



2025 Joint Legislative Hearing

Environmental Conservation Hearing on FY25-26 State Budget

9:30 AM January 28, 2025

TESTIMONY PREPARED AND PRESENTED BY:

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“The policy of the state shall be to conserve and protect its natural resources and scenic beauty and encourage the development and improvement of its agricultural lands for the production of food and other agricultural products.”

- Article XIV, Section 4, New York State Constitution

Thank you for holding today’s hearing, for giving me the opportunity to testify, and for the New York State Legislature’s support for programs that enable a viable farm and food future in the state. These critical public programs keep land in farming, bring a new generation of farmers onto the land, improve access to healthy food for New Yorkers, and help farmers steward and protect the irreplaceable natural resource that is New York’s farmland.

I am pleased to present testimony today on behalf of American Farmland Trust (AFT). AFT is the nation’s leading conservation organization dedicated to protecting farmland, promoting sound farming practices, and keeping farmers on the land. Since its founding in 1980 by farmers and citizens concerned about the rapid loss of farmland to development, AFT has helped protect nearly 7 million acres of farmland and led the way for the adoption of conservation practices on millions more. Established in 1990, AFT’s New York office works to save the land that sustains us across the state.

New York’s Farmland is the Foundation of a \$85.8 Billion Farm and Food Economy

With more than 6 million acres¹ of farmland and 30,650 farms, New York is the breadbasket of the Northeast. New York is among the nation’s top 5 producers of various dairy and fruit products, including cottage cheese, sour cream, yogurt, apples, and grapes.² The breadth of food and crops grown on farmland across New York is vast (Figure 1)—with **just one acre of farmland providing approximately 1,000 meals per day** to New Yorkers and other eaters across the globe.³ New York’s farming, fishing, and forestry sectors have a \$85.8 billion in economic impact, while supporting

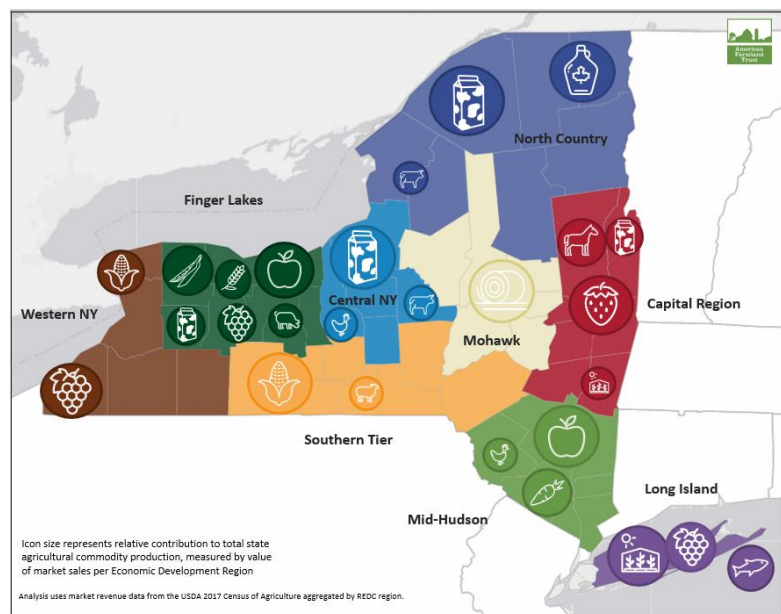


Figure 1 – Products Produced in New York by Regional Economic Development Council Region

¹ Farm Credit East. 2024. “Northeast Economic Engine: Agriculture, Forest Products, Commercial Fishing.” [Northeast Economic Engine: Agriculture, Forest Products and Commercial Fishing](#).

² Office of Budget and Policy Analysis. 2018. “Agriculture of New York State.” Office of the New York State Comptroller. <https://www.osc.state.ny.us/files/reports/special-topics/pdf/economy-agriculture-2018.pdf>.

³ Peters, Christian J., Jennifer L. Wilkins, and Gary W. Fick. 2006. “Testing a Complete-Diet Model for Estimating the Land Resource Requirements of Food Consumption and Agricultural Carrying Capacity: The New York State Example.” *Renewable Agriculture and Food Systems* 22 (2): 145–53.

291,474 jobs.⁴ Farms are often considered “anchor businesses”—keeping rural economies strong by retaining economic opportunities. Research has shown that for every 1,000 farm jobs, there are an additional 668 jobs in industries that assist or supply farms.⁵ Agriculture’s mutual dependency on upstream and downstream industries such as equipment suppliers, trucking, and the restaurant and beverage industries intimately ties the health and success of this sector with that of New York’s broader economy and serves as connective tissue between upstate and downstate, rural and urban communities.

The pandemic underscored the direct ripple effects of New York’s farms on the state’s economy while exposing significant vulnerabilities in supply chains. At the same time, it provided a pivotal moment to address these challenges and strengthen the foundational role farms play in building a more resilient and adaptive food system. This effort includes positioning farmers and the land they steward as essential contributors to climate change resilience—mitigating the impacts of extreme weather events—and as leaders in advancing sustainable solutions through the implementation of innovative, climate-conscious practices.

Public programs that protect farmland, bring a new generation of farmers onto the land, and enable schools to purchase local products have consistently delivered substantial returns on investment for taxpayers. These initiatives channel resources directly into local communities, creating jobs, supporting the viability of farms and food businesses, strengthening food supply chain resilience, and advancing climate solutions. Thanks to ongoing support from the state Senate and Assembly, these programs have earned widespread recognition, respect, and support from constituencies across New York. For these reasons, we strongly urge the legislature to collaborate with Governor Hochul to ensure these vital programs receive robust funding in the FY25-26 state budget.

