

Chapter 9: Agriculture and Forestry

Introduction:

Brighton Plantation's landscape and identity have been shaped for over a century by the decisions of timber companies, most of them headquartered far from the community itself. Since the late 1800s, large-scale land acquisition by logging interests has defined land ownership patterns, limited local control, and redirected economic benefits out of the community. While forestry once provided seasonal employment in cutting, trucking, and milling, today's operations are highly mechanized and regulated from out-of-state boardrooms. Residents have raised concerns about soil degradation, damage in shoreland zones, and the long-term impacts of past practices, such as spreading paper mill sludge across clearcuts. With the growing recognition of PFAS contamination across Maine, these legacies carry renewed urgency.

Agriculture, though once practiced out of necessity by early homesteaders, has always been challenged by Brighton's poor soils and harsh climate. As farming declined through the 20th century, it gave way to industrial timber harvesting. What remains today are small, individual efforts, driven more by a desire for self-reliance than profit. While not a commercial industry, these practices remain central to how many residents choose to live.

Brighton's identity has not shifted recently. It has been under pressure to change for generations. The loss of control over land use, the consolidation of forest profits, and the decline of seasonal rural employment has all shaped a quiet but enduring resilience among residents. Agriculture and forestry today are less about industry and more about values: independence, conservation, and a refusal to contribute further to the damage already done. Even as the economy transforms, Brighton remains rooted in the land—by choice, not by corporate mandate.

Farms in Brighton Plantation:

Brighton Plantation's rocky terrain, steep elevation, and poor-quality soils have historically made large-scale farming difficult. Early settlers struggled with erosion-prone land and limited access to markets. As westward expansion opened new opportunities in the 1800s, many abandoned their farms in search of more fertile ground. Those who stayed often shifted to timber-related work, especially as the industrial era brought jobs in nearby mills and factories.

Farming was never a dominant industry in Brighton, but it has remained part of the community's fabric. Today, agriculture exists on a much smaller scale, primarily as homesteading or hobby farming. Residents grow food not for profit, but for self-reliance, food security, and personal values. These small-scale operations include gardens,

poultry, goats, and seasonal farmstands, where locals sell fresh produce, eggs, and cottage goods such as jams or baked items.

While there is strong local interest in supporting agriculture, Brighton lacks formal infrastructure such as a farmers' market. The closest established market is located in Skowhegan. As a result, most agricultural sales occur informally, at the roadside or through word of mouth. In the 2025 community survey, nearly 97% of residents said protecting farmland was 'important' or 'extremely important,' and many expressed support for encouraging more local food opportunities, such as farmstands and community-supported agriculture.

Land Use Policies:

Brighton Plantation exercises local land use control under its Land Use Zoning Ordinance and Comprehensive Plan originally approved in 1995, transferring jurisdiction from the Maine Land Use Regulation Commission (LURC). This Land Use Ordinance is in the process of being updated. While this provides a foundational framework for land management, Brighton's approach to protecting farming and forestry lands is limited in scope and largely reliant on voluntary participation.

The most notable regulatory action taken by the community was the 1996 ban on the use of herbicides on forestland, an early and strong expression of concern over industrial forestry practices. This local ordinance remains in effect and reflects long-standing environmental values among residents, particularly regarding water quality, soil health, and wildlife habitat.

The current land use ordinance includes zoning districts and performance standards that regulate timber harvesting, agricultural clearing near water bodies, and road construction, particularly in protection districts (such as around ponds, wetlands, and deer wintering areas). These provisions aim to reduce erosion, sedimentation, and ecological disruption. However, enforcement capacity is limited, and many conservation outcomes depend on the cooperation of individual landowners.

Brighton does not work with any regional or statewide land trusts, and no agricultural or forest parcels are protected by conservation easements. While current-use tax programs like Tree Growth and Farmland classification are used locally, they are state-administered and often criticized by residents for favoring corporate landowners over residents.

There is no farmland preservation program, no formal conservation commission, and no active partnerships with entities such as Maine Farmland Trust or Land for Maine's Future. The planning board is authorized to review subdivisions and conditional uses but does not have the regulatory authority or capacity to direct private land management beyond ordinance compliance.

In summary, Brighton Plantation’s conservation efforts are rooted in community-driven values and historic action, such as the herbicide ban, but remain informal, under-resourced, and unconnected to broader land trust networks. Most preservation happens at the individual level. While the plantation has laid a regulatory foundation, broader protection of productive lands will require expanded local engagement or new partnerships.

