

New Directions for Agricultural Policy in Connecticut

Connecticut Food Policy Council

Northeast Sustainable Agricultural
Working Group

Hartford Food System

Executive Summary



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Introduction

This report grew out of a partnership between the Connecticut Food Policy Council's Agricultural Policy Committee (CFPC/CAPC), the Northeast Sustainable Agriculture Working Group (NESAWG), and the Hartford Food System (HFS). Each organization was interested in studying agricultural policy and making recommendations that would enhance the region's agriculture.

Although CAPC and HFS' focus was agricultural policy in Connecticut, having an understanding of neighboring states' agricultural programs and policies would strengthen their policy recommendations for Connecticut. To expand the breadth of study, the three organizations formed a partnership to work on a research project that would study agricultural policy in the twelve-state Northeast region that includes West Virginia, Maryland, Delaware, Pennsylvania, New Jersey, New York, Connecticut, Rhode Island, Massachusetts, Vermont, New Hampshire, and Maine. In the end, two final reports were created – one for Connecticut and one for the Northeast.

In the Executive Summary of this report, we have presented an overview of the research findings, including a 'A Vision for Connecticut Agriculture' and a summary of 42 policy recommendations. As a useful reference point for policy-makers, we have also included an inventory of Connecticut State funded programs, agricultural-related statutes, relevant advisory councils, and publications as of 2002. A full version of the report was also produced, containing a more comprehensive examination of each of the specific 42 policy recommendations with accompanying model programs from other Northeastern states and, in many cases, additional ideas generated through interview responses.

Readers with an interest in the Northeast version of this report are encouraged to contact NESAWG for a copy. For more information about this report or the full version of the Connecticut report, contact Jean King, The Parisky Group, 860-232-0641, jeank@pariskygroup.com.

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Executive Summary

In order to plan for the future of Connecticut agriculture, we need to take stock of where we are now, how we expect things to change, and what we hope to achieve. The recommendations in this document for agricultural policy in Connecticut are the result of taking inventory of Connecticut's existing policies, examining similar policies in the Northeast region, and constructing a vision of Connecticut agriculture in the future. We believe our recommendations are based on a sound assessment of existing and future challenges to a vital agricultural sector in Connecticut.

New directions are in store for Connecticut agriculture. Based on interviews and research, our analysis points toward **three principal directions:**

- A) *increasing the economic viability of farming;*
- B) *fostering the development and promotion of agricultural markets; and*
- C) *protecting farmland while encouraging conservation and sustainable land use practices.*

There are many different ideas on how to pursue these new directions. For example, to increase the economic viability of farming, suggestions include enhancing access to new technologies, increasing business

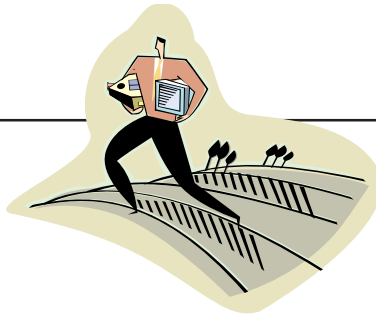
planning assistance, and targeting the special needs of new farmers (e.g. preferential loans and grants). For each new direction, we have provided an *un-prioritized* list of recommendations. To some extent, context and political commitment will determine which of these policy recommendations will evolve into a best fit for Connecticut. The policies presented here are consistent with the direction of Connecticut agriculture, are an accurate reflection of the recommendations of interviewees, and, in many cases, have been successfully applied in other Northeastern states.

Constructing a vision statement for the future of Connecticut agriculture was a crucial step in this analysis in order to define the challenges and opportunities ahead. From this, the investigation deliberately focused on policy recommendations that addressed these anticipated challenges and opportunities. For example, an opportunity in our vision statement centered on Connecticut's unique geographical position along the New York/Boston corridor. As a result, one policy recommendation is to create an agricultural identity for Connecticut and enhance the CT-Grown program—a strategy employed particularly well in New Jersey through their *Jersey Fresh* program. Another example is the challenge in our vision statement of preserving enough farmland to

meet the state's goals of protecting 130,000 acres. Two policy recommendations are to expand Connecticut's Farmland Preservation Program by increasing the program's funding and staffing levels while taking advantage of the matching funding available through the Federal Farmland Protection Program.

