

## Installment 2 of 12: Why Participate in a Farmland Protection Program?

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Last month I gave an overview of the Berkeley County Farmland Protection Program; including what a conservation easement is and what having an easement means to the landowner. This month I'd like to explain some of the reasons individuals place their land into a conservation easement. In Berkeley County we presently have 46 properties under easement representing 44 different property owners. Some of these easements were purchased by the Berkeley County Farmland Protection Board, some were also purchased with matching funds from the USDA and the West Virginia Agricultural Land Protection Authority, and a surprising number of easements were fully donated. We received a generous donation of a 206 acre farm in June of this year. Despite these differences in how or whether a property owner is compensated for their conservation easement, when I talk with our property owners their reasons really boil down to three common reasons.

The first and perhaps the most frequently heard reason is to fulfill a sense of connection to generations past. Many of our property owners live on land purchased by their parents, grandparents, or generations even further back. They recognize the hard work and dedication their ancestors made to take land and make it into a working farm – a farm that usually kept food on the table, paid the bills, and even sent children off to college. The current property owner feels that by putting their farm into a farmland protection program they are ensuring that the agricultural legacy of their land will continue into the future.

Related to the first reason is a group of property owners who may not be connected to their land through many generations of family, yet still feel deeply connected to their property. Some of these owners have only recently purchased their farms but already sense that there is something important about their property that needs to be preserved into the future. They may be on a quiet stretch of Back Creek or have a farm with a 200 year-old house but something about their property is so special that they feel it needs to be protected forever. Personally, I'm in this second group of people. My property is in Jefferson County and my home, built in 1835, is centered on my land. Back then the land was likely planted in wheat and corn. In more recent times it was a working dairy farm. It is open pasture and woodland now. My hope for my property is that it never becomes a townhome subdivision with my grand but small stone house serving as the club house for the community. Putting my property in the Jefferson County Farmland Protection program (the easement is also held by the Land Trust of the Eastern Panhandle) has guaranteed that this will never happen. Many of our property owners under easement in Berkeley County feel the same way too.

The last common reason folks go into a farmland protection program is financial. If the property scores highly on our local or on the USDA ranking, and if sufficient funds to purchase the conservation easement are available then the easement is purchased. This can amount to a significant amount of money for the property owner who still owns the land once the conservation easement has been purchased. In the case of full or partial donations of a conservation easement, there may be significant tax or estate planning advantages to the donor.

So these are the most common reasons people enter into our Farmland Protection program. Next month we will explore what it is like to live under a conservation easement.

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