

3. Existing Conditions and Environmental Consequences

3.2 Farmlands

3.2.1 CHANGES TO THIS CHAPTER SINCE THE DEIS

Since the Draft Environmental Impact Statement (DEIS), this chapter has been revised to update the acreage of the project study area, including acreage of Farmland Soils within the project study area, due to the Refined Recommended Preferred Alternative (RPA). It has also been revised to include the impacts from the Refined RPA.

3.2.2 WHY IS IT IMPORTANT TO PROTECT FARMLAND?

Agriculture has played an important role in South Carolina since Native Americans began farming corn, beans, and tobacco across the southeastern United States.¹ English settlers adopted similar farming practices in the 17th century and established farms farther inland from the coast. Land around Columbia was found to have suitable soils for farming, especially near major rivers. Richland County is even believed to be named after its abundance of “rich land”² between the Congaree and Wateree Rivers. This legacy of agriculture and farming still thrives in portions of Lexington and Richland Counties and has grown in recent years.

South Carolina farms produce crops and livestock valued at over \$3.0 billion annually. This represents a 29 percent increase since 2007.³ In Lexington and Richland Counties, crops and livestock are valued at almost \$200 million, a 10 percent increase over the same period. The total number of farms and the number of acres in farm production are also increasing across Lexington and Richland Counties. Over 1,400 farms operated within the counties in 2012, up 7 percent from 2007. Over this same period, the total acreage of farms increased more than 13 percent.

The main crops grown in the two counties are grains, vegetables, melons, and potatoes. Poultry and eggs are also vital elements of the agriculture industry in the midlands. Lexington County ranks second among all counties in the state for poultry products and in the top 100 counties of the United States.⁴ Richland County also produces a high percentage of poultry and eggs and ranks 11th among counties in South Carolina.⁵

3.2.3 HOW IS FARMLAND PROTECTED?

The Farmland Protection Policy Act (FPPA) of 1981 is intended to minimize the impact federal programs have on the unnecessary and irreversible conversion of farmland. Prior to farmlands being impacted for a federal project, an assessment must be completed to determine if farmland would be converted to non-agricultural uses. If the assessment determines the use of farmland for the project is in excess of the parameters defined by the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), the federal agency must take measures to minimize the impacts of the project to these farmlands.

¹ <http://nativeamericannetroots.net/diary/1277>

² http://www.rcgov.us/Portals/0/Departments/Planning/ADOPTED_RC_2015CompPlan.pdf

³ https://www.agcensus.usda.gov/Publications/2012/Online_Resources/County_Profiles/South_Carolina/cp99045.pdf

⁴ https://www.agcensus.usda.gov/Publications/2012/Online_Resources/County_Profiles/South_Carolina/cp45063.pdf

⁵ https://www.agcensus.usda.gov/Publications/2012/Online_Resources/County_Profiles/South_Carolina/cp45079.pdf

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All projects are not subject to the FPPA. Certain activities are exempt from the FPPA, including projects on land already in urban development or used for water storage and/or construction within an existing right-of-way purchased on or before August 4, 1984.

3.2.4 WHAT ARE THE DIFFERENT TYPES OF PROTECTED FARMLAND?

Farmlands that are protected by the FPPA are based on the type of soil that makes up the land. The NRCS has established a specific farmland designation for each soil type. Farmland soils eligible for protection are designated as “prime,” “unique,” or “farmland of statewide importance.”

Prime farmland is land that has the best combination of physical and chemical characteristics for producing crops and has the soil quality and growing season needed to produce high yields. In general, prime farmland has an adequate and dependable supply of moisture from precipitation or irrigation, acceptable acidity and salinity content, and few or no rocks. Prime farmland must be available for agriculture uses. It could be cultivated land, pastureland, forestland, or other land, but it is not urban or developed land or water areas.⁶

Unique farmland is land other than prime farmland that is used for production of specific high-value food and fiber crops. It has the special combination of soil quality, location, growing season, and moisture supply needed to economically produce high yields of specific crops when properly managed. Examples of such crops include citrus, tree nuts, cranberries, olives, and grapes specific to wine production.⁷

Farmland of statewide importance is land that does not meet the national criteria for prime or unique farmland but has been identified by state agencies as important for protection. Generally, this land includes areas of soils that nearly meet the requirements for prime farmland and that economically produce high yields of crops.⁸

3.2.5 WHAT TYPES AND AMOUNTS OF FARMLAND ARE IN THE PROJECT STUDY AREA?

The project study area is comprised of approximately 1,480 acres of land within Lexington and Richland Counties. Of these acres, approximately 485 acres are designated as prime farmland and 440 acres are farmland of statewide importance. Together they account for 62 percent of the land within the project study area. No soils designated as unique farmland are located within the project study area. Table 3.2-1 summarizes the acreages of prime and statewide important farmland soils in the project study area, by county.

⁶ https://www.nrcs.usda.gov/wps/portal/nrcs/detail/pr/soils/?cid=nrcs141p2_037285

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

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Table 3.2-1 Summary of Farmland Soils in the Project Study Area

Soil designation	Lexington County	Richland County	Totals
Prime farmland (acres)	189.3	295.8	485.1
Farmland of statewide importance (acres)	219.5	220.3	439.8
Not prime farmland (acres)	268.7	289.1	557.8
Totals (acres)	677.5	805.2	1,482.7

Source: <https://websoilsurvey.sc.egov.usda.gov/App/WebSoilSurvey.aspx> (November 2017)

The majority of soils within the project study area are designated as farmland soils and would be protected by the FPPA. However, the project is located within the urban limits of Columbia and the majority of land has been developed. As discussed in Chapter 3.1 Land Use, approximately 80 percent of all land within the land use project study area is currently developed. The remaining approximately 20 percent that is undeveloped is committed to urban development as current and future land use plans anticipate similar land use patterns along the corridor and at the interchange locations.

3.2.6 HOW WOULD THE NO-BUILD ALTERNATIVE IMPACT FARMLANDS?

The No-build Alternative would have no effect on farmlands since existing conditions would remain unchanged.

3.2.7 HOW WOULD THE RPA AND THE REFINED RPA IMPACT FARMLANDS?

The RPA and the Refined RPA are located within land that is currently, or is intended to be, developed with transportation, residential, and commercial uses; therefore, the project is exempt from the FPPA and no impacts are anticipated.

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