Farmland Protection Programs Save Land, Support Farmers, and Protect the Environment

New York is fortunate to have abundant water resources and fertile soils capable of producing “the full plate” while supporting a diverse network of farm and food businesses that connect urban and rural communities across the supply chain. According to the 2022 *Farms Under Threat 2040: Choosing an Abundant Future* report by the American Farmland Trust, 54% of New York’s farmland is classified as nationally significant, meaning it possesses ideal characteristics for sustaining food and crop production while sequestering carbon with minimal environmental impact. However, this critical resource faces severe threats from high land prices and mounting development pressures⁶.

⁴ Farm Credit East. 2024. “Northeast Economic Engine: Agriculture, Forest Products, Commercial Fishing.” [Northeast Economic Engine: Agriculture, Forest Products and Commercial Fishing](#).

⁵ Schultink, Gerhardus. 2009. “Land Use Planning and Open Space Preservation: Economic Impacts of Low-Density Urbanization and Urban Sprawl.” *Journal of Civil, Environmental, and Architectural Engineering* 3 (1).

⁶ Hunter, Mitch et. al. 2022. “Farms Under Threat 2040: Choosing an Abundant Future.” https://farmlandinfo.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2022/08/AFT_FUT_Abundant-Future-7_29_22-WEB.pdf

To keep land in farming in New York, the state has invested in the farmland protection program in the Environmental Protection Fund (EPF) since 1996, purchasing agricultural conservation easements from farmers so that land can remain in farming forever. **While the state has permanently protected more than 120,000 acres of farmland through this voluntary grant program since its inception,⁷ New York saw a loss of 2,788 farms and 363,885 acres of land in farms - more than three times the amount protected - between 2017 and 2022.⁸** Pressure on lands around urban areas threatens local food security and resilience — over 80% of the fruits, vegetables, and dairy products produced in New York State are grown on farmland immediately surrounding urban areas.⁹ As urban flight due to the pandemic and proposed solar projects suggest increased development pressure on this farmland, New York must ramp up its protection efforts to sustain the State’s economy and food security into the future. Projections indicate that **by 2040, an additional 452,000 acres could be lost to urban and low-density conversion, potentially resulting in the disappearance of 2,500 farms, a \$288 million reduction in farm output, and the loss of 7,200 jobs.¹⁰**

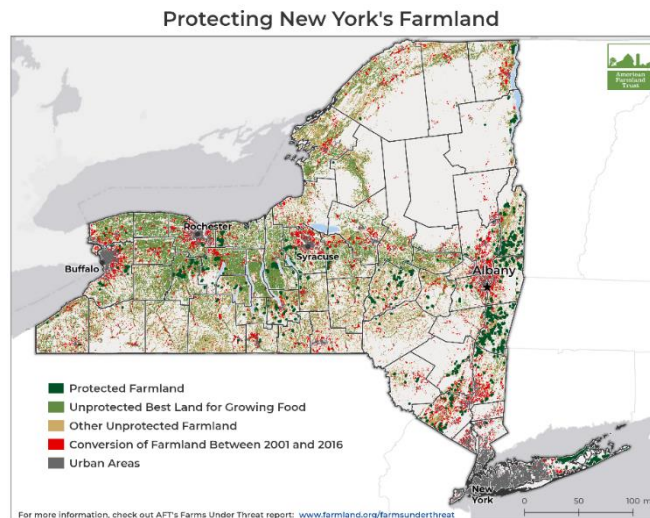


Figure 2 – Farmland Conversion and Protected Farmland in NYS

Economic Benefits of Farmland Protection for Farmers and Surrounding Communities

Farmland protection programs help support farms and the communities that rely on them by permanently protecting farmland from development, while providing farmers with the funds they need to invest in business viability and longevity. Research has shown that farmers use the proceeds from the sale of their development rights to pay down debt, put money towards savings, purchase leased land, expand and diversify operations, upgrade farm equipment, and transfer farms to the next generation.¹¹

Investments spurred by farmland protection funding have positive impacts that reverberate throughout the community, including keeping jobs in rural areas and fostering economic development. A study in Pennsylvania found that every dollar invested in farmland protection programs re-circulates within the

⁷ Office of Governor Andrew M. Cuomo. 2019. “Governor Cuomo Announces More Than 75,000 Acres of Farmland Have Been Protected from Development Since Start of Farmland Protection Program.” July 16, 2019. <https://www.governor.ny.gov/news/governor-cuomo-announces-more-75000-acres-farmland-have-been-protected-development-start>.

⁸ USDA National Agricultural Statistics Service, 2022 Census of Agriculture. Complete data available at www.nass.usda.gov/AgCensus.

⁹ Calculations based on 2012 Census of Agriculture and the Economic Research Service’s Urban Influence Codes.

