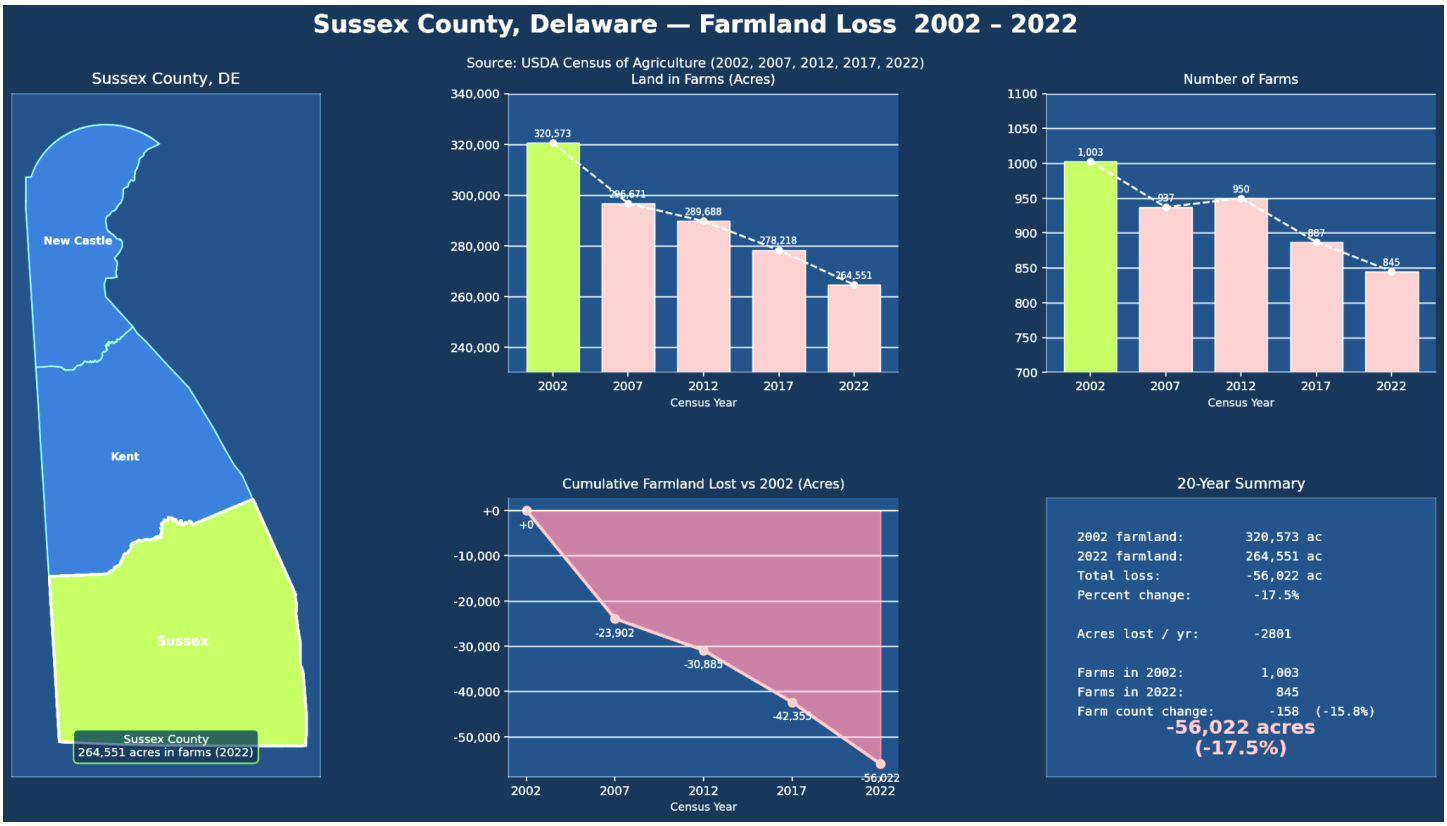
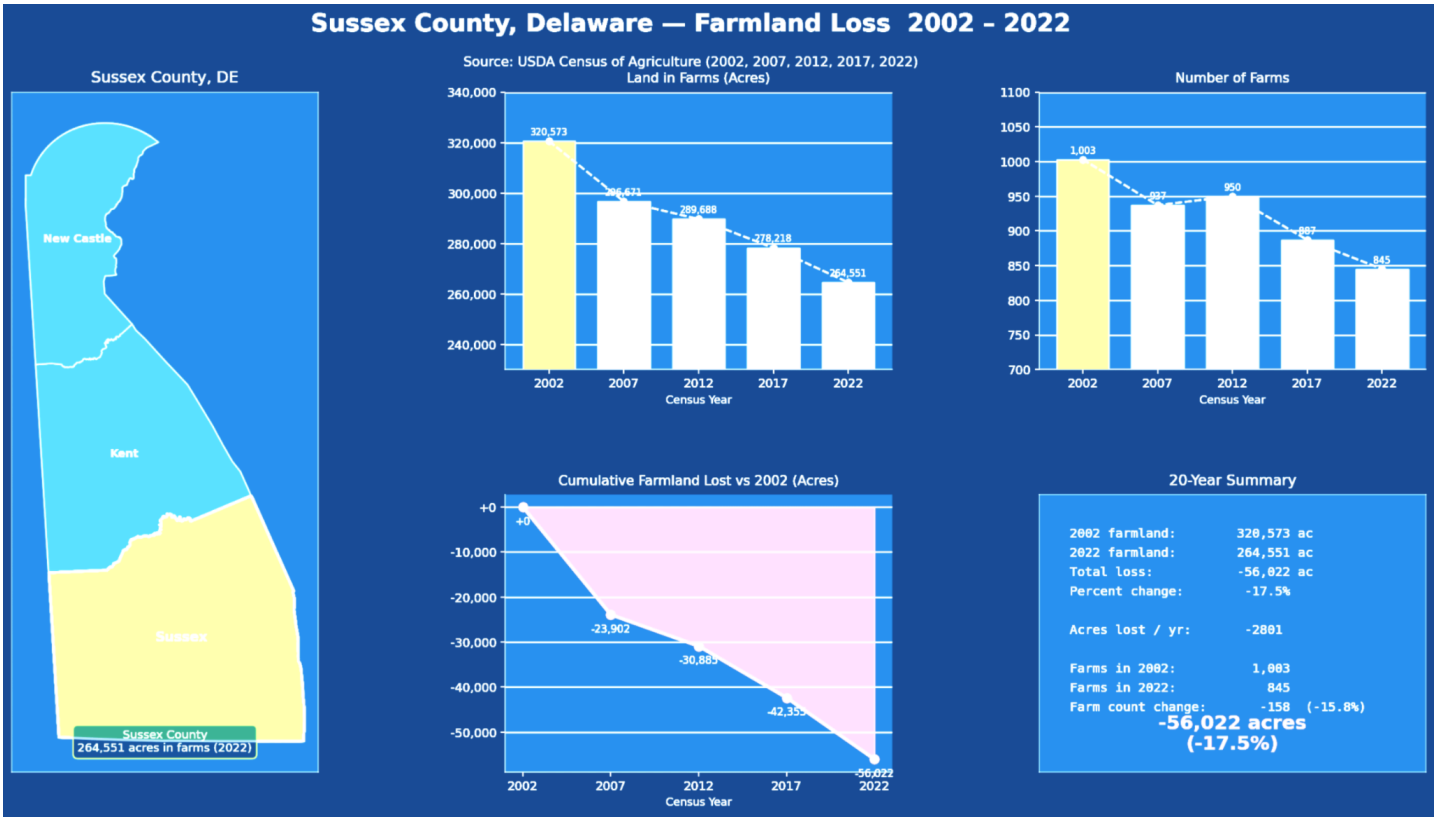
When Farmland Becomes Developments:
A Look at Sussex County Since 2000

