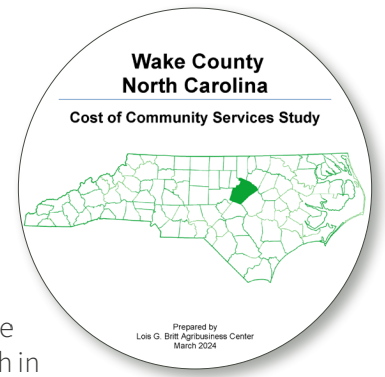
Hazards that have the greatest effects on agriculture in Wake County include:

**Agricultural Drought** — a type of drought that is “based on the impacts to agriculture by factors such as rainfall deficits, soil water deficits, reduced ground water, or reservoir levels needed for irrigation.” Drought reduces water availability for irrigation, lowers crop yields, and stresses livestock which can lead to sever losses. In fact, the majority of damages that result from drought are to crops and other agricultural activities.

**Extreme Heat** — a long period (2 to 3 days) of high heat and humidity with temperatures above 90 degrees. Prolonged heat stresses crops and livestock, reduces yields, and increases irrigation needs. Crop loss and damage are caused when temperatures rise above their tolerance extremes.

**Flooding** — the partial or complete inundation of normally dry land area caused by the rising and overflowing of water from inland waters or from the unusual accumulation or runoff. Flooding can inundate farmland, erode soil, destroy crops, and contaminate water sources. Farms in flood-prone areas are highly vulnerable. Preserving flood prone areas as open space is one of the highest priorities of the FEMA Community Rating System, which determines flood insurance premium reductions within a community.

# WAKE COUNTY COST OF COMMUNITY SERVICES STUDY (2024)



This Cost of Community Services (COCS) Study for Wake County during fiscal year 2021-2022 analyzed the financial impact of residential, commercial/industrial, and agricultural/forestry land uses on county revenues and expenditures. The study highlights the importance of maintaining a balanced land-use strategy to ensure fiscal stability and sustainable growth in Wake County. Key findings include:

## Revenue-to-Expenditure Ratios:

- Residential land use: For every \$1 of revenue, \$1.09 was spent, resulting in a net loss of \$86.7 million.
- Commercial/Industrial land use: For every \$1 of revenue, \$0.08 was spent, generating a surplus of \$645.2 million.
- **Agricultural/Forestry land use: For every \$1 of revenue, \$0.24 was spent, creating a surplus of \$5.7 million.**

## Revenue and Expenditure Breakdown:

- Residential land use accounted for 57.26% of revenues but 94.89% of expenditures.
- Commercial/Industrial land use contributed 42.29% of revenues and 4.95% of expenditures.
- **Agricultural/Forestry land use provided 0.45% of revenues and required only 0.06% of expenditures.**

## Net Fiscal Impact:

- Residential development resulted in a revenue-to-expenditure deficit, while Commercial and Agricultural land uses offset this loss, contributing to a total county surplus of \$564 million.

## Breakeven Analysis:

- The breakeven property value for residential land use was calculated at \$304,481, illustrating the high cost of services for residential properties.

## Comparison with Other Studies:

- Wake County's residential ratio (1:1.09) is lower than the national median (1:1.16) and NC median (1:1.23).
- Commercial (1:0.08) and Agricultural (1:0.24) ratios are also lower than national and NC medians.

## Implications for Land-Use Planning:

- **Residential development increases fiscal pressure, while Commercial and Agricultural provide financial stability.**
- **Preserving Agricultural land is fiscally beneficial and supports economic diversity and quality of life.**

This study emphasizes the importance of farmland preservation in Wake County for economic reasons. The deferred tax program for agricultural lands is important in helping keep these lands available and affordable for farmers. The Present Use Value (PUV) Program is a state program already in place in the county that is providing financial relief to agricultural landowners through tax deferral. The study further validates the need and effectiveness of the North Carolina PUV Program and the Wake County Farmland Preservation Program and its associated conservation tools.

