

Farmland Protection in Tompkins County



Why save farmland?

Less than one-fifth of U.S. land is of high quality agricultural use, and we are losing this finest land to development at an accelerating rate. U.S. agricultural land provides the nation—and the world—with an unparalleled abundance of food. But farmland means much more than food. Well-managed farmland shelters wildlife, supplies scenic open space and helps filter impurities from our air and water. These working lands help to keep our taxes down and maintain the legacy of our agricultural heritage.

What does farming look like in Tompkins County?

Farmland makes up nearly a third of Tompkins County's land area. Agriculture and agriculture-related enterprises represent a significant share of the rural economy. Approximately 230 full-time farms contribute \$50 million annually to the local economy. Many more people are employed in farm products and supplies. The total value of farming in Tompkins County may exceed \$100 million a year. Since 1982, Tompkins County has lost over 20% of its farmland to development and abandonment.

How are farmlands protected in Tompkins County?

A variety of tools are used to help support farming in Tompkins County including the use of agricultural districts, agricultural assessment, agricultural zoning, local planning efforts (including comprehensive planning and right to farm laws) and **agricultural conservation easements**. Locally, agricultural conservation easements are funded through the New York State Department of Agriculture & Markets' Farmland Protection Implementation Grants Program, as well as through a variety of specialized federal USDA programs and the Finger Lakes Land Trust.

What is an agricultural conservation easement?

An agricultural conservation easement is a flexible tool designed specifically to protect farmland. Farmers retain the right to use their land for farming and other purposes that do not interfere with or reduce agricultural viability. Landowners continue to hold title to their properties and may restrict public access, sell, give or transfer their property as they desire. Farmers participating in these agreements also remain eligible for any state or federal farm program for which they qualified before entering into the conservation agreement.

Conservation easements limit land to specific uses and thus protect it from development. These voluntary legal agreements are created between private landowners (grantors) and qualified land trusts, conservation organizations or government agencies (grantees). Landowners can receive federal tax benefits as a result of donating these easements. Grantees are responsible for monitoring the land and enforcing the terms of the easements. Most easements are permanent, and all conservation easements legally bind future landowners. Land protected by conservation easements remains on the tax rolls, limits development, and does not affect other private property rights.

What are Purchase of Development Rights programs?

Purchase of Development Rights (PDR) programs pay property owners to protect their land from development. PDR is known by a variety of other terms, the most common being the purchase **agricultural conservation easements**. Landowners sell agricultural conservation easements to a government agency or private conservation organization. The agency or organization usually pays them the difference between the value of the land for agriculture and the value of the land for its “highest and best use,” which is generally residential or commercial development. Easement value is most often determined by professional appraisals.

PDR programs allow farmers to cash in a fair percentage of the equity in their land, thus creating a financially competitive alternative to selling land for non-agricultural uses. Permanent easements prevent development that would pave over the land and render it inaccessible for agriculture. Removing the development potential from farmland generally reduces its future market value. This may help facilitate farm transfer to the children of farmers and make the land more affordable to beginning farmers and others who want to buy it for agricultural purposes. These programs provide landowners with liquid capital that can enhance the economic viability of individual farming operations and help family's hold onto the land from generation to generation. Finally, PDR programs give communities a way to plan for and share the costs of protecting agricultural land with the local farmers.

New York State's PDR program is called the Farmland Protection Implementation Grants (FPIG) Program. It is administered through the NYS Department of Agriculture and Markets, in cooperation with Town and County government sponsors and willing farmers. It is a very competitive statewide program that typically has one award cycle per year. The 2007 award cycle resulted in funds being awarded to purchase the development rights on Lewis and Linda Stuttle's Lew-Lin Farm in Dryden and Charles and Andra Benson's Bensvue Farm in Lansing. In 2006, Tompkins County's first agricultural conservation easement through the FPIG program was finalized on Donald Howser's Farm in Lansing. This year, the Sherman Family's Jerry Dell Farm in Dryden was selected to receive funding to purchase the development rights on the Tompkins County portion of their land.

How do I find out more information about farmland protection and agricultural conservation easements in Tompkins County?

Tompkins County Farmland Protection efforts are coordinated through Cornell Cooperative Extension of Tompkins County. For more information on these efforts contact Debbie Teeter at 272-2292 or dlt22@cornell.edu or Scott Doyle with the Tompkins County Planning Department at 274-5560 or sdoyle@tompkins-co.org.

You can also find out more information on New York State's farmland protection opportunities by visiting <http://www.agmkt.state.ny.us/AP/agsservices/farmprotect.html>.

Sources:

Why Save Farmland? (2003). American Farmland Trust – Farmland Information Center. Website: <http://www.farmlandinfo.org>.

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