Although this report presents 42 specific policy recommendations, there are also five fundamental strategies that are necessary to move Connecticut agriculture in a new direction. These strategies emphasize state agency coordination and capacity-building, as well as building enthusiasm and understanding about the contributions of Connecticut agriculture.

In conclusion, the future of Connecticut agriculture depends on a thoughtful and careful planning process with clearly defined objectives. We hope readers will use this document as a tool to design and implement policies that will move Connecticut agriculture successfully through the 21st century and beyond. The future of our state depends on the successful outcome of this process, including the integrity of our land base, our environmental and food security, the livelihoods of several thousand farmers, and a quality of life that all residents of Connecticut currently enjoy.



A Vision for Connecticut Agriculture

In looking to the future, we envision an agriculture that thrives in Connecticut. Our state's farms will produce high quality food and non-food products that will meet a significant share of the needs of Connecticut residents, public institutions, restaurants, and businesses. Connecticut grown agricultural goods will also be readily available and affordable to all Connecticut residents in outlets across the state, including supermarkets, farm stands, farmers' markets, schools, garden stores and nurseries. Our state's agriculture will enjoy a competitive advantage based on its location that sits astride the New York/Boston corridor, one of the largest and most important markets in the world. And Connecticut agriculture will capitalize on the state's comparative advantage in technology and related intellectual property.

In the future, we trust that agriculture in Connecticut will remain multifunctional. Not only will it provide food, fiber, and ornamental products, it will also provide jobs, scenic beauty, and a buffer against sprawl. Our hope is for increased consumer demand that will drive the production and marketing of Connecticut-grown products, creating an aggressive marketplace that strengthens both local and state economies.

As stewards of the land, more Connecticut farmers will seek to conserve and enhance their natural resource base while protecting the surrounding environment. Connecticut's agricultural operations will become more economically viable, their numbers throughout the state will increase, and farm profits will grow. From farm hand to farm owner, we look forward to an agricultural sector that provides an income that supports a comfortable livelihood for farm families. We also envision more young farmers that will enter agricultural livelihoods, lowering the average age of Connecticut farmers.

Finally, we predict that leaders, policy-makers, and communities will come to value the contribution of agriculture to the vitality of urban and agricultural communities. All of Connecticut's towns will have farmland preservation plans and a range of "farm-friendly" policies. Even the rate of farmland preservation will begin to exceed the rate of farmland loss such that Connecticut will make steady progress toward its original goal of preserving at least 130,000 acres. As a general rule, we foresee municipalities and state government agencies that will collaborate in support of laws, regulations, and practices that promote agriculture's growth, protect the environment, conserve farm resources, and recognize the unique and diverse characteristics of Connecticut agriculture.



Summary of Policy Recommendations

Based on this research effort, the following policy recommendations are presented as a means to improve the status of agriculture in Connecticut. Policy recommendations are based on these considerations: the common opinions of stakeholders; evidence from model programs in other states; and policy ideas that hold promise for replication in the context of challenges and opportunities facing Connecticut agriculture.

The recommendations are extensive (there are 42 specific recommendations). However, it is understood that not all of these recommendations can occur simultaneously. Rather, the policy recommendations are presented as a starting point for policy-makers to stimulate discussion, generate strategies, and hopefully lead to a more fully developed change in policy that will benefit the future of agriculture in Connecticut. To accomplish this task, policy-makers will need to acknowledge and commit to five fundamental strategies.

Strategy #1

Improve coordination on agricultural policy and programs between CT State agencies, encouraging collaboration for agricultural promotion and development.

Strategy #2

Enhance the capacity of CT's Department of Agriculture through increased funding, staffing, and overall strengthening for improved program effectiveness.

