

# CALL TO ACTION

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*Farmland Protection Success Stories  
in the Empire State*

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By Kirsten Ferguson,  
Jeremiah P. Cosgrove  
and Teri Ptacek



*American Farmland Trust*

# American Farmland Trust

American Farmland Trust is the only private, nonprofit conservation organization dedicated to protecting the nation's strategic agricultural resources. Founded in 1980, AFT works to stop the loss of productive farmland and to promote farming practices that lead to a healthy environment. Its activities include public education, technical assistance, policy research and development and direct land protection projects. Basic AFT membership is \$20 a year. AFT provides a variety of professional services to state and local governments and public agencies, private organizations, land trusts and individual landowners. Services include customized information products and workshops on farmland protection and estate planning; policy research, development and evaluation; farmland protection program implementation; and conservation real estate consulting.

For membership information or for more information on farmland protection activities in New York and New England, contact the Northeast Field Office or connect to AFT's home page at:

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BOB WAGNER



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On the front and back cover: Rural Washington County, New York, was once home to renowned octogenarian painter Grandma Moses, who depicted the area's pastoral landscapes and country life. In the 1990s, Washington County artist Virginia McNiece has taken her own brush to canvas to create unique portraits of the county's farmland.

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Michele Phillips designed this report.

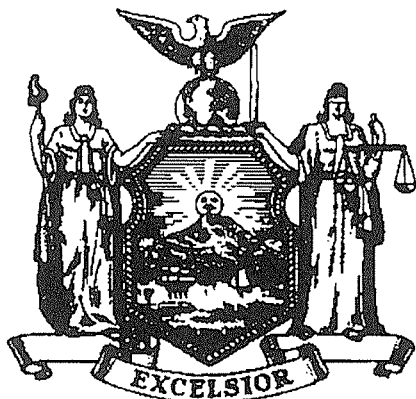
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# *A Note from the Governor*



STATE OF NEW YORK

## *Dear Friends:*

Since 1995, our Administration has worked hard to ensure that agriculture in New York State thrives. We have cut property taxes for farmers up to 100 percent; reduced workers' compensation rates up to 25 percent; cut energy costs by 10 percent; and increased marketing opportunities for our homegrown farm products.

I am also extremely proud of our Farmland Protection Program. Since 1996, New York State has awarded nearly \$10 million for farmland protection projects. Development pressures exist in many parts of New York State, which is why we will commit \$5 million for farmland protection projects from the Environmental Protection Fund and additional resources from the Clean Water/Clean Air Bond Act in 1998.

These grants will help local municipalities preserve the beautiful working landscapes of New York State farmland for our children and grandchildren. Farmland provides open space and wildlife habitat so important to our environment and quality of life.

The heritage of farming is rich in New York's culture. We are working very hard to keep it that way. We will continue to do all we can to ensure the family farm remains strong and healthy in New York State.

Through the Farmland Protection Program and our other efforts to protect their livelihood, a successful future for New York farmers, and the land they tend, will be a reality.

Very truly yours,

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Geo. E. Pataki".

GEORGE E. PATAKI, GOVERNOR

# Foreword



SHARON TEFFT

Simply stated, “It’s the people.” Successful agriculture and farmland protection efforts require leadership, perseverance and patience by committed individuals. Positive results come over time, and this is certainly true with farmland conservation.

Unfortunately, we do not have unlimited time to protect and conserve our valuable agricultural resources. As Will Rogers once said: “Land—they ain’t making any more of it.” Current state and federal Agricultural Census figures show that we are losing farms and farmland at an alarming rate. This is all the more disturbing because there are realistic ways—demonstrated by the profiles in this publication—to strengthen agriculture and protect farmland. We just need to find the will and the wherewithal to do it!

American Farmland Trust’s recent “Farming on the Edge” study identified three critical farming areas in New York State that are currently threatened by nonfarm development: the Hudson River Valley, the Western New York/Finger Lakes Region and Long Island. Across the state, farmers face other hurdles. Farms in the New York City watershed must address the drinking water quality concerns of more than nine million users. Dairy farmers statewide suffer from flat milk prices and ever-increasing costs of production.

While the challenges facing agricultural and farmland protection efforts in New York vary from region to region—reflecting the tremendous diversity in geography and demographics in the Empire State—common themes emerge from the success stories depicted here. Individuals who take action are the most crucial ingredients in any recipe for success.

Because farmers comprise less than one percent of the population in this state, coalition

building is absolutely essential. We must work to build consensus both inside and outside the agriculture community. Ultimately, people must recognize that without farmers, there is no farmland. The notion of the “working landscape” is virtually meaningless if the landscape does not produce food and fiber. And that takes farmers.

As you read these success stories, which travel from the Lake Ontario Plain to the Catskills to the Hudson River Valley, and on

to the shores of Long Island, we hope you can appreciate how much hard work and dedication farmers have contributed to these achievements. Remember that these are men and women who consider a 40-hour workweek to be “part time”! We dedicate this publication to them and to all people committed to conserving our farmland resources.

JERRY COSGROVE  
NORTHEAST FIELD DIRECTOR  
AMERICAN FARMLAND TRUST



JEREMY GREEN

# Introduction



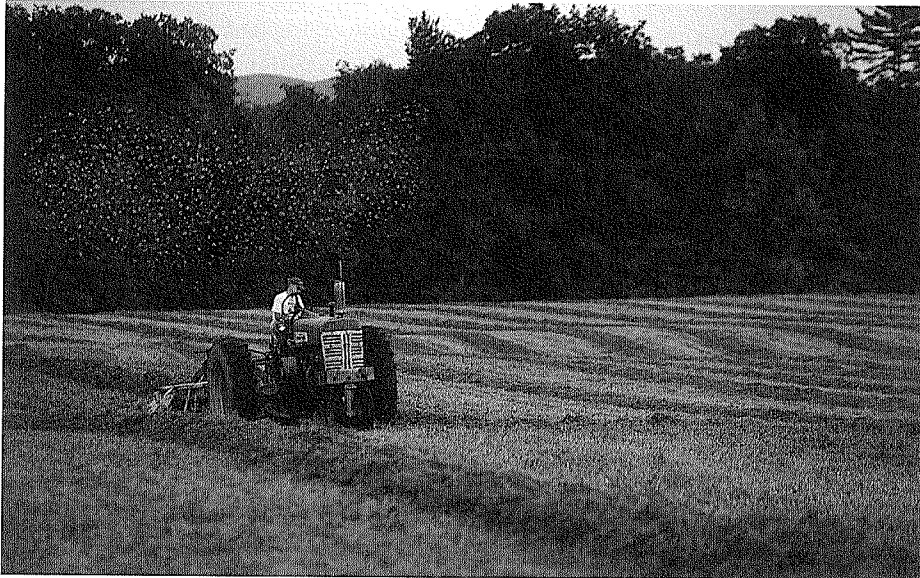
## FARMING IN THE EMPIRE STATE

New York is a farm state, and agriculture is the state's principal land use. In 1992, New York had a total of 8.3 million acres of land supporting 38,000 farms. The yearly gross cash income from agriculture routinely totals about \$3 billion.

While such figures sound impressive, Empire State farms are in danger. As development from our cities and suburbs sprawls farther into rural areas, farmland dwindles. From 1982 to 1991, the state's crop and pastureland declined by 707,000 acres, the equivalent of a 1,105-square-mile area. Such farmland losses cannot continue without having a severe effect on New York's farming industry, economy and quality of life.

According to 1991 U.S. Bureau of Census figures, 96 percent of New York State farming occurs in the shadow of cities. This proximity of agriculture to urban areas presents both opportunities and challenges to New York farmers. For some forms of agriculture, such as vegetable farms and fruit operations, nearby urban markets can be an advantage. However, farms on urban edge locations also must cope with intense pressures such as skyrocketing land prices, development pressures from urban and suburban growth, increasing conflicts with non-farm neighbors, rising property taxes and a general increase in the costs of doing business.

Farming, often a precarious business to begin with, becomes harder to sustain in areas



CLIFFORD OLIVER

undergoing rapid residential growth. Prime farmland is usually highly developable and can be sold at prices that far exceed its agricultural value. For a struggling farmer, the pressure to sell farmland for development is often intense. In places like Pittsford or Suffolk County, farmers feel the heat as housing developments sprout around them like beanstalks and precious natural soils disappear under blacktop.

#### WHY SAVE FARMLAND?

Why should we be concerned about saving farmland? Productive farmland is an

essential component of agriculture, and its loss is usually permanent. When productive farmland soils are gone or paved over, they are lost forever. As the availability of these soils decreases, farmers are forced to choose between farming less productive and inefficient soils or going out of business.

In many New York State communities, farming is a way of life. Plots of land, business strategies and rural traditions have been passed down from generation to generation on family-owned farms. Farming is the economic backbone in many communities throughout the state, supporting a

network of farm-related businesses and services. In rapidly developing New York, farmland also makes up an increasingly important part of the state's open space. It adds diversity to the man-made environment, offering wetlands, wildlife habitat and scenic vistas.

#### STATE INITIATIVES

Empire State officials have confronted some of the challenges facing farmers and rural communities. In 1971, New York enacted its Agricultural Districts Law, which now serves as the cornerstone of the state's agricultural and farmland protection efforts. Based on the theory that the best farm neighbor is another farmer, the program encourages farmers to join together and commit their lands to agricultural use in return for property tax relief and protection from outside intrusions.

In 1992, New York went a step further by passing the Agricultural Protection Act. Heralded as the most sweeping farmland protection legislation since the passage of the agricultural districts law, this act strengthened farmers' right to farm, placed greater scrutiny on public projects that may negatively affect agriculture and set in

motion the development of county agricultural and farmland protection strategies.

Starting in 1994, the state began allotting funds for counties to develop strategic agricultural and farmland protection plans. Since the enactment of the state Agricultural Protection Act, 26 counties—over half of New York's counties—have developed, or are currently developing, these plans, which focus predominantly on education, agricultural development and land protection.

In 1996, the state passed legislation to provide counties that have approved plans, or eligible municipalities, with the funding to purchase development rights to farmland. Since 1996, two rounds of farmland protection grants have been awarded: eight applicants received \$3.75 million in the first round and 11 applicants received \$4.5 million in the second round.

## SUCCESS STORIES EXIST

Statewide initiatives and funding make a world of difference, but farmland protection in New York could never succeed without the efforts of individuals in towns and counties around the state. As Washington County dairy farmer George Houser has said, "You lose agricultural land one house lot at a time." The reverse is also true: You save farmland one parcel at a time. American Farmland Trust has put together this series of profiles to demonstrate what some New York State residents have done locally to protect their farmland.

Chapter One takes us to Long Island's Suffolk County, where the state's top-

grossing agricultural county may also be the most threatened; land values for development of Suffolk County farmland are among the highest in the state. Despite the threats still facing Suffolk County agriculture, its purchase of development rights program—which buys permanent, protective restrictions on farmland—is one of the most celebrated farmland initiatives ever. Implemented in 1977, it was the first of its kind in the nation and has since been replicated across the country.