Challenges and Threats to Farmland and Farms:

There are no commercial farms in Brighton Plantation today. Agriculture exists primarily through small homesteads, gardens, and pasture used for personal food production. These efforts reflect residents’ desire for self-sufficiency, not profit—a value strongly supported in the 2025 community survey.

The most significant threat to remaining farmland is conversion—either to residential lots or, more recently, to large-scale solar developments. While development can support tax revenue, it often comes at the cost of open land and the rural lifestyle residents seek to protect.

Another growing concern is the potential contamination of soil and water due to past industrial forestry practices. In previous decades, paper mill sludge was spread on clear-cut land throughout rural Maine, including in parts of Brighton. This sludge may contain PFAS—persistent, harmful chemicals now known to affect food safety and health. Additionally, Brighton permitted tire burning in the 1990s, raising further concerns about long-term impacts on soil quality. While no local testing has been conducted, these past practices could limit the safety or viability of future agricultural development.

Brighton has no local ordinance to regulate farmland conversion, and there are no formal partnerships with land trusts or conservation groups. Agricultural preservation is left to individual landowners. One important protection in place is Maine’s Right to Farm Law, which shields farmers from nuisance complaints related to standard agricultural practices. While informal, the community’s support for local agriculture remains strong—and preserving farmland will depend on continued individual commitment, soil health awareness, and thoughtful planning.

Farmland and Open Space Tax Law Programs:

The state offers multiple tax programs aimed at improving and protecting agriculture and forestry operations. There are three current-use tax programs that relate to forestry or agriculture in Brighton Plantation: Farmland Tax Law, Open Space Tax Law, and Tree Growth Tax Law (Tree Growth will be addressed later in this chapter). The Maine Legislature declared in the Farm and Open Space Tax Law (Title 36, MRSA, 1101 et. Seq.), that “it is in the public interest to encourage the preservation of farmland and open

space land in order to maintain a readily available source of food and farm products close to the metropolitan areas of the state.” These programs are detailed below.

Farmland Tax Law: This tax law was adopted to encourage the preservation of farmland and open space land and to protect these lands from competition from higher-valued uses. The farmland program provides for the valuation of farmland based on its current use as farmland, rather than based on its fair market value for other potential uses. This reduced land valuation results in lower property tax bills for the owner. Lower taxes are intended to incentivize the preservation of Maine’s farming communities. In addition to reducing the farmland owner’s tax burden, the municipality avoids costs associated with development and state subsidies are positively impacted.

Open Space Tax Law: This law provides for the valuation of land based on its current use as open space, rather than its highest and best use. To qualify for open space classification, land must be preserved or restricted for uses providing a public benefit. This classification encourages landowners of open, undeveloped land to prevent or restrict its use from development by conserving scenic resources, enhancing public recreation, promoting game management, or preserving wildlife, and/or wildlife habitat. This is mutually beneficial, as the landowner’s proportionate tax burden is reduced, the municipality avoids costs associated with development, and state subsidies are positively impacted.

TABLE 3: PARCELS OF LAND IN BRIGHTON PLANTATION ENROLLED IN THE FARMLAND TAX LAW

| | 2013 | 2023 | Percent Change |
|-------------------------------|----------|-----------|----------------|
| Number of Parcels | 1 | 2 | ↑50% |
| Acres First Classified | 182 | 0 | ↓182% |
| Farmland Acres | 29 | 119 | ↑76% |
| Farmland Valuation | \$10,900 | \$45,400 | ↑76% |
| Woodland Acres | 153 | 2,444 | ↑94% |
| Woodland Valuation | \$18,670 | \$332,660 | ↑94% |

Source: Municipal Valuation Return Statistical Summary

TABLE 4: PARCELS OF LAND IN BRIGHTON PLANTATION ENROLLED IN THE OPEN SPACE TAX LAW

| | 2013 | 2023 |
|-------------------------------|------|------|
| Number of Parcels | 0 | 0 |
| Acres First Classified | 0 | 0 |
| Total Acres | 0 | 0 |
| Total Valuation | \$0 | \$0 |

Source: Municipal Valuation Return Statistical Summary

The data presented in Table 3 reflects significant growth and changes in the enrollment of parcels of land under the Farmland Tax Law in Brighton Plantation from 2013 to 2023.

Over this period, the number of parcels classified under this program increased from 1 to 2, marking a 50 percent increase. Notably, while the acreage first classified in 2013 was 182 acres, this figure has dropped to 0 in 2023, indicating a potential reclassification or a shift in how farmland is being utilized or reported.

