

# SOURLANDS

Despite financial uncertainty and 80-hour workweeks, a new generation is ready to farm. Will they be able to find a piece of land to call their own?

WRITTEN AND PHOTOGRAPHED BY JARED FLESHER

**W**e desperately need more young farmers in this country. “If we do not repopulate our working lands, I don’t know where to begin to talk about the woes,” U.S. Deputy Secretary of Agriculture Kathleen Merrigan told *The Washington Post* in April 2012.

The average age of the American farmer is 57 years old and rising. According to the USDA, there are just 120,000 American farm operators age 34 and under. There are 1.3 million American farm operators age 55 and older.

In 2009 I picked up a video camera in order to start documenting something that looked hopeful. As if they had seen a poster with Uncle Sam’s pointing finger, young people with college educations—but absolutely no background in agriculture—were showing up on small organic farms in New Jersey, seeking training. In many cases, the self-appointed mission of these young people wasn’t just to farm, but to farm as sustainably as possible. I made a film about it, titled *The Farmer and the Horse*.

The problem is, at least in Jersey, there’s no straight path for young farmers to follow if their goal is to make enough money farming to actually own the farm. (Farmland prices in New Jersey are the second highest in the nation.) Land tenure, many of these farmers tell me, is what they want: Not to be rich, not even necessarily to be financially secure, but at least to control their own destiny on a piece of land where the blood, sweat and tears they shed during the 80-hour workweeks will fall on soil they can call their own.

Tom Paduano, one of the stars of *The Farmer and the Horse*, examined his prospects at the end of the documentary and—spoiler alert—decided his best option was to leave the Garden State and try to farm elsewhere. Tom and his wife are now growing certified organic vegetables on leased land in Maryland. Tom recently explained his decision to a Baltimore magazine:

We cast a wide net—Jersey, eastern Pennsylvania, and northern Maryland. There were many opportunities managing farms for wealthy people. We weighed that. You get the stability of a salary and health insurance. But it’s not your vision, and the money that’s backing you often comes from Wall Street, which was a consideration for us. It’s harder to be a startup, but we ultimately decided we didn’t want to work for anybody but ourselves.

In 2011 I began work on my second film, *Sourlands*. My idea was to tell three different stories all at once, all related to sustainability in New Jersey. One story line delves deeper into the challenges young

farmers face; another explores the ecology of central Jersey’s last big forest; and a third looks into energy and what New Jerseyans are doing to reduce their carbon footprints. I suspected that the threads might prove to be connected.

For the section of *Sourlands* devoted to farmers, I followed 29-year-old Aubrey Yarbrough to Stonehedge Farm in Hopewell. I first tracked Yarbrough’s story in *The Farmer and the Horse*, when she made the leap from a comfortable office job into her first low-paid farming internship. Now, two years later, she was trying something unique: She was taking over the operation of a small farm for just one summer, as the owners would be spending the season elsewhere. The idea was that she could gain the valuable experience of what it takes to be the decision maker on a farm (in addition to being the bean picker, tractor driver, lettuce washer, bookkeeper and saleswoman), without a huge financial risk.

At the outset, I thought the farming story in *Sourlands* would focus on the complicated economics that dictate the farming scene in central Jersey. The valley between Princeton and what locals call “the Sourland Mountain” is home to the largest cluster of organic farms in the state. The farmers’ markets here are populated by hungry, affluent, educated customers. Fresh arugula fetches top dollar.

It is in these markets that young farmers, some up to their eyeballs in debt, compete with well-established farms, as well as a throng of other new farms financed by outside wealth. Yarbrough and her few acres of vegetables were entering the fray, and I thought it would be fascinating to tag along.

But then something happened that made me turn my camera skyward. The farming season of 2011 was defined by extreme weather, so much so that it shouldered into my story to become the star of the show. July ranked as the second-hottest month ever recorded in the state, and included one of the hottest days modern New Jerseyans have ever seen. August was, by a huge margin, the wettest month ever recorded, and it included Hurricane Irene, the costliest storm in New Jersey history. Then October brought a huge freak snowstorm. Overall, 2011 ranked as the wettest year in New Jersey history and the third hottest.

At Stonehedge Farm, Yarbrough was especially vulnerable to the record-setting deluge. Stonehedge is located on the edge of the Sourland Mountain, which is a raised wetland littered with two-hundred-million-year-old boulders. It was so wet that Yarbrough couldn’t get her tomatoes planted until June. Not coincidentally, many other cash-strapped farmers have also tried their luck on the less-than-desirable soils of the Sourland Mountain over the past two centuries.

If you’re a farmer and you don’t have access to good land, you take what you can get.