Strategy #3

Build enthusiasm among stakeholders and policy-makers while developing consumer awareness and appreciation for CT agriculture.

Strategy #4

Exploit Connecticut's unique potential to develop a market for CT-Grown agriculture directed toward buyers along the New York/Boston corridor.

Strategy #5

Recognize the mutual importance of promoting agricultural economic viability and farmland preservation for the development of CT agriculture.



Specific Policy Recommendations

A. Economic Viability

Profitability in the agricultural sector depends on farmers exercising a certain competency in business management. But in support of farmers, a variety of programs and policies need to be in place that provides access to technical and financial resources while promoting agricultural goals in the state. The recommendations in this category present strategies related to tax laws, business assistance programs, programs for diversification and enhancement, and other grant and loan efforts.

Recommendations, Economic Viability

- A1) Improve Connecticut's Farm Enhancement Program's (FEP) scope, operation, and participation. Increase FEP's funding, place greater emphasis on business planning assistance, and consider adding elements of farmland preservation as is done in other states' farm viability programs.
- A2) Enhance UConn's, the Department of Agriculture's, and other state agencies' quality of assistance, support, and focus for CT agriculture. Consider creating a comprehensive agricultural economic viability plan.
- A3) Provide more business planning assistance to CT farmers through UConn, the Department of Agriculture, and other state agencies. These groups should work together to provide the small business tools that farmers need to be successful.
- A4) Enhance Connecticut's Agricultural Technology Program. Create grant or loan programs to complement the informational services already provided by the Agricultural Technology Program.
- A5) Establish additional grant and loan programs to enhance the development of CT agriculture.
- A6) Encourage collaboration between state agencies such as the Department of Agriculture and the Department of Economic and Community Development. Continue to educate policymakers about agricultural enterprises, highlighting how such enterprises are businesses just like any other businesses and deserve to be included in the state's business and economic development grant and loan programs.
- A7) In recognition that many agricultural enterprises are small businesses, support the needs of these small business owners.
- A8) Support and build on the efforts of the Connecticut Agricultural Businesses Cluster (CAB). CAB is an example of many individuals, organizations, and agencies working together on projects to foster the economic viability of CT's agricultural enterprises.
- A9) Create agricultural preference areas or rural economic development zones, officially designated places in which agricultural businesses would be offered particular economic advantages or incentives.

Recommendations, Economic Viability, cont.

- A10) Reinforce efforts to assist new farmers, including special loan programs, specialized extension agents, or other programs that would provide financial, technical, educational, or business planning support.
- A11) Create energy efficiency programs or a special electricity rate for certain farmers, dependant on the type and size of the farm.
- A12) Provide greater support for sustainable farming practices (such as integrated pest management). Increase the number of extension agents with expertise in sustainable farming practices and organic production.
- A13) Increase the number of extension agents who specialize in specific commodities. Also review how the Cooperative Extension System is working, and analyze ways to improve its service to the state's agricultural operations.
- A14) Support and strengthen Public Act 490 (Connecticut General Statutes 12-107). Have municipalities' tax assessors apply PA 490 with consistency and fairness throughout the state.
- A15) Improve coordination on regulatory issues between the Department of Agriculture and other state agencies with regulatory responsibilities, such as the Departments of Labor, Environmental Protection, Health, Consumer Protection, and Revenue. Such regulatory issues may relate to labor, housing for labor, environment, health, food safety, and taxes. The actual impact that regulations have on agricultural businesses should be taken into account.
- A16) Create or modify tax laws so that they are more beneficial to farmers. Examine the laws in other states and consider how they can be applied to Connecticut.

B. Market Development and Promotion

Developing and fostering markets for agricultural products is essential for maintaining the economic viability of an agricultural enterprise. As do other states in the Northeast region, Connecticut addresses the need for market development and promotion with a range of programs. These programs include supporting farmers' markets, providing marketing assistance, creating promotional logos and slogans for state-grown produce, and publishing agricultural directories for retail consumers and wholesale buyers. The recommendations in this category focus on enhancing the capacity of existing programs in Connecticut as well as proposing new strategies for market development.

