



Chapter 4

Agricultural Resources of Juniata and Mifflin Counties

Introduction

Juniata and Mifflin Counties have significant farmland nestled between the long ridgelines that traverse the Counties. Agriculture and farmland are a part of Juniata and Mifflin Counties identity and heritage. The valley farms with the backdrop of wooded ridgelines are a core landscape image for the Counties. Agriculture lands are critical components of open space, just as forest and meadow lands, streams, and rivers are part of the landscape valued and enjoyed by all who reside and visit the area. Agricultural fields and fenced pastures are central to the rural landscape character of Juniata and Mifflin Counties.

Agriculture has long been the leading industry in the Counties and this agriculture heritage continues today with large and small farms located throughout the valleys. The agricultural industry of the Counties is based in both field crops and livestock and includes many supporting farm-based businesses. Juniata County is characterized by field crops with significant poultry production in the eastern portion of the County. Mifflin County has a larger percentage of dairy farms, many of which are located in the broad “Big Valley” area located in the northern portion of the County between Stone Mountain and Jacks Mountain.

Current Conditions for Agriculture in Juniata and Mifflin Counties

The most recent Pennsylvania Agricultural Census (2007) states the total acreage of farmland in Juniata County as 97,681 acres and 94,133 acres in Mifflin County. This acreage equates to over one-third of Juniata County’s land area (38.78%) and over one-third of Mifflin County’s land area (35.47%) devoted to agriculture.

The 2007 Pennsylvania Agricultural Census shows that there are more acres in agriculture in both Counties than the previous census in 2002, while the average farm size decreased. Over the past several decades, both Counties have seen an increase in Amish farm ownership. The agricultural tradition of the Amish and their commitment to this heritage bode well for the future of agriculture in the Counties.

Table 4-1 - Juniata and Mifflin Counties Farmland Loss/Grain			
Year	Acres in Farms	Number of Farms	Average Farm Size
Juniata County			
2002	86,203	644	134 acres
2007	97,681	788	124 acres
% Change	+ 13%	+ 22%	- 7%
Mifflin County			
2002	90,486	752	120
2007	94,133	1,024	92
% Change	+ 4%	+ 36%	- 24%

Source: 2007 USDA Census of Agriculture

As of January 2009, Juniata County had 13 farms preserved through the Agricultural Conservation Easement Program (ACE) equating to 1,541 acres of farmland and Mifflin County had 16 farms totaling 1,764 acres. There is more interest in the ACE program in both Counties than can be funded on an annual basis. Typically, each County can fund the purchase of only one farm annually and each year there are many more applications that must go on the waiting list. In 2008, Mifflin County had 13 applications and Juniata County typically receives 18-20 applications annually for the ACE Program. In both Counties the yearly funding typically covers purchase of one farm in the 80-120 acre range.



In 2008 the Pennsylvania Department of Agriculture listed 67 Concentrated Animal Operations (CAOs) in Juniata County and 23 in Mifflin County. These large-scale agricultural operations are a significant departure from the traditional family farms that previously dominated farming in the area.



In contrast to the large-scale factory farms are the Amish farms that can be found in both Juniata and Mifflin Counties. The Amish continue 18th century farming practices, using non-mechanized equipment and driving their produce to farmers markets and roadside stands with horse-drawn buggies. Several farms and farmer's markets have emerged in both Counties that are open to the public on a daily or weekly basis in and out of season. A farm or farmer's market where locally grown fresh produce can be purchased is located in or within minutes of each County seat and other population centers.

The Counties are witnessing agricultural innovation with farmers of diverse backgrounds and interests moving to the area. These farmers are thinking differently about farming and how it can be viable within the current economic model. They are working with Pennsylvania Association for Sustainable Agriculture (PASA) to maximize economic opportunities for farmers. Ideas such as Buy Fresh Buy Local and agri-tourism are emerging in the Counties as a new way to practice and sustain agriculture.

Economics of Agriculture in Juniata and Mifflin Counties

Juniata and Mifflin Counties have deep agricultural roots and it remains the leading industry in both Counties. Although the soils are not as significant for agriculture as elsewhere in the Commonwealth, farming and associated farm industries are critical to the economic health of the Counties. Pennsylvania farmers and agribusinesses are the leading economic drivers in the state and Juniata and Mifflin Counties are ranked 15 and 18 respectively out of 67 counties for agricultural products sold. The Pennsylvania

Agricultural Census for 2007 listed the value of agricultural products sold in Juniata County as \$91,658,000 and \$86,818,000 for products sold in Mifflin County. Dairy production ranked as the largest segment of Mifflin County's agricultural business and poultry ranked highest in Juniata County.

