

AGRICULTURAL INDUSTRY SUSTAINABILITY



Creating an environment that supports the agricultural industry at the municipal, county and state levels demonstrates that agriculture is a preferred land use in New Jersey and encourages the retention of thriving and diverse farming operations. Educating the next generation of farmers, welcoming newcomers and ensuring the safety and well-being of today's farm workers are critical components of maintaining a profitable, strong agricultural industry poised for a bright future.

Overview

Sustaining a profitable, modern-day agricultural industry ensures that Garden State residents will continue to have access to an abundant supply of locally grown food and agricultural products.

Preserving the land base is the initial step. The next is ensuring the farmer can continue to work profitably on the land.

A thriving industry is largely dependent upon public policies, including laws, rules and programs that are tailored to meet the agricultural industry's unique needs. At the same time, the industry must have access to a well-trained and educated workforce to be successful.

In addition, while the general public appreciates the products of New Jersey's farms, many may not understand the process that brings fresh eggs to their breakfast tables, apples to their children's lunches and corn to their summer barbecues. The public must recognize that commercial agriculture is first and foremost a business – a business that may create noise and odors or generate traffic from delivery trucks and tour buses. The existence of viable farms – and therefore the open space New Jerseyans enjoy – is largely dependent upon the business' ability to operate profitably.

Agriculture must be recognized as a priority by state and local leaders when making policy decisions regarding taxation, regulations and financial incentives.

Tax incentives, such as the Farmland Assessment program, keep land in farms by reducing the property tax on active farmland. However, this incentive program does not apply to farm structures, such as barns and storage facilities, and farmsteads. Abatements and exemptions that encourage farmers to maintain their buildings in good working order and do not penalize them for renovating or replacing old or unsafe structures can benefit not only the farmer, but the entire community.

Regulatory programs, such as the New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection's Water Allocation Program, give special consideration to the industry's water needs and provide for a separate certification and registration process.

Financial incentives, such as the income averaging legislative proposal introduced in March 2003, help stabilize a farmer's bottom line by recognizing the high-risk,

cyclical nature of farming. Under income averaging, New Jersey farmers can average out yearly gains and losses over a four-year period to even out their tax liability.

Just as important is New Jersey's Right to Farm Act, which provides eligible farmers who operate responsibly with protection from overly restrictive municipal ordinances, and public and private nuisance actions. The Act, the strongest in the nation, provides increased protection to those farmers who operate in accordance with agricultural management practices that have been adopted by the State Agriculture Development Committee.

The Act gives primary jurisdiction in resolving complaints against agricultural operations to County Agriculture Development Boards, and ultimately to the State Agriculture Development Committee if decisions of the County Boards are appealed.

The Committee also offers a voluntary mediation program that disputing parties can use instead of going directly to court and has the authority to review municipal actions in Agricultural Development Areas to determine their potential impact on agricultural operations.

Still, right-to-farm conflicts are typically the number one concern of farmers.

Many people want to live near a farm to enjoy the rural character it provides. However, once they move in they often discover that rural character means more than pretty open spaces and traditional, small-town values.

Rural character includes tractors on local roads, odors and early morning noise.

As the New Hampshire Office of State Planning points out:

“Everyone wants the calendar-photography scenes of rural character, but along with the pretty side of rural character comes a gritty side.”

Right to Farm Act at a Glance

The Act provides commercial farm owners or operators with certain protections from restrictive municipal ordinances and public and private nuisance actions.

To receive these protections, commercial farms must be in conformance with federal and state laws, agricultural management practices recommended by the State Agriculture Development Committee or site-specific agricultural management practices. They also must not be a direct threat to health and public safety, must be located in an area where agriculture was a permitted use under municipal zoning ordinances and must have been operating as of December 31, 1997.

Protected activities under the Act include production, processing and packaging of agricultural products, farm market sales, and agriculture-related education and farm-based recreational activities that are related to marketing of the farm's agricultural products.

An alternative conflict resolution process can help improve communication among farmers, municipalities and private citizens, and reduce litigation time and expense.

That gritty side can create conflict between farmers and neighbors and often municipal governments who don't understand the business of agriculture.

Many people don't want to see or live near farm worker housing.

Neighbors and municipal leaders often would prefer acres and acres of open fields rather than greenhouses.