In contrast, the farmland acres designated for use saw a substantial increase from 29 acres to 119 acres, representing a 76 percent rise. This increase suggests a positive trend in the preservation and use of active farmland in the region. Correspondingly, the valuation of farmland has also risen significantly from \$10,900 to \$45,400, which aligns with the growing number of acres classified under current agricultural use. The increase in woodland acres classified under the same program is particularly noteworthy, jumping from 153 acres to an impressive 2,444 acres, which reflects a 94 percent increase. The valuation of woodland also soared from \$18,670 to \$332,660, indicating a substantial recognition of the economic value of these wooded areas alongside farmland.

In stark contrast, Table 4 highlights that there have been no parcels classified under the Open Space Tax Law in Brighton Plantation as of 2023. This absence suggests that there are currently no designated open space lands in the municipality, which could represent an opportunity for future conservation efforts. Implementing this classification could provide additional benefits to landowners through tax reductions while also serving public interests such as enhancing recreational spaces and preserving wildlife habitats.

Overall, the data indicates a growing commitment to preserving farmland and woodland in Brighton Plantation through the Farmland Tax Law, enhancing the area's agricultural viability and environmental resources. In contrast, the lack of participation in the Open Space Tax Law presents an area for potential development that could complement existing efforts to protect and utilize the land in ways that benefit both landowners and the broader community.

Forestry in Brighton Plantation:

Forestry has been central to Brighton Plantation's identity, economy, and land use since its earliest days. From the 1800s onward, Brighton developed almost entirely around timber extraction. It began with William Bingham's land lottery, which handed over millions of acres, including Brighton, to absentee investors. Settlers followed, carving out homesteads and sawmill operations in the dense forest. By 1840, the population surged to over 800 residents, supported by sawmills, small farms, and forest-based trades.

However, as woodlots close to the center of the plantation were cleared and the soils proved too poor for farming, the community struggled with persistent poverty. The large landholding of the Bingham estate meant much of Brighton's land was controlled by outside investors through the 1800s, even as local lumbermen worked the forests. This

early pattern, vast tracts owned by absentee landowners with locals dependent on timber jobs, set the stage for Brighton's later development and challenges.

In Brighton, the large tracts of land stayed consolidated. Governor Abner Coburn, one of Maine's most influential land speculators from Skowhegan, was among the first to consolidate land holdings in the region. His lands in Brighton would later pass to industrial forestry companies. In 1949 after a devastating birch borer infestation, Brighton surrendered its municipal status. The population had dwindled to 108 and emergency clear-cutting left most local woods workers unemployed. In 1950, the plantation formally joined the Maine Forestry District to ensure fire watch coverage on its now largely unpopulated woodlands, leading to the construction of Kelly Fire Tower.

Through the mid to late 20th century, major timber corporations consolidated ownership of Brighton's land. By the 1990s, Scott Paper Company was the principal land owner, holding roughly 16,900 acres of Brighton's forest (the majority of the plantation's ~40 square miles) for timber production. This meant that a single corporate owner controlled most of the plantation's land and resources. When Scott Paper's Maine assets were later sold, Brighton's ownership passed to other timber investors: First S.D. Warren/SAPPI and then by the late 1990s and 2000s, to Plum Creek Timber Company. Plum Creek, a large out-of-state REIT, acquired extensive Maine holdings (including Brighton's forests) in that era. In 2016, Plum Creek merged with Weyerhaeuser, one of the nation's largest timber companies, making Weyerhaeuser the current predominant landowner.

Between 1990 and 2020, Brighton Plantation experienced over 24,000 acres of commercial timber harvesting, as reported in confidential landowner filings with the Maine Forest Service. The data reveal a heavy emphasis on shelterwood harvesting, with 13,607 acres cut using this method, followed by 8,891 acres under selection harvesting. While clearcutting declined sharply after the 1990s—from 963 acres in the early 1990s to just 345 acres between 2015–2020—it still accounted for 1,777 acres total over three decades. The peak decade for harvesting activity was 2005–2009, with more than 6,300 acres harvested. The average harvest per five-year period was just over 4,000 acres, representing a substantial and consistent level of forest extraction for a municipality with approximately 25,000 acres of forested land. The number of harvest reports filed (182 over 30 years) suggests continuous, industrial-scale forestry by large landowners, aligned with the corporate consolidation of Brighton's forests during this same period.