¹⁰ Hunter, Mitch et. al. 2022. “Farms Under Threat 2040: Choosing an Abundant Future.” https://farmlandinfo.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2022/08/AFT_FUT_Abundant-Future-7_29_22-WEB.pdf

¹¹ Seidl, Andrew, Ryan Swartzentruber, and Rebecca Hill. 2018. “Estimated Economic Impact of Federal Agricultural Conservation Easement Programs (ACEP) on Colorado, 2009-2017.” <https://s30428.pcdn.co/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2020/02/csu307173-RuralLandResearch-bk-www.pdf>.

local economy, with an economic multiplier of \$1.62-\$2.00.¹² Protecting farmland also encourages other local farmers and business owners to invest in their own operations because they have greater confidence in the stability and longevity of the local agricultural sector. Protected farmland has also repeatedly shown to increase nearby residential property values between 1.2% and 2.6%, and local property tax revenues far more than “developable” agricultural land.¹³ Finally, on average, an acre of farmland in New York costs municipal governments \$0.34 per acre in services, compared to \$1.34 for residential land use.¹⁴

Farmland Protection Facilitates Intergenerational Transition

Over a third of New York farmers, who own or manage nearly 2 million acres of farmland, are at or have surpassed retirement age. Farmland protection funding allows these senior farmers to retire without having to sell their land to a developer by freeing up equity in what is often their most valuable asset—their land. This, in turn enables them to sell the farm at the agricultural value, making land affordable for farmers looking to start new farm operations or invest in their existing operation. Bridging this financial gap is critical to keeping land in farming in New York as the state is beginning to enter a period of significant intergenerational transition of farmland.

Farmland Protection Helps Fight Climate Change while Providing Other Environmental Benefits

Keeping land in farming also retains environmental benefits that combat climate change and protect the health of New Yorkers. According to AFT’s 2017 *Greener Fields* report using NYSERDA data, **human activity on an acre of farmland produces 66 times fewer greenhouse gas emissions than human activity on an acre of developed land**, and strategic farmland protection coupled with smart growth planning can have significant greenhouse gas emission reduction benefits.¹⁵

Participation in farmland protection programs has also been shown to encourage the adoption of new, improved, and more widespread climate-friendly conservation practices. These practices aid in sequestering carbon, improving the quality of the air, soil, and water, and increasing farm viability when adopted long term.¹⁶ The healthier our soils, the greater the capacity of farmland to store carbon and convert the agricultural sector from a carbon source to a carbon sink—critical for meeting our climate goals. In addition to carbon sequestration, farmland also provides a range of reliable yet often-

¹² Daniels, Tom. 2019. “An Analysis of the Economic Impact of Pennsylvania’s Farmland Preservation Program.” University of Pennsylvania. https://www.agriculture.pa.gov/Plants_Land_Water/farmland/Documents/PA%20Farmland%20Preservation%20Economic%20Impact.pdf.

¹³ King, Jonathan R., and Christopher M. Anderson. 2004. “Marginal Property Tax Effects of Conservation Easements: A Vermont Case Study.” *American Journal of Agricultural Economics* 86 (4): 919–32.

¹⁴ American Farmland Trust. 2016. “Cost of Community Services Studies.” Northampton, MA. https://s30428.pcdn.co/wpcontent/uploads/sites/2/2019/09/Cost_of_Community_Services_Studies_AFT_FIC_201609.pdf

¹⁵ Arjomand, Sanaz, and David Haight. 2017. “Greener Fields: Combating Climate Change by Keeping Land in Farming in New York.” American Farmland Trust. https://s30428.pcdn.co/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2019/09/AFT_NY-GrFields-RPT_FNL2lo.pdf.

¹⁶ Esseks, J. Dixon, and Brian J. Schilling. 2013. “Impacts of the Federal Farm and Ranch Lands Protection Program: An Assessment Based on Interviews with Participating Landowners.” University of Nebraska-Lincoln: Center for Great Plains Studies. <http://farmlandinfo.org/publications/impacts-of-the-federal-farm-and-ranch-lands-protection-program-an-assessment-based-on-interviews-with-participating-landowners/>.

unaccounted-for cost-saving environmental services such as air pollution removal, wildlife habitat, and flood mitigation.

NY is Increasing the Pace of Permanent Protection and Farmers Continue to Show Strong Interest in Permanently Protecting Their Farmland

Farmer interest in permanently protecting their farmland has been historically high, and the Governor and Legislature have worked together in recent years to ensure that Farmland Protection Implementation Grants (FPIG) have become increasingly accessible. The 2024 Status of State Purchase of Agricultural Conservation Easements (PACE) Programs by AFT's Farmland Information Center places New York State 8th out of 30 states in number of acres protected, and 10th out of 29 states in the number of easements, but with only 1.7% of New York farmland permanently protected, there is opportunity to continue protecting more of this land.

Interest in farmland protection has continued to grow with this renewed state commitment, and as farmers see their neighbors successfully protect their farms and use the funds to pay down debt, invest in their operations, or transfer their land to the next generation, they have become interested in protecting their land, too. Land trusts across the state who submit FPIG applications on behalf of farmers continue to report significant demand from farm families interested in protecting their land, and as a result they have steadily expanded their staff capacity to meet this demand. NYSDAM closed out RFA Round 19 in April of 2024 for the Farmland Implementation Grant program. Of the 54 projects submitted, 45 projects were funded protecting 15,646 acres and allocating \$41,220,364. A survey of pending projects of land trusts working to protect farmland waiting for the next round of funding indicates a strong demand for farmland protection. Of the 17 land trust surveyed, there are 168 projects totaling 49,267 acres and estimated funding of \$171,464,981. In addition, land trusts are leveraging these state funds and protecting even more farmland using the Federal farmland protection program Agricultural Conservation Easement Program – Agricultural Land Easements (ACEP-ALE).

Regional examples of demand include:¹⁷

- **Hudson Valley:** Farms in the Hudson Valley are at high risk of being lost due to farmers aging, urban flight, and development pressure. Orange County Land Trust has 12 farmers wanting to protect their farms totaling over 1400 acres of farmland. Dutchess Land Conservancy is working with eight farmers willing to protect 1,198 acres of farmland. The Hudson Valley currently has among the highest rates of local food sales in the state and is a key part of the foodshed for multiple downstate urban centers.
- **Capital Region:** The Agricultural Stewardship Association (ASA), a land trust that conserves farmland in Washington and Rensselaer counties, is working with 25 farmers that are interested in this program, with a potential to protect an additional 5,125. They also report frequent calls from farmers who are seeking more information about protecting their farms. Columbia Land Conservancy is working with 2 farmers to protect 595 acres and Saratoga PLAN is working with 9 farmers to potentially protect 1,017 acres. farmers.