THE ISSUE: In the recent past, residents and visitors have noticed a dramatic loss of open land, most of it agricultural land, and in its place are housing developments, large and small, with supporting commercial development and infrastructure. This agricultural-land-to-developed land has, of course, been occurring for many years. However, we have reached a point in Delaware and particularly in Sussex County where visual impacts have become so apparent and stunning, that, combined with traffic congestion and overcrowding, the adverse effects which affect our lives, health, safety, and economic security have become a priority issue to many property owners.

CALL TO ACTION: As is often the case, governments at all levels and the public are behind the curve, making it hard to both stop and reverse the adverse effects that have occurred thus far. Yes, growth may be inevitable. Yes, we need housing and infrastructure. However, it is necessary to get serious about better planning, community and transportation design, and the laws, regulations, and codes that have supported, even encouraged, overdevelopment.


Sussex County, Delaware — Farmland Loss 2002 – 2022
Sussex County, DE
New Castle
Kent
Sussex
Sussex County
264,551 acres in farms (2022)
Source: USDA Census of Agriculture (2002, 2007, 2012, 2017, 2022)
Land in Farms (Acres)
320,573
296,671
289,688
278,218
264,551
Census Year
Number of Farms
1,003
937
950
887
845
Census Year
Cumulative Farmland Lost vs 2002 (Acres)
+0
-23,902
-30,885
-42,355
-56,022
Census Year
20-Year Summary
2002 farmland: 320,573 ac
2022 farmland: 264,551 ac
Total loss: -56,022 ac
Percent change: -17.5%
Acres lost / yr: -2801
Farms in 2002: 1,003
Farms in 2022: 845
Farm count change: -158 (-15.8%)
-56,022 acres
(-17.5%)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LOSSES BY THE NUMBERS:

- Delaware lost approximately **70,000 acres** of farmland to residential development between 1997 and 2007 alone, representing about **13.5%** of its total agricultural land at that time.

- **Initial Major Losses (1997–2002)**: Sussex County lost **30,147 acres** of farmland in just five years, a nearly 10% decrease.

- **Recent Trends (2017–2022)**: According to the 2022 Census of Agriculture, land in farms in Sussex County decreased by **5%** (roughly 13,000 acres) in five years.

- **Watershed Impact**: Between 1996 and 2016, approximately **106 square miles** (roughly 67,840 acres) of farmland were lost within the Delaware River Watershed.

- **Regional Pressure**: According to Neilsberg Research, the population of Sussex County was 157,298 in the year 2000. By 2023, the population had increased to 263,509 (up 106,211). Using the average growth rate in 2021-2023, it is likely that another 24,000 people will come to Sussex County from 2023-2026 - bringing the estimated population up to 287,509, an increase of 55%. The trend in population growth seems to indicate that the population has not reached its peak yet and that further growth is likely. All of this growth has placed intense pressure on rural landscapes, leading to continuous conversion of farms into residential zones.

- **Woodland Conversion (1998–2023)**: In addition to open fields, Sussex County lost over **43,000 acres of forest** to development in the last 25 years. The Global Forest watch website provides information (text, maps, charts) on the loss of forests due to logging, developments and infrastructure, agriculture, and other causes. In Sussex from 2001 to 2004, 26% of tree cover loss occurred as a result of these drivers. From 2021 to 2024, 91% of tree cover loss in Sussex occurred within natural forests. There were gains in forest, but mostly on tree plantations as part of forestry management and the logging industry.

- **Development Speed**: New development in rural areas often occurs at low densities (averaging 1.9 units per acre), which consumes land more rapidly than denser growth areas.

- **Other Threats**: Development is not the only cause of loss. Between 2011 and 2017, an estimated 20,000 acres of farmland were converted to marsh across Delmarva due to saltwater intrusion, causing between $39 million and $109 million in losses. Dr. Leah Palm-Forster, from the University of Delaware's College of Agriculture & Natural Resources pointed to another 2023 study as described in this news article.

EXAMPLES OF KEY GENERAL IMPACTS: The loss of farmland to development in Sussex County significantly impacts the environment by degrading water quality, increasing flood risks, and destroying critical wildlife habitats. As rural landscapes are converted into residential and commercial areas, the natural functions of the land—such as filtering water and absorbing storm surge—are permanently altered. Additionally, making roads, trails, elevated walkways, water and sewer lines, and support facilities causes significant impacts, not only due to direct losses, but to fragmentation of habitat and disruptions in hydrology. Specific impacts include:

1. Water Quality Degradation: The shift from agriculture to dense housing changes the type of pollutants entering local waterways like the **Delaware Inland Bays** and the **Chesapeake Bay**.

