

Spanning the Gap

Agriculture in the Park



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Agriculture plays an important role in the management of Delaware Water Gap National Recreation Area. Park managers rely on agricultural use to fulfill some of our landscape management objectives such as maintaining the rural character of the park and enhancing wildlife habitat. Maintaining agricultural fields also helps to retain the cultural landscape. In many cases, the fields in the river valley are the same fields that were tilled by the earliest inhabitants, as evidenced by artifacts from early Indian settlements.

Currently, there are approximately 3,000 acres under cultivation in the recreation area, leased out under 23 five-year contracts to 10 different farmers. Some of the farmers live in the government-owned structures associated with a farm unit, while others have their own farms located more than 50 miles from their leased land.

Much of the agricultural use is for row crops, especially corn, but some small grains, hay, and soybeans are grown as well. In order to protect the land from erosion, farmers must use the land in accordance with the recommendations of a conservation plan written by the Soil Conservation Service (now called the U.S. Natural Resources Conservation Service.) The conservation plan can include information on soil types, recommendations on what to plant each year, and farming practices designed to help conserve soil and water. The farmers must also follow National Park Service guidelines for pesticide use. Each year, all pesticides must be approved by the Park Service



A cover crop of oats protects the farm fields from erosion. The oats will die during the winter, leaving a valuable residue of organic matter for the sandy soil.



Farmers are required to maintain some fields strictly for wildlife as part of their agricultural leases, or special-use permits.



prior to being used.

Agricultural land can also provide wildlife habitat. Many of our farmers are required to improve or create wildlife habitat on their leased land. One example of a wildlife management practice that is carried out by farmers is the use of hedgerows to divide fields. These bands of vegetation, about 30 feet wide, provide food and escape, refuge, and nesting cover, as well as travel lanes for many species of wildlife such as songbirds, pheasants, rabbits, groundhogs, deer, and fox. Shrubby hedgerows provide more cover than those with many tall trees, so farmers are sometimes required to remove overstory trees. This lets in more sunlight, favoring increased production of shrubby understory species. Overstory trees as cherry, apple, butternut, and oak are not cut.

Farmers also help keep grassy areas open by mowing them periodically. Open, grassy areas contain grasses and; other plants that are different from those found in wooded areas and so help to sustain a greater variety of wildlife. Openings are attractive to deer, grouse, skunks, rabbits, songbirds, and others.

Those who farm in the park provide a valuable service to the recreation area by perpetuating the agricultural traditions of this scenic river valley.

A field of native warm season grasses maintained by farmer strictly for wildlife habitat as part of agricultural lease.



A closer look at native warm season grasses in the fall. They provide good cover and insulation to wildlife during the wintertime.

*(All photos above: NPS
Photos by Larry Hilaire)*



Goldfinches live mostly on seeds, and they wait for the summer before they begin to nest.