¹⁷ Data comes from a survey of land trust staff across NYS conducted in November/December 2024.

- North Country: Tug Hill Tomorrow Land Trust serves Jefferson, Lewis, Oneida, Oswego, Herkimer, and Saint Lawrence Counties. They have 13 farmers interested in protecting an additional 4,500 acres who meet the requirements for the FPIG program and have approached the land trust about applying to the next round of funding.
- Mohawk Valley: The Mohawk Hudson Land Conservancy works in Albany, Montgomery, and Schenectady counties and receives about two calls monthly from farmers interested in conserving their land or finding farmland.
- Central New York: The New York Agricultural Land Trust (NYALT) consolidates and submits applications from Cayuga, Cortland, Onondaga, Oswego, Seneca, and Madison counties. Between these counties, 17 farmers with 3,884 acres have expressed interest in protecting their farms.
- Finger Lakes: Finger Lakes Land Trust is working with five farmers to protect 2000 acres, Genesee Land Trust is working with 16 farmers to protect 7,422 acres, and Genesee Valley Conservancy has 32 farmers interested in participating in the farmland protection program adding 15,628 acres of potential protected farmland.
- Western NY: Western New York (WNY) Land Conservancy is working with 7 farmers that are willing to participate in the farmland protection program, adding 1,912 acres of farmland.
- Long Island: Peconic Land Trust is working to protect thirty-eight acres of farmland in Suffolk County, an area with a large population, high land prices, waning farmland acres, and enormous development pressure. North Shore Conservancy has two farmers interested in protecting 86 acres.

American Farmland Trust and the Alliance for New York’s Farmland, a coalition of land trusts, farmers, and agricultural and environmental organizations, encourages the legislature to work to increase funding for farmland protection to \$25 million as part of an EPF of at least \$500 million in the FY25-26 one house budgets. This would ensure that suitable, affordable land is available for new farmers, curtailing further loss of New York’s farmland and retaining the environmental benefits, economic activity, and the necessary food production our farmland provides.

Amendments to Article VII – Farmland Protection

The Governor’s Budget also makes a variety of amendments to Article VII Part OO related to farmland protection. AFT supports these amendments and recognizes that there will be fiscal implications. AFT encourages at least an additional \$10 million in funding to be allocated to the farmland protection line in the EPF to support these additional changes.

Support for Planning for Agricultural and Farmland Protection

The amendment provides state assistance payments to be made to counties and municipalities for developing agricultural and farmland protection plans but at the level of funding \$50,000 for counties and \$40,000 for municipalities that was initially established in 1992 when this program began. AFT encourages these payments be increased to \$150,000. AFT also encourages the cost share amount to

be decreased for counties and municipalities so they would be responsible for only 17.5% like the farmland protection grants. AFT applauds the changes in the language to eliminate the barriers for New York City to participate in the farmland protection program by adding and defining urban agriculture as an eligible activity and supporting the development of a farmland protection plan and allowing approval by the City council or a board designated by them.

Increasing Capacity for Agencies and Organizations that Conduct Farmland Protection Activities.

The amendment also creates a funding program for counties, municipalities, Soil and Water Conservation Districts and Not For Profits to increase staff capacity. Adequate funding and increased capacity has been identified as a the two major barriers for these organization to increase the pace of farmland protection. AFT fully supports this additional program and encourages additional funds be added to the farmland protection line of the EPF to support this capacity building program.

Transitioning Land to a Diverse New Generation of Farmers

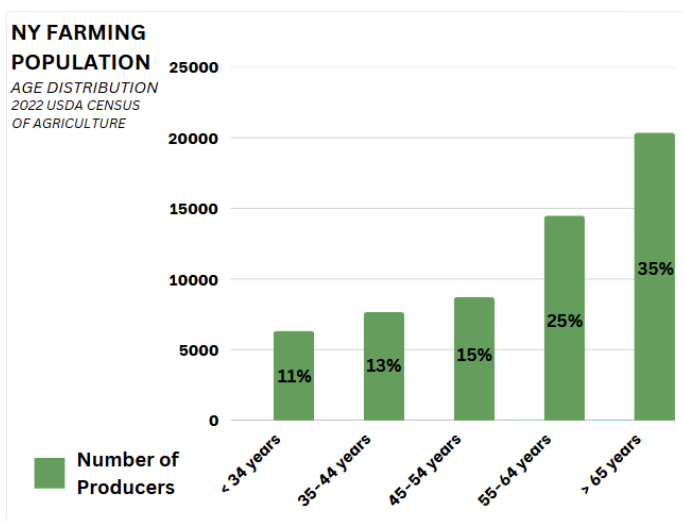


Figure 3

New York is at the beginnings of a large-scale intergenerational transition of farmland. According to the 2022 USDA Census of Agriculture, 35% of New York’s farmers were over 65 with an additional 25% nearing retirement age (Figure 3). **These senior farmers own or operate nearly 2 million acres of land vulnerable to being lost forever as it changes hands, and AFT’s research shows that more than 90 percent of these senior farmers do not have a young farmer-operator involved in the ownership or management of the farm ready to take over.**¹⁸ At the same time, young, new, beginning farmers face enormous

and challenges finding land at prices they can afford from which to launch successful farm businesses. This challenge is particularly acute for Black, Indigenous and Farmers of Color (BIPOC) and other historically resilient farmers, who represent a small percentage of farmers in the state,¹⁹ due in large part to systemic barriers to resources that enable more equitable access to land. Prices for farmland are often driven out of reach for these farmers as they find themselves competing for land with real estate developers, non-farming landowners and established farmers—as well as new high value opportunities

¹⁸ USDA/NASS. 2019. “2017 Census of Agriculture - Volume 1, Chapter 1: State Level Data.” Accessed January 4, 2021. https://www.nass.usda.gov/Publications/AgCensus/2017/Full_Report/Volume_1,_Chapter_1_State_Level/New_York/.