The upstate New York town of Pittsford, located outside Rochester in the Great Lakes region, is featured in Chapter Two as a community that has successfully planned

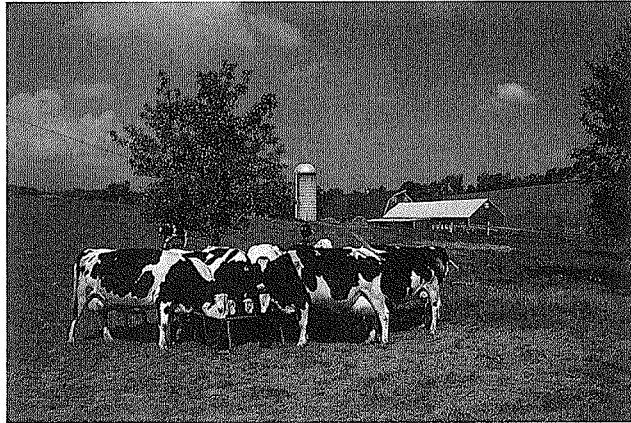
### "COWS AND CROPS DON'T GO TO SCHOOL"

*At the 1996 New York State Fair in Syracuse, Governor George Pataki signed the Farm Preservation Act, which created a refundable income tax credit for farmers' school taxes. On hand for the event was AFT's Jerry Cosgrove, who worked with New York Farm Bureau and other farm organizations to push for this landmark farmland protection legislation.*



COUNTRY FOLKS

farmland as part of its future. By the 1990s, rapid suburbanization had squeezed out all but 12 of the town's historic family-run farms. Alarmed town residents and officials began mapping out the town's remaining resources; when they were done they had produced their *Greenprint for the Future*, which ensures the preservation of their town's remaining farmland.



BOB WAGNER

Farmland is threatened not only in areas on the urban fringe. Fairly isolated rural regions such as Chapter Three's Washington County have yet to feel intense development pressure; still, many of their farms are in danger.

Economic factors that mean fewer profits for many farmers, particularly those in the dairy industry where milk prices have not kept pace with inflation, remain very real threats. Washington County is an example of a community where farmland protection initiatives—many tied to the economic development of agriculture—have arisen from individually led grass-roots efforts.

Our last regional profile takes us to the Catskill Mountains, where farmland protection has been uniquely integrated with efforts to reduce agricultural contributions

to water pollution. In the mountainous region that provides New York City residents with 90 percent of their drinking water, farmers have been working to protect water quality. AFT's Northeast office has helped a farmer-driven task force called the Watershed Agricultural Council (WAC) reach an agreement on a landmark multi-million-dollar agricultural easement program that integrates farmland protection and water quality.

Chapter Five describes in brief some of the other innovative and exciting initiatives taking shape around the state. Our concluding chapter—"Call to Action"—lists some steps **you** can take to help protect farmland in your community.

For more technical discussions of any of the initiatives referred to in these chapters, the reader may wish to seek further information. Contact numbers are provided at the bottom of each chapter.

As we were writing this publication, our goal was to emphasize the importance of the individuals who make farmland protection happen in their communities. We hope to present the voices of some of the people who had the vision, foresight and dogged persistence to get things done.

## PDR Pioneers: Suffolk County Invests in Farms and Farmland



CCE SUFFOLK COUNTY

“*T*he alarm sounded in the early 1970s when residents first realized their agricultural industry was in danger,” says Suffolk County Planning Director Steve Jones. “Most farms in the western portion of Suffolk had already been cut up, and people began to realize the pattern was likely to repeat itself in the rest of the county.”

Prior to World War Two, the vast majority of Suffolk County—which occupies the eastern-most end of Long Island—was rural. Starting in the 1950s, spillover growth from New York City marched steadily eastward across the island. In the years between 1950 and 1969, Suffolk lost approximately half of its total farm acreage when the region’s population almost quadrupled, reaching 1.3 million. The county’s rapid rate of development continues to place intense pressure on farmland for conversion. From 1969 to 1996, Suffolk County lost farmland at an annual average rate of 652 acres per year.

Despite the rapid conversion of prime farmland, for more than two decades Suffolk has been the highest-grossing agricultural county in New York. It leads the state in the total amount of land used to produce a broad variety of crops, including cauliflower, broccoli, pumpkins, spinach and potatoes. Suffolk farmers have been able to produce more goods on less land in an ecological region perfectly suited for farming. “Soils, sun and water,” says Tom Wickham, a fruit grower from the Town of Southold. “Those are the three key factors to our productivity. We’re lucky in that respect.” The county is blessed with fertile soils that were formed by the retreating glaciers of the last Ice Age. Moreover, the region’s growing season is a generous 200+ days, the land is mainly level and the climate moderate.

Economically, Suffolk still has much to lose from the decline of its agricultural industry. "Agriculture is a homegrown part of the economy," says Jones. "It generates a positive 'trickle-down' effect by lessening the county's tax burden and stimulating sales tax through tourism." The area's rural ambiance has long attracted thousands of tourists and seasonal residents to eastern Long Island each year. "Without farming," Jones adds, "Suffolk County's \$2 billion tourist industry would be seriously weakened."

In the 1970s, Suffolk County residents began working together to preserve their

prime farmland and valuable agricultural industry. Along the way, they pioneered a new farmland protection technique called Purchase of Development Rights (PDR).

### **SOWING THE SEEDS**

In 1972, Suffolk County Executive John Klein established an Agricultural Advisory Committee—comprised of farmers and agricultural specialists—to devise a plan to preserve farmland. Two years earlier the county had considered implementing a "purchase and lease-back approach" to buy land from farmers and rent it back to them.

Instead, the committee latched on to a slightly different idea conceived by a local attorney: Suffolk County could purchase the "development rights" to land at risk of being lost from agriculture forever.

Such a program would pay farmers to protect their land from development. By purchasing the "development rights" to a piece of property, the county could stipulate that the land remain in agriculture. Farmers would continue to own their own land, but would give up the right to build non-farm structures on property enrolled in the program. In return for participating, farmers would receive payment equivalent to the development values of their land.

"Ultimately," says Jones, "we went with the PDR program because it keeps property private and on the tax rolls, and it keeps farmers farming. The county already had an aggressive open space initiative and wanted to save farmland, but it did not want to be in the actual business of farming."

By 1974, Suffolk County had created the first program of its kind in the country. The county contacted its landowners and offered them the chance to submit bids for the sale of development rights to pieces of their property. The bids were opened in early 1975. Approximately 60 landowners had



*Development threatens Suffolk County's remaining farmland.*

SUFFOLK COUNTY PLANNING DEPARTMENT



## Lobbying for Change

As executive director of the Long Island Farm Bureau, a membership organization that addresses economic and policy issues affecting agriculture, Joe Gergela has spent the past decade walking the legislative corridors in Albany and Washington, D.C. He speaks to legislators about the grave challenges facing farmland protection efforts on his native Long Island.

"The end game is in sight for us. The next five to ten years will determine the landscape of our future," Gergela says. "We are running out of time, and we don't have the money we need to preserve all of our open space." His concerns for Long Island's farmland have not gone unheard. By sounding the plight of the island's agricultural industry to state and federal politicians, Gergela recently has helped acquire more than \$4 million in state and federal funds for the island's farmland preservation programs.

The funds come from sources such as the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Farmland Protection Program—launched by the 1996 Farm Bill—and New York State's Agricultural and Farmland Protection Program, supported by the state's Environmental Protection Fund. More funding also became available from the state's \$1.75 billion Clean Water/Clean Air Bond Act, which allocated \$150 million for open space projects.

These state and federal programs were established to provide matching funds for communities struggling to preserve farmland in areas at greatest risk from urban encroachment. Long Island is a prime candidate for such funds, since its land values for development are among the highest in the state.

However, such successful lobbying "has taken constant diligence and

dedication," says Gergela.

"I personally spend my life trying to keep this on the legislature's radar screen.

I can't give up on it." He is quick to point out that farmland protection has succeeded because of group efforts. "We have a lot of committed people here who have persevered and spent a lot of time working on these issues.

It has been a coordinated effort. Towns, counties, the state, the federal

government, the Farm Bureau, the agricultural industry and environmental organizations have all pulled together for a common goal."

In fact, when asked for advice for other municipalities interested in lobbying their elected officials for state and federal farmland protection funds, Gergela emphasizes the importance of teamwork and coalition building. "It needs to be done as a community, with environmental and civic groups and everyone speaking as one voice," he says. "Have your elected officials involved in a team effort. Be well prepared to demonstrate need. Most of all, stick with it. Don't become discouraged. Just keep plugging along, and when the stars line up, things will happen."



**Joe Gergela, executive director of the Long Island Farm Bureau**

CHARLES MCKINNEY



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*"We went with the PDR program because it keeps property private and on the tax rolls, and it keeps farmers farming."*

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– STEVE JONES,  
SUFFOLK COUNTY PLANNING DIRECTOR

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offered up a total of 3,883 acres of land. The county then developed a rating system to evaluate properties for submission into its PDR program, emphasizing saving the best remaining prime soils, protecting blocks of adjacent farmland and preserving land under the most intense development pressure.

#### **THE HARD SELL**

From the start, the county's biggest obstacle was finding the money they needed to fund their PDR program. Using Cost of Community Services studies that determine the fiscal impact of various land uses on a community, county officials argued that the full-scale conversion of farmland into housing developments would cost more in county resources than would the funding of a farmland preservation program. In 1976, the county authorized a \$21 million bond program to pay for the development rights to thousands of acres of farmland. The county sold its first bonds and closed its first deals in 1977. In the process, it acquired the development rights to more than 3,200 acres of farmland.

Wickham's family farm was the second in the county to enroll in the PDR program.

"It's a very important and popular program," he says. "It's a necessary tool, but we still need to look for additional ways to save farmland, especially ways that don't break the bank. We've got a lot more work to do."

#### **FOLLOW-UP**

In the early 1980s, the towns of Southampton, East Hampton and Southold established their own PDR programs. "County efforts have probably worked best in coordination with local efforts. Local programs have the ability to be a bit closer to the needs of the community and the landowners," says Tim Caulfield, vice president of the Peconic Land Trust. Caulfield refers to a "Preservation Partnership" program that allows towns to match county funds for land acquisition projects. By 1998, all five eastern Suffolk towns had established their own agricultural reserve programs.

Private sources such as the Peconic Land Trust also have contributed greatly to the county's farmland protection efforts. "We blend our private conservation efforts with other tools, such as public PDR acquisition," says Caulfield. "By the same

token, a private land trust can contribute greatly to the bottom line of an overall project. If farmers gift a portion of their property to us, it can help offset their tax liability." By 1995, the Peconic Land Trust had helped preserve more than 2,500 acres of Long Island farmland, mainly by acquiring donations of land and conservation easements. The value of that land is close to \$40 million. "And that," Caulfield points out, "is money the public did not have to pay."

During the 1990s, state and federal programs became available to match the county's contributions to land acquisition. By 1997, the county had applied for \$2 million in state and federal funds to purchase development rights to additional farmland. The passage of the New York State Environmental Bond Act in 1997 also created further funding possibilities for the county. By March of 1998, the county had acquired the development rights to a total of 6,081 acres of farmland, while town programs preserved an additional 1,500 acres.

Despite the overall successes of Suffolk County's PDR program—measured best, perhaps, in the number of farmland acres preserved in perpetuity—problems have remained. Rapidly rising land costs have gradually forced planners to re-evaluate their initial goals of preserving vast acreage of



LONG ISLAND FARM BUREAU

*Suffolk County's premium wine industry is the largest outside California.*

farmland. The region has banned residential development in certain environmentally sensitive areas such as pine barren woodlands, a factor that has contributed to intense development pressure on the surrounding farm areas.

