

Picking up the Pace

A Road Map for Accelerating Farmland Protection in New York

Executive Summary

New York's farmers and communities are ready for state government to take a fresh look at the way it approaches farmland protection. Farmers and the state's \$3.6 billion agricultural industry face increased competition for productive land from poorly planned development. Meanwhile, local governments on Long Island, the Hudson Valley and a growing number of areas in Upstate New York are challenged by the task of managing sprawling development while maintaining their quality of life and community character. These trends stretch local and state budgets, drive up property taxes and threaten New York's economic future.

Never before have the challenges facing New York's farmers and communities been greater. Three of the Top Twenty Most Threatened Farming Regions in the country are located in New York. Farmland loss has accelerated with almost 26,000 acres being developed annually in the state — more than twice the amount of farmland being protected. New York's Farmland Protection Program has made great strides in its 15 year history but has only protected 17,500 of the state's 7.6 million acres of farmland. The state has spent the second lowest per capita and third lowest overall on farmland protection of all Northeastern states — putting New York's farmers at a competitive disadvantage and limiting options available to communities as they struggle to deal with growing land use changes.

New York State can play a critical leadership role in supporting local economies and communities by significantly increasing the pace of farmland protection in New York. **The pace of farmland protection must be increased so that at least 1 acre of farmland is protected for every acre of farmland that is developed in New York — “An Acre for An Acre”.**

New York State
needs a fresh look
at the way it is
supporting farmers
and protecting farmland.

To achieve this bold objective, New York must:

- Increase State Funding and Expand Financial Incentives to Double the Farmland Protected Annually
- Significantly Reduce the Time Needed to Complete State Farmland Protection Projects
- Create Local and State Strategic Plans for Farmland Protection

Increase State Funding and Expand Financial Incentives to Double the Farmland Protected Annually in New York

The pace of farmland protection is directly related to the availability of local, state, federal or private financial incentives that encourage farmers and rural landowners to protect their land. Efforts must be made to leverage funds in all four categories to double the pace of farmland protection in New York. New York State should:

- Increase funding for the state's Farmland Protection Program to \$50 million annually.
- Eliminate the state capital gains tax on agricultural conservation easement sales.
- Expand the state's Conservation Easement Tax Credit to include land protected by purchased agricultural conservation easements.
- Resolve administrative conflicts between the state's Farmland Protection Program and the federal Farm and Ranchland Protection Program.

- Support federal legislation that changes the federal Farm and Ranchland Protection Program to make it better complement New York's Farmland Protection Program.
- Expand farmland protection funding options for town and county governments through state legislation such as the Community Preservation Act.
- Establish an Agricultural District Enhancement Program to stabilize broad areas of New York's farm landscape while providing property tax relief to farmland owners.
- Lower the Farmland Protection Program's local match requirement to 15%.

Significantly Reduce the Time Needed to Complete State Farmland Protection Projects

State funded farmland protection projects frequently require three to five years to complete. This lengthy timeline discourages farmers, erodes public support for farmland protection and frustrates state and local partners. Ultimately, lengthy timelines result in fewer farms being protected. Steps must be taken by New York State to reduce the time period needed to complete state projects to no more than two years. These include:

- Strengthen the Department of Agriculture and Market's ability to process funded Farmland Protection Program projects and provide proactive technical assistance to grant recipients.
- Develop guidance documents that outline minimum Farmland Protection Program requirements for funded projects.
- Streamline Farmland Protection Program requirements and give more discretion to local partners in completing projects.
- Establish a consistent timeline for Farmland Protection Program grant applications, awards and project milestones.
- Create a Farmland Protection Program Advisory Committee to provide input about Farmland Protection Program policies and project requirements.
- Provide funding for land trusts, including the New York Agricultural Land Trust, as a means of improving local capacity to cultivate and complete farmland protection projects.

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Create a Strategic Long Term Direction for Farmland Protection

New York needs a plan that defines the direction and purpose of its farmland protection efforts. Such an action plan must articulate both the state's farmland protection goals and the strategies it will use to support its farmers and protect its agricultural land base. A state level plan should be complemented by county and town strategies that define local plans to support agriculture and protect farmland. New York State should:

- Develop a state farmland protection plan outlining New York's farmland protection goals and strategies.
- Support legislation authorizing grants to counties to update agricultural and farmland protection plans every 10 years.
- Distribute grants to municipalities to develop local agricultural and farmland protection plans.

New York State needs a fresh look at the way it is supporting farmers and protecting farmland. **The state's farmers and communities are ready for leadership from Albany that doubles the pace of farmland protection across the state. The results will be good for New York's economy, communities and environment and move the state towards the long-term goal of protecting "An Acre for an Acre".**