



NEW YORK STATE SENATOR

Patty Ritchie

## 'DRAFTING' A NEW GENERATION OF FARMERS AT FORT DRUM

PATTY RITCHIE June 7, 2016



A first-in-the-nation program aimed at recruiting new farmers out of the ranks of New Yorkers serving in the US military will make its first stop at Fort Drum, the Northeast's largest military post that's home to the 10th Mountain Division, for a June 9th "Ag Career Day," Senator Patty Ritchie announced Tuesday.

The initiative—a major expansion of Senator Ritchie's Beginning Farmers plan to encourage careers in family farming—is being made possible through \$115,000 secured by the Senator in the state's agriculture budget.

Dubbed “Farm Ops,” the Cornell University-run program is seen as a way to expose soldiers and veterans to another post-military career option, while at the same time protecting the future of New York’s leading industry by encouraging more people to pursue agribusiness. The number of farmers in New York State over the age of 65 has grown, while those under the age of 45 has decreased 30 percent—making the need to recruit more farmers critically important.

“The men and women of our Armed Forces know the meaning of hard work—and, that’s something that isn’t just important for a military career, it’s something that’s important to agriculture careers too,” said Senator Ritchie, who serves as Chair of the Senate Agriculture Committee.

“Our state’s farming industry is at a very important crossroads. We have such potential to grow, but we can’t expand without new farmers who are ready to dig into agriculture. Not only will this program help to encourage more people to become involved in farming, it will also help to connect those who have given so much to our country with rewarding post-service careers.”

“After leaving the military, our veterans enter the workforce with the dedication, grit and work ethic to succeed in whatever they wish to do,” said Anu Rangarajan, director of the Cornell Small Farms Program and senior extension associate in the Horticulture Section of the School of Integrative Plant Sciences.

“Until now, the job-training benefits they earned have not been applied to agriculture. Our program offers pathways, information and support to enter the agricultural workforce. It’s a

win for our veterans and a win for the New York agricultural industry that desperately needs these talented people.”

Farm Ops allows earned military benefits to be used for agriculture training. Through the initiative, veterans will receive on-the-job training experience at pilot farm sites across the state. Once a farm is approved by the Division of Veterans’ Affairs, program participants can work at the location for six to 24 months, learning all aspects of the farm’s operation.

Hosted at the Northeast’s largest military post, which is home to 19,000 battle-tested soldiers, the June 9th event at Fort Drum is the first informational event on the program. Those attending will hear from Small Farm program representatives about the initiative, as well as from Cornell Cooperative Extension of Jefferson County about other agricultural opportunities available to them after they retire from military service.

Informational sessions—that will touch on agricultural programs, opportunities in the North Country, local resources and educational opportunities and more—will take place at Clark Hall, Room A2-88 from 9:00 a.m. to 11:00 a.m. and again from 1:00 p.m. to 3:00 p.m. Those interested in attending are required to pre-register via the Fort Drum Transition Assistance Program. The program can be contacted at (315) 772-4111.

In addition to the Fort Drum event, the Cornell Small Farms Program, in conjunction with the National Center for Appropriate Technology will hold a week-long “Armed to Farm” workshop at the White Eagle Lodge in Hamilton, New York from August 8th through August 12th. The program is open to military veterans in New York State who are interested in beginning a farm, or who have been farming for less than 10 years. The workshop will give

attendees an opportunity to learn key farming skills, explore various farming sectors and improve their business plans. For information on how to register, those interested are encouraged to visit [www.ritchie.nysenate.gov](http://www.ritchie.nysenate.gov).

Support secured by Senator Ritchie for Farm Ops was part of a final state budget that included record funding for agriculture programs. In addition to Farm Ops, the budget also included funding for other initiatives that seek to encourage more people to pursue careers in agriculture, including a third round of “Beginning Farmer” grants. The \$1 million grant program is open to farmers who are in business for less than 10 years, and provides help with purchase of land, building and supplies to help new farmers succeed.