"Build-out is still in sight," says Caulfield. "We could face it in ten years unless a steady, coordinated, all-encompassing effort continues between all involved." Since easements on

farmland under the most intense urban pressure tend to carry the highest prices, "Farmers receive offers to sell their land to nonfarmers that are double or triple the amount that the county can offer them through PDR," says Jones.

#### **FROM SPUDS TO BUDS**

Suffolk County agriculture can also benefit from the very element that threatens to



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*"Build-out is still in sight. We could face it in ten years unless a steady, coordinated, all-encompassing effort continues between all involved."*

— TIM CAULFIELD,  
PECONIC LAND TRUST VICE PRESIDENT

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destroy it. As a quintessential example of farming on the "urban fringe," Suffolk County farms can draw from the huge market that lives next door. "There is a positive to development pressure," says fruit grower Tom Wickham. "Many of the people in the area become good customers." The future survival of the county's agriculture may hinge on the ability of area farmers to market their goods directly. A number of the region's farms are moving toward the production of "exotic" herbs and vegetables that end up on the menus of upscale Manhattan restaurants. Others grow specialty vegetables for New York City's large Asian population.

Suffolk County agriculture also has undergone a rather dramatic changeover to horticulture. Geared primarily toward potato

production in the 1970s, two-thirds of the county's overall agricultural yield now involves greenhouse and nursery products, which generally require less land for production. "Many growers have been able and willing to shift out of standard, extensive crops," explains Wickham. "That's how they've survived, by converting to land-intensive, high-value crops and by placing an emphasis on their retail sales." The county's premium wine industry, the largest outside California, sprang from Suffolk's PDR program because the high costs of wine-making equipment have been offset by the low costs of land enrolled in PDR.

#### LEADING THE WAY

Despite the obstacles, Suffolk County's PDR program was the nation's first. Since then, other states and communities have followed the lead. Maryland and Massachusetts authorized their own development rights programs in 1977. Connecticut and New Hampshire followed suit in 1978 and 1979, respectively. Today, 15 states and more than 50 counties have adopted the farmland protection model pioneered by Suffolk County.

When asked if Suffolk County's program has been an overall success, Jones answers without pause. "Absolutely. Out of the 7,000 acres we have protected, over 6,900 acres are currently being farmed. The program is a great way for us to keep people farming without the county inheriting the maintenance of the property." Caulfield concurs. "Regardless of the program's shortcomings," he adds, "we would be in a lot worse shape today without its successes."

#### *Contacts for More Information*

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Joe Gergela  
Long Island Farm Bureau Executive Director  
516-727-3777

Suffolk County's Agriculture and Farmland  
Protection Plan is available for view at  
[www.co.suffolk.ny.us/planning](http://www.co.suffolk.ny.us/planning).

## Greenprint for the Future: Pittsford Plans Ahead

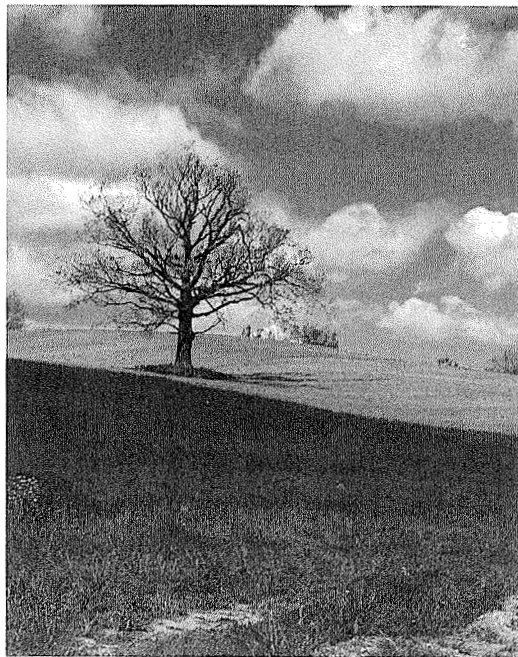
When a land use crisis hovered like a storm cloud over the small town of Pittsford, local residents took charge. Their landmark efforts to save the town's remaining farms have been so successful, a national television network visited Pittsford to highlight their achievements.

"The sounds of farming have been heard here in the sleepy town of Pittsford for seven generations," intoned CBS News correspondent Hattie Kaufman during a 1997 broadcast as the television screen flashed scenes of pastoral fields and farmers at work on large pieces of machinery.

Pittsford farmer Larry Knickerbocker was filmed standing in a freshly tilled crop field. "This is home. We know where every rock is, every tree, every corner," he told the TV reporter. "I've got sweat and blood out there in the field. I want to see it stay as I remember it—open farmland."

"But these days, the tractor is not the only familiar sound," Kaufman continued, as the camera panned to shots of construction workers pounding nails into the frames of brand-new houses. "Over the past few decades, nearby Rochester has expanded as farmers have watched uneasily, fearing for their future."

By 1990, only 12 family farm operations remained in the once predominantly agricultural town of Pittsford. Planners projected the town would be essentially built out within the following decades. Still, Pittsford's rapid rate of development alone might not have been enough to attract national news attention. As stated during the CBS news report, an



JOHN BEHAN



*Pittsford farmers David and Larry Knickerbocker examine their wheat crop.*

estimated two acres of American farmland are lost per minute.

Instead, Pittsford is unique because town officials and residents there tackled their difficult land use issues head-on. By 1996, they had drafted a groundbreaking document called *Greenprint for the Future* that mapped out the town's remaining open spaces. The *Greenprint* also outlined strategies for preserving important natural resources including buying the development rights to more than 1,000 acres of the town's farmland. In 1998, the American Planning Association honored the plan with a national award.

#### **SOIL TURNS TO BLACKTOP**

Located along the banks of the Erie Canal, the Town of Pittsford was settled by farmers. In 1789, brothers Simon and Israel Stone staked out territory there and began the arduous process of clearing the land. Other settlers followed suit, drawn by the promise of rich, fertile topsoil that covered land within the Great Lakes Drainage Basin.

"Three elements make up the historical character of Pittsford: its location on the Erie Canal, its historic village, and its agricultural nature," says Pittsford Town Supervisor Bill Carpenter. "With a

topography highlighted by the working landscapes of farms, this has always been a beautiful place." By the 1990s, however, Pittsford residents were forced to ask themselves how long it would last.

"The first real subdivisions sprang up in the 1920s and 1930s," explains Pittsford crop farmer Mark Greene. "Development in Pittsford was a slow, gradual thing, and people weren't concerned about it at first." As the nearby city of Rochester swelled from the growth of its industry, many workers relocated to the suburbs. To the commuter, Pittsford offered a reputable school system, pastoral landscapes and historic character.



## Farms Not for Sale: Pittsford Preserves Its Historic Farmsteads

"My ancestors saw this piece of ground along the Erie Canal and decided to start farming," says Town of Pittsford crop farmer Larry Knickerbocker, whose family still farms that ground seven generations later. Knickerbocker's historic 106-acre farmstead is one of seven farms preserved by Pittsford's ground-breaking *Greenprint for the Future* plan, which identifies the town's valuable open spaces and recommends the use of purchase of development rights (PDR) to preserve them.

The strategy was necessary to preserve farmland in a historic agricultural region that has become overwhelmed by development. Knickerbocker recalls when he first realized that Pittsford was transforming from a farm town into a bustling suburb. "I knew it back in the 1960s when my grandfather told me he could sell our farm for big money," he says. "The farm right next to us had just sold. He said it was up to us whether we wanted to stay. I told him I wouldn't trade farming for anything in the world. He turned around and told the developer he wouldn't sell the farm for less than a million dollars." Back then, that amount of money was enough to turn away potential developers. In the 1990s, a \$1 million asking price may not be so farfetched.

Since his family made the decision to stay in farming decades ago, Knickerbocker has watched as most of Pittsford's farmers have succumbed to such offers. "Farming is not that lucrative a business," he says. "Once the developers came and they started building houses here, the ground became worth so much. Farmers weren't making that kind of money and their kids weren't staying on the farms. That's why there are so few of us left."

By the 1990s, Pittsford residents and officials had joined together to focus on preserving their town's remaining open land. "People were looking around them and realizing how fast the land was being gobbled up," Knickerbocker says. He praises the role of town officials in Pittsford planning efforts. "Fortunately, the leaders of this town had enough guts and foresight to push things along."

Pittsford's plan to buy the development rights to more than 1,000 acres of the town's remaining farmland will help ensure that farmers like

Knickerbocker can stay in business. "You don't make any money farming blacktop," he says. "As much as I love farming and I love Pittsford and I want to stay here in my home, if I didn't have enough land to till to feed my family, I couldn't stay."




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*"This is home. We know where every rock is, every tree, every corner. I've got sweat and blood out there in the field. I want to see it stay as I remember it—open farmland."*

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— LARRY KNICKERBOCKER,  
PITTSFORD FARMER

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"By the 1960s," Greene adds, "the rate of development had really picked up. It escalated after that, as development spread farther and farther out toward the fringes of town."

By the 1990s, the continued loss of town farmland threatened to end Pittsford's agricultural industry. When high land values prohibit farmers from purchasing the acreage they need to continue or expand their operations, farmers are forced to lease land, often from developers. "I think I rent from about 35 different landlords," says crop farmer Larry Knickerbocker with a laugh, although he's not kidding. "It's a few acres here, a few there." By 1990, farmers in

Pittsford were leasing 65 percent of their farmland. With development occurring rapidly in town, the future availability of that rented land was highly uncertain. "You can't take care of the land as well as you should if you don't know whether you'll be farming it the following year," Knickerbocker adds.

To survive, Pittsford farmers needed some kind of guarantee that the town's remaining open land would stay available for farming. Town officials already had determined that their "50-50" zoning (a form of rural residential zoning that requires 50 percent of a developed parcel to remain as open space) was ineffective in preserving farms.

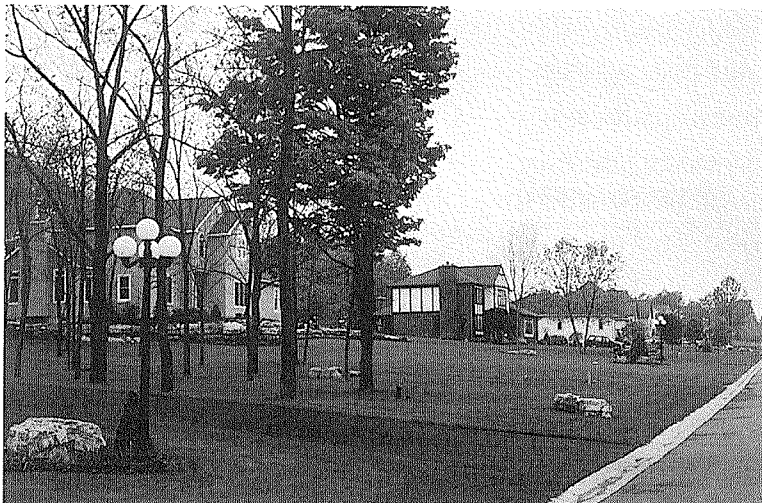
"If you really want to save farms, you have to save a whole parcel," says Carpenter. "You can't develop half a farm and have half a farm left. You either save the farm or accept development."

The defining time for Pittsford residents determined to save their farms may have been 1992, when a 200-year-old farm within the town's only historic district came up for sale. Two Pittsford nonprofit groups—The Pittsford Greenbelt Association and Historic Pittsford—and American Farmland Trust had been in the final stages of developing a proposal to purchase the scenic farm when it was sold to a developer. The new owner planned 120 homes for the site.