Recommendations, Market Development and Promotion

- B1) Enhance the CT-Grown Program. Toward this end, provide CT-Grown with greater funding and staff resources. Use the program to create consumer awareness of Connecticut agriculture and to promote regular consumer purchase of Connecticut agricultural products.
- B2) Place a greater priority on providing farmers with assistance in marketing their crops to consumers. Part of this strategy should involve orienting the Department of Agriculture's toward the consumer as well as the farmer.
- B3) Create an agricultural identity for Connecticut.
- B4) Increase the visibility and accessibility of the CT Creative Store.
- B5) Facilitate efforts to link farmers, chefs (restaurants), and consumers.
- B6) Facilitate efforts to create regional buy-local organizations. Such organizations help promote the message of CT-Grown but on a more local level.
- B7) Continue to support the Senior and WIC Farmers Market Nutrition Programs.
- B8) Create new marketing programs that encourage state residents to buy state-grown produce.
- B9) Create a branding program that adds value to agricultural products based on their product and food safety qualities. Just as a state-grown brand can be created, a food safety-brand can be created. Incentives can be offered to encourage farm businesses to become involved.
- B10) Increase the development of farmers' markets and ensure that participating farmers sell CT-grown products exclusively.
- B11) Support efforts by farmers to form and operate cooperatives. Cooperatives enable farmers to aggregate supply, making the marketing and selling of this produce supply easier in the face of growing food industry consolidation.
- B12) Facilitate efforts by farmers to increase markets and profitability through the creation of value-added agricultural products. This encouragement can take the form of a Department of Agriculture of other supporting agency business development/grant program or can be provided as more general marketing assistance.
- B13) Encourage and promote the purchase, marketing, and selling of state-grown produce by supermarket chains, either directly from growers or indirectly through food wholesalers who support locally grown produce.
- B14) Encourage, promote, and facilitate the purchase of state-grown produce by state institutions and state-agencies. Potential institutional purchasers include prisons, hospitals, schools, and colleges. Potential state agency purchasers include state departments, such as the Departments of Mental Health and Addiction Services, Corrections, and Education.