# WAKE COUNTY STRATEGIC PLAN (2024)



Wake County adopted its first organization-wide strategic planning process in April 2024 to identify the County’s top priorities through 2029. The plan outlines the County’s vision for a thriving, resilient community through six focus areas and 24 goals. Each of the focus areas have goals associated with them. The “Growth, Land Use and Environment” Strategic Plan focus area contains the goals most relevant to farmland and forest preservation in the county, listed below.

## Growth, Land Use, and Environment Goals:

1. Between 2024 and 2029, **97% of growth and development will be directed toward cities and towns** that provide municipal services, transportation, and utilities.
2. By 2029, increase public transit ridership by 10%.
3. **Protect 1,000 acres of green space, including** open space, parks, greenways, **farmland, and forests by 2029.**
4. By 2029, 95% of residents asked will have easy access to clean water.
5. Wake County Government will progress toward achieving 80% clean energy by 2035.

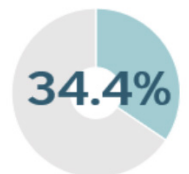
Goals 1 and 3 from this focus area display the County’s vision of reducing development patterns that would negatively affect the availability of viable farms and forests. The plan states that “preserving farm and agricultural land supports local food systems and sustains rural economies. Protecting forests buffers against climate change and preserves wildlife habitats.”

Community surveys conducted in 2022 in regard to Goal 1 (growth and development) reveal less than a third of people agree that Wake County government does a good job planning for and managing residential growth, and less than half agree that it does a good job managing commercial growth. This is relevant to understanding the public’s perception of the potential need for regulation of development in the rural areas of the county.

Some supporting indicators and metrics provided from Goal 3 (green space protection) that relate to farmland preservation are shared in these graphics:

Indicator	FY 2020	FY 2021	FY 2022	FY 2023	Updated
Wake County Park Visitation	1,604,732	1,608,953	1,812,174	1,748,686	Nov 2023
Open Space Acres Acquired (Cumulative)	7,768.0	8,543.2	8,847.0	9,103.1	Nov 2023
Acres Approved in Enhanced Voluntary Agricultural Districts and Voluntary Agricultural Districts	628.7	839.3	842.9	783.0	Nov 2023

**2022 Community Survey**  
 Respondents who agree that Wake County does a good job preserving and protecting farmland (excludes unsure).



## WAKE ONE WATER PLAN (2026)



Water is essential to agriculture. Wake County worked with local partners to develop the One Water Plan to ensure clean water and water security for the county. This plan presents a 50-year integrated framework for managing the county's entire water cycle from supply and quality to stormwater, wastewater, and land use. It establishes a unified approach that connects water management, land conservation, and community resilience to ensure clean, reliable water resources for current and future generations.

The plan's guiding vision emphasizes collaboration among municipalities, utilities, and regional partners to optimize water systems, protect natural infrastructure, and support equitable access to water across Wake County. It identifies four key **focus areas**:

- **Optimized Water Supply:** Safeguard groundwater, expand reuse, and increase system efficiency.
- **Site-Specific Water Quality & Hydrology Improvements:** Advance green infrastructure, nutrient reduction, and nature-based solutions.
- **Land Conservation & Preservation:** Protect open space and farmland to sustain water quality, flood mitigation, and biodiversity.
- **Flood Resilience:** Restore natural floodplain functions and invest in risk reduction through strategic planning and infrastructure.

The One Water Plan positions **open space and farmland preservation as fundamental components of Wake County's long-term water resilience strategy**. It reframes farmland, forests, and natural areas as green infrastructure that provides critical services such as flood absorption, groundwater recharge, and water filtration key to maintaining both environmental and fiscal sustainability.

Policy implications emphasize coordinated land and water planning at both county and municipal levels, including within extraterritorial jurisdiction (ETJ) areas. The plan calls for the County to:

- **Use farmland and open space preservation as green infrastructure** to enhance flood control, aquifer recharge, and water quality.
- **Expand conservation easements and strategic land acquisition** to protect critical recharge zones and working lands.
- **Establish intergovernmental agreements** to fund and manage green infrastructure and conservation projects that cross jurisdictional boundaries.



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