- **Runoff & Infrastructure**: Replacing permeable soil with impervious surfaces (roads, roofs, parking lots) increases stormwater runoff, carrying sediment and pollutants into bays and streams.

- **Nutrient Pollution**: While farming contributes nitrogen and phosphorus from fertilizers, residential development introduces "nonpoint source pollution" from lawn chemicals and failing septic systems.

- **Aquifer Risk**: The shallow, unconfined aquifer in eastern Sussex County—a major source of drinking water—is highly susceptible to contamination from both agricultural runoff and effluent from residential septic systems.

2. Loss of Natural Buffers & Flooding: Developing farmland often involves clearing adjacent woodlands and wetlands, which act as natural defenses against Sussex County's low-lying coastal geography.

- **Increased Flood Risk**: Natural areas like marshes and forests protect nearby built environments from flooding. When these are destroyed, the county must build expensive, artificial infrastructure to manage stormwater. Agricultural land provides important habitat and flood storage functions, and while not a "natural" landscape, this land buffers and helps protect environmental values.

- **Marsh Migration Barriers**: As sea levels rise, tidal marshes need to "migrate" inland to survive. Developments and hard surfaces built right along the shoreline act as barriers, preventing this natural adaptation and leading to the permanent loss of wetland habitats. Farmlands store flood waters and in some cases provide open areas to support natural marsh migration.

3. Habitat Fragmentation & Biodiversity Loss: Conversion of rural land disrupts the ecosystems that support Delaware's native species.

- **Forest Depletion**: Sussex County has lost over **43,000 acres of forest** in the last 25 years. Unlike land that moves between forest and agriculture, development represents a **permanent reduction** in the forest base.

- **Invasive Species**: When productive farmland is abandoned for future development or left unmanaged, it often becomes a breeding ground for invasive plant species, which can further damage local biodiversity.

- **Wildlife Impact**: Replacing diverse forested ecosystems with non-native lawns provides little value for native wildlife, further fragmenting habitats in a once heavily forested coastal plain.

4. Saltwater Intrusion: While not caused by development directly, the pressure of a rising sea level is turning coastal farmland into salt marshes, rendering thousands of acres unusable for both farming and future traditional development.

WATER QUALITY IMPACTS: The conversion of farmland to development creates a shift in water quality challenges, moving from manageable agricultural runoff to permanent "nonpoint source" pollution from urban infrastructure. The primary ways this transition affects water quality include:

1. Increase in Impervious Surfaces: Developing farmland replaces permeable soil with "hard" surfaces like roofs, roads, and driveways.

- **Reduced Filtration**: Natural soil acts as a filter for rainwater. Without it, water cannot soak into the ground to recharge aquifers—the primary source of drinking water in Sussex County.

- **Stormwater Surges**: Rainwater flows rapidly over pavement, picking up pollutants such as **roadway deicers**, **heavy metals**, and **vehicle drippings** before entering local streams and bays.

2. Nutrient Pollution Shift: While both farms and suburbs contribute nutrients like nitrogen and phosphorus, the delivery and management methods change:

- **Agricultural Runoff**: Farming often involves fertilizers and manure, which can leach into groundwater or wash into bays, causing **algal blooms** and oxygen depletion.

- **Residential Runoff**: Developed land introduces new nutrient sources, primarily from **lawn fertilizers** and **failing septic systems**. Unlike farms, which are subject to *Nutrient Management Laws* and can use "cover crops" to hold nutrients in place, residential areas are harder to regulate.

3. Habitat and Buffer Loss: Development often involves clearing "buffers" like forests and wetlands that naturally protect waterways.

- **Wetland Destruction**: Sussex County has lost approximately **60% of its Inland Bays wetlands**. These wetlands are the "kidneys" of the water system, trapping sediment and purifying water before it reaches the bays.

- **Sedimentation**: The construction process itself can lead to massive sediment runoff into local ditches and streams, which can clog habitats and carry attached pollutants like phosphorus.