Supervisor Carpenter describes the event as a wake-up call of sorts. "The sale of that farm was good news and bad news. It forced the community to come to grips with this issue. As a psychological blow, it made us get moving. People realized the community would have to step up to the plate to save its open spaces."

## WORKING TOWARD SOLUTIONS

"The community had already recognized the importance of preserving farmland," says consulting town planner John Behan. "But



*Pittsford's Greenprint insures that valuable farmland will not be replaced by houses.*

NYS AG & MARKETS

there needed to be a planning effort to help focus on what that meant. We considered a range of options, from doing nothing to undertaking very aggressive land preservation. We realized neither was acceptable. That's when we began looking at the financial cost of protecting the environment and all the land versus the cost of not protecting it."

In 1993, the Town Board commissioned a Fiscal Impact Study that estimated what the costs would be to the town and school district if residential development continued until build-out. Its conclusion: Since residential areas require many costly services such as schools and police protection, the community would be better off financially if it acquired the development rights to its remaining open space.

"The study helped show people that Pittsford was primarily a residential community on a collision course," Carpenter says. "It really helped open people's eyes. There would be serious tax consequences down the line. As a result, the town turned to comprehensive planning modeled after land use policies that made fiscal sense in the long term."

## GREENPRINT FOR THE FUTURE

"By 1994, we were at a fork in the road," Carpenter says. "We had to decide whether to accept the total build-out of the town from one end to the other or whether we were going to save open spaces. We began to look around to determine what resources were left that helped define the character of the community."

In 1995, after adopting an updated comprehensive town plan, the Town Board developed a rating formula to evaluate the town's remaining land resources. The town's planning consultants then inventoried more than 3,600 acres based upon the evaluation system criteria. They paid close attention to which land resources should be a priority for protection.

The highest-rated land parcels were identified in Pittsford's *Greenprint for the Future* plan in 1996. The *Greenprint* identified 2,000 acres—approximately 60 percent of the town's remaining undeveloped land—for preservation. Some were corridors of wildlife habitat that linked valuable ecological resources such as wetlands, ancient forests and major streams.



JOHN BEHAN

Other parcels encompassed the town's remaining historic farmsteads. The *Greenprint* described in detail the valuable agricultural, historic, ecological and scenic qualities of each of these farmlands. It noted, for instance, that Greene's farm was still being operated by direct descendents of town founder Colonel Caleb Hopkins, who gave Pittsford its name. Farms were lauded for their maintenance of important wildlife habitat and stream corridors. Some parcels were highly regarded for their scenic beauty; the *Greenprint* acknowledged that many of these farms provided great "visual relief" for adjacent residential areas.

"The *Greenprint* provides a rational guide for directing preservation efforts to the most significant resources," explains Behan. "The



JOHN BEHAN

plan steers development away from areas where costs and environmental impacts are likely to be highest. As a result, it has a direct financial and social benefit to residents of the town. It seeks to reserve ecologically significant areas for the enjoyment of town residents and minimize economic and social costs associated with over-development."

#### AT THE FINISH LINE

The *Greenprint* also outlined specific protection strategies for preserving Pittsford's land

resources. For one, it recommended the preservation of permanent open space through a purchase of development rights program. In 1996, the town board unanimously approved \$9.9 million in bonds to purchase development rights and permanently protect seven farms totaling 1,100 acres.

The development rights project requires compromise on all sides. Farmers will sell the development rights to their land at less than full value; developers only will be allowed to build in certain areas; taxpayers will see an initial increase in their taxes—one that preservationists argue would be much higher if development continued unabated.

In Pittsford, such a sense of cooperation has prevailed in the face of potentially heated issues. "There has been no real controversy—only community debate," Carpenter emphasizes. "We have been able to bring all residents along on this issue.

It's critical to have a process that allows the community to come to consensus."

Farmer Mark Greene praises the contributions of concerned Pittsford residents. "Citizen volunteers have been a crucial aspect of the whole planning process," he says. "Land preservation groups such as the Pittsford Greenbelt Association and Historic Pittsford have put a tremendous amount of work into planning efforts here."

To Greene, Knickerbocker and other Pittsford farmers, the *Greenprint* helps ensure that there is a future for the town's remaining agricultural industry. "The development rights program will at least preserve a base. It's guaranteed farmland," Knickerbocker says. "We know that land will always be there."

As a news correspondent once stated on the CBS Morning News, "The little town of Pittsford isn't taking any chances."



#### *Contacts for More Information*

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*"With the implementation of this plan, I think there's certainly a future here for the farmland we have left."*

— MARK GREENE, PITTSFORD FARMER

# Home Grown: Grass-Roots Farmland Protection in Washington County



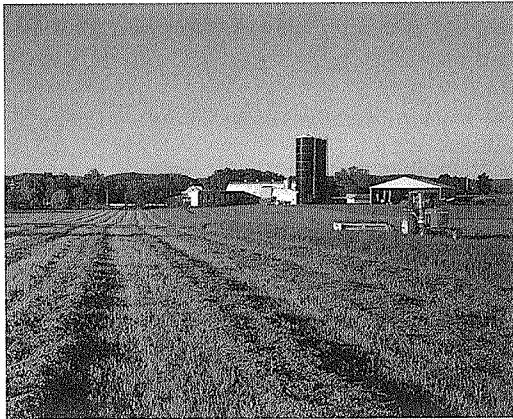
**F**armland is not just at risk in regions with intense development pressure. Even farms in the most rural parts of the state are endangered, mainly by economic factors that have long threatened agriculture's survival.

"The principal threat to agriculture in Washington County is economics," says beef farmer and Town of Salem Supervisor Bruce Ferguson. "It's low prices versus the costs of staying in operation. Secondly, there's a demand for property from non-farm people—weekenders and vacationers. It bids up the price of the land."

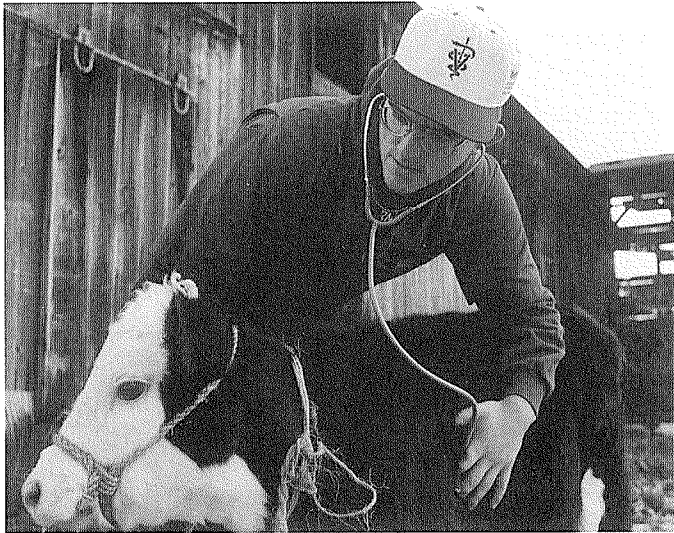
Rural Washington County—50 miles north of Albany and 100 miles south of Montreal—lies just far enough away from major urban centers that farmers there have yet to feel developers breathing down their necks. The county has, in fact, been described as a "rural island" located on the fringe of areas more affected by intensive development. Neighboring counties such as Saratoga and Warren have grown much more rapidly due to their proximity to Interstate-87 and their access to Capital Region cities.

Since the early days of its settlement, Washington County has been an assembly of farm towns. Rolling pastures, meadows and cornfields dominate the landscape; small towns and hamlets are scattered about like an afterthought. First settled by Scottish-Irish immigrants in the early 1800s, agriculture always has been the county's primary industry. By 1845, farmers had cleared a majority of the hillsides and were grazing over 250,000 sheep; by the end of the century the county was a nationally important potato producer.

In the early 20th century, the advent of the automated milking machine and the refrigerated



JEREMY GREEN



RICH CLAUSS

*Agriculture is supported by a variety of local businesses.*

bulk storage tank allowed a majority of Washington County farmers to shift to dairy production. By the 1990s, the county was producing more milk than either New Hampshire or New Jersey and more than twice as much milk as Rhode Island and Delaware combined. Today's milk prices, which have not kept pace with inflation since the 1970s, have hurt the region's farmers.

In the late 1970s, Washington County residents first took action to address their threatened agricultural industry. Their efforts can be described as "grass-roots" because individual citizens led the way. "It all goes back to a meeting held in the

Town of Salem in the late 1970s," says Jim Perry, operator of a White Creek apple orchard. "There were probably 40 people at that first meeting, and everyone talked about wanting to keep the county viable in agriculture. From there, a core group of people came together."

That group came to be known as the Washington County Agricultural Opportunities Committee. Though the assembly came to include local businesspeople, conservationists, government officials and other concerned county residents, its nucleus from the beginning was the farming community. "In the past, when there were more farms, farmers were often the pillars of their community," says Ferguson. "Since agriculture is the number one industry here, local leaders quite often have been farmers. They've always had great influence."

## FOCUS ON ECONOMICS

As a fairly isolated rural area, Washington County always has had a difficult time attracting outside businesses and manufacturers. Its agricultural sector, however, contributes millions of dollars a year to the local economy, providing employment, supporting local agribusinesses and generating tax revenue.

"Agriculture is our county's leading industry," says Perry. "It happens to use as its base our natural resources—the land, good rainfall. We believe it is the best use of land in our area. Without it, we lose our biggest industry and also our county's beauty. Taxes will go up, traffic will get worse, we'll start to acquire all the problems that go along with living in a heavily populated area."

To work toward saving its county's farms, Washington County's Agricultural Opportunities Committee developed an approach fairly unique to the pantheon of farmland protection. Their concept—"agricultural




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*"We're not trying to prevent development. We're struggling to save farms and farming—our industry."*

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— BRUCE FERGUSON, TOWN OF SALEM SUPERVISOR

economic development”—refers to initiatives that seek to improve the profitability of farming. The goal: help keep farmers in business so farmers can keep their land in farming.

## FARMS FOR TRADE

The Agricultural Opportunities Committee developed some groundbreaking ideas to help sustain the county's farming industry. Since New York State agriculture is primarily family-based, farming is threatened when heirs decide to leave the business. "When young people leave the farm," says Washington County dairy farmer George Houser, "they're often lost forever. It's a matter of on-the-job training. Farming is more than what you learn in a course." Though some would argue that people from non-farm backgrounds can and do learn to farm successfully, Houser also pointed to an economic reality of dairy farming: operations that require



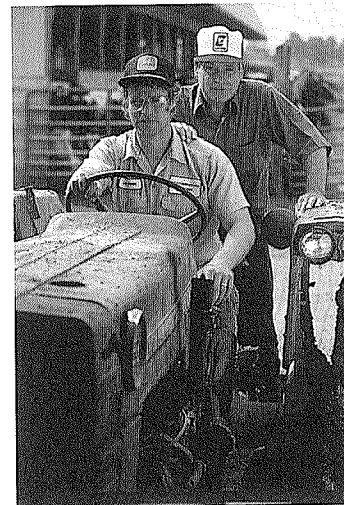
## Mission to Farm

Washington County farmer George Houser operates a sixth generation dairy and forage farm in the town of Easton and has been involved in farmland protection for perhaps longer than anyone in his county. "Since a long time ago, I can't even give you a year," he says. He does pin it down to a time during the tenure of New York State Governor Nelson Rockefeller in the mid-1950s, when he became concerned that city and town governments "weren't working on the issue of agricultural land conversion."