¹⁹ USDA/NASS. 2019. “State Agriculture Overview for New York.” Accessed January 4, 2021. https://www.nass.usda.gov/Quick_Stats/Ag_Overview/stateOverview.php?state=new%20york.

such as solar. This growing challenge and disparity is well characterized by the map in Figure 4, which spatially color-codes each county by the ratio of senior to young farmers working within that county with yellow, orange, and red counties representing those where there are more than two farmers over 65 for every farmer under 35. These ratios are highest in Broome (9:1), Onondaga (6:1), Greene (5.5:1), and Saratoga (4:1) counties, which are all above the median ratio for the state (3:1). **For the future of the state’s farm and food system, we must work to ensure that this land makes its way safely into the hands of a diverse new generation of New York farmers.**

Ratio of New York Farmers 65 and older to Farmers under 35

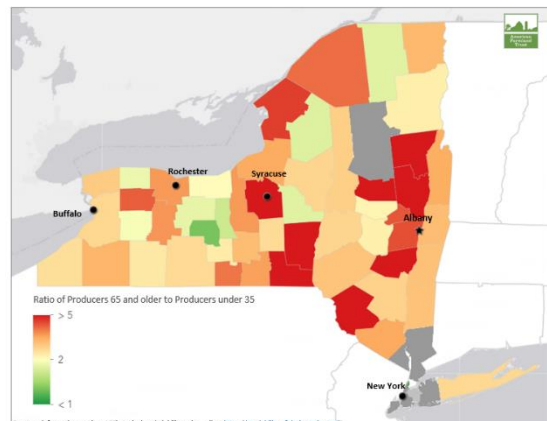


Figure 4

Farmland Protection Program Keeps Land in Farming and Contributes to Farmland Affordability

As stated above, a well-funded farmland protection program plays an integral part in a successful intergenerational transition by helping aging farmers afford retirement without having to sell their land for development. Extinguishing the right to develop the property also lowers the market value of farmland, keeping it affordable for new generation of farmers. There are numerous examples across New York of the farmland protection program enabling the intergenerational transition of land by bridging the gap between what farmers need to sell their land for, and what younger farmers – even within the same family – can afford to pay. Farmland for a New Generation New York works in complement with the farmland protection program to bring a diverse new generation of farmers onto farmland in New York to sustain a thriving agricultural sector to feed New Yorkers in the future.

Farmland for a New Generation New York Brings a New Generation of Farmers onto the Land

Farmland for a New Generation New York Matches Across the State

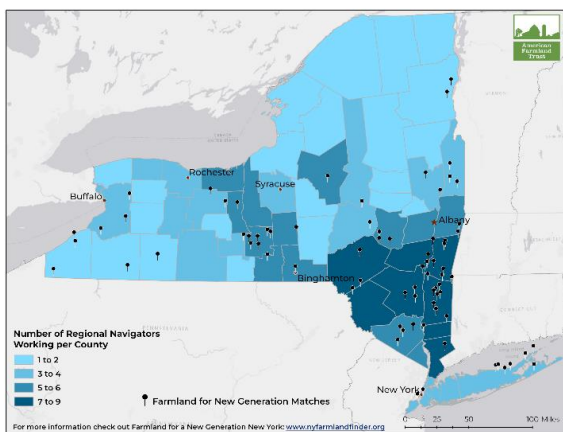


Figure 5

Farmland for a New Generation New York (FNG-NY), a state-funded partnership between the New York State Department of Agriculture and Markets, AFT and organizations statewide, leads the nation in helping farmers gain access to land while supporting retiring farmers in transferring their farms to the next and increasingly diverse generation. State funding for this program supports a free one-stop shop for farmers and landowners which includes a website (www.nyfarmlandfinder.org) featuring farmer and farmland profiles and a farm job listings page, and expert staff at AFT who serve as the first point of contact to offer guidance and advice. A network of

Regional Navigator organizations also funded through this program provide one-on-one, on-the-ground support to farmland owners and seekers in all 62 counties (Figure 5).

Beginning farmers often need active support to clarify their personal and business goals, identify and evaluate farms, evaluate lease or purchase options, or find financing, legal advice, or other resources

that can help them access land to start a new farm business. Senior farmers and their families often need support developing succession and retirement plans that enable them to pass their land to the next generation of farmers. FNG-NY's network of 39 Regional Navigators—including CCE offices, land trusts, and farm organizations—provide coaching, training, and one-on-one assistance to help farmers find land, landowners make their land available, and senior farmers transition their land to the next generation across the state.

