

Why is Commodity Farming Important to the State of Maryland including the Western Shore and Montgomery County?

Agriculture is the largest commercial industry in Maryland, employing some 350,000 people, including nearly 6,000 full-time farmers, and contributing some \$8.25 billion annually to the economy. Agriculture also remains the largest single land use in the State, 2 million acres, or roughly 32 percent of total land area used for farming in 2020.

[Maryland Agriculture, Farming](#)

The number one agricultural product produced in State of Maryland is the Chicken Broiler Industry providing \$1.2 billion in total agricultural production.

Maryland is a grain deficit state-meaning that we must import grain produced for animal feed from the surrounding states to support the entire livestock industry of chickens and all other types of animals which encompass 62 % of the total number of farms in Maryland.

Commodity farmers outside our region are bound by the Chicago Board of Trade prices for all types of grain.

The local demand for animal feed in the State of Maryland benefits all commodity farmers in our region.

The commodity farmers in our region receive an additional basis for crop prices due to the high demand for grain associated with the chicken industry.

Commodity farmers in our region receive between ten to twenty-five cents more per bushel of grain because they are closer to the markets like the port of Baltimore and demand centers for animal feed like the eastern shore where most of the chickens are produced.

This helps to explain why commodity farmers in our region will harvest their grain, dry it, and store it on the farm and then wait to sell their grain until the crop prices increase during the winter months.

Commodity farmers in our region will transport the grain themselves with tractor trailer trucks to the port of Baltimore, the eastern shore and southern PA.

Farmers make business decisions based on market forces. If there is a market for products, farmers will produce the products that the market demands.

Farmers are price takers and not price makers. Farmers cannot demand the price they want for their products as most agricultural products and prices are controlled by either the Chicago Board of Trade, Federal Government, or large corporate entities in the western United States.

Many Montgomery County residents believe that acres devoted to commodity production of corn, soybeans and wheat inside the Agricultural Reserve should be replaced with table food crops like fruits and vegetables using what they refer to as regenerative agricultural practices to address soil health.

Montgomery County was one of the first counties in the Nation to implement conservation tillage also referred to as No-till farming. In 2018, Montgomery County farmers celebrated a 50th Anniversary of No-till farming in recognition of our farmers embracing this best management practice that significantly reduces soil erosion and increases the level of organic matter in the soil.

Montgomery County farmers have also embraced precision agriculture where their farm equipment including planters and harvesters use global positioning satellites -GPS with auto steering that ensures farm equipment pass over the acres of farmland once with no overlap and this helps to reduce production costs for fuel, labor, seed, fertilizer, and wear and tear on equipment.

Since the growing season is limited in our region from April through October, this environment encourages farmers to construct high tunnels to extend the growing season.

If Montgomery County encourages the expansion of table food production, where will the labor force come from to support these operations and how many high tunnels would be needed to extend the growing season to accommodate the expanded production?



Large scale production of table food requires tremendous amounts of labor. Where will the labor come from to support the expanded production of fruits and vegetables?

All of the large-scale table food producers in Montgomery County (Lewis Orchard, Homestead Farm, Butlers Orchard, Rockhill Orchard) depend on seasonal agricultural workers through the H2A program.

Prior to the Chicken industry on the eastern shore, most of the farmland was devoted to vegetable production-truck farms with local canneries in the each of the towns.

With the invention of refrigeration, this outcome contributed to the closing of canneries including the large-scale processing facilities that large scale table food production demands today.

With the evolution of Chicken farms on the eastern shore, this outcome created the market for farmers to produce commodities and animal feed for the chickens and other livestock.

If the Chicken industry left the eastern shore of Maryland like all the local canneries did, this outcome would be devastating to the commodity farmers in our region and the entire agricultural economy of the state of Maryland.

The production of vegetables is more intensive in terms of soil disturbance and crop rotation throughout the growing season as farmers replace one crop after another. The production of crops is rotated during the year with cool weather crops like spinach and broccoli in the spring verses warmer weather crops like green beans, squash, and potatoes in the summer.

This outcome will result in more soil erosion from crop production as compared to commodity production in Montgomery County that relies on No-till conservation practices.

The total amount of commodity production in Montgomery County and the state of Maryland has been reported over the past 10 years including the implementation of cover crops planted in the fall that absorb residual nutrients left in the soil from the primary crop and as the cover crop germinates and winters over as a vegetative cover with roots holding the soil together, this best management practice is contributing to both reduced sediment and nutrient loads in the Chesapeake Bay.

[Montgomery County Ag Fact Sheet](#)

[Montgomery County Best Management Practices Installed](#)

[Reductions in Nitrogen and Phosphorus from Best Management Practices](#)

[Greenhouse Gas Reductions from Best Management Practices](#)

The increase in soil erosion from the expanded production of vegetables could create additional environment challenges for the Chesapeake Bay.

According to the Maryland Department of Agriculture-Chesapeake Bay Water Shed Implementation Program-WIP III goals, the Rural Sector of the MS4 Permit has resulted in farmers achieving 84 % of the Nitrogen Goals, 96 % of Phosphorus Goals and 100 % of the Sediment Goals.

Questions?