



Farmer John Swaine and TNC agriculture program director Amy Jacobs highlight conservation practices on John's farm. © Severn Smith/TNC

## Farmers at the Forefront

### Sustainable Agriculture Drives a Healthy Chesapeake Bay

On the Delmarva Peninsula, water connects everything and everyone. It's a landscape dominated by agriculture—surrounded by, and dependent upon, water. Agriculture, tourism and seafood are the major economic and cultural drivers on Maryland's Eastern Shore, and they all depend on clean water.

Throughout the year, rain falls on the farm fields that dominate the Delmarva landscape. Rain and groundwater are essential to move nutrients from the soil to crops. However, when water leaves a field, nutrients not used by the crops can be carried into local streams and rivers, and ultimately, the Chesapeake Bay where they can harm ecosystems that fuel the seafood and tourism industries. Everything is connected by water, and no one is more aware of this than the

farmers and fishermen/women. They are neighbors, friends family.



Cover crops help reduce erosion, weeds and diseases while promoting soil health and biodiversity. © Kent Mason

Over the past decade, Delmarva farmers have made significant progress to reduce the impact of nutrients and sediment on the Bay, but there's still more progress to be made. And as rainfall continues to increase because of climate change and its impact on weather patterns, efforts to farm more sustainably are more important than ever.

In Maryland and across the Bay watershed, TNC works with farmers, landowners, and their trusted agribusiness advisors to support the increased adoption of conservation practices that improve water quality for the Bay and habitat for wildlife. This has been a focus of TNC in Maryland for the past decade.

Since the mid-1970s, TNC has been working on Maryland's Eastern Shore to protect some of the state's most iconic habitats. During that time, TNC built a reputation of trust and respect with local farming communities. In 2010, former board member Louisa Duemling encouraged TNC to leverage that reputation to help accelerate sustainable agriculture practices in Maryland.

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Farmer Trey Hill (left) and landowner Joe Hickman (right) discuss the importance of conservation on Joe's farm. Collaboration is key for farmers and landowners in terms of both profitability and conservation. © Katie Schuler

As a conservationist and Delmarva farm owner, this topic was extremely important to Louisa. Thanks to her generosity and that of other like-minded supporters, TNC's sustainable agriculture program was launched in Maryland in 2010. At around the same time, Louisa decided to walk the walk by putting her family's 2,894 acre farm—Andelot Farm—under a conservation easement, protecting the land forever. “It means it can never be developed. It's important to do for the future of the Bay,” says Louisa of her decision. Andelot Farm is run by farm manager Eddie Taylor. Eddie and Louisa have regular conversations about how to make the farm more sustainable. “Eddie really cares. He understands and studies conservation farming practices,” explains Louisa.

A dozen miles down the road from Louisa's farm is another example of an important relationship between farmer and landowner: Joe Hickman, owner of Black Horse Flag Farm, has been leasing his land to farmer Trey Hill for more than 20 years. “It's really a collaboration between the farmer and the landowner,” says Trey. “If we fail with the crops then neither one of us makes any money.” Trey's philosophy of farming is to implement practices that mimic the natural ecology of the land to build soils and improve soil health. Healthy soils are important for both improving water quality and mitigating climate change. A recent report on soil health developed by a team of TNC scientists, economists and agriculture experts revealed that national adoption of soil health practices would mitigate 25 million metric tons of greenhouse gas emissions.

“One of the reasons Joe and I have had such a great relationship that's spanned over 20 years is that we're very like-minded in terms of conservation,” explains Trey. “I can get anyone to plant corn, but I need someone to tell me how my farm is better next year, and more importantly, 10 years from now. And if I want it to go to my children, longer than that,” says Joe of the importance he and Trey place on sustainable agriculture practices.

*Watch the video at [nature.org/mdruralsolutions](https://nature.org/mdruralsolutions)*

## NATURE MARYLAND/DC

### Maryland Farming by the Numbers

# \$2.4B

Market value of ag  
products sold.

# 3,100 acres

of wetlands TNC has  
restored to filter nutrients.

# 30K+ acres

of farmland using  
advanced nutrient  
management practices  
supported by TNC.

# 43%

of farmland in the state  
is rented or leased by  
non-operating  
landowners (NOLs).

# 80%

of NOLs nationwide  
depend on their farmer  
for conservation advice.