C. Farmland Preservation, Land Use, and Conservation

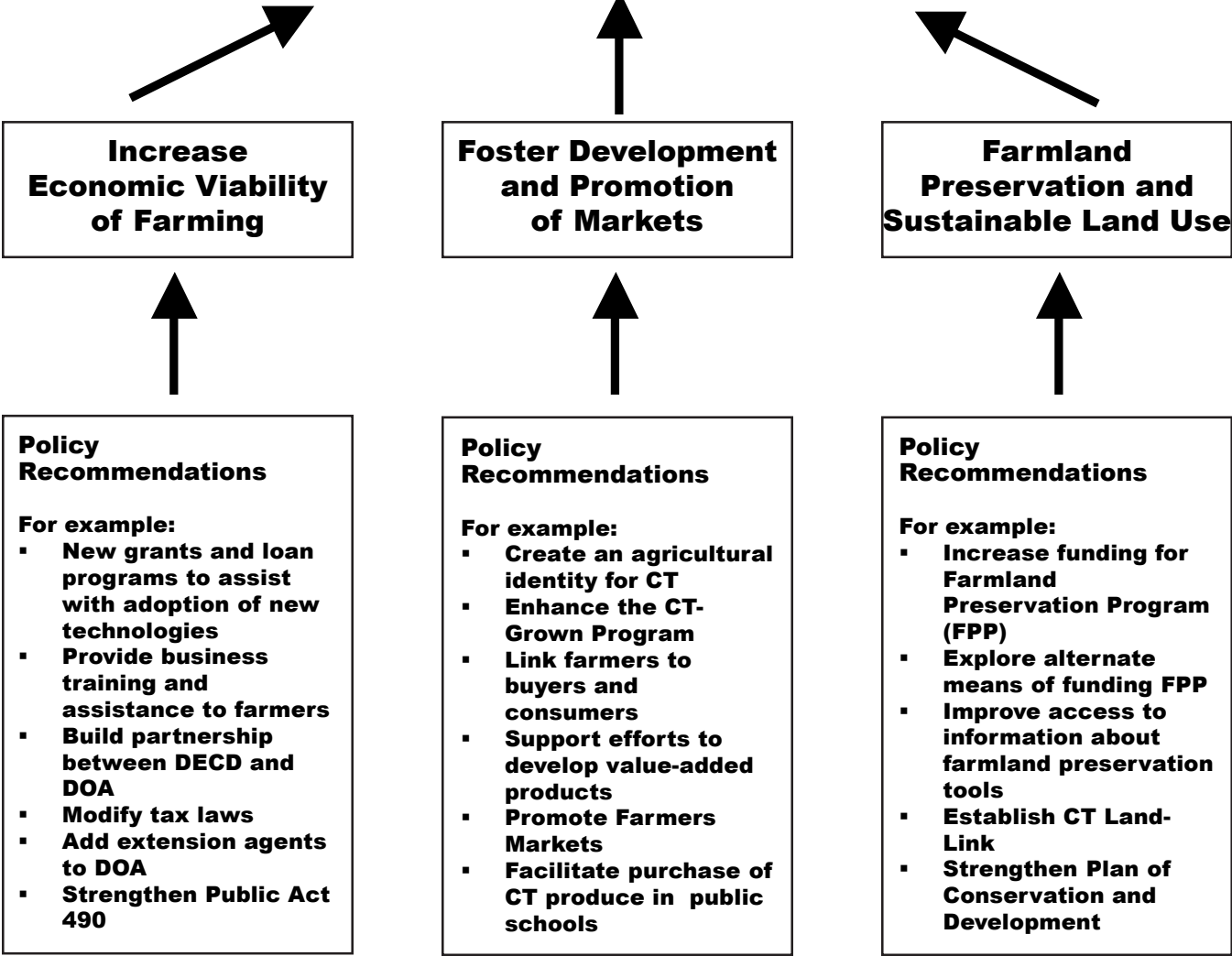
In order for agriculture to contribute to Connecticut's rural character and to benefit the state's economy, Connecticut must have a permanent land base available for agricultural use. If there is no viable land to farm, or if the land available is too expensive or degraded, pursuing or sustaining an agricultural enterprise holds little appeal. The recommendations in this category focus on the state's farmland protection, land use, and conservation programs and policies. Model programs from other northeastern states that hold the most promise for replication in CT support these recommendations.

Recommendations, Farmland Preservation, Land Use & Conservation

- | | | |
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| C1) Expand the Farmland Preservation Program so that more land can be preserved. Increase the program's funding and staffing levels to adequately reflect this expansion and the state's farmland preservation goals. | threatened by development but still important, smaller parcels such as many organic farms, and farmland that can contribute to the state's overall food security. | state plan. Include farmland preservation concerns among the issues discussed and considered by state planners. Include farmland preservation sections in the plans that planners write. |
| C2) Consider utilizing additional, alternate means of funding for the state's Farmland Preservation Program. | C6) Reduce restrictions on the types of agricultural operations permitted on state preserved farmland. Regulations and restrictions in any type of program should allow for diversity and for any technological changes that may occur in the future. | C10) Foster local initiatives that increase towns' farm-friendliness. Encourage the creation of town committees that support agriculture, and continue to educate the public about the benefits of farms and what is involved with agricultural enterprises. |
| C3) Take advantage of available federal and other matching funding. Increase funding for the Farmland Preservation Program so that Connecticut can capitalize on matching funds available through the Federal Farmland Protection Program. | C7) Improve communication with landowners so as to inform them about all of Connecticut's farmland preservation tools and options and how they work. | C11) Make more land available for farmers. Create a state policy to rent or lease out state-owned land to state farmers. Provide tax incentives that make it more desirable for landowners to lease their farmland to farmers. Encourage land trusts with farmland to make their land available. |
| C4) Improve integration of farmland preservation with economic viability programs. | C8) Strengthen the state's Farm Link or Land Link system. In addition to supporting New England Land Link, establish a complementary CT Land Link Program. | C12) Minimize the cost-share provided by the farmer to participate in the Connecticut Department of Agriculture's Environmental Assistance Program. |
| C5) Consider additional foci and criteria for selecting land through the Farmland Preservation Program. Such alternate foci may be blocks of land that would preserve an agricultural infrastructure, farmland not immediately | C9) Strengthen the state's Plan of Conservation and Development and apply, at the state level, the policies and strategies described in the | |