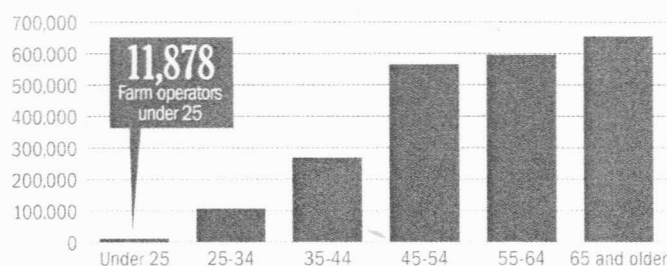
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## Challenges to New Jersey's Farming Future: Age, Land Availability and Access

### American Farm Operators by Age



### The Decline of New Jersey Farmland



### The Price of Farmland

NATIONAL  
AVERAGE  
**\$2,350**  
PER ACRE

NEW JERSEY  
**\$12,700**  
PER ACRE

Graphs: Christopher George

## GET INVOLVED

There are no easy answers to the question of how to secure land tenure for young New Jersey farmers (not to mention farmers everywhere) but many groups are already working hard to help solve the puzzle.

In New Jersey, the Northeast Organic Farming Association and the State Agriculture Development Committee are teaming up to help foster links between landowners and farmers seeking farmland. Details are available at [nofanj.org](http://nofanj.org) and [nj.gov/agriculture/sadc](http://nj.gov/agriculture/sadc).

Starting soon, NOFA-NJ is also teaming up with Duke Farms in Hillsborough to establish, according to reports, 250 acres of incubation space for aspiring organic farmers. Check for details at [dukefarms.org](http://dukefarms.org).

On a national level, young farmers have already begun to organize themselves. One group, the Greenhorns, keeps a blog about land opportunities and farm advocacy issues ([thegreenhorns.wordpress.com](http://thegreenhorns.wordpress.com)), and so does the National Young Farmers Coalition ([youngfarmers.org/blog](http://youngfarmers.org/blog)).

But perhaps the simplest way to get involved with the food movement is also the tastiest—**buy local**. As Michael Pollan puts it, "You get to vote with your fork three times a day." The biggest reason local, small-scale agriculture in New Jersey has been revitalized is because consumers have embraced it. The next step is to really get to know your farmer—ask questions about who owns the farm business, who completes the work on the farm and who benefits from the farm's financial success. Realize that every time you buy food directly from a farmer, you are casting a vote for the agricultural future of the Garden State.

—J. Flesher

The weather last summer would have been simply unfortunate if it were merely bad luck. Instead, it's part of a tragic trend. Climate scientists say extremes of heat and precipitation are symptoms of global warming, and we should expect these extremes to get worse. Scientists are virtually certain that the main cause of global warming over the past century is the burning of fossil fuels by humans.

And so, the thread I was searching for between my farming story and my energy story was no longer hard to see. It buzzed and jumped like a live wire.

There's a reason I've been following the sustainable agriculture movement so closely over the past few years. I'm an optimist at heart, but the data shows that in two of the biggest environmental fights of our time—the fight to stop global climate change and the fight to preserve the world's biodiversity—the home team is on a losing streak.

But I see strength in the food movement. And hope. A brigade of young people are suddenly interested in learning how to grow food in ways that are healthier for the soil, the water, the atmosphere, native wildlife and human health. Established farmers are stepping up to teach and support these young farmers, regardless of the fact that they represent the future competition. Consumers in New Jersey have responded by gathering en masse at farmers' markets to buy produce directly from local farms. And good food just seems to have a way of bringing people and causes together.

At a potluck gathering of central Jersey farmers recently, I listened in on a conversation between two of the veteran farmers in the room. They weren't exactly elderly; they just weren't in their 20s like almost everyone else in attendance. The two farmers discussed how a decade ago, the same potluck would have been a quiet, sparsely populated affair. Tonight the room was alive.

It won't stay that way unless we find those youngsters some well-drained Garden State farmland to call their own.

Learn more about Jared Flesher's upcoming documentary, *Sourlands*, at [sourlands.com](http://sourlands.com).

### FILM FESTIVAL PREMIERE

**When:** July 11, 7 pm

**Where:** Princeton Public Library, 65 Witherspoon St., Princeton

**Tickets:** Free and open to the public

**Details:** A special summer event of the Princeton Environmental Film Festival.

### DINNER AND A MOVIE

**When:** July 18, 6-8 pm

**Where:** Eno Terra, 4484 Route 27, Kingston

**Tickets:** \$55 (includes dinner) **Reservations:** 609-497-1777

**Details:** For dinner, Eno Terra's chef presents a special meal using ingredients from several of the Central Jersey farms featured in the movie, including maple syrup from Sweet Sourland Farms in Hopewell and vegetables from Chickadee Creek Farm in Pennington. After dinner, a special 25-minute version of *SOURLANDS* will be shown followed by a discussion with film director Jared Flesher and special-guest farmers.

