



JEFFERSON COUNTY, NEW YORK

# PURCHASE OF DEVELOPMENT RIGHTS: *Feasibility Analysis and Program Design*

Produced by the Jefferson County Agricultural and Farmland Protection Board  
with assistance from the American Farmland Trust





# “Agriculture makes Jefferson County what it is”

**Jefferson County Dairy Farmer**

## **Introduction**

Jefferson County is widely recognized for the strength of its agricultural industry, especially dairy farming. 40% of the land in Jefferson County is in agricultural use and in 2006 there were 970 farms operating on 323,600 acres. In the same year, farmers sold almost \$106 million in farm products. Combined with local food processing companies and other agribusinesses, the agricultural sector is an important source of jobs and a stable base of the local economy.

One of Jefferson County’s agricultural assets is its land base. Productive, affordable farmland helps create a supportive investment climate for farms and agribusiness. Large blocks of unfragmented agricultural land are also important for farm compliance with new environmental regulations and reducing conflicts between farmers and non-farm neighbors. The potential conversion of productive agricultural land by new development has significant ramifications for Jefferson County farm businesses – particularly the dairy sector.

Jefferson County’s Agricultural and Farmland Protection Board decided to undertake this study to evaluate the feasibility of developing a Purchase of Development Rights (PDR) Program to help protect the county’s valuable farmland. PDR is a voluntary approach to farmland protection that pays landowners for permanently protecting their land for agriculture. Nearby counties such as Cayuga and Clinton have recently established county Purchase of Development Rights programs, which have leveraged millions of dollars for local farmers while protecting thousands of acres of productive agricultural land.

## **Process**

A Work Group was established to facilitate the PDR Feasibility Study that included representatives of the Jefferson County Legislature, Jefferson County Department of Planning (County Planning), Jefferson County Agriculture and Farmland Protection Board (AFPB), Jefferson County Agriculture Development Corporation (JC ADC), Cornell Cooperative Extension of Jefferson County (CE), Jefferson County Soil and Water Conservation District (SWCD), Tug Hill Tomorrow Land Trust, Tug Hill Commission, Thousand Islands Land Trust and US Army’s Compatible Use Buffer (ACUB) from Fort Drum. American Farmland Trust was hired as project consultant to assist in the development of the Feasibility Analysis.

The Work Group held seven meetings over a nine month study period. Eleven key agricultural leaders in Jefferson County were interviewed as part of the study process. Six of the interviewees are active farmers and five are associated with agriculture in other capacities. In addition, two public workshops were held for farmers and rural landowners on October 29, 2007 and May 21, 2008.

“We see farms continuing, (as a business) we have expanded and are here to stay in the NY area. We have a long standing customer base and a knowledgeable and experienced work force.”

**Jefferson County  
Agribusiness Owner**



## Key Findings

The PDR Feasibility Study identified the following key findings through its interviews, public workshops and Workgroup meetings:

**Agriculture is a major industry in Jefferson County and farms are the largest taxpayer and second largest employer in several townships.** There is wide recognition of the importance of Jefferson County's agricultural sector to the economy and support for continued growth of the agricultural industry.

**Affordable, productive farmland is a key asset for Jefferson County's farmers.** Large blocks of unfragmented agricultural land are important for farm compliance with environmental regulations and reducing conflicts between farmers and non-farm neighbors.

**Development pressure is an important threat to Jefferson County's agricultural sector.** There is broad recognition that high quality farmland in Jefferson County has been lost to development and has resulted in conflicts between remaining farms and their new neighbors.

**Jefferson County should create a PDR Program to provide an option to farmers and rural landowners for protecting their land and strengthening the agricultural industry.** The development of a PDR program is an important complement to other initiatives underway to protect agricultural land and support the long-term viability of Jefferson County agriculture.

**Jefferson County's PDR Program should prioritize productive farmland most at risk for development/conversion.** Large blocks of high quality agricultural land are concentrated in the southern areas of Jefferson County, with pockets of such land scattered in other areas of the county.

**A county PDR program needs to have active involvement from the AFPB, Department of Planning, JCADC and land trusts to win the support of the agricultural community and achieve the program's goals.** The program also needs to utilize an objective ranking system to select competitive applications for federal or state farmland protection funds.

"It is getting harder to find land to rent to support our farm"

**Jefferson County Dairy Farmer**

## Goals

The following six goals were developed for Jefferson County's PDR program:

**GOAL 1.** Retain a critical mass of agricultural land needed to support farming and agribusinesses. Through 2035, promote a "no net loss" goal for land in Agricultural Districts by retaining approximately 187,000 acres as a critical mass of agricultural land.

**GOAL 2.** Through 2035, protect 20% of the current productive acreage for agriculture.

**GOAL 3.** Preserve the best land first.

**GOAL 4.** Support the protection of farmland that will enable agriculture to be a good steward of natural resources.

**GOAL 5.** Implement a transparent system to objectively select farms to be protected.

**GOAL 6.** Protect the quality of life and rural character that is associated with active farms.





## Recommendations

The following recommendations were developed as part of the Feasibility Study to guide Jefferson County and their partners in advancing a successful PDR program:

- Annually conduct workshops, provide written materials and have opportunities for personal meetings with county staff or other local partners to educate landowners about farmland protection options.
- Pro-actively reach out to municipal officials, county legislators, land trusts and other local leaders about Jefferson County's PDR Program to encourage support for the program.
- Use an objective, transparent ranking process each year to select applications to be submitted for state or federal funding.
- Commit resources to assist landowners in developing compelling applications to insure the highest probability of success in securing state or federal funding.
- Pro-actively work with all involved local partners to manage funded projects, secure matching funds and complete projects in a timely fashion.
- Look for opportunities to leverage local, state, federal and private funding to maximize the effectiveness of Jefferson County's PDR Program.
- Support greater state and federal farmland protection funding to increase opportunities for Jefferson County landowners to protect their land.
- Pro-actively integrate priorities from the Jefferson County PDR Program into county infrastructure and economic development programs to maximize the likelihood of achieving the PDR Program's success in achieving its long-term goals.
- Work with local municipalities to foster an appreciation for agriculture with a goal of decreasing conflicts between farm and non-farm neighbors and increasing farm viability. Educate municipal leaders about funding available for the development of municipal agricultural and farmland protection plans to encourage complementary efforts by municipalities.
- Update Jefferson County's Agricultural and Farmland Protection Plan to identify complementary strategies for enhancing the viability of the county's agricultural sector and protecting land for active agricultural use.

"Jefferson County developing a PDR program demonstrates a strong commitment to agriculture and the industry"

**Jefferson County Dairy Farmer**

### Contacts for Further Information

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