Farmer's Perspective

A public forum was held with farmers as part of the public input process for this plan. A diverse representation of farmers attended and shared their thoughts on farming and the future of farming in the two Counties. Farmers raised concerns about farming and its future viability and identified challenges that face today's farmers in the Counties. Concerns and challenges include:

- The low compensation for land through the Agricultural Conservation Easement program and low level of state funding for the program relative to other counties.
- Although both Counties have chapters of the PA Farm Bureau that serve farmers and their interests, participants expressed the need for a common organization for farmers to come together to advocate for their interests. Following the forum, farmers continued to call the County agricultural agents with their comments demonstrating the need for a communications vehicle for regular discussion about agricultural and farmer's ideas and concerns.
- State policies on funding for farmland preservation favor counties in developing areas of the state, such as southeastern Pennsylvania and Lancaster County. While these counties also have prime farmland soils, the money does not go as far as it would in Juniata and Mifflin Counties for preservation. Dealing with this as a policy issue could be an area of exploration if a farmers group is formed for on-going discussion of farm issues. Having a voice in Harrisburg to influence policy in favor of Juniata and Mifflin Counties would be important.

- As farmers retire they are faced with the difficult decisions of trying to sell their land for farming or development. It is difficult to purchase a farm that can be paid off by farming and developers typically offer higher prices for farmland.
- The trend is toward large-tract corporate-owned farms. The family farm is much less financially feasible than it had been in recent past.
- The Counties present opportunities for farmers with diverse education, experience, and interests to establish operations. Farmers have moved to the Counties from other areas because of the lower land costs, bringing different farming strategies, innovations, and focuses.
- Where will the next generation of farmers come from? Children and grandchildren of farmers are opting for non-farm careers.
- Pennsylvania Association for Sustainable Agriculture (PASA) offers information to farmers on the agricultural industry, opportunities to connect with consumers, and strengthen the economic future of the family farm.
- Amish farmers are active in the two Counties and do purchase farmland.
- The costs of grain, fuel, and other farm necessities are rising, making farming less profitable.
- The tie between tourism and agriculture raises concerns, as those present at the forum thought that sustaining the traditional industry of agriculture in the counties is important.
- Development should be prohibited on Class I soils.
- The initiation of Agricultural Security Area Programs (ASA) in each township of the two Counties should be a priority so that farmers who wish to participate in the

Agricultural Conservation Easement Program (ACE) can do so.

Agricultural Soils of Juniata and Mifflin Counties

The Agricultural Soils Maps (pages 4-7 and 4-8) illustrate the locations of the quality of the soils for agricultural purposes based on the USDA Soil Capability Classes. Prime farmland in the Counties includes Class I and II soils. Pennsylvania classifies Class III soils as “soils of statewide importance” due to their productive capabilities.

Table 4-2 USDA Soil Capability Classes
<p>Class I Soils have few limitations that restrict their use.</p> <p>Class II Soils have moderate limitations that reduce the choice of plants or require moderate conservation practices.</p> <p>Class III Soils have severe limitation that reduce the choice of plants or require special conservation practices, or both.</p> <p>Class IV Soils have very severe limitation that reduce the choice of plants or that require very careful management, or both.</p>

When the preservation of agricultural land is a land use goal, there is an inherent conflict that is becoming more and more evident in Juniata and Mifflin Counties. The best soils for farming are also the most compatible soils for development. Compatibility with development translates into higher land values. Farmers are often presented with the conflicting choice of selling their farms for development or continuing to farm. The American Farmland Trust, *Farming on the Edge* report notes that this conflict is occurring nationwide with our highest quality farmland threatened by development. “We’re losing our best land – most fertile and productive – the fastest.”

Table 4-3 - Juniata and Mifflin County Agricultural Soils		
Soil Class	Juniata County	Mifflin County
Prime Farmland (Class I & II)	23,000 acres	35,780 acres
Soils of Statewide Importance (Class III)	67,110 acres	39,440 acres

Source: GIS data and County Conservation Districts

The recent development activity of the Big Valley is a testament to the pressures of development on the best farmland. For years 2003 through 2005 Brown Township in the Big Valley had the most building permits issued of any municipality in Mifflin County. The gently sloped terrain of the Big Valley and easy access from the Route 322 corridor are putting additional pressures on these important agricultural resources.

County Agricultural Preservation Programs

Juniata and Mifflin Counties have three programs to promote the continuation of farming and the preservation of agricultural lands in the Counties: Clean and Green program, the Agricultural Security Area program (ASA), and the Agricultural Conservation Easement (ACE) program. The Agricultural Lands Maps (pages 4-9 and 4-10) illustrate parcels enrolled in the ASA and ACE programs in the Counties.

- Clean and Green – This program offers landowners with parcels of 10 acres or more tax relief for agreeing to keep their properties in agriculture, woodlands, or pastures. Parcels within this program receive a differential property assessment based on the value of productive farmland, not on the parcel's development potential. Participation in this program does not preserve the farmland, but the lowers tax assessment helps to keep farming viable. Both Counties have parcels enrolled in this program. The program places restrictions on the future subdivision of land or establishment of non-agricultural business on the land. If the landowner makes changes to lands within the program resulting in noncompliance with the program restrictions roll-back taxes and interests will be assessed based on the program provisions. These restrictions and penalties are not always fully understood by landowners.
- Agricultural Security Area (ASA) – The ASA program does not directly preserve farmland but promotes farming operations

by strengthening rights relative to farm operations. Parcels placed in this program receive a variety of benefits such as protection from certain ordinance restrictions, limited protection from condemnation of land, and eligibility for the agricultural conservation easements program. As of August 2008 Juniata County had 31,741 acres (590 parcels) in the ASA and Mifflin County had 38,937 acres (289 parcels) in the ASA.