Houser has since spear-headed a grass-roots farmland protection movement in a fertile agricultural region where farming has been the dominant industry since the county's settlement in the early 1800s. "Nobody realizes what we have here," he says. "This county has all the natural, physical and human resources needed for agriculture, though that's slowly being limited by the amount of land converted out of farming. Still, our agricultural strengths have carried us this far."

Washington County's dairy-oriented agricultural industry faces unfavorable economic conditions—such as low milk prices and high costs of production—as well as speculative land values. Houser and other county farmers have been working to ensure a future for agriculture in their region. "You've got to plan," he says. "You've got to set up guidelines. Otherwise, the ability for towns to control their own destinies is lost. We also have to decide as a county what our mission is. If it's agricultural—and we feel it is—we should make every effort to keep the county in farming."

In the late 1970s, Houser and several fellow farmers formed an organization called the Agricultural Opportunities Committee to address the conversion of county farmland to nonagricultural uses. He was also one of the first farmers in Washington County to work with AFT in donating an agricultural easement on his own farm. "You lose agricultural land one house lot at a time," he says. "If you don't set aside these blocks of farms, conflicts can increase to the point where farmland always loses. It's an erosion process. But ultimately, everybody loses."



George Houser and his son

JEREMY GREEN

such major investments in equipment, livestock and land are extremely difficult to start from scratch.

The committee recognized the challenge of finding people to take over farms when the owners had no successors. They launched a "Come Farm with Us" promotional campaign that placed advertisements in agricultural magazines throughout New England and southern New York. The ads emphasized the county's easy accessibility to support services such as vet clinics, crop and feed suppliers, government agencies, auction houses, cattle dealers and milk cooperatives. Meant to target farmers in other counties who were being squeezed out by development, they read: "If you're one of today's modern farmers pressured by declining support services, rapidly rising taxes and urban sprawl, consider relocating your farming operation to Washington County."

Responses came from over 100 farmers, most located in more heavily suburban

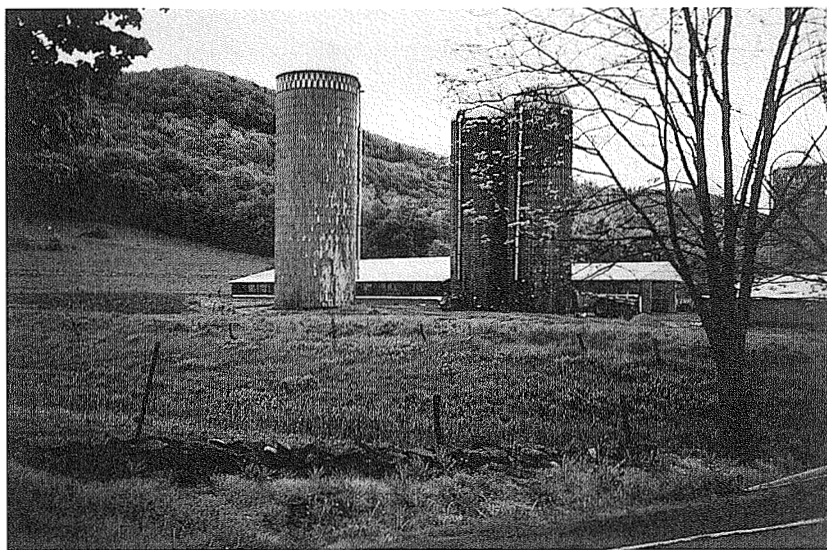
Northeast states such as New Jersey and Connecticut. The committee then initiated a Farm Match program that was one of the first of its kind in the nation. By matching the needs of respondents interested in relocating to Washington County to those of county farmers, the program aimed to assist older farmers nearing retirement who wanted to transfer their farms to the next generation.

#### IN LAND WE TRUST

As another grass-roots effort to assist farmers, some members of the Agricultural Opportunities Committee formed a county

land trust called the Agricultural Stewardship Association (ASA). Houser describes how he first thought of creating the land trust. "I gave a talk somewhere on the Agricultural Districts Law and an elderly farmer came up to me. He said, 'Does this mean my farm will forever stay in farming?' I could see how much he wanted that to happen. Unfortunately, I had to tell him no, this only would be temporary."

"That got us talking though, back in our Agricultural Opportunities Committee, and this idea of easements just sort of surfaced," he continues. "We decided they were something we ought to be thinking about." Still, the group kept the concept on the back



*The Stewart family farm was the first state-funded PDR project in Washington County.*

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burner until one night when Houser got a phone call from a New York City organization. They were interested in acquiring easements to farmland in Washington County. "We realized then," he says, "that we wanted to hold our own easements, rather than let some outside organization do it for us."

In the spring of 1990, ASA was formed. Stating that they were "designed by local farmers for local farmers interested in farmland retention and agricultural stewardship," ASA concentrated its efforts on working with the agricultural community. In the past, land trusts had been formed primarily by conservationists concerned about vanishing habitat and open space. Only recently have supporters of the family farm made use of these same land use trust tools.

"Many farmers in the county had expressed their concern about what would happen to their farms after their tenancy," says Pamela Cali, who helped found ASA and later became its president. "Since there had been little long-term land-use planning in the county, this was one of the few positive options open to us."

"We were at a stage where we felt the county's critical mass of farmland was

starting to deteriorate and was threatened," says orchard farmer and ASA member Jim Perry. "The land trust seemed a logical route for us because it could accept easements and protect land permanently."

The organization made establishing an agricultural conservation easement program their main ambition. By 1998, volunteer board members of ASA had acquired 14 easements on more than 1,400 acres.

#### **AFPB ALERT**

ASA was also instrumental in helping Washington County develop an Agricultural and Farmland Protection Plan. In 1992, ASA applied for and received a grant that helped Washington County become one of the first counties in New York to receive state funds to develop a farmland protection plan.

The county's Agricultural and Farmland Protection Plan was developed during 1995 by the county Agricultural and Farmland Protection Board and a working group that included representatives from more than eight agencies and organizations within the county. Among its goals were strengthening the "critical mass" of county agricultural land, integrating agriculture into county economic initiatives, promoting Washington



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*"It all takes money, and that's a problem. As farmland gets scarcer and scarcer, it's going to be a premium price. But something has to be done, or else we won't be worrying about this issue in a few years."*

— GEORGE HOUSER,  
WASHINGTON COUNTY DAIRY FARMER

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*"If it weren't for grass-roots people and grass-roots efforts, the Agricultural and Farmland Protection Plan could not have been implemented."*

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— JIM PERRY, WASHINGTON COUNTY ORCHARD FARMER

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County as an agricultural center, protecting important farmland and developing community and government support of agriculture.

The plan provided a "road map" for the county to "maintain its farmland base and strengthen the agricultural economy." A committee formed to implement its recommendations, and many of its ongoing efforts are educational. They conduct yearly farm tours for the nonfarm public, support a program called "Ag in the Classroom" that encourages school teachers to emphasize the importance of farming, and inform realtors as to the value of finding new farm buyers for existing farms. "Overall, we just want to be more visible throughout the county to keep these issues alive," says Supervisor Ferguson, who chairs the county's Agricultural and Farmland Protection Board.

In the fall of 1996, the Agricultural and Farmland Protection Board formalized a partnership with ASA to apply for matching

funds from the New York State Department of Agriculture and Markets for a purchase of development rights pilot project. ASA initiated its PDR Demonstration Project to illustrate how PDR keeps land available and affordable for farming.

#### **SUCCESS STORY**

Washington County is, by no means, the only predominantly agricultural region around the state that has benefited from grass-roots initiatives. They have, however, been among the most innovative. How have they done so? "Between the Ag Opportunities Committee and ASA, we've had an active interest in the county for some time," says Ferguson. "Some of the truly rural agricultural counties may not have the combination of interested people that we do, with the incentive to move forward. Basically, we have members of our board who want things to happen, and we have

staff people who are willing and able to devote their time to these issues."

"Without a lot of farmer support you can't do much," says Houser. "What you really need is to get the agricultural people with a self-interest to protect to be a stronger voice." Unfortunately, he admits, it is often hard to include active farmers in the process. "The working farmer doesn't even have time to go to a meeting," he says. "Farmers may be dead set against an issue, but when they're too busy to attend a public hearing, they don't have their opinions expressed."

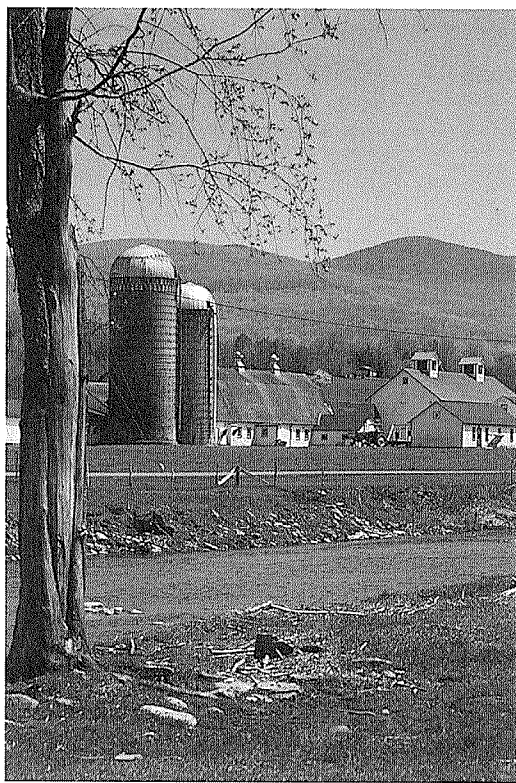
"I would still like to see more interest and more land protected," Houser adds. "You either have enough agriculture to keep everyone in business or you have nothing. Some say residential development is the only thing that will keep this economy going. I say they're dead wrong."

#### *Contacts for More Information*

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# *Water Supply: Farms in the NYC Watershed Help Protect Water Quality*



AIMEE WILES

For many years, the Catskill Mountains have earned their reputation as a popular vacation spot. The resorts where leading American comedians such as Milton Berle and Buddy Hackett once performed may be past their heyday, but tourists still flock to the area to fish in renowned trout streams or enjoy the bucolic setting provided by the region's many dairy farms.

The Catskills, however, offer more than a weekend-getaway destination. For the past century, New York City residents have obtained 90 percent of their drinking water from reservoirs and streams in the Catskill region. Much of this water flows through farmland, and area farmers have long had to accommodate downstate demands for water.

Many Catskill farmers lost land or went out of business when the reservoir system was first created in the early 1900s. More recently, farms in the region were pressured again in 1990 when changing Environmental Protection Agency standards required New York City to protect the purity of its drinking water. Since then, Catskill farmers have been making environmental improvements on their farms to protect the watershed's natural resources.

In 1991, the city and watershed farmers started working together to develop whole-farm plans that protect water quality and enhance agricultural viability. After months of negotiations, New York City agreed in 1998 to fund an agricultural easement program. The first of its kind "Whole Farm Easement" program will integrate water quality and farmland protection.



## *A Unique Approach to Watershed Protection*

"We have become a national model for watershed protection," says beef farmer Dick Coombe when talking about the precedent set by the Watershed Agricultural Council (WAC) that he chairs.