Regional Navigators also often help connect new farmers with legal assistance and local professionals like accountants and real estate agents, and frequently provide training on how to develop business plans, evaluate finances, and establish successful farm businesses. Because of this unique structure and hands-on approach, the *Farms Under Threat: The State of the States* report found FNG-NY to be the #1 farmlink program in the United States.²⁰

FNG-NY launched in October 2018 and is currently celebrating its seven-year anniversary! Over the past seven years, this partnership has achieved remarkable results:

- **206 matches** of farmers to **10,899 acres** of land.
- Over **297,646 users** have visited NYFarmlandFinder.org to view listings, farm jobs, resources and events.
- **943** farmland seekers and owners have **active profiles**.
- **5** critical agriculture resources have been translated to Spanish.
- **12** Spanish speaking farmers supported in 2024.

With just \$2.5 million in state funding over the past five years, given the average farm sale per acre in New York state, this program has avoided the loss of nearly \$30 million in farm sales to development, ensuring that NY State's farmland continues to bolster the local economy and provide food and fiber to New Yorkers.

Throughout the lifetime of the program, Regional Navigators working across New York regions have received funding to help farmers and landowners, including some of the following:

- Sam Rose began his farming journey as a teacher, first in a high school classroom, followed by a decade of teaching field science in Mexico and co-founding an agricultural nonprofit. Sam's passion for growing food and community led him to the Hudson Valley, and to find the Farmland for a New Generation New York website, where he created a profile to search for farmland. After several conversations, Sam found a parcel to lease that he didn't know was possible: 200 acres of prime farmland just a 15-minute walk from his home and adjacent to his kids' elementary school. In Sam's words, "I had been searching for land for about five years to no avail... I literally never would have met the owners without farmlink (FNG-NY). As the saying goes, it looks like I finally found happiness in my own backyard."

²⁰ Freedgood, Julia, Mitch Hunter, Dempsey, and Ann Sorenson. 2020. "Farms Under Threat: The State of the States." American Farmland Trust. ["USDA/NASS 2019 State Agriculture Overview for New York." n.d. Accessed December 29, 2020.](#)

- Fourth-generation farmer Carlos L. Valery Jr. immigrated from Venezuela to live in New York City, but after a few years working in Brooklyn, he decided to move upstate and start his own beef cattle operation. Carlos connected with a landowner through the Farmland for a New Generation New York website who shared his commitment to sustainable cattle grazing practices and already had the right farm infrastructure in place to support his dream of raising pastured beef and now farms on 415 acres in Delaware County.
- Bill and Brycie Goodell were dairy farmers who faced a dilemma known to many farmers in New York – they hoped to retire but they didn’t have a successor. Bill and Brycie watched as farms surrounding them were bought up by real estate developers, and they knew they wanted a different outcome. Discovering resources and support from Farmland for a New Generation New York and Regional Navigator, Genesee Land Trust, the couple found a match with a young farmer, Mike Verstraete, and began the process of permanently protecting their 275-acre farm in Ontario County, making it more affordable for the next generation and fulfilling a legacy to keep their land in farming.

Alliance for New York’s Farmland Recommends at least \$1,000,000 for FNG-NY in FY25-26 Budget

Farmland for a New Generation contributes to a resilient local food supply in New York by connecting farmers and landowners to help keep land in production and support the next generation of agricultural entrepreneurs in getting started. In only four years and on a shoestring budget, FNG-NY has already been able to achieve so much. **The Alliance for New York’s Farmland is grateful for the legislature’s championship of this program since its inception.** The inclusion of \$700,000 in the FY24-25 budget was well received and kept the program's momentum, but our Regional Navigators requested \$485,000 for \$270,000 available, a \$215k deficit to providing full support.

In the executive budget proposal, the Governor did not include funding for these critical services. We respectfully request that the legislature include funding of at least \$1,000,000 for FNG-NY in the FY25-26 one house Budgets. This small increase in funding would not only uphold the program’s track record of excellence but also accelerate opportunities to address barriers met by BIPOC, Spanish-speaking, and other historically resilient farmers. Without this support, the services offered through FNG-NY to senior and new farmers will not provide a response adequate to meet the growing critical situation of intergenerational transition, when the New York agriculture industry needs it most. Thank you for your past and continued support for this work.

New York State’s 30% Initiative and Farm to School Grants Programs are Investments in Farm and Food System Resiliency and Public Health

The COVID-19 pandemic has made all too clear the need to build resilient and secure regional food systems that feed communities, support greater equity, and build economic opportunities. This system relies on an infrastructure that supports the complete supply chain, from the farmers growing and raising food all the way to the consumer. Public institutions are key places for food interventions. Through its agencies and public facilities, New York State spends more than \$957 million to feed approximately 6.6 million people annually, a majority of which is through the emergency food system and K-12 schools.²¹ For children across New York, school meals serve as a key source of sustenance and nutrition, and these students typically consume half of their daily calories at school, no matter their socioeconomic status.²²

With the right support, schools offer a growing and reliable market for farmers to enable agricultural viability and serve as a widespread public health intervention point. AFT’s *Growing Resilience* report, examined the potential of farm to school programs, particularly through New York State’s increased per meal lunch reimbursement for schools that spend 30% of their lunch food dollars on New York grown food. This 30% Initiative, funded in the Agriculture Aid to Localities budgets, supports the health of our children and a strong farm economy while building businesses and more resilient local food supply chains.

Governor Hochul’s announcement of support for Universal School Meals in her State of the State address, underpins the importance of nutrition for New York’s school children. This school meals for all would increase procurement capacity for local food, increase the access of nutritious meals and snacks for students, support New York farmers, and bolster the local economy.