Strengthen Connecticut Agriculture





Inventory

The following inventory provides a comprehensive list of Connecticut State agricultural programs, policies, incentives, and resources that already exist, as of 2002.

Agricultural Programs

Agriculture Technology Program -

DOA has identified five technologies to support: aquaculture, plant, farm waste management, transgenic animal technology, and animal vaccine and diagnostic technology. The program works on breaking down barriers (such as aiding and assisting people in looking for grants), changing policies and procedures (such as getting many departments to meet together about energy ideas or getting a company to rethink its investment policy), strategic planning with UConn, and outreach and education.

Connecticut Creative Store – Located in DOA on the second floor, selling gourmet foods and crafts that have been produced by Connecticut companies using Connecticut products.

CT Grown Program – The program was created in 1986 to brand CT products through the use of a logo and advertising. The CT Grown program provides directional signage and point-of-purchase materials, funds matching grants for commodity groups, hosts the annual Farm City event for children, and maintains a presence at food shows and expositions.

Dairy Farms of Distinction Program – Begun in 1985, this program promotes the industry by annually recognizing an outstanding dairy farm. The program is funded privately through donations by milk processors and farmer organizations.

Environmental Assistance Program

(EAP) – In this program, a farmer can be reimbursed for up to 75% of the cost of complying with a CT DEP agricultural waste management plan.

Export Program – This program focuses on small- to medium-sized food and beverage companies, providing start-up assistance and export information. CT is a member of Food Export USA-Northeast, a co-op of 10 states which offers matching grants to companies for overseas promotion and trade show attendance assistance.

Farm Waste Management Grants

Program – Farmers can receive technical assistance – help with waste management planning, structure design, and permit acquisition. Financial assistance is also available through participation in the federal, NRCS-sponsored Environmental Quality Incentive Program (EQIP). This program provides cost sharing grants and incentive payments for meeting water quality and other environmental standards.

Farmland Preservation Program –

Established in 1978, the program enables DOA to purchase farms' development rights. The state buys the development rights and acquires an easement that permanently limits development on the land to agricultural uses. The landholder retains ownership of the land and can continue to operate the farm business.

Farm Enhancement Program –

This farm viability program offers matching grants to eligible farmers for capital improvements to expand or diversify their operations. There is

a \$40,000 ceiling per application, and applicants must attend a seminar and create 10-year business plans.

Farmers' Market Nutrition Programs

(FMNPs) – Through the Senior and WIC FMNPs, seniors and low-income mothers and children receive coupons redeemable for CT grown produce at CT farmstands and farmers' markets. 70% of the WIC FMNP funding comes from the federal government, and 30% comes from the state.

Harvest New England Program –

In this program, large grocery store chains in New England buy produce from New England states and then market the combined loads as New England grown (so as not to lose the local identity).

Specialty Food Assistance

Program – DOA gives technical information and marketing assistance to small to mid-sized food production businesses. It helps with marketing, production, and start-up. It also provides information on labeling laws, state and federal guidelines, financing, and other resources.