- Agricultural Conservation Easement (ACE) – This state program is administered by the Counties and provides a mechanism for purchasing agricultural conservation easements from willing landowners enrolled in ASA's. A parcel must be previously enrolled as an ASA to be eligible for the ACE program. Funds from the state and county are used to purchase land development rights. The farmer retains ownership of the land and can continue to farm the land, but the land cannot be converted to a use other than agriculture. Agricultural conservation easements are held in perpetuity, providing permanent protection for farmland. The landowner benefits by receiving the proceeds from the sale of the development rights.

Growth and development are taking important farmlands out of productions. Growth in the Old 22/Route 322 corridor between Thompsontown and Mifflintown is experiencing growth with land lost to residential development. This area is convenient to Route 322 and within commuting distance to Harrisburg which is spurring the growth. In Mifflin County the Big Valley is experiencing growth which is taking viable farmland out of production. Both of these areas include some of the best soils in the Counties.

Development in the Big Valley has primarily occurred in Brown Township, which until recently was the only township in Mifflin County without an ASA program. Currently all Mifflin County townships have an ASA program and Lack Township is the only township in Juniata County without an ASA program. Farms are not eligible for

the ACE program and permanent protection if an ASA program does not exist in the municipality.

Administration of the Agricultural Preservation Programs

Both Juniata and Mifflin Counties have an administrator that oversees the agricultural preservation programs for their Counties. Unfortunately, the staff is limited to one person in each County and administering the agricultural preservation program as one of many other functions they must perform. Agricultural preservation is administered by the County Conservation Districts. Demands on the staff time greatly exceed their capacity. While funding is tight, additional staff is needed for farmers support, outreach, and developing an ongoing forum for the farmers input and discussions. Staff would also provide support and information about farming trends in alternative methods of farming such as sustainable agriculture, organic farming, farm to table, and other programs. By comparison, Centre County has a dedicated



planner in the Centre County Planning and Community Development Office that administers the agricultural preservation program. Although the planner interacts with the Conservation District and County Cooperative Extension, his responsibilities are limited to the Centre County Agricultural Preservation program and the non-profit Centre County Farmland Trust.

Funding of Agricultural Preservation

An often heard remark regarding the Agricultural Conservation Easement Program in Juniata and Mifflin Counties is that the program is under funded

by the Commonwealth, relative to other counties and the funding at not at a level needed to address the majority of the farmers interested in participating in the program. Both Counties have indicated that they typically have funding to purchase development rights from one farm annually and there is consistently a waiting list of farmers interested in preserving their land through the program.

Additionally, many farmers have indicated that the compensation for agricultural conservation easements is a low per acre cost which dissuades many farmers from participating in the program. The program is based on fair market value for agricultural land, but, as the Counties experience growth, the fair market valued for farmland is competing with what developers are willing to pay.

Conclusions

Strengths

The industry of agriculture is active and viable in both Juniata and Mifflin Counties. Farming has long been an integral part of the Counties' landscape and there is significant interest among farmers and the general public in sustaining farming into the future. The Amish and new farmers moving to the Counties with new ideas about agriculture as a business add to the vigor of the agriculture industry of the area.

Challenges

As the Counties' number one industry it is critical to the economic health of the area. The loss of agricultural areas would forever change the essential nature of life in rural Juniata and Mifflin Counties. The loss is incremental but at some point there would be a tipping point in which the character of the communities would essentially change from rural to suburban. Right now, that tipping point is not defined but continued loss of farms and development of major commercial areas on prime farmland set the Counties on this path.

The industry of agriculture is changing and this change may create different opportunities for farmers. Methods for keeping discussions and awareness of alternative methods and trends needs to be advocated and supported.

Agricultural Resources of Juniata and Mifflin Counties

It is important to encourage all townships to participate in the Agriculture Security Area program so that landowners have the opportunity to apply for the Agriculture Conservation Easement program. The Agriculture Conservation Easement program is an effective tool for preservation of farmland but unfortunately the Counties do not receive adequate funding to be able to preserve all of the farms that farmers are interested in preserving. Of the 590 parcels enrolled in the ASA Program in Juniata County only 13 parcels or 2-percent have received permanent protection through the ACE Program. Summarily, in Mifflin County only 16 of the 789 ASA parcels, or 2-percent, are permanently protected with easements.

Residential development is modest in Juniata and Mifflin Counties compared to other areas, although both Counties continue to lose farmland to development. The loss of farmland in the Big Valley is noteworthy as the soils in this area are ranked as some of the best agricultural soils in the County. Preserving the Big Valley is critical to the continuation of farming in Mifflin County. Finding ways of providing more County staff time to promote preservation opportunities is needed along with coordinated land use planning and regulations to guide development so that farming can be sustained while providing for development in appropriate locations within the two Counties.

