

What is LESA?

Targeting Priority Working Lands FAQ Sheet



What is LESA?

LESA, or the Land Evaluation and Site Assessment, is a decision-support tool designed to target priority working lands, where protection efforts are desirable and help attain community goals and objectives. LESA applies suitability analysis techniques which prioritize land for its ability to sustain a particular use or activity, such as farming or forestry. The LE portion of LESA evaluates working lands based on soil characteristics, such as crop yields and erosion limitations. The SA portion evaluates non-soil site characteristics of working lands. Numerous site characteristics based on agricultural productivity, development pressure, and other public values can be considered (see Land Evaluation and Site Assessment Discussion Scenario).

What are common uses for LESA?

Decision-makers use LESA to help them prepare well informed and justifiable policy choices about land use. It is most commonly used to identify, prioritize, and evaluate agricultural or forestry lands, but it has also been applied to identify important riparian areas, wetlands, and even areas suitable for urban uses. LESA helps decision-makers:

- Delineate areas on a map that should remain in agriculture or forestry.
- Respond to requests for rezoning, a zoning variance, or a zoning permit.
- Score agricultural operations or parcels applying for conservation funding.
- Evaluate the consequences of a development proposal on working lands.

How does LESA assist with decision-making?

LESA helps decision-makers prepare policy choices that are:

- **Information based.** Physical and social sciences as well as community held values and public involvement informs how LESA is applied locally.
- **Measurable.** The choices decision-makers apply using LESA can be systematically measured and evaluated in comparison to community goals and objectives.
- **More equitable.** The LESA system can evenly apply decisions across an entire jurisdiction, so all working lands and operations are considered more fairly.
- **Transparent.** Every choice or decision made to develop LESA is openly visible so it is clear how each affects the results.
- **More defensible.** Decision-makers can point to the systematic procedures and criteria to defend their rationale for making a decision or crafting a policy.

“LESA...is a
decision-support
tool...”



A local committee, equipped with LESA and GIS, identifies priority working lands to include in their town's comprehensive plan.

How is a LESA system put into practice?

LESA should be custom tailored to fit local conditions and circumstances. The following points, however, describe the fundamental steps.

- **Contact a resource professional.** To begin, it is wise to contact a resource professional that can offer advice and perhaps services to administer a LESA system. County planners, conservationists, or UWEX educators are good contacts.
- **Form a LESA committee.** A committee consisting of knowledgeable professionals and committed local stakeholders should be assembled to design and recommend a LESA system to the local governing body or other group.
- **Establish a purpose for LESA.** The purpose for developing a LESA system should drive its development, so that appropriate working lands are identified. The local comprehensive plan is an excellent source to establish a fitting purpose.
- **Get informed about local agricultural systems and issues.** Understanding local conditions and land use issues is important to ensure that LESA is designed to fit local circumstances.
- **Identify characteristics that accurately define priority working lands.** Address questions about how soil quality, agricultural productivity, development pressures, and other public values define working lands that meet your purpose.
- **Score and prioritize working lands.** Working lands are scored based on their individual characteristics (i.e. soils, parcel size, distance from urban areas). The combination of characteristics are then prioritized to determine which are most and least important for deciding which lands are priority working lands. A Geographical Information System is used to efficiently score and prioritize working lands.
- **Test the results.** LESA results should be tested for accuracy to determine if the system is indeed targeting working lands that meet the intended purpose.
- **Recommend the LESA system.** After ensuring that LESA is accurate and appropriate, the committee formally recommends the LESA system for use. The committee should be prepared to describe how the LESA system was developed, what the results suggest, and how it helps meet local goals and objectives.

References

American Farmland Trust. (2004). *Land Evaluation and Site Assessment* (Fact Sheet). Northampton, MA: American Farmland Trust, Farmland Information Center.

Pease, J. R., & Coughlin, R. E. (1996). *Land Evaluation and Site Assessment: A guidebook for Rating Agricultural Lands, Second Edition*. Retrieved from www.nrcs.usda.gov/Programs/lesa/lesa_sysdes_uses.html.

Please look for our research findings, documentation, and educational products on the internet: www.uwsp.edu/cnr/landcenter/workinglands.

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