The council works to minimize the potential for non-point source pollution from agricultural and forestry activities within the Catskill/Delaware watershed, which supplies drinking water to the metropolitan New York area. Their program has helped the city of New York avoid costly drinking water filtration orders from the Environmental Protection Agency.

As opposed to point source pollution—which refers to pollutants discharged directly into a watercourse such as from a factory pipe—non-point pollution occurs when contaminants such as sediment, manure, pesticides or fertilizer are washed across land into a body of water.

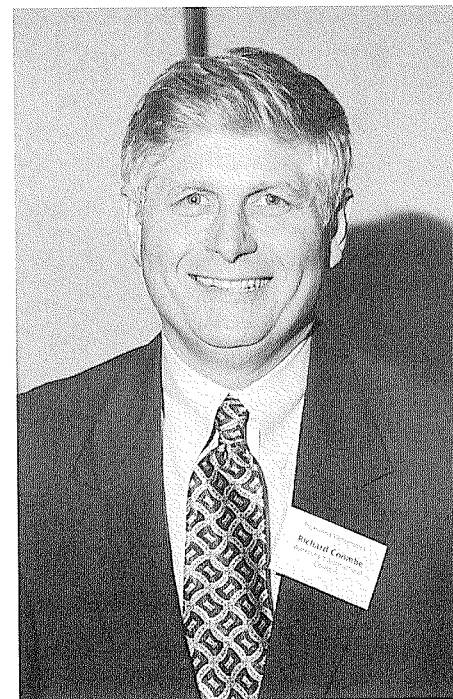
"In non-point source pollution prevention, you must change everyday behavior patterns of the people working in the ecosystem," says Coombe. "You must include all stakeholders in a collaborative way to protect the water and the environment. An incentive based, locally led, voluntary program is working in our particular area. That's the bottom line."

By the summer of 1998, more than 85 percent of farmers in the watershed had signed agreements to participate in the program. "The farmer feels more comfortable since WAC is made up of peers," says Coombe. He describes council-sponsored "kitchen meetings" at which WAC members would get together with farmers to discuss the program.

"Farm families would invite friends and neighbors. This grass-roots effort

was critical. I can't overemphasize the importance of WAC members reaching out."

Once focused largely on pollution prevention, WAC now is protecting water quality by preserving farmland and maintaining the economic viability of the region's natural resources. "We have initiated an easements program that will protect valuable agricultural and forestry land resources," says Coombe. "We have also begun a direct marketing of agricultural products that were produced according to whole-farm plans and certified by WAC. This makes our program unique. We are helping the private sector support watershed protection by using the marketplace to reward the behavioral changes made by farmers who are working to protect the water supply."



**Dick Coombe, chair, Watershed Agricultural Council**

CHARLES MCKINNEY

## **WATER, WATER EVERYWHERE...**

In the early 1900s, New York City leaders began to anticipate a water supply crisis. Reservoirs in the upstate Croton-Hudson area built in the 1800s were failing to meet the needs of a rapidly growing population. City officials looked farther upstate for water, to the hundreds of miles of pristine streams and rivers cascading through the Catskills. From 1907 to 1964, the New York City Board of Water Supply acquired more than 57,000 acres of Catskill land. Streams and rivers were dammed to create six new reservoirs. Houses were razed, farms flooded and entire villages relocated.

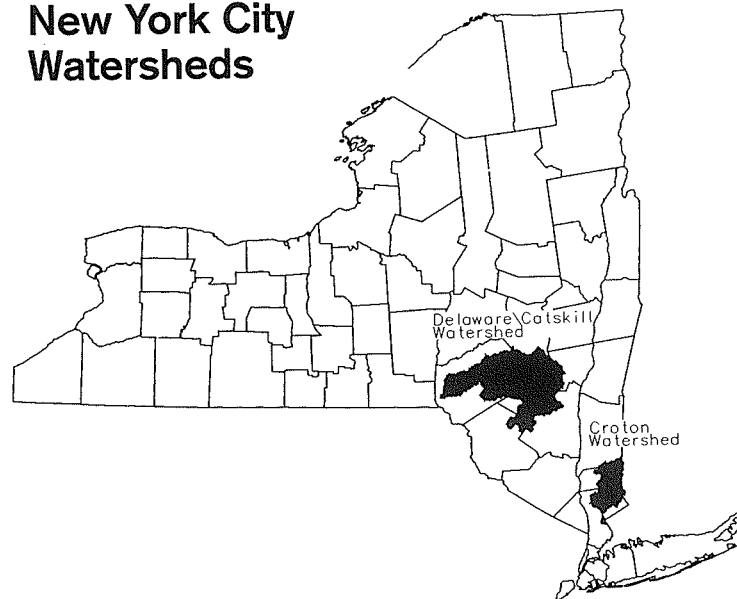
The new reservoir system provided an abundant source of clean water for millions of New York City residents. The city had created the largest surface drinking water supply in the country, encompassing more than 1,900 square miles of reservoirs and waterways. For years, that drinking water was treated only by the addition of chlorine. In 1989, however, the federal Safe Drinking Water Act ordered New York City to filter its water to reduce the possibility of contamination. A filtration plant for city water could cost between \$3 billion and \$8 billion to build and hundreds of millions of dollars per year to operate.

"Financially, such a plant would have been a tremendous hit on the city," says Ira Stern, Director of Watershed Planning and Community Affairs at New York City's Department of Environmental Protection. The EPA rules also offered an alternative: watershed protection. This was a much less costly option, and city officials decided to protect their water supply at the source rather than treat the water just prior to its dispersal.

### **ALARMS SOUND**

In a region where dairy farming remains one of the primary industries, such an effort was bound to have a major impact on the farming community. After evaluating land uses in the watershed, the city released a draft watershed protection plan in 1990. The draft, which contained new updated rules and regulations for the watershed and

## **New York City Watersheds**



outlined ways to protect the water supply, proposed banning such practices as applying manure or fertilizer within 100 feet of a waterway.

To the farm community, that was not welcome news. "Basically, the draft regulations robbed people of tillable acreage," says Dean Frazier, a Cornell Cooperative Extension Agent who oversees the Extension's component of New York City's Watershed Agricultural Program.

Catskill dairy farmer Fred Huneke doesn't



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*"Agricultural and forest lands have provided documented high-quality water over the decades. In order to protect that water quality, those land use patterns would have to be maintained."*

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— DICK COOMBE,  
WATERSHED AGRICULTURAL COUNCIL CHAIRMAN

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mince words. "The implications of the discussion draft on the farming community were devastating. Only a few pages of the regulations pertained to agriculture, but those few pages would have put most farmers right out of business. They were just plain too restrictive."

A 1990 study determined that the average farm would be forced to retire 35 percent of its land in order to comply with the regulations. The farmers surveyed said that such a loss of productive farmland would cause them to sell land to developers. Further development of the watershed, however, was not what city officials wanted. Since agricultural enterprises are considered low-density land uses, with less potential to pollute surface water than dense urban areas, watershed farmers contended that it would be to the city's advantage to keep farmland in farming.

#### SHARING THE WEIGHT

In response to farmer protests, New York State's Department of Agriculture and Markets convened a task force to develop programs that would protect the city's water supply and promote the long-term future of agriculture in the watershed. They

worked with farmers in the process. "After the initial shock of the draft wore off," says Huneke, "we began to hammer out agreements."

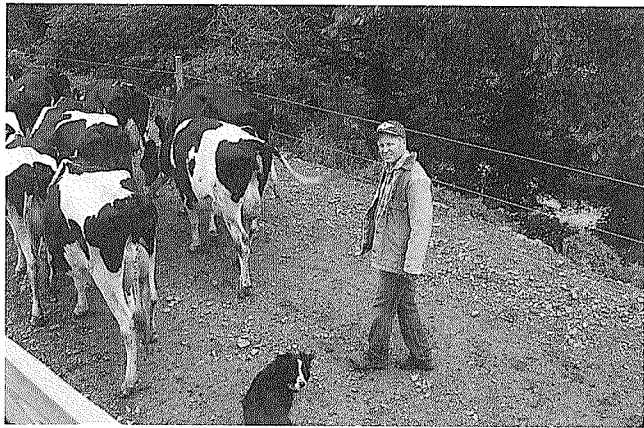
In 1991, the task force issued a set of "brown book" recommendations that advocated the development of a voluntary, local program to provide farmers with funds to design and implement "whole-farm" plans. Such plans would address farm environmental management holistically, keeping farmers' economic objectives in mind.

Whole-farm plans would account for soil erosion, management of livestock waste and use of chemicals, pesticides and fertilizer. To implement the plans, farmers would utilize "best management practices (BMPs)"—modern conservation tools, such as state-of-the-art manure pits, nutrient management plans or streamside vegetative buffers—that help reduce a farm's potential to degrade the environment. A grass buffer, for example, helps filter storm water before it reaches a watercourse. Nutrient management plans and manure storage structures help farmers spread manure where and when the crop need for fertilizer is greatest.

Whole-farm management—with the city picking up the tab—allows upstate farmers

and the city to share responsibility for protecting water resources. “The development of the whole-farm concept was a team effort, driven by the farmers themselves,” says Frazier. “Planners and technicians from several agencies—including Cornell Cooperative Extension, the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service, Soil and Water Conservation Districts and the Department of Agriculture and Markets—were responsible for hammering out the nuts and bolts of this program.”

New York City and the EPA agreed that the whole-farm program could effectively meet the criteria of watershed regulations. “The program acknowledges that agriculture is a source of pollution to streams,” says Stern.



Farmer Fred Huneke herds cows on his Catskill farm.

“But we think the whole-farm plans are an extremely effective way to deal with it, rather than issuing blanket regulations.”

In 1991, the farm community and various state agencies formed the Watershed Agricultural Council (WAC) to help implement the whole-farm program. The council evaluates the program’s impact on agriculture, develops individual farm plans and ensures implementation of the recommended BMPs. More than 75 percent of its members are farmers.

By summer of 1998, WAC had enrolled 314 of the watershed’s 350 farms in the program, exceeding its initial goal of 85 percent farmer participation. “Developing a

sense of trust with the farm community has been key to WAC’s success in signing up so many farms,” says Frazier. “In order for such a process to work, the farmers must be engaged and their objectives understood. Beyond that, the key has been partnership. Agencies working together need to respect each other’s roles and responsibilities. But above all, farmers need to be a part of the team.”



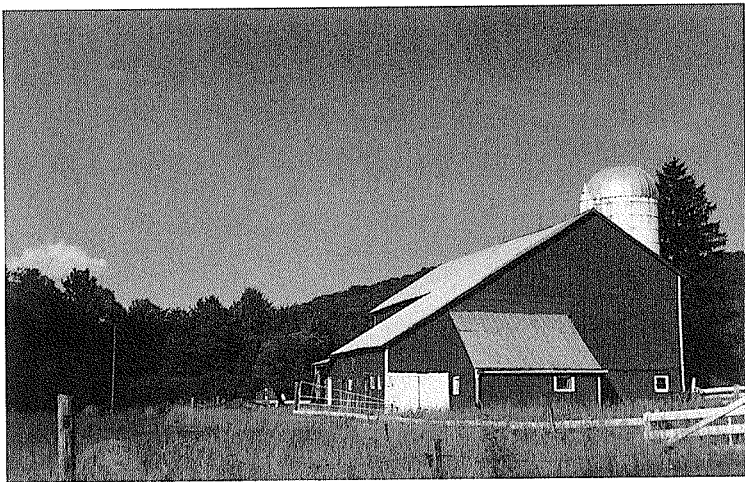
*“Without farmers to keep the landscape open, tourists would have nothing to look at but brush.”*

— KARL CZYMEK,  
WATERSHED AGRICULTURAL COUNCIL

## WHERE FARMLAND PROTECTION FITS IN

As an extension of the whole-farm program, WAC has worked with American Farmland Trust to develop an easement program that would protect farmland. In late 1998, the city’s Department of Environmental Protection and WAC were expected to commit themselves to a ten-year contract to provide up to \$20 million to fund the easement program for farms in the Catskill/Delaware River watershed.