AFT’s 2020 research revealed that with the right support, like that provided through the state’s Farm to School grants program, 75% of schools could spend 30% of their lunch budgets on New York grown food by 2025. Unfortunately, the 30% Initiative has remained inaccessible for most School Food Authorities (SFAs) across the state, with only a 11.4% participation rate of all SFAs. According to 2024-2025 program participation data a total of \$9.6 million was spent on purchasing NYS products for lunch, which equated to \$3.13 million in reimbursement. This figure falls well short of the \$10 million appropriated for reimbursement for the 30% Initiative, which justifies broadening local food purchasing eligibility for SFAs.

Expanding the Incentive Program to Include All School Meals Benefits Students and Farmers

New York’s farm to school programs have already positively impacted thousands of students statewide and generated over \$13 million in spending on products from New York farms, but their full potential remains untapped. In 2023, updated AFT research found that the exclusion of breakfast in the 30% program remains the number one barrier to participating in the Farm to School program, with nearly

²¹ Libman, Kimberly, Amanda Li, and Christine Grace. “The Public Plate in New York State: Growing Health, Farms and Jobs with Local Food.” Saratoga Springs, NY: American Farmland Trust, November 1, 2017. https://finys.org/sites/default/files/uploads/pol_publicplatefinal11_1_17.pdf.

²² Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. 2015. “America’s schools make positive changes to create healthier school meals.” Retrieved from <https://www.cdc.gov/media/releases/2015/p0827-school-meals.html>

70% of School Food Authorities (SFAs) across the state indicating that they have not even attempted to apply because it is such a great burden to separate and track their local purchases between breakfast and lunch²³. Lack of time to prepare local items, lack of local items offered by vendors, New York food suppliers not being least cost bidders, and simply not knowing where to start also posed barriers. The pandemic and related supply chain issues have amplified many of these problems, which are felt more acutely by larger school districts.²⁴

Schools have repeatedly identified the difficulty of separating out lunch from other meals as a top barrier to participating in the 30% Initiative. The current program's design focus on lunch also has the unintended impact of incentivizing schools to shift New York foods purchased for other meals to lunch, creating a mirage of increase in farm spending while decreasing student access to these foods throughout the school day. Furthermore, some Food Service Directors report purchasing breakfast foods from neighboring states such as Pennsylvania, where items such as dairy products are slightly less expensive, to save their budgets to purchase local foods for school lunches. This is not only affecting the potential of our state's economy, but also reducing the amount of fresh, local foods kids receive at breakfast. The bottom line? **Focusing the incentive program on lunch limits the potential economic and student health impact of the program.**

According to AFT's *Growing Resilience* report, 95% of schools serve breakfast meals, and 83% of schools report already serving at least one New York food product at breakfast. Incentivizing purchasing of New York grown food at breakfast would increase access to fresh healthy local food throughout the school day and could unlock \$78 million in annual spending if 75% of schools not already spending 30% or more of breakfast costs on New York food products reached that level of spending. A more robust incentive program would also help support supply chain development and the selection of food from the "full plate" grown in New York that schools can incorporate into school meals. Changing the program to include breakfast could result in nearly \$112 million in additional annual total statewide economic impact. **If schools were incentivized to increase purchases of New York food products at lunch and breakfast, this could generate roughly half a billion dollars in total economic impact.**

Farm to School Grants Works Hand in Hand with the Incentive Program to Help Schools Succeed

The Farm to School Grants Program offers vital support to schools by providing funding to help them overcome their lack of time, knowledge, or capacity to purchase and serve local food. These grants can be used to employ a local or regional farm to school coordinator, train staff on how to procure and prepare locally produced food, or make capital improvements to support the transportation, storage, and preparation of local food. Since Andrew Cuomo launched New York's Farm-to-School Grant Program in 2015, more than \$6.8 million has been invested to support 116 Farm to School projects, benefiting almost 750,000 students in 255 school districts across the State. Since 2018, NYSDAM has received double the requests for Farm to School projects than the \$1.5 million funds available to award each year, dollars that would help schools buy more New York grown food.

Many schools use these grants to hire farm to school coordinators who provide food service directors with the expert guidance and additional capacity they need to participate in farm to school purchasing.

²³ Perry, Mikaela and Aliana Ruxin, "The 30% NY State Initiative," 2023. <https://farmlandinfo.org/publications/30-percent-nys-initiative-report/>

²⁴ [Growing Resilience](#). 2020

Farm to school coordinators are consummate professionals that help schools connect with farmers, design menus, procure local foods, and foster kids' curiosity and excitement for eating healthy foods. In interviews conducted by AFT during the summer of 2019, food service directors that intentionally procure New York grown food recognized farm to school coordinators as essential to their success in reaching 30%.²⁵

These regional coordinators have been helping connect schools with producers in their region, preparing and tracking documentation, and designing menus and educational events to highlight local products and get kids excited about eating fresh foods. It is also important to note that past research has shown that each new farm to school job creates up to 2.35 additional jobs in the local community, and so continued investment in these roles is a job creator for the state.²⁶ Schools surveyed by AFT in both 2019 and 2020 repeatedly identified farm to school coordinators as critical to their ability to successfully increase purchases of New York grown food and qualify for the Farm to School Incentive program.²⁷ Schools celebrated the launch of the new Regional Farm to School Coordinator Program established through a partnership between the Department and Cornell Cooperative Extension. Farm to school coordinators have been hired to provide additional support to schools in the lower and upper Hudson Valley, Long Island, Central New York, New York City, and the North Country.