Opportunities

As the agricultural industry changes it is important to work directly with farmers to understand how agriculture can be promoted and sustained in Juniata and Mifflin Counties. The farmer's forum illustrated the enthusiasm and desire of farmers to work together toward common goals. There is interest in creating an ongoing forum so that farmers can speak with one voice to promote farmland protection and other initiatives to sustain farming as a viable industry in Mifflin and Juniata Counties.

The recent economic downturn has slowed development all across the Commonwealth including Juniata and Mifflin Counties, lessening the pressure on farmers to sell their farmland for development. This window of opportunity coupled with the new interest in locally produced fresh food as an important aspect of a sustainable healthy

lifestyle and new farmers moving to the area with expanded views on the business of agriculture bodes well for agriculture in the Counties.



Juniata/Mifflin County Greenway, Open Space and Rural Recreation Plan



Mifflin Borough & Mifflintown Borough

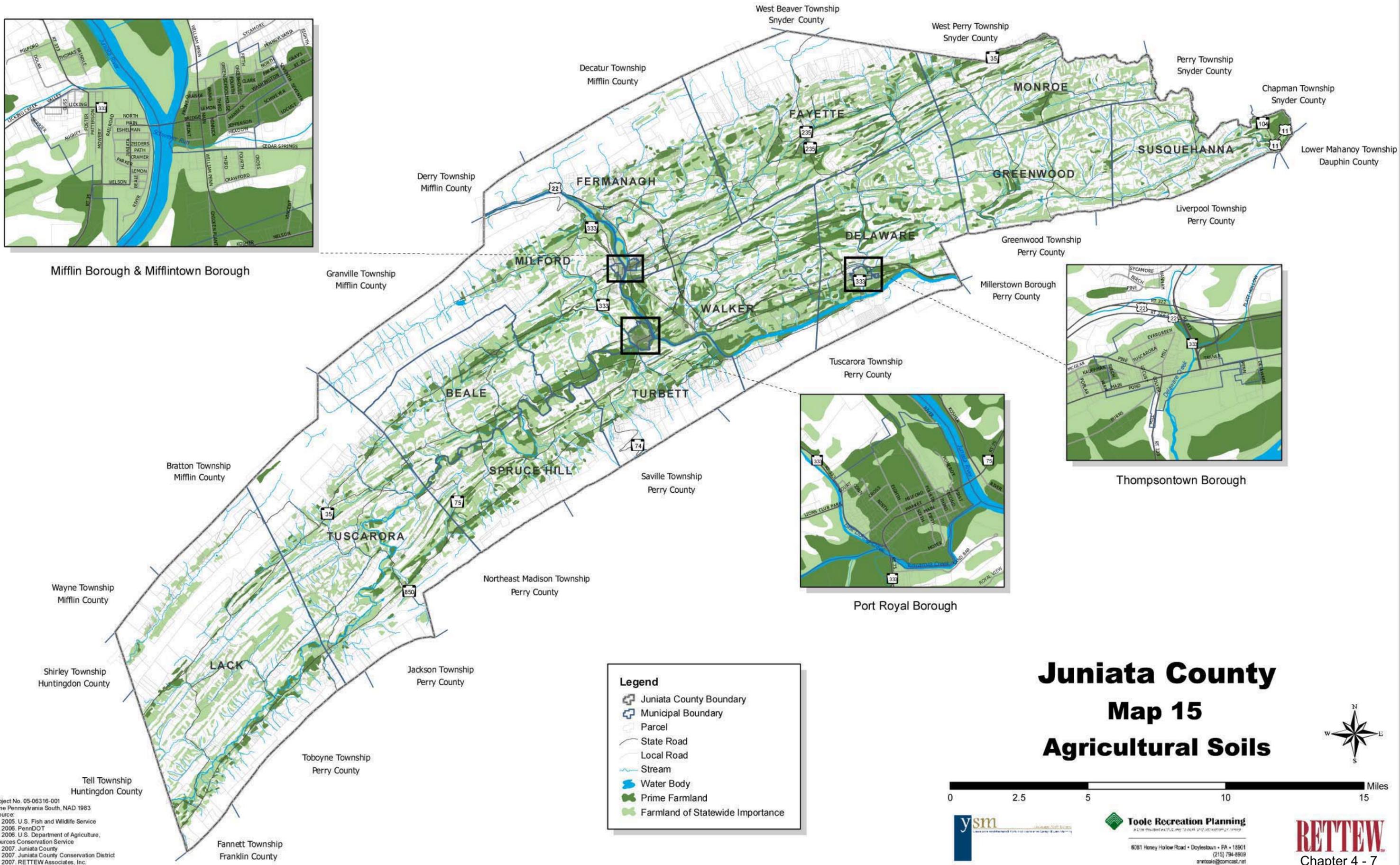
Granville Township
Mifflin County



Thompsontown Borough



Port Royal Borough



Legend

- Juniata County Boundary
- Municipal Boundary
- Parcel
- State Road
- Local Road
- Stream
- Water Body
- Prime Farmland
- Farmland of Statewide Importance