From the city’s perspective, farmland protection programs help ensure that government money spent on farm improvements will not go to waste. “We have to make sure that economic conditions support the land use patterns that result in clean water,” says Stern. “To maintain



farmland protection mission. A pilot program provides marketing and assistance for watershed farmers, helping them sell produce and dairy products directly to gourmet restaurants and shops in New York City. Its marketing symbol is a water drop, accompanied by the slogan: "The crop with the drop."

low-density land uses, we need to keep farmers on the land," adds Karl Czymmek, who now manages the easement program for WAC.

The working capital farm families receive for participating in the easement program will help them invest in their businesses, plan for retirement and transfer their farms to the next generation. WAC also has added an economic development initiative to its

#### **WATERSHED MANAGEMENT MODEL**

Since New York City first initiated its groundbreaking watershed protection efforts, rural counties across the state have begun to consider similar watershed management programs that improve surface-water quality with whole-farm plans and best management practices. "This model could probably be successfully

instituted across the country," says Huneke.

The precedent is an important one. "The program is an acknowledgement that the consumer of the water should support the supplier," says Stern. "It really was the only way to deal with many years of discontent." As a result, city taxpayers have avoided the burden of a costly filtration plant, millions of New York City residents can enjoy clean drinking water, and farmers in the Catskill region have a much better chance of remaining in business for decades to come.

"I never dreamed in my wildest dreams that I would be involved in anything like this," says Huneke. "I never thought that farmers would be working with the environmental community to make the environment better. This has taken me totally by surprise. But I think it is important, timely and a benefit to everyone."



*"The whole-farm program promotes the farming practices that are most beneficial to both farmers and water quality."*

— FRED HUNEKE, CATSKILL DAIRY FARMER

#### *Contacts for More Information*

Karl Czymmek  
Watershed Agricultural Council  
607-865-7790

Ira Stern  
New York City Department  
of Environmental Protection  
914-657-7613

## Across the State: Other Efforts in the Nineties



**F**armland protection initiatives in New York are not limited to the regions highlighted in this publication. In the 1990s, towns and counties across the state have been opening their eyes to the benefits of farmland conservation.



*Mandara Orchards, one of seven farms in Red Hook protected by Scenic Hudson*

### **SCENIC HUDSON—PROTECTING “CRITICAL” FARMS IN RED HOOK**

In 1998, the private nonprofit conservation organization Scenic Hudson announced that it had purchased conservation easements on seven farms in the Town of Red Hook, assuring that more than 1,000 acres of productive Hudson River Valley farmland would be safe from the pressures of suburban sprawl. Grants from a private foundation funded the easement purchases that protect three cash crop operations and four orchards, including a sixth-generation bicentennial farm. The project created an affordable pool of land for farmers; immediately after the easement signings, three of the seven farms were transferred on to a new generation of younger farmers. Working with American Farmland Trust, Hudson Valley farmers, farmland protection board members and local land trusts, Scenic Hudson developed a flexible and innovative conservation easement document that accommodated the needs of present and future farming enterprises, while protecting agricultural and environmental resources.

*For more information, contact Seth McKee or Hank Stebbins of Scenic Hudson at 914-473-4440.*

## ORANGE COUNTY—A FARMLAND PROTECTION GRANT LEADS TO LOCAL INITIATIVES

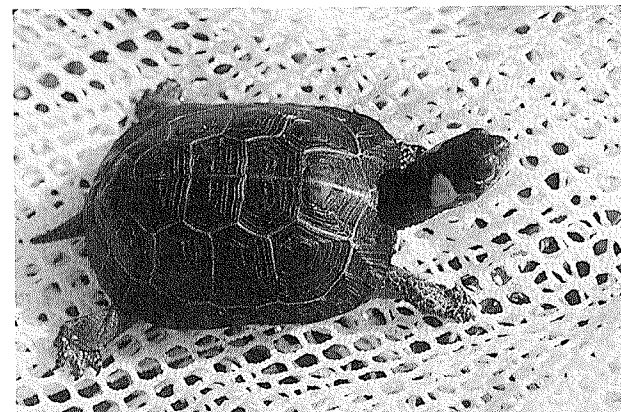
A rapidly developing county located just northwest of New York City along the Hudson River, Orange County was one of the first in the state to develop an agricultural and farmland protection plan. Acting on one of the plan's recommendations, the Orange County AFP board secured funding in 1997 from the county planning department, Industrial Development Agency and local farm bureau to hire an agricultural economic development director with an office located in the Chamber of Commerce. The director helped Orange County efficiently coordinate and package its applications for state PDR funds. As a result, Orange County claimed nearly \$1 million of

the \$3.7 million available in the first round of implementation grants.

*For more information, contact Lucy Joyce of Cornell Cooperative Extension at 914-344-1234 or the Orange County Agricultural Development Specialist at 914-294-8080.*

## DROWNED LANDS SWAMP—PROTECTING FARMLAND AND WETLANDS HABITAT

In the Taconic hills, Town of Ancram farmers and the Columbia Land Conservancy are combining farmland and habitat protection in an area known as Drowned Lands Swamp. The swamp, predominantly surrounded by agriculture, has been



JACK HECHT

*Farmland protection efforts in the Drowned Lands Swamp will help protect the endangered bog turtle.*

identified as one of the most important sites for biodiversity protection in the Hudson River Valley. It contains numerous rare, threatened and endangered species. The project uses agricultural conservation easements to protect farmland in the watershed from development and land fragmentation. In addition, the protected land will buffer the habitat of the endangered bog turtle. Initial research sponsored by the Bronx Zoo has shown that viable populations of bog turtles within the region may be directly tied to the surrounding dairy grazing lands.

*For more information, contact Judy Anderson of the Columbia Land Conservancy at 518-392-5252.*



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*"Our vision for the Drowned Lands Swamp merges farmland protection with important wetland habitat protection. If critical farms are protected within the watershed, it will become increasingly likely that the swamp and its endangered species will remain ecologically viable."*

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— JUDY ANDERSON,  
COLUMBIA LAND CONSERVANCY EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

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## AMHERST—BIRTH OF A FARMLAND PROTECTION PROGRAM

Located in northeastern Erie County, the Town of Amherst has experienced rapid development from the south and west. In 1994, a light industry project called Crosspointe was proposed on a 178-acre parcel of farmland in the town's agricultural district. Though the potential farmland loss concerned community and town board members, the development was eventually approved. Still, its passage motivated the town to establish the first farmland protection program in Erie County. With assistance from the Western New York Land Conservancy, the Erie County Farm Bureau and the Erie County Agricultural and Farmland Protection Board, a PDR project area was designated and approved. Town money, along with state farmland protection grants, will allow Amherst to acquire development rights on up to 23 parcels of critical farmland.

*For more information, contact Susan Grelick, Amherst Town Supervisor, at 716-631-7032 or John Whitney of the Western New York Land Conservancy at [wnylc@wnylc.org](mailto:wnylc@wnylc.org) or 716-652-0992.*

## STUYVESANT— A MODEL COMMUNITY

Located south of Albany in northern Columbia County, the Town of Stuyvesant has long made a strong commitment to farming. In 1993, the town was accepted into the "model communities program" of the Hudson River Greenway Communities Council, which provided funding and technical assistance for the town to develop a comprehensive plan. The plan identified agriculture as the town's primary land use; the town has since implemented a right to farm law, passed a resolution declaring Stuyvesant to be an "agricultural community" and established a farm building tax relief program. The town also is considering farmland protection techniques such as incentives for residential clustering, low-density zoning and PDR.

*For more information, contact Tod Grenici, Stuyvesant Town Supervisor, at 518-799-6801 or Andrew Labruzzo, Hudson River Valley Greenway, at 518-473-3835.*



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*"The community decided it should help protect farmland by supporting the farmers who are responsible for the rural character our townspeople appreciate so much."*

— TOD GRENCI,  
STUYVESANT TOWN SUPERVISOR

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*"Farmland and open space protection, once viewed as a luxury, are now viewed more appropriately as a necessity."*

— GEORGE FRANTZ,  
ITHACA ASSISTANT TOWN PLANNER

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#### **ITHACA—OPEN SPACE PLAN INCLUDES PDR**

Located in the heart of the Finger Lakes Region, The Town of Ithaca's 1997 "Park, Recreation and Open Space Plan" incorporated recommendations from a 1992 report, *Planning for Agriculture in the Town of Ithaca*, that emphasized the importance of agriculture to the town's economy and quality of life. The report made several policy recommendations including revising zoning regulations, integrating agricultural policy statements into the town's comprehensive plan, creating a voluntary PDR program, and establishing a permanent town agriculture committee (which was created in 1993). The 1997 open space plan estimated the acquisition of development rights to important lands would cost the town \$3.7 million over 20 years, approximately \$15 per resident per year—a somewhat modest investment on a per capita basis. The town is currently reviewing a draft of new zoning regulations for its agricultural district to better protect agricultural land, and is setting up a structure for its PDR program.

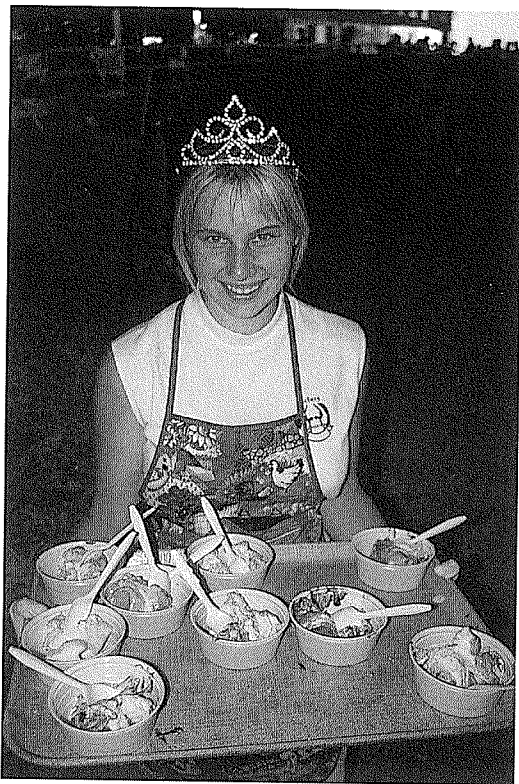
*For more information, contact George Frantz, Assistant Town Planner, at 607-273-1747.*

#### **JEFFERSON COUNTY— AT THE FOREFRONT IN AGRICULTURAL ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT**

Jefferson County, located along the St. Lawrence Seaway in northwestern New York, has been at the forefront of statewide efforts to include agriculture in local economic development initiatives. In 1992, the county created a staff position to promote the economic development of agriculture. The agricultural development specialist, with an office in the Jefferson County Job Development Corporation, has helped develop a marketing program to attract producers, agribusiness and processors to the county. She also has played a major role in assembling sources of loan funds and packaging loan applications for farm enterprises. The county has set up revolving loan funds that provide gap financing to be used for barn expansions, equipment, diversification projects, processing or new agricultural ventures.

