

Agricultural Info Sheet

Field Crops in Chester County

Agriculture is the number one industry in Chester County and field crops play an important role in that equation.

General Facts

Do field crops grow well in Chester County?

Yes! Chester County has some of the best non irrigated farmland in the country. The combination of soils, about 45 percent is classified as prime farmland, and the average rainfall of 46 inches annually creates an excellent environment for crop production.



“Chester County has some of the best non irrigated farmland in the country.”

What field crops do I see around the county?

Although some farmers grow corn, soybeans and wheat for human consumption, most of these crops are grown for grain and forage and is used for animal feed.

Our farmers grow many things, but typically those growing field crops produce corn, soybeans, wheat, hay and a variety of forage crops. (Hay is made from dried alfalfa and grass/clover. Forage crops include corn, alfalfa and grass/clover but they are harvested while still green and fed to livestock.)

There are more acres of land used to grow corn than any other crop, followed by hay, then soybeans and wheat.





Aren't we losing farmland?

Field crop **yields** have been **increasing steadily** mostly due to genetics but also due to improved agronomic practices; as a result farmers are able to produce more from the same area of land. This means that field crops are still significant to the industry and the county's economy even though our total farmland acres have decreased.

Amount of land in field crops

Crops are grown on 70 percent of Chester County's 166,900 farmland acres. These crops occupy approximately 117,000 acres, which represents 24 percent of the total land area of the county (total acres of Chester County = 485,600).

Approximately 80 percent of our farms (there are 1733 farms in the county) grow crops, although many of these operations are involved in other agricultural production as well.

Conservation

What conservation practices do farmers in Chester County employ?

Most farmers use conservation practices to protect soil health, prevent weed development, stabilize soil structure, maximize nutrient and moisture retention, and to decrease erosion.



Virtually all crop farmers know that **crop rotation**, planting dissimilar crops in the same field in successive seasons, maximizes benefits for the soil, improves weed and pest control and enhances crop productivity.

Many farmers in Chester County rotate growing corn with soybeans since corn requires a lot of nitrogen and soybeans help replenish some of this critical nutrient back into the soil.

Many Chester County farmers plant a **cover crop** over the winter, such as winter wheat or rye, as soon as the corn or soybeans are harvested in late summer and early fall. The plant cover provides protection and so reduces loss of soil from rain and wind.

Many Chester County farmers use a conservation practice called "**no-till farming**" where the soil is not disturbed by a plow or tillage. Over 60 percent of the field crops produced in Chester County are grown using no-till methods.

What are field crops used for?

A significant percentage of Chester County crops are used as ingredients in animal feed for major **poultry** and **livestock** producers. In addition, our wheat is used in processed food products such as pretzels, cereal bars, candy bars and other confections.



The need for custom farming

Custom farming is an important aspect to crop farming in Chester County because it helps bridge the gap between farmers who need additional lands for crop production and landowners who need help with land management (one example of this would be land trusts or other such entities that own agricultural land but are not equipped to manage it). Each arrangement is unique and developed to best suit the needs of the landowner, farmer, and market conditions.

Custom farmers help keep large amounts of land in agricultural production, and without them, it would be difficult to maintain the quantity of field crops that are the underpinnings of our agricultural industry.

Agricultural Relationships

The **diversity** of our agricultural industry is what helps to keep it strong; different sectors rely upon each other for materials and their own success.

Virtually all of our **dairy** and **livestock** farmers grow their own forage and grain from corn to feed their herds because it is much more economical than purchasing it, however, this requires that they have access to crop land.

Our sizable **equine** industry also requires a significant amount of high quality hay, an estimated 50,000 acres, as hay makes up 50-100 percent of a horse's diet. Therefore, this industry also imports hay from surrounding counties and states.

To make mushroom compost, an essential element in **mushroom production**, Chester County mushroom farmers (who produce 47 percent of the U.S. mushroom production), need approximately 130,000 tons of hay annually. It takes about 40,000 acres of land to produce that amount of hay, therefore while mushroom growers get some of their hay within the county, they must also import hay from surrounding counties and states.