Juniata County Map 15 Agricultural Soils



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PA State Plane Pennsylvania South, NAD 1983
Base Map Source:
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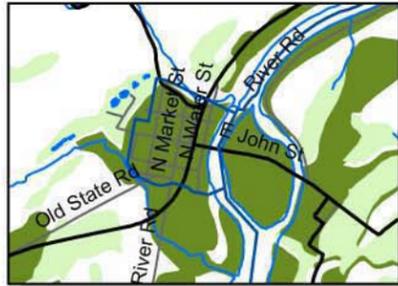
ysm Juniata County
Yield-Sustainable Management

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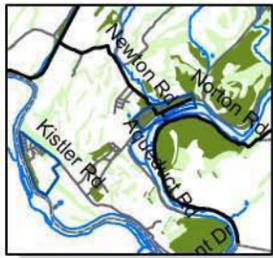
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Chapter 4 - 7

Juniata/Mifflin County Greenway, Open Space and Rural Recreation Plan

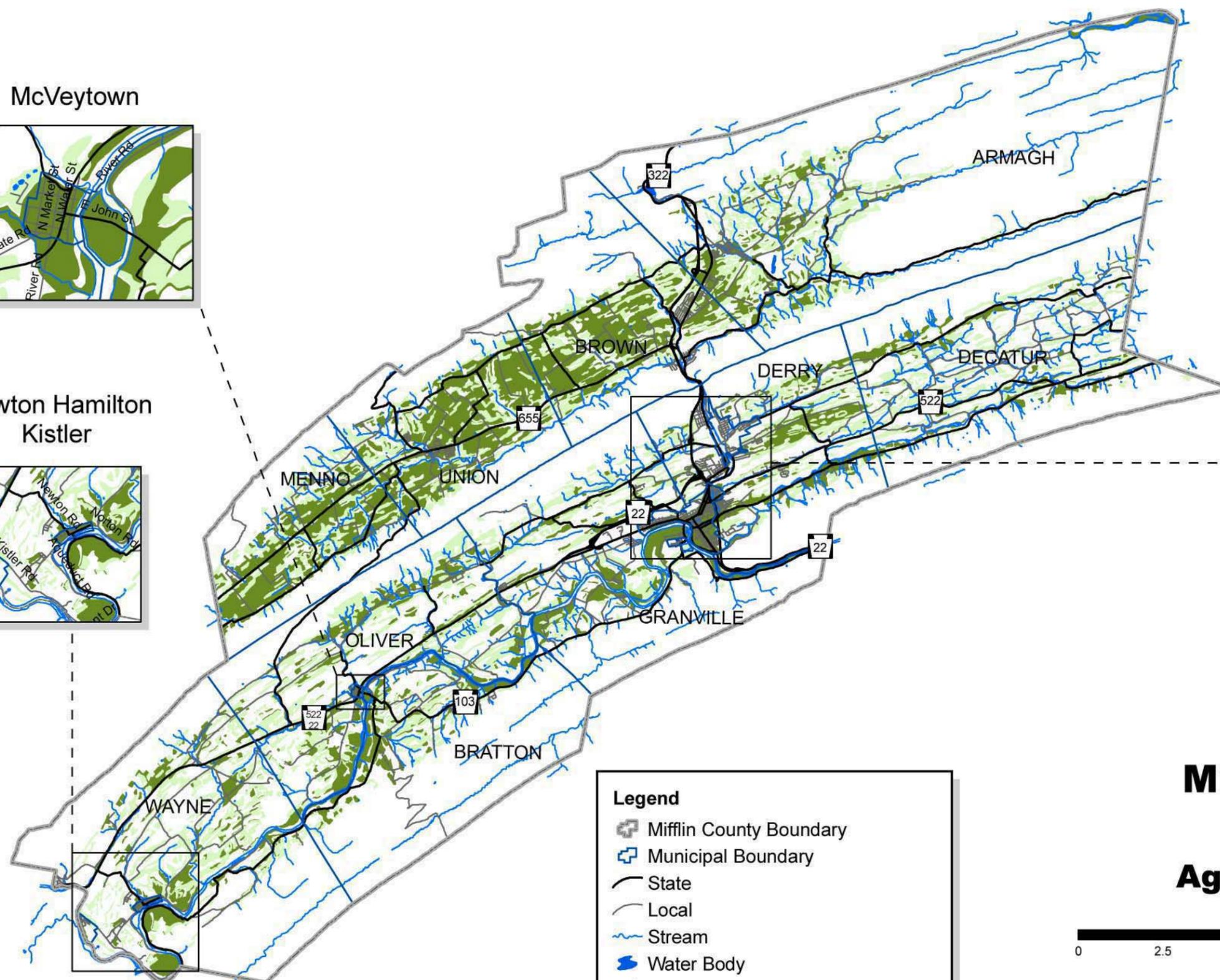
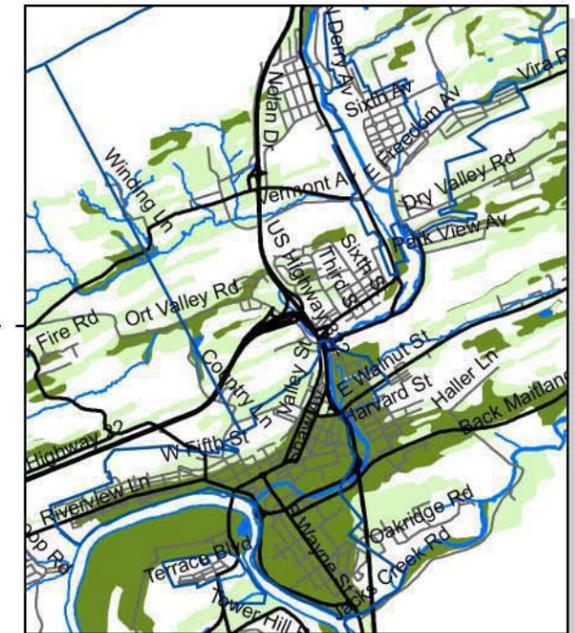
McVeytown