4. Impact on the Inland Bays: In Sussex County, approximately **87% of waterways are polluted**. The Inland Bays are particularly sensitive because they are shallow and do not "flush" pollutants out to the ocean quickly. Rapid development around these bays has led to **eutrophication**, where excessive plant and algae growth kill off native bay grasses and oysters.

POTENTIAL APPROACHES TO SLOW FARMLAND CONVERSION: In March 2026, the Sussex County Council introduced a package of **six landmark ordinances** based on recommendations from the Land Use Reform Working Group. These reforms are designed to slow the conversion of rural land and prioritize conservation in new developments. The key legislative changes currently being debated include:

- **Rural Subdivision Restrictions**: A major proposal to **prohibit high-density "cluster" subdivisions** and Residential Planned Communities (RPCs) in areas designated as rural on the Future Land Use Map. In these areas, only standard subdivisions with larger minimum lot sizes would be allowed.

- **Increased Open Space Requirements**: The proposed Open Space Ordinance would raise the minimum required open space in new developments to **50% for rural areas** and **30% for designated growth areas**. It also tightens what counts as open space, excluding "non-functional" areas like grass strips between buildings or playgrounds.

- **Forest Preservation Standards**: A new ordinance (pending final state forester review) would require professional assessments of forest health and connectivity before development begins. It introduces **significant fines ($10,000 per quarter-acre)** and steep mitigation requirements for unauthorized tree clearing.

- **"Missing Middle" Housing Definitions**: To encourage denser, more walkable growth in designated areas, the council is defining new housing types like **cottage courts, stacked flats, and triplexes**. A second phase later in 2026 will determine exactly where these types are permitted.

- **Sussex County Rental Program (SCRP) Overhaul**: Proposed changes aim to make workforce housing more financially feasible for developers by reducing the required affordable set-aside from 25% to 15% and allowing some projects to skip public hearings if they meet specific "by-right" criteria in growth zones.

- **Cluster Moratorium**: While not yet adopted, a temporary moratorium on cluster development applications was introduced in March 2026 to prevent a flood of new projects before the higher standards take effect.

ISSUE FOR DISCUSSION: An important question elected officials and the public face is how to accommodate responsible growth and development while also preserving and protecting the natural and cultural environment and landscape. It is the opinion of the BBLA Board that Sussex County must continue to strive to find the appropriate mix between development and preservation. Given the County has been "behind the curve" for many years, it is a difficult task to both stop and subsequently reverse the adverse effects that have occurred thus far. An article by Roger Morris published in the July 23,2025, issue of **Delaware Today** titled *Sussex County Grapples With the Pros and Cons of Growth - Rapid population growth causes challenges for state's southernmost county* provides a comprehensive summary of the issues associated with development needs and environmental protection goals. The many political, fiscal, social, and policy considerations that must be considered are described using real-life examples. For those interested in understanding the issues and perhaps becoming engaged in the solution to the problems, reading this article is a good place to start the journey.

BBLA Board of Directors
April 2026

About BBLA:
BBLA is a volunteer-led non-profit association representing property owners in Bethany Beach for over 55 years. BBLA serves as the eyes and ears of the community, working closely with town leadership, local organizations, and business partners to preserve and enhance the unique charm of Bethany Beach. For more information, please visit www.bbla.us.

References and Further Reading

Rural Land Management www.completecommunitiesde.org

Delaware Agricultural Lands Preservation Foundation announces 36 properties, more than 2,800 acres preserved in 2025
https://news.delaware.gov/2025/10/10/delaware-agricultural-lands-preservation-foundation-announces-36-properties-more-than-2800-acres-preserved-in-2025/

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https://delawaretoday.com/life-style/sussex-county-growth/#:~:text=%E2%80%9CThe%20more%20natural%20areas%20that,we%20call%20nonpoint%20source%20pollution

Issues Affecting the Bays, Delaware Center for the Inland Bays
https://inlandbays.org/about-the-bays/#:~:text=Issues%20Affecting%20the%20Bays,happens%2C%20algal%20growth%20accelerates%20and

Sussex County Introduces Four Land Use Reform Ordinances
https://www.coasttv.com/news/sussex-county-introduces-four-land-use-reform-ordinances/article_e1f24903-6163-42a9-914a-232ae664c7a1.html