State Food Buying Program –

Since 2002, DOA has been working with the Department of Corrections (DOC), the Department of Administrative Services (DAS), and US Foodservice (the state's food vendor) on a program through which CT's correctional facilities are supplied with state grown produce. US Foodservice owns the state contract, and one of its sub-contractors, M & M Produce, takes care of the buying and supplying of the CT grown produce.

Advisory Councils and Agribusiness Promotion Groups

Connecticut Agricultural Business Cluster (CAB) – Launched in 2002, CAB is a government-industry partnership designed to promote the growth, competitiveness, and profitability of CT's agricultural industry. CAB priorities are developing a waste management program, organizing collective promotion and marketing, and reviewing buying, labor, environmental, and agricultural building regulations.

Connecticut Food Policy Council – This council serves as an advisor to state government on food and agricultural policy. The Food Policy Council's goals are to recommend and support legislation that promotes food security, educates the public and policy makers about the food system, and promotes the preservation of farming and farmland.

Seafood Council – This council promotes the Seafood Industry, a \$34 million slice of the CT economy.

Wine Council – This council promotes the wine industry, specifically the planting of grapes and the marketing of wine.

Tax Policies and Legal Supports

PA 490 – Public Act 490 - according to this statute a town assessor assesses farm property according to its current use. Because a farm is assessed at the land's value as a farm rather than the land's market value as a site for development (the 'highest and best use'), the farmer pays less taxes. A conveyance tax penalty is assigned if the owner sells the property within 10 years of the initial farm assessment.

Estimated Income Tax – Those farmers and fisherman who are required to make estimated income tax payments are required to make only one payment instead of four.

License plates law – Vehicles with farm license plate do not have to pass emissions testing. Registration of farm tractors and self-propelled agricultural equipment is not required, but proof of \$2500 in agricultural sales is.

Plan of Conservation and Development – CT has a document describing the state's conservation and development policies and strategies. Municipalities are encouraged to adopt measures included in the state plan in their own local plans of conservation and development.

Property tax exemption for farm machinery - Farm machinery as well as horses or ponies used exclusively in agricultural production are exempt from local property taxes (assuming the farmer qualifies and properly applies for the tax exemption). Having \$15K in gross agricultural sales is one measure of a qualified applicant. The exemption reaches an upper limit of \$150,000 at the state level and \$250,000 at the town level.

Right to Farm Law - Agricultural operations are protected from nuisance complaints if the farm has been in operation for at least a year and follows generally accepted agricultural practices.

Sales tax exemption on sold items – A farmer selling goods has to register for a sellers' permit and collect sales tax on taxable goods (plants, flowers, livestock, poultry, Christmas trees, decorated items, seed, etc.). Food products such as syrup, eggs, honey, fruits, vegetables, etc. are not taxed.

Sales tax exemption on purchased items – Purchases of items used exclusively in agricultural production (e.g. tractors) can be exempt from sales and use taxes.

Reports - Resources

Agricultural Resources Directory – The DOA maintains an on-line list of agricultural organizations.

CT Weekly Agricultural Report – A four-page newsletter that contains an editorial, agricultural articles, pricing information, ads, and meeting notices.

Farm Database – DOA is developing a database of all the farms in CT.

Farm Map – The Connecticut Farm Map, a collaborative effort of Departments of Transportation and Agriculture, is an official road map that pinpoints, describes, and guides people to the "more than 280 farms, farmers' markets, and other agricultural businesses that make up Connecticut's scenic landscapes."

Publications

DOA produces the following publications, which can be accessed on their website at: www.state.ct.us/doag/pubs/pubspage.htm:

- Connecticut Agricultural Fairs
- Connecticut DairyFarms
- Guide to CT Sugarhouses
- Hay Producers
- Honey Producers
- Connecticut Food Products (18 categories)
- Cut Your Own Christmas Trees
- A Guide to Connecticut Apple Growers & Retailers
- Pick Your Own Fruits and Vegetables
- Pick Your Own Pumpkins
- Wholesale Orchards
- Wholesale Fruits and Vegetables
- Farmers' Markets
- Visit the Connecticut Wine Trail