*For more information, contact Tracy Ferry, Agricultural Development Specialist, Jefferson County Job Development Corporation at 315-782-5865.*

# Call to Action: How You Can Help Protect Farmland



CLIFFORD OLIVER

**I**n the previous chapters, we presented some of the stories behind successful farmland protection initiatives in New York. No chapter has a real-life ending—efforts to save farmland continue in each of those communities and around the state. Many other towns and counties also have success stories; yours may be one of them.

Throughout the publication, we have emphasized the importance of people who have worked hard to successfully protect farmland. The work is not finished, and more people are always needed to help with this important cause. As part of our call to action, we urge **you** to become involved and help protect farmland in your area. Here are steps you can take:

**Express yourself.** Elected officials respond to public opinion. Let them know the importance of ending the destruction of productive farmland by sprawling development. Tell them you support smart growth and farmland protection—and you vote. Contact your local planning or zoning board, town supervisor, state representatives and the Governor of New York State. You may write to your state representatives at the NYS Senate, Albany, NY 12247 or the NYS Assembly, Albany, NY 12248. You may write the governor at The Executive Chamber, State Capital, Albany, NY 12224. To contact local officials, check your town hall or your local public library.

**Support your local farmers.** Helping local farms stay in business makes them less vulnerable to development pressure. Support right-to-farm and other ordinances that protect farmers from nuisance suits. Vote for initiatives establishing and funding state and local farmland protection programs. Buy locally grown produce at roadside stands, farmers' markets or

pick-your-own operations. Encourage your local grocer to stock produce grown in New York. Read labels and choose products made from American-grown produce.

**Save your land.** If you own a farm, protect it from development. A good estate plan, possibly employing a conservation easement, will ensure that your land remains in farming even after you retire. For information on easements and other ways to

protect your land, contact AFT's Land Protection Division at 413-586-9330 or AFT's Northeast Field Office at 518-581-0078.

**Fight sprawl at the grass roots.** Support American Farmland Trust and your local land trust. Attend public meetings with your local town or county officials, zoning and planning boards, and agricultural and farmland protection boards. Encourage your

local government to perform a Cost of Community Services Study to reveal the tax burden citizens must pay for sprawl—AFT can help.

**Recruit supporters.** Get the word out to the public—your neighbors. Write about the importance of farmland protection in a letter to the editor of your local newspaper or the nearest big-city paper. And be sure to send a copy to American Farmland Trust's Northeast Office.

**Call us.** Invite a representative of American Farmland Trust or your local agricultural and farmland protection board to speak at your next community or club meeting, or consider sharing AFT's award-winning video, "Growing Concerns: The Future of America's Farmland," with local groups. Circulate your copy of *Call to Action* to your family, friends and colleagues and encourage them to join AFT. Better yet, buy them gift memberships for holiday gifts.

**Walk the talk.** If you can choose where to live, work and shop, go to already-established towns and suburbs. Likewise, use public transportation whenever possible.



Events such as this farm breakfast and tour help promote agriculture.

SHARON TEFFT

**Learn more.** American Farmland Trust can provide you with the resources you need to help your community protect farmland, from the definitive new guidebook, *Saving American Farmland: What Works*, to the online farmland information library and customized farmland advisory services. Contact our homepage at [www.farmland.org](http://www.farmland.org), or one of the following resources for more information.

## *Organizations to Contact for More Information*

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### **American Farmland Trust Northeast Field Office**

110 Spring Street  
Saratoga Springs, NY 12866  
518-581-0078

### **NYS Department of Agriculture & Markets**

Division of Agricultural Protection and  
Development Services  
1 Winners Circle  
Albany, NY 12235  
518-457-7076

### **New York Farm Bureau**

Route 9W, PO Box 992  
Glenmont, NY 12207-0992  
518-436-8495

### **Land Trust Alliance of New York**

PO Box 792  
Saratoga Springs, NY 12866  
518-587-0774

### **Cornell Cooperative Extension**

Box 8, Kennedy Hall  
Cornell University  
Ithaca, NY 14853-4203  
607-255-2237

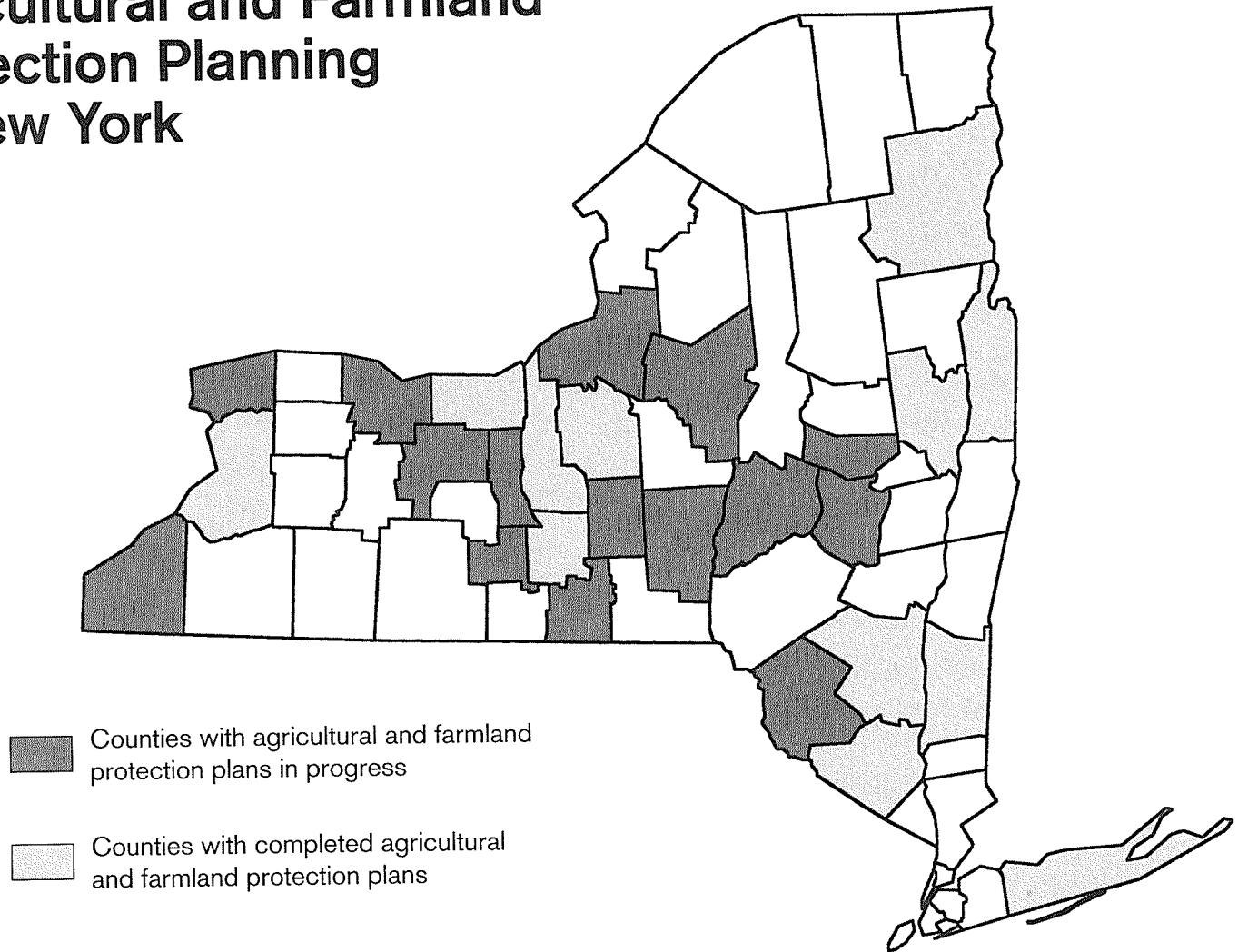
### **USDA's Farm Service Agency**

441 South Salina Street  
Suite 356  
Syracuse, NY 13202  
315-477-6304

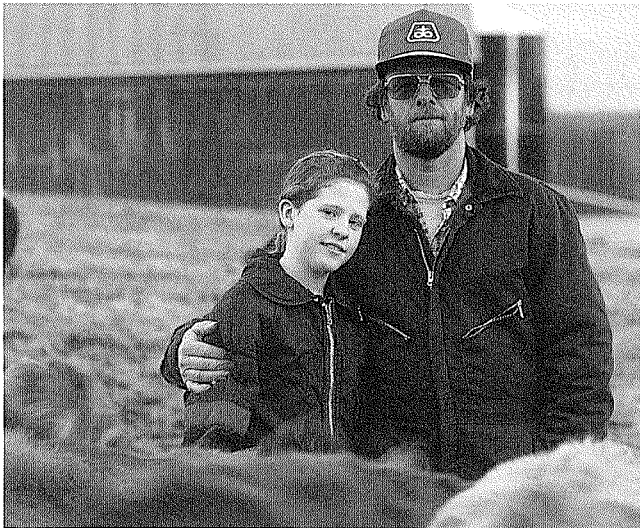
### **USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service**

441 South Salina Street  
Suite 356  
Syracuse, NY 13202  
315-477-6304

# Agricultural and Farmland Protection Planning in New York



September 1998



JEREMY GREEN

# *Help Support Farmland Conservation Efforts in New York and New England*

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# AMERICAN FARMLAND TRUST: SAVING FARMS FOR THE FUTURE

American Farmland Trust's Northeast Field Office opened in 1990. Located in the Upper Hudson River Valley, the office serves New York State and New England. Its staff assists state and local governments, conservation organizations and consumers on local land use initiatives, policy development, public education and direct farmland protection projects.

Recent Northeast Field Office activities include:

## • Promoting Partnerships Conference May 1998 •

AFT brought together agricultural and environmental organizations including New York Farm Bureau, Cornell University, NYS Commission on Rural Resources and Scenic Hudson for a conference to promote the future of agriculture. The conference demonstrated the broad base of support for agriculture and farmland protection.

## • New York City Watershed •

AFT is working with the Watershed Agricultural Council (WAC)—a farmer-driven task force that oversees the farm component of New York City's efforts to protect water quality in the watershed. AFT provides expertise to WAC on agricultural conservation easements and its farmland protection program.

## • Easton Niagara Mohawk Project •

Teaming up with the Open Space Institute, AFT helped permanently protect 1,000 acres of land along the Hudson River in the Town of Easton where Niagara Mohawk Power Corporation once tried to build a nuclear power plant. The site includes 900 acres that is permanently protected as farmland and a 100-acre, two-mile-long riverfront strip that will provide public access. The project permanently protects views from the Saratoga Battlefield National Park located just across the river from the site.

## • Agricultural and Farmland Protection Technical Assistance •

AFT works closely with local farmland protection boards, local governments and groups like Scenic Hudson and the Hudson River Greenway to provide technical assistance, workshops and other support for farmland protection. We recently completed work with Saratoga County to craft its agricultural and farmland protection plan. This included landowner listening sessions, forums on land use and agricultural economic development and publication of a 16-page guide to Saratoga farms and farm events.



## AMERICAN FARMLAND TRUST – NORTHEAST FIELD OFFICE

110 Spring Street, Saratoga Springs, NY 12866  
Phone: 518-581-0078 • Fax: 518-581-0079





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