

# Linking Lands and Communities in the Land-of-Sky Region

Creating a framework for conservation and development that respects community values and natural systems

## The Regional Green Infrastructure Network is

an interconnected network of lands valuable for their ecological systems and services and significant contribution to regional and local economies.

## Agricultural Lands: Farming and Forestry

*The Agriculture Assessment is one of three assessments conducted as a part of the Linking Lands and Communities Project. This assessment was developed by a working group of partners from across the four-county region, with the primary goal of identifying the lands most valuable for agricultural uses in the region – namely farming and forestry.*

Farming and forestry are deeply embedded in the culture of Western North Carolina. Tied closely to the land, residents have always relied on resources provided by the forests and high quality soils found in the valleys and fertile bottomlands throughout the region. Agriculture also contributes significantly to Western North Carolina's local economy. In 2007, the market value production for farms in Buncombe, Henderson, Madison, and Transylvania counties totaled just under 120 million dollars. In 2006, forest income for the four-county region exceeded 10 million dollars and provided over 6,000 jobs across the region.

### Agricultural Land Values

Communities across the region and the state rely on the products and services that our agricultural lands supply, including food, fiber, pollination, habitat, and clean water. Major crops in the region include potatoes, apples, sweet corn, snap beans, tomatoes, hay, medicinal plants and herbs, Christmas trees, and many hardwood products, including handcrafted furniture, lumber and building supplies. In addition to these more traditional products and markets, new opportunities for selling ecosystem services are emerging for farmers and forest managers that place an economic value on the environmental benefits ecosystems provide. Examples include: purifying water, storing carbon and protecting biodiversity.

The cultural heritage and aesthetic benefits of scenic landscapes and views provided by farms and forests also contribute significantly to the region's two billion dollar tourism industry. Results from a survey conducted through the Farmland Values Project (a multi-year project of UNCA) confirmed this, finding that residents of Buncombe, Madison, Henderson, and Haywood Counties identified scenic beauty, a link to our agricultural heritage, and open space as additional benefits of farmland. They also indicated that these are essential factors that contribute to high quality of life ([www.unca.edu/farmlandvalues](http://www.unca.edu/farmlandvalues)).

### Loss of Farm and Forestlands: Conversion to other uses and fragmentation

Our forests and farmlands are being converted to other uses at an alarming rate. As this occurs, the landscape often gets cut up into smaller and smaller parcels, resulting in diminishing productive farm lands, the fragmentation of forest ecosystems, and the loss of key ecosystem services and functions. Fragmentation affects both the agricultural production capacity of the land and its rural scenic quality and contributes to increasing land prices that have ballooned beyond agricultural productivity values. This trend has been occurring in Western North Carolina since the early 1950's, and accelerated in the 1970's and 1980's. Likewise, between 1974 and 2002, North Carolina lost almost 2 million acres of timberland due to human-related land conversion and natural disturbances, including weather, fire, and insects.



### Regional Quick Facts

- 2007 Census data show that farms only make up **16%** of our land area, or about **192,813 acres**. In 2007, there were 2700 farms in the region.
- 2002 USFS data show that forests make up **68%** of our land area or about **817,000 acres**. According to the NC Division of Forest Resources, 98% of these are considered potential timber lands.

# The Agriculture Assessment

The Agricultural Lands Assessment identifies lands that are the most valuable for agriculture, including farming and forestry practices. The work group placed significant emphasis on economic viability of farms and forests, recognizing that income producing potential for the landowner is the single most important determinant of whether lands will stay in farm or forest use. However, the lack of region-wide spatially available data related to economic factors ultimately limited this aspect of the assessment.

The final assessment was primarily based on four key components:

1. The presence of an existing farm or forest operation (which was determined to be the best indicator of economic viability)
2. Land cover, including vegetation type and extent of existing development
3. Agronomic Soils (the most productive soils for agriculture)
4. Land management factors, including land restrictions and proximity to publicly managed lands

## Agricultural Lands Assessment Conceptual Model