Newton Hamilton
Kistler



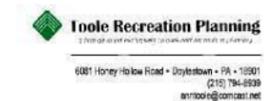
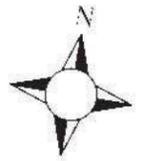
Burnham
Lewistown
Juniata Terrace



Legend

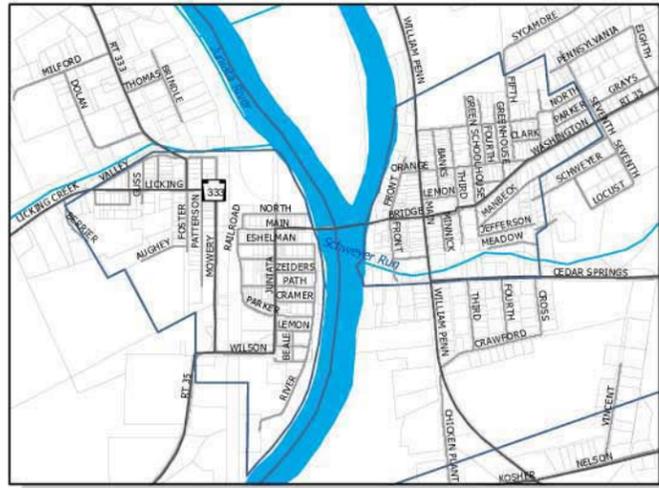
- Mifflin County Boundary
- Municipal Boundary
- State
- Local
- Stream
- Water Body
- Prime Farmlands
- Farmland of Statewide Importance

Mifflin County Map 16 Agricultural Soils

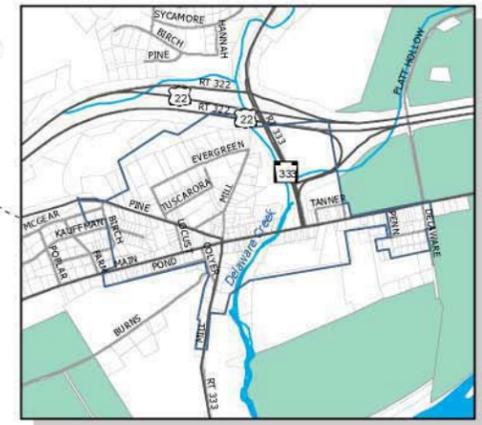


Provided by: Mifflin County GIS Department
NAD 1983 Pennsylvania State Plane North FIPS 3701 Feet

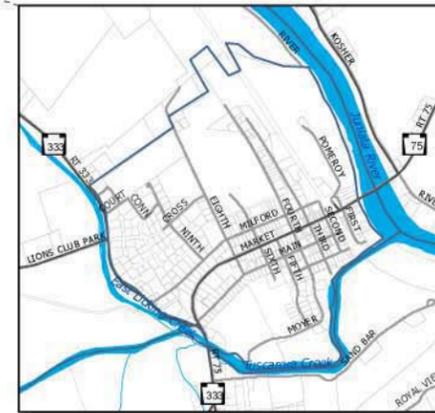
Juniata/Mifflin County Greenway, Open Space and Rural Recreation Plan



