



## **Prime, Unique, and Important Soils Determination**

The Purchase of Agricultural Conservation Easement program and the Farm and Ranchland Protection Program strive to protect important farmland, which consists of Prime, Unique, Statewide Important, and Locally Important farmland classifications.

These farmland classifications identify soil map units as prime farmland, farmland of statewide importance, farmland of local importance, or unique farmland. They also identify the location and extent of the soils that are best suited to food, feed, fiber, forage, and oilseed crops. NRCS policy and procedures on prime and unique farmlands are published in the "Federal Register," Vol. 43, No. 21, January 31, 1978.

To qualify for FRPP, a parcel must contain at least 33 to 50 percent prime soils. At less than 50 percent, other supporting factors must be present, such as Unique Soils, to allow the parcel to qualify under the program. Production ratings (or the capability of a soil for producing a specified plant or sequence of plants) are not considered, since the above categories all encompass productive and highly productive soils. At times, the term "Prime and Productive" is used, which can lead to confusion. To avoid this, the FRPP criterion focuses on farmland classification.

### **According to the United States Code 7 USCS § 4201:**

#### **Prime Farmland**

Land that has the best combination of physical and chemical characteristics for producing food, feed, fiber, forage, oilseed, and other agricultural crops with minimum inputs of fuel, fertilizer, pesticides, and labor, and without intolerable soil erosion, as determined by the Secretary. Prime farmland includes land that possesses the above characteristics and is currently being used to produce livestock and timber. It does not include land already in or committed to urban development or water storage.

#### **Unique Farmland**

Land other than prime farmland that is used for production of specific, high-value food and fiber crops, as determined by the Secretary. It has the special combination of soil quality, location, growing season, and moisture supply needed to economically produce sustained high quality or high yields of specific crops when treated and managed according to acceptable farming methods. Examples of such crops include citrus, tree nuts, olives, cranberries, fruits, and vegetables.

(Note: For the purposes of the FRPP program, unique soils are rarely used and are included only at the request of the applicant. This category takes into account such things as local micro-climate for raising specialty crops. For an area of land to be designated as unique farmland, the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) state soil scientist must classify or re-classify an area currently growing specialty crops as "unique" upon request.)



### **Statewide and Locally Important Farmland**

Land other than prime or unique farmland, that is of statewide or local importance for the production of food, feed, fiber, forage, or oilseed crops, as determined by the appropriate State or local unit of government agency or agencies, and that the Secretary determines should be considered as farmland for the purposes of this subtitle [7 USCS §4201 et seq.]

(Note: According to the WI NRCS, all soils in Wisconsin that have been determined to be locally important have been incorporated into the category of statewide important. All counties should have at least some statewide important soils.)

### **Soils and County Farmland Preservation Plans in Ch. 91, Wis. Stats.**

At the request of the Council, the intent of the addition of this criterion was to expand the group of productive soils in the existing PACE soils category to include soils of local significance as identified in the county's farmland preservation plan or comprehensive plan.

DATCP staff selected at random and reviewed Farmland Preservation Plans from four counties.

The Department encountered two challenges during plan review:

- 1) Because of the outdated nature of many of the farmland preservation plans, not all plans identify locally important soil types. Some plans describe soil types generally found in the county, or include a map of areas designated as the farmland preservation area. The challenge presented in this situation is how to determine which soils merit inclusion based on a 20 or more year old plan, especially when plan updates and content vary widely between counties.
- 2) Some farmland preservation plans use other prioritizing methods for farmland, such as the Land Evaluation and Site Assessment (LESA) system, which prioritizes farmland based not only on soils, but other factors that may already be incorporated in the existing PACE ranking criteria. The challenge presented here is how to translate a county ranking system into a PACE score, and how many points to assign to the farm based on the county score versus the PACE score.

Upon completion of the plan reviews, and after much discussion, DATCP concluded that utilizing FRPP determinations for Prime, Unique, and Important farmland classification for the 2010 ranking criteria would satisfy PACE program goals.

At some point when all county Farmland Preservation Plans have been updated to include locally important soils, then these determinations may be used in addition to the NRCS classifications for application ranking purposes.