New York Grown Food for New York Kids Coalition Recommendations for FY24-25 Budget

Governor Hochul proposed maintaining funding for the incentive program for lunch at \$10 million and the Farm to School grants program at \$1.5 million in the FY26 budget. The New York Grown Food for New York Kids coalition, a group of farm to school experts from the school, farm, food, public health, academic, environmental, and anti-hunger sectors, appreciates this proposed continued commitment and encourages the legislature and the Governor to build on these proposals in the enacted FY25-26 state budget by:

- Expanding the incentive program so that schools that spend 30% of their total school meal costs can receive the reimbursement of 25 cents per school lunch.
- Allocating at least \$1.5 million for the Farm to School Grants program split between agriculture and education, so long as this does not compromise funding for other agricultural programs, to meet current demand for support.

²⁵ Levy, Samantha, and Kali McPeters. 2020. "Growing Opportunity for Farm to School: How to Revolutionize School Food, Support Local Farms, and Improve the Health of Students in New York." American Farmland Trust. www.farmland.org/growingopportunity

²⁶ National Farm to School Network. "The Benefits of Farm to School," May 2020. https://assets.website-files.com/5c469df2395cd53c3d913b2d/611027419232d281ad2f51ff_BenefitsFactSheet.pdf.

²⁷ Levy, Samantha, and Mikaela Ruiz-Ramon. "Growing Resilience: Unlocking the Potential of Farm to School to Strengthen the Economy, Support New York Farms, and Improve Student Health in the Face of New Challenges." Saratoga Springs: American Farmland Trust, December 9, 2020. <https://farmlandinfo.org/publications/growing-resilience-for-farm-to-school-in-new-york/>;

Levy, Samantha, and Kali McPeters. "Growing Opportunity for Farm to School: How to Revolutionize School Food, Support Local Farms, and Improve the Health of Students in New York." Saratoga Springs: American Farmland Trust, January 27, 2020. <https://farmlandinfo.org/publications/growing-opportunity-for-farm-to-school-in-new-york/>.

Ensuring NYS Reaches its Climate Goals Through Changing Antiquated Bond Act Language

As New York State mobilizes to take swift and bold action on climate change, farms are a critical part of the solution. Climate change presents an incredible threat to farm viability and productivity, and efforts to mitigate climate change while supporting farm viability and resiliency to extreme weather will be critical in the coming years to ensure a strong future for agriculture. However, farmers and farmland also have the potential to play a critical role in the fight against climate change. Two reports published in 2020 indicate that working lands could play a key role in our state climate strategy if more farms implement practices that increase carbon sequestration and soil health and improve surrounding water quality like cover cropping, crop rotation, reduced tillage, and using biological soil amendments to enhance soil fertility.^{28 29} In addition, AFT research indicates that in the near-term, increasing the adoption of these practices on a small number of acres can sequester over half a million metric tons of CO₂ equivalent annually.³⁰ Enhancing natural and working lands so they are a carbon sink is necessary to meeting our climate goals, and with greater adoption of conservation practices, the opportunity for increased carbon sequestration on farmland is much higher.

The passage of the Climate Leadership and Community Protection Act (CLCPA) in 2019 set ambitious goals in statute to mobilize New Yorkers to work together to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. The swift and bold action on climate change proposed by the CLCPA, and the recommendations developed by the Agriculture and Forestry Advisory Panel of the Climate Action Council, on which AFT served, have brought new opportunities to light to promote the management of farmland and the important role farms of all types and sizes can play as part of the solution in addressing the climate crisis.

AFT also applauds Governor Hochul and the legislature for their work in passing the Environmental Bond Act in 2022, including a line item for Farmland Protection funding in the amount of \$150 million. As mentioned above, farmland protection is a critical component in promoting environmentally sound practices and mitigating climate change.

²⁸ Energy+Environmental Economics. "Pathways to Deep Decarbonization," July 4, 2020. <https://documents.dps.ny.gov/public/Common/ViewDoc.aspx?DocRefId=%7B9163B892-F852-4074-B3AA-F67D918F7BE0%7D>.

²⁹ McDonnell, Todd, Timothy Sullivan, Peter Woodbury, Jenifer Wightman, Grant Domke, C.M. Beier, and C. Trettin. Sources and Sinks of Major Greenhouse Gases Associated with New York State's Natural and Working Lands: Forests, Farms, and Wetlands, 2020.

³⁰ Hunter, Mitch, Gabrielle Roesch-McNally, Tom Stein, and Beth Sauerhaft. "Combatting Climate Change on US Cropland." American Farmland Trust, February 5, 2021. <https://farmlandinfo.org/publications/combating-climate-change-on-us-cropland/>.

Conclusion

In closing, I extend my gratitude to the New York State Legislature for its continued commitment to programs that ensure the vitality and resilience of the state's farm and food system. These programs play a crucial role in protecting farmland, empowering a new generation of farmers, strengthening local food security, and advancing sustainable agricultural practices that combat climate change.

New York's farmland is not only an irreplaceable natural resource but also the foundation of an \$85.8 billion farm and food economy that supports nearly 300,000 jobs and connects urban and rural communities. Yet, as the challenges of development pressures, climate change, and intergenerational farmland transitions grow, it is clear that more needs to be done to secure a sustainable future for New York's agricultural sector.

By increasing investments in farmland protection, enhancing programs that connect farmers to land, and ensuring that farmland protection funding remains accessible and robust, New York can safeguard its agricultural heritage and pave the way for a more resilient food system. These actions will not only preserve the environmental benefits of farmland but also bolster the state's economy and uphold its legacy as a leader in food production and sustainability.

On behalf of American Farmland Trust, I thank you for the opportunity to share this testimony and urge the legislature to continue prioritizing farmland protection and agricultural development in the FY25-26 budget. Together, we can ensure that New York's farmland remains a cornerstone of the state's economy, environment, and communities for generations to come.