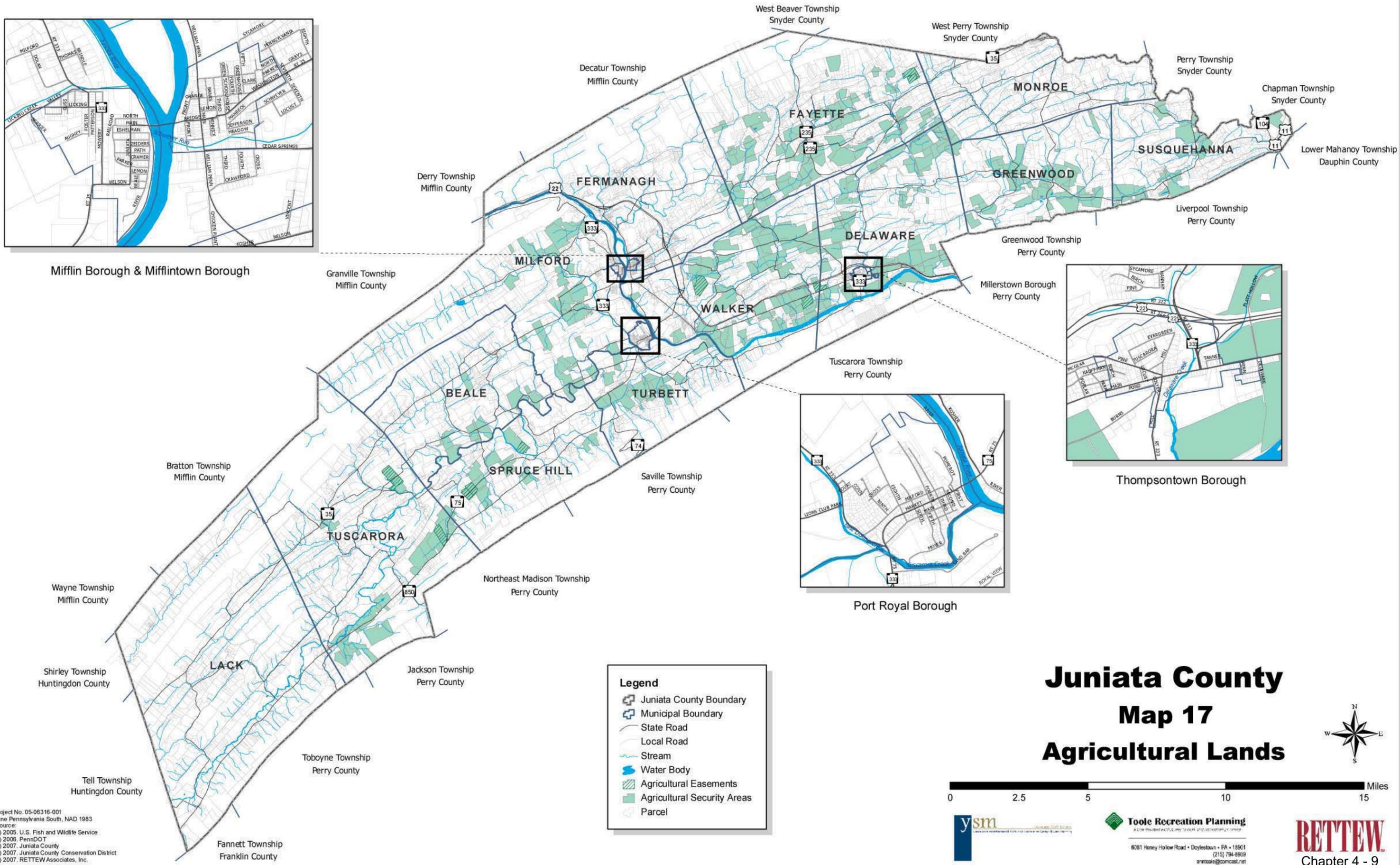
Mifflin Borough & Mifflintown Borough



Thompsontown Borough



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Legend

- Juniata County Boundary
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- State Road
- Local Road
- Stream
- Water Body
- Agricultural Easements
- Agricultural Security Areas
- Parcel

Juniata County Map 17 Agricultural Lands

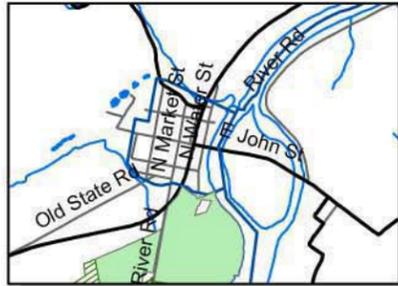


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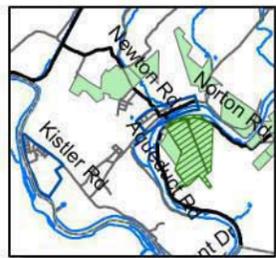