Municipal officials sometimes enact overly restrictive ordinances that can hamper a farmer's ability to run a profitable farm market operation.

With increased pressures from local development, agricultural operators need a strong commitment from their municipalities. The most effective right-to-farm support must occur at the municipal level. Municipal right-to-farm ordinances that are consistent with the state's model indicate to residents that the local community supports agriculture as an industry and a land use.

In addition to right-to-farm ordinances, state, county and municipal regulations must also be sensitive to the needs of farmers. Small changes to or exemptions from certain regulations can protect agricultural operations from unnecessary costs and create a farmer-friendly environment. State, county and local officials must be conscious of farm machinery when planning road improvements to ensure that farmers can move efficiently on local roads. One way to address this is through the delineation and special consideration of commonly traveled agricultural routes. Local officials need to be aware of changes to building and tax codes as well as fees as they relate to agricultural operations.

Counties and municipalities must

***Pulling it all Together:
A Rural Redevelopment Success Story***

The City of Bridgeton, Cumberland County, in October 2003, received a \$3 million low-interest loan for the construction of 40 duplex rental units exclusively for farm workers and their families.

The funding – the result of cooperative efforts among federal, state and local partners – was the first such funding for off-farm housing in New Jersey in more than a decade.

As part of a comprehensive redevelopment strategy, the housing will be designed to reflect the character of Bridgeton's historic district. This approach is a model program that addresses several needs at once by:

- Providing desperately needed quality housing for agricultural workers, whose efforts drive the local economy.
- Visually and functionally integrating all socio-economic groups into the community.
- Promoting appreciation of local history, which improves community morale and sense of place.

also be sensitive to the negative economic impacts caused by excessive wildlife populations and support the federal, state, and local efforts to minimize the damages.

Some municipalities may take advantage of the variety of grant and loan programs offered by the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Rural Development program. Grants and loans are available in three key areas: Rural Business-Cooperative Service, Rural Housing Service and Rural Utilities Service. Unfortunately, many of New Jersey's rural municipalities may not qualify for many of the programs offered because most are unavailable to cities with more than 50,000 residents or municipalities with more than 10,000 residents. While the population criteria for these programs may make sense in a large portion of the country, they do not make sense for New Jersey.

Efforts are underway to reevaluate specific program criteria to make these programs available to New Jersey's rural communities, especially the regional centers serving the state's most rural regions.

It is also important farmers understand and participate in the U.S. Department of Agriculture's risk management programs to insure their operations against potential losses. The New Jersey Department of Agriculture, in conjunction with the U.S. Department of Agriculture, conducts farm risk management and crop insurance education programs to assist farmers in understanding what assistance is available to reduce agricultural risks.

Understanding and addressing the labor needs of the industry are also critical to sustaining viable farming operations. Without an adequate labor supply, crops cannot be harvested, livestock cannot be properly cared for, and the agricultural industry cannot continue to provide food for our tables.

The supply of farm laborers must meet demand.

When U.S. workers are unavailable to meet the demand, employers traditionally look to foreign workers for relief. Currently, nonimmigrant foreign workers can be employed temporarily in agriculture under specific provisions of the Immigration and Nationality Act. However, this process has its own set of limitations that make it unworkable for many agricultural employers.

This fall federal lawmakers introduced AgJOBS – the Agricultural Jobs, Opportunity, Benefits and Security Act of 2003. AgJOBS supports much needed reforms to the guest

worker visa program (H-2A) and also allows for the short-term, on a one-time basis, workers with a significant work history in American agriculture to stay in the United States legally and earn adjustment to legal status.

Although vital to agriculture, hired farm workers continue to be one of the most economically disadvantaged groups in the United States, with low wages, seasonal employment and limited participation in the non-farm labor market. More can be done to ensure a well-trained farm labor workforce and to improve farm worker living and working conditions.

Housing and training opportunities need to be considered. Quality housing, along with an educated workforce, will improve the quality of life for farm workers and enable them to perform even more efficiently.

A comprehensive, ongoing worker safety program is also critical to improving working conditions and retaining experienced workers. Farm owners and employees need to implement proper safety measures to prevent injury and death. Ongoing worker training includes lessons on:

- Safe handling of pesticides,
- Safe handling of power tools,
- Safe operation of farm vehicles, and
- Appropriate emergency response protocols.

