

Gap View Farm county's largest-ever farmland protection buy

CHARLES TOWN – The 320-acre Gap View Farm has become the 41st Jefferson County property – and the largest – to be accepted into the county's farmland protection program. The inclusion of the Charles Town property brings to 4,320 the number of acres in the 17-year-old program.

The conservation easement was completed last week. Matching funds for the purchase were provided by the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service and the Jefferson County Farmland Protection Board.

The property includes important agricultural soils and supports hay production and grass-fed beef cattle, according to Elizabeth Wheeler, director of the Jefferson County Farmland Protection Program.

"Gap View Farm has been a working farm since the 1700s. It contains a

number of valuable conservation features," Wheeler said, noting the farm property also contains the headwaters of Elks Run.

Wheeler said a 15-acre area around Elks Run, which is the source of water for Harpers Ferry, has been protected with fencing and conservation plantings.

Jefferson County's farmland protection program is governed by a board of directors that was established as a result of a state law passed in 2000. The law allows West Virginia counties to levy a



Elizabeth Wheeler

transfer tax on real estate to purchase development rights from landowners who wish to protect their land for agricultural purposes.

Wheeler said the property's owner offered the easement as a generous "bargain sale" of about \$2.06 million – less than half of its appraised value of about \$5.4 million. The county's share of the purchase was a little more than \$706,000, with the remaining \$1.3 million paid with federal monies.

"The county received an enormous benefit in that the board's investment is 34 percent of the total easement purchase and the landowner donated 62 percent of the full value of the property, a gift in perpetuity for the county," Wheeler said.

The amount donated by the property owner in support of the easement comes to about \$3.37 million.

An agricultural conservation easement is a voluntary, legally recorded deed restriction that is placed on a property used for agricultural production.

An easement lets landowners to permanently protect the agricultural, natural, scenic and historic values of their property from being developed and subdivided. Under an easement, property owners retain full use and ownership of the land, and an easement is transferred with the property when the property is sold.

Jefferson County Commissioner Jane Tabb said it is a critical time for farmland protection in Jefferson County. "It has never been more important to preserve farms and sustain our agricultural heritage if we are to remain a viable agricultural economy," Tabb said. "The Farmland Protection Program enables us to support our local farmers and pro-

tect our quality of life."

According to the 2012 U.S. Department of Agriculture Census, between 2007 and 2012, the number of farms in Jefferson County decreased from 546 to 501 – a loss of 5,126 acres.

"Protecting our county's farmland goes hand in hand with protecting the quality of life in Jefferson County," Wheeler said. "Local farms provide us with healthy food, support the economy, and protect water supplies, wildlife habitat and the scenic and historical landscapes that make Jefferson County such a beautiful place to live and visit."

The farmland protection board is working to complete conservation easements on another 1,200 acres on five farms in Jefferson County. For more information about the county's program, call 304-724-1414 or go to Jefferson.wvfp.org.