Forestry has shaped every era of Brighton Plantation's history, from early settlement, to economic collapse, to deorganization and modern land use patterns. The activity remains physically present and economically important in terms of acreage harvested and property value, but it is neither locally controlled nor broadly beneficial to the community. As harvest data show, timber extraction in Brighton has been steady and large in scale, but ownership and profits reside with distant corporate entities. Despite tens of thousands of acres harvested since 1990, the plantation's population has not rebounded, and

municipal revenues have not kept pace. Forestry is therefore best described as active but extractive, stable in scale, but declining in value to the community. Without structural changes in tax policy, land ownership, and environmental accountability, Brighton Plantation will continue to host a significant forestry industry without reaping meaningful, long-term benefits.

TABLE 5: FORESTRY HARVEST INFORMATION

| Year | Selection harvest, acres | Shelterwood harvest, acres | Change of land use, acres | Clearcut harvest, acres | Total Harvest, acres | # of Reports |
|----------------|--------------------------|----------------------------|---------------------------|-------------------------|----------------------|--------------|
| 1990 – 1994 | 1,127 | 139 | 1 | 963 | 2,230 | 21 |
| 1995 – 1999 | 1,793 | 985 | 2 | 324 | 3,104 | 31 |
| 2000 – 2004 | 2,814 | 3,012 | 3 | 36 | 5,865 | 26 |
| 2005 – 2009 | 1,545 | 4,772 | - | 20 | 6,337 | 42 |
| 2010 – 2014 | 784 | 2,272 | 18 | 89 | 3,163 | 36 |
| 2015 – 2020 | 828 | 2,427 | 10 | 345 | 3,610 | 26 |
| Total | 8,891 | 13,607 | 34 | 1,777 | 24,309 | 182 |
| Average | 1,482 | 2,268 | 6 | 296 | 4,051 | 30 |

Source: Data compiled from Confidential Year End Landowner Reports to Maine Forest Service.

Tree Growth Tax Law Program:

Table 6 summarizes changes in parcels enrolled in the Tree Growth Tax Law Program in Brighton Plantation from 2013 to 2023. Over this ten-year period, the total number of enrolled parcels declined slightly from 57 to 54, a 6% reduction that may reflect consolidation of ownership or changes in land management strategy. Despite this decrease, the majority of land in Brighton Plantation remains in the Tree Growth program, reflecting the continued dominance of commercial forestry in local land use.

Acreage under Tree Growth enrollment fell by 10%, from 20,957 to 19,020 acres. Notable shifts occurred in forest type distribution:

- Softwood acreage decreased by 30% (from 3,242 to 2,501 acres),
- Mixed wood acreage declined by 33% (from 11,235 to 8,418 acres), while
- Hardwood acreage increased by 20% (from 6,481 to 8,101 acres).

These changes may reflect ecological transitions, harvesting cycles, or market-driven adjustments in forest management. Despite the decline in total acres, the assessed value of Tree Growth parcels increased by 22%, rising from \$2,585,911 in 2013 to \$3,143,998 in 2023. This increase suggests that forestland remains a valuable asset in Brighton Plantation, even as composition and ownership dynamics evolve.

The fiscal implications of the Tree Growth program are significant for Brighton Plantation. While the State of Maine provides partial reimbursement for revenue losses from Tree Growth–enrolled land, the reimbursement does not fully offset the difference between market-rate property taxation and the reduced valuation under the program. The result is a measurable disparity in effective tax contributions between large Tree Growth landowners and typical residential property owners.

For example, in 2024:

- Weyerhaeuser NR Company, the largest landowner in Brighton Plantation, paid \$5,456.39 in property taxes on 1,024.6 acres enrolled in Tree Growth.
 - This amounts to \$5.33 per acre.
- In contrast, the average residential property in Brighton is approximately 1.9 acres, with an average annual tax of \$470.21.
 - This equates to approximately \$247.48 per acre.

On a per-acre basis, residential property owners pay over 46 times more than Weyerhaeuser, despite owning a fraction of the land and requiring only limited municipal services. This tax structure places a disproportionate burden on residents while providing significant relief to large-scale corporate landowners.

While the Tree Growth Tax Law was designed to encourage long-term forest stewardship and reduce development pressure on working forests, its practical effects in Brighton Plantation—based on available valuation and enrollment data—show that it offers substantial tax advantages to large commercial landowners. These advantages are not matched by equivalent contributions to local governance, planning, or public services.