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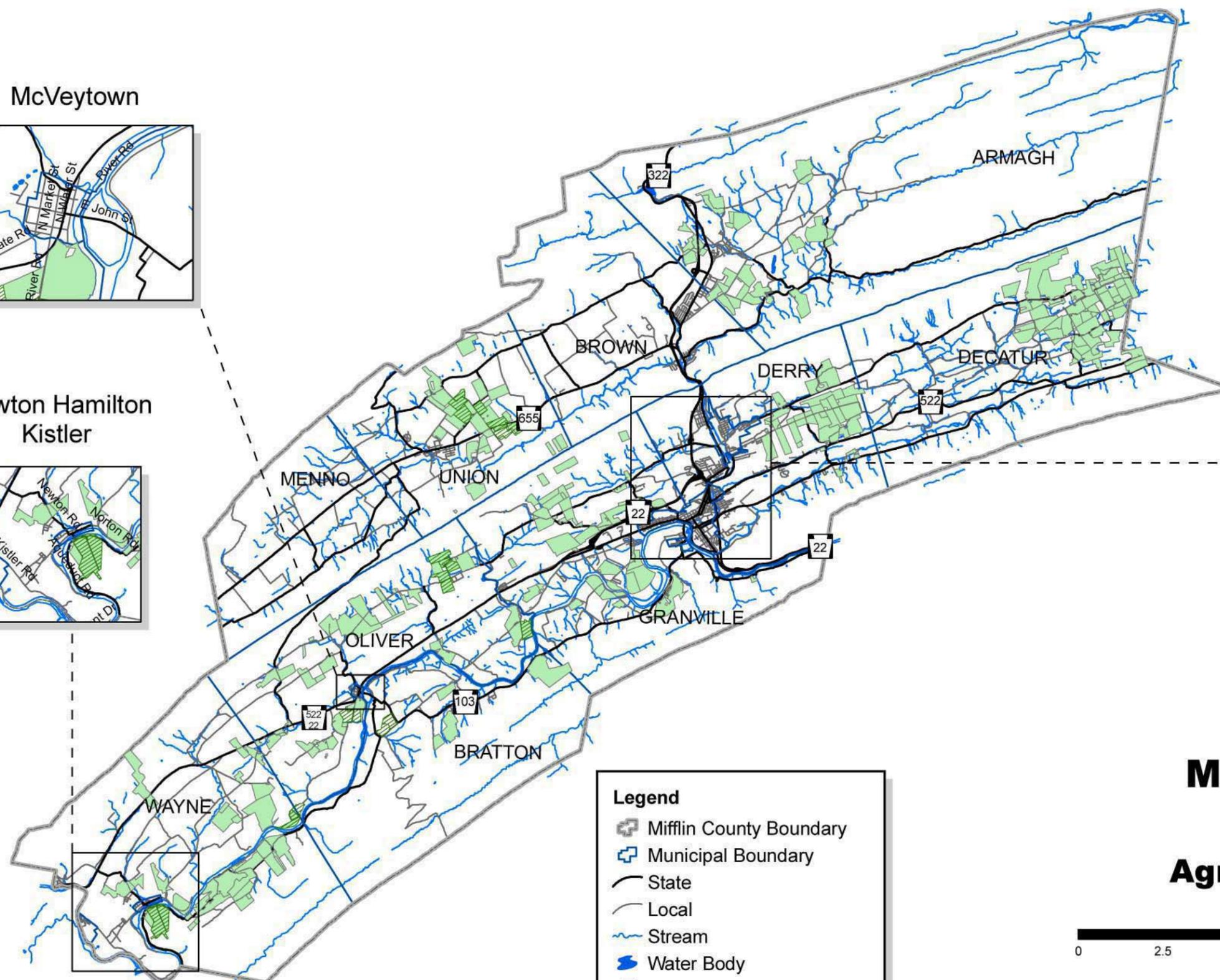
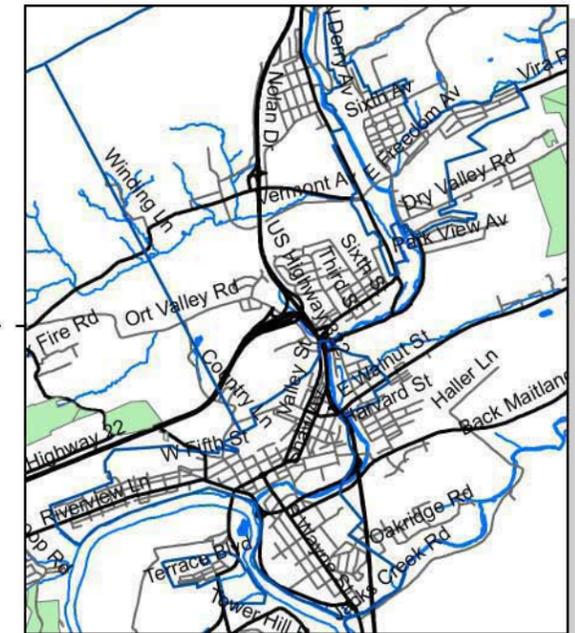
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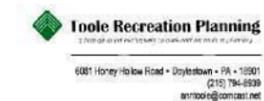
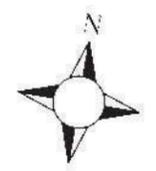
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Legend

- Mifflin County Boundary
- Municipal Boundary
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- Local
- Stream
- Water Body
- Agricultural Easements
- Agricultural Security Areas

Mifflin County Map 18 Agricultural Lands



Provided by: Mifflin County GIS Department
NAD 1983 Pennsylvania State Plane North FIPS 3701 Feet