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Delmarva Conservation Corridor Program

Introduction – The Delmarva Peninsula

Stretching nearly 200 miles north to south, comprised of Delaware and portions of Maryland and Virginia, and nearly surrounded by sea and estuary, the Delmarva Peninsula has been a dominant agricultural and maritime center on the East coast for centuries.

Agriculture on the Delmarva Peninsula has been the backbone of the economy for hundreds of years and it remains so today. A flight over or drive through Delmarva confirms vast acreages of highly productive farmland interspersed with working forests. This area is the largest contiguous block of productive farmland on the East coast from Maine to the Carolinas. This abundance of productive land is situated within an overnight's drive of 60 million or one-third of America's consumers.

Despite decreases in recent years, farming and linked industries such as food processing and transportation provided 120,270 jobs on Delmarva in 1997. This accounts for more than 16 percent of all jobs on the peninsula and does not include other resource based industries such as forestry, fishing, and their linked industries. In addition, the American Farmland Trust study identified a new labor force for agriculture that is emerging on the peninsula. Migrant workers from Central and South America now make up a considerable portion of the labor force in Northampton and Accomack counties and their influence is growing significantly in other counties as well. This emerging labor force is vital to the long term viability of many farm industries including dairy, vegetables, fruits, and nursery products.

Equally important as Delmarva's agricultural strength and heritage is the Peninsula's natural heritage. Due to its mid-coastal location, the Delmarva Peninsula provides critical migratory and wintering habitat for vast numbers of waterfowl within the Atlantic flyway. And similarly, Delmarva provides critical migratory and summer breeding habitat for much of the East's neotropical and temperate migrant songbird population. The Delmarva's mid-latitude location also provides habitat for a rich intermingling of northern and southern non-migratory plant and animal species

Regarding songbirds and birds of prey, the Delmarva Peninsula represents an extremely important migratory corridor for juvenile songbirds in the fall where migrants rest and feed before resuming their migration. The southern tip of the Delmarva Peninsula also serves as a major fall migration funnel for raptors because of prevailing winds and habitat requirements for mostly juvenile accipiters and falcons. It is for these reasons that the lower Delmarva Peninsula is considered hemispherically important to a wide variety of migrants. In addition, the federally threatened Bald Eagle thrives on Delmarva with 23 known breeding territories on Virginia's Eastern Shore, a similar number in Delaware, and over a hundred on Maryland's Eastern Shore.

Regarding other plant and animal species, the Delmarva Fox Squirrel was listed as federally endangered in 1967 and currently occupies less than 10% of its historical range. However, federal and state agencies and non-governmental partners have undertaken many efforts on behalf of this species including a total of 16 attempts to establish new squirrel populations (11 in Maryland, two in Virginia, two in Delaware, and one in Pennsylvania). At least ten of these efforts have been successful in establishing new reproductive populations. Also, many existing source populations are thought to be stable or increasing in size. The continued recovery of this species depends on the protection of the remaining large forested blocks on Delmarva and connecting forests between those blocks.

While Delmarva's Mid-Atlantic location is an asset for agriculture and natural resources, it is also a potentially disastrous vulnerability. Urban and suburban expansion on the Mid-Atlantic Coast is rapidly creating a megalopolis of development from Boston south to the Carolina's. Delmarva Peninsula land in farms decreased by 11 percent or 203,445 acres between 1982 and 1997. The rate of loss has been accelerating with 4,620 acres/year lost between 1982 and 1992, and 7,140 acres/year from 1992 to 1997. Although these losses are being felt throughout the Peninsula, they are acute in northern Delmarva, near the Chesapeake Bay Bridge where commuters are a short drive from Washington and Baltimore, and near the Chesapeake Bay Bridge Tunnel (CBBT). The recent commuter toll reduction at the CBBT increased traffic 36% in the first month, compared with 2-3% per year normal annual increase. Also of particular note, in New Castle County in northern Delaware, where suburban expansion is most rampant, several farmers have sold their farms for upwards of \$20,000 per acre only to re-invest in farms for less than \$5,000 per acre in nearby Maryland. On the Maryland side of the state line the growth pressure is not as severe and preservation activities and growth controls are more successful.

The number of farms and farmers is also decreasing. Delmarva lost 25 percent or 2,176 farms between 1982 and 1997. Farmer age increased over the same fifteen year period creeping up from an average of 51 years to 54 years. With growing overall populations (1990's increases were 10%-Maryland, 14.4%-Virginia, and 17.6%-Delaware) farmers as a percentage of the total population is decreasing dramatically thus further isolating this population.

Delmarva Conservation Corridor Demonstration Program (DCCDP)

The primary objectives of the DCCDP are to:

1. Improve the Economic Viability of Agriculture; and
2. Improve the Environmental Integrity of Watersheds on Delmarva.

These objectives provide a balanced approach to strengthening agriculture and conserving natural resources. Perhaps more importantly, these objectives are mutually dependent. That is, assuring the economic viability of farming and land based industries is essential for long term retention of land and protection of water quality and natural resources. And similarly, protecting the environmental integrity of the region is vital to our health, our quality of life, and a balanced economy for our region.

Toward that end, the DCCDP will provide the following advantages:

For the Economy: the proposed program will secure prime farmland – the foundation of Delmarva's number one industry – and will help stimulate farm related businesses;

For Farmers: the proposed program will elevate Delmarva agriculture and natural resources to a national priority while also allowing for local program innovation and streamlining of paperwork;

For the Environment: the proposed program will provide incentives to landowners to voluntarily conserve their natural resources thus protecting sensitive areas and limiting the harmful effects of sprawl.