TABLE 6: BRIGHTON PLANTATION PARCELS ENROLLED IN THE TREE GROWTH TAX LAW PROGRAM

| | 2013 | 2023 | % Change |
|-------------------------|-------------|-------------|----------|
| # Of Parcels | 57 | 54 | ↓6 % |
| Softwood Acres | 3,242 | 2,501 | ↓30 % |
| Mixed Wood Acres | 11,235 | 8,418 | ↓33% |
| Hardwood Acres | 6,481 | 8,101 | ↑20 % |
| Total Acres | 20,957 | 19,020 | ↓10 % |
| Total Value | \$2,585,911 | \$3,143,998 | ↑22 % |

Source: 2013 & 2023 Municipal Valuation Return Statistical Summary

Potential for Land Sale and Land Use Conflicts:

Although no recent large-scale sales have occurred, the possibility of major forestland divestment is a significant concern. Across Maine, several corporate timberland owners have sold holdings in recent years, leading in some cases to fragmented residential development, recreational access restrictions, or absentee ownership. Brighton is especially vulnerable to this trend. With limited local planning infrastructure, no staff planner or code enforcement officer on-site full time, any large land transaction could result in rapid land use changes that the Plantation is not equipped to manage.

If such parcels were to be sold or subdivided for residential or speculative development, impacts could include:

- Fragmented or low-density development that strains local infrastructure
- Loss of public access to recreational land
- Disruption of hunting areas and traditional land uses
- Increased fire and erosion risk from unmanaged cutover land
- A rapid shift in municipal service needs with little time to plan
- Abrupt shifts in tax base composition, requiring the Plantation to re-evaluate its limited service provisions

Weyerhaeuser was invited to participate in the comprehensive planning process but did not respond. This absence underscore a broader challenge. While large landowners control the majority of land in Brighton, they are not currently engaged in shaping its future alongside residents. Without local engagement or regulatory mechanisms, any future sale

of corporate timberlands would leave the community with limited tools to respond or guide growth in a way that aligns with local goals.

At present, there is no indication that existing homes are interfering with active forestry operations, and land use conflicts have been minimal. Most residential parcels are longstanding, and harvest activities have continued uninterrupted. However, if residential development were to increase, conflicts with trucking, harvesting, or noise could emerge.

In short, while current land use is stable, Brighton Plantation faces a real and growing risk from the potential sale or withdrawal of large-scale Tree Growth parcels. Without planning tools in place, the Plantation may struggle to maintain its character, manage land use transitions, or protect residents from the impacts of incompatible development.

Analysis:

- Brighton's landscape and economy have been shaped and constrained by external ownership for over 150 years. From the land lotteries of the 1800s through today's industrial timber operations, decisions about land use and resource management have historically been made by absentee landowners, not residents.
- Agriculture has always been limited by geography. Poor soils, rocky terrain, and short growing seasons made large-scale farming difficult. Today, only small, garden-scale farm operations remain, driven by self-reliance, not profit, and are supported by strong local values and informal exchange.
- Forestry is not locally controlled or a broadly beneficial industry. While over 24,000 acres were harvested between 1990 and 2020, Brighton received minimal economic benefit. Profits and decisions rest with corporate landowners, not the local community.
- Land consolidation remains extreme. As of 2023, over 19,000 acres (87% of Brighton) were enrolled in the Tree Growth Tax program, with much of that land owned by a single entity: Weyerhaeuser. This limits land availability, local governance, and long-term planning capacity.
- Tax equity is a significant issue. The average Brighton resident pays 46 times more per acre in property taxes than corporate timber companies enrolled in Tree Growth. This disparity limits municipal revenue and places a disproportionate burden on residents.
- Environmental legacy issues are unresolved. Past practices, including tire burning and the spreading of paper mill sludge, may have long-term consequences. These raise concerns about PFAS contamination, water safety, and soil quality, possibly limiting future agricultural use.
- The community has taken steps to regain local control. Brighton adopted a Land Use Ordinance in 1995 and passed a herbicide ban in 1996. These actions demonstrate a history of proactive local governance despite limited resources.

- No conservation easements or land trust partnerships exist. All current preservation is voluntary and handled privately. No agricultural or forest parcels are formally protected beyond state tax programs.
- The risk of corporate land divestment are rising. If large landowners sell or subdivide their holdings, Brighton lacks the regulatory or staffing infrastructure to manage growth or prevent land use conflicts.
- Residents support agriculture and working land, but want balance. Survey responses show strong interest in farmstands, local food access and conservation, but not in continuing to subsidize corporate forestry without accountability.