Agriculture contributes 311,000 jobs and $52 billion annually to Virginia's economy; however, over five million acres of farmland were lost in the state between 1960 and 2012 (VAgriculture Facts and Figures, VDACS, 2015). Within the Rappahannock-Rapidan Region, 37% of the land cover is farmland, and the sale of agricultural products is a key component of the region's economy with $225 million of crops and livestock sold in 2012 (Census of Agriculture, USDA, 2012). Farmland also provides benefits to the community such as agri-tourism, wildlife habitat, recreational opportunities, and aesthetic value. While Purchase of Development Rights and other easement programs have protected 14.84% of the region's Prime Farmland, the remainder is vulnerable to development pressure as a result of high land prices and an aging population of farm operators.

The objective of the Prime Agriculture Lands Model is to quantify the relative suitability of lands for agricultural activity within the Rappahannock-Rapidan Region and identify those likely to be most productive. In partnership with the Virginia Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services, the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) and Virginia Tech, the Virginia Department of Conservation and Recreation developed the original statewide model in 2007 and an updated version in 2015. The Regional Commission's Agriculture Working Group determined the 2007 methodology better met regional needs. Therefore, the Commission updated the 2007 state model using local development data and the most recent soils and land cover data.

The Region's Agriculture Lands Model incorporates the following components:

- Farmland Classification/ Soil productivity (NRCS SSURGO Data)
- 2011 National Land Cover Database (NLCD)
- Steep Slopes (USGS Digital Elevation Model)
- 2010 US census data
- Local development data (E911 points)

This model has many applications for local governments, land trusts, regional and community organizations, and state partners. The data can be used in land-use planning, prioritizing land for conservation, making land management decisions, and public education. For example, by overlaying this data layer with local zoning and/or the Protected Lands data layer, users can identify prime farmland with a high vulnerability. The region's rich farmland is an asset to the community. The regional Prime Agriculture Lands Model provides decision makers and land owners with a tool to continue to best utilize this valuable resource.

For additional information concerning the Rappahannock-Rapidan Region Prime Agriculture Model, please visit RRRC's website at www.rrregion.org/greeninfrastructure.html, or contact Michelle Edwards at medwards@rrregion.org or 540-829-7450. For information on the state model visit DCR's website at www.dcr.virginia.gov/natural_heritage/vclnaforest.shtml.
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