From training the farm worker to equipping future farmers to lead and manage the state's food, agricultural and natural resource industry, agriculture education takes on many forms.

High school agricultural education programs provide classroom instruction, work-based learning, and career and leadership development for FFA members and other students considering careers in agriculture or related fields. The national Agriculture in the Classroom program helps to make K-12 students aware of the importance of agriculture. 4-H is an informal, practical educational program for youth, while the New Jersey Agricultural Society's Agriculture Leadership Program provides young adults in agriculture with leadership development skills and opportunities. While these programs are valuable, it is imperative they are coordinated to eliminate duplication of effort and to

maximize educational opportunities for New Jersey's next generation of agricultural managers and leaders.

For agriculture education programs to be effective, it's important the industry's leadership and employment needs are identified and communicated to educators preparing young people for careers in agriculture. An educational curriculum that addresses the needs of the food and agricultural industry, and the natural resources that sustain it, is needed at the secondary and post-secondary education level.

Educational programs in agriculture must be offered as an optional and viable opportunity for the youth and adults of New Jersey who are interested in pursuing such careers. Education in agricultural production and business practices for those currently involved in agriculture is just as important as programs for those who have an interest in changing to or initially choosing a career in agriculture.

Objectives & Strategies

- Create an environment that is supportive of agriculture to maintain the profitability of the industry.
 - Sustain tax incentives like Farmland Assessment to keep land in farms, and encourage the development or extension of other abatements and exemptions for the agricultural industry.
 - Recognize agriculture as a priority when making policy decisions regarding regulations, taxation and financial incentives at all levels of government.
 - Develop agricultural management practices for agri-tourism, farm markets, greenhouse operations, equine operations and other activities as needed to ensure Right to Farm Act protection for these operations.
 - Provide additional and continuing outreach to better equip County Agriculture Development Boards and encourage counties and municipalities to participate in the Agricultural Mediation Program when right-to-farm disputes arise.
 - Work with all levels of government to create and advocate for appropriate public policies that support the food and agricultural industry.

- Encourage municipalities with significant agricultural resources to adopt a Right to Farm ordinance that provides the same level of protection as the state's model, including regular notices to all residents and landowners.
 - Work with the Department of Environmental Protection's Fish and Wildlife Program, counties and municipalities to implement wildlife control strategies on privately and publicly owned land.
 - Promote and develop tools that municipalities and counties can use to strengthen and support agriculture.
 - Investigate potential innovative tax incentive programs to enhance preservation efforts and coordinate conservation initiatives.
 - Coordinate public outreach activities among various agricultural organizations, such as New Jersey Farm Bureau and Rutgers University's Cook College, to educate New Jersey residents about the business of agriculture and the need to maintain a vibrant agricultural industry in order to retain farmland.
 - Encourage adoption by the New Jersey Legislature of income averaging legislation introduced in March 2003.
- Examine and address farm labor training and housing needs.
 - Work with the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Rural Development program to reexamine program criteria to enable New Jersey's rural communities to qualify for more programs.
 - Link neighborhood revitalization efforts with housing opportunities for farm workers to ensure a safe and stable workforce.
 - Develop and promote comprehensive and ongoing training opportunities for farm workers.
 - Work with the New Jersey Department of Labor, Rutgers Cooperative Extension and others to provide farm safety training.
 - Join other agricultural stakeholders in supporting ongoing efforts at the federal level to streamline and modernize the immigration process.
- Equip the next generation to lead and manage the industry.

- Collaborate with Cook College and Rutgers Cooperative Extension to promote research and provide training and educational programs for New Jersey farmers and agribusiness professionals.
- Promote agricultural education programs that provide professional development training for high school teachers.
- Support the Agricultural Education program and FFA as it seeks to enhance the instructional program at the local, state and national levels.
- Promote educational programs that train and equip people for careers in natural resource conservation and the food industry.
- Provide educational grants for agricultural education programs.
- Identify educational, financial and support opportunities for small farmers, new farmers and farmers with limited resources.
- Promote the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Farm Service Agency program for limited resource farmers.
- Support efforts by Rutgers Cooperative Extension to educate small farm owners and support small farm operations.
- Create opportunities to welcome newcomers into the agricultural industry.

By creating an environment that is supportive of agriculture, addressing the needs of farm laborers and equipping the next generation to lead and manage the industry, New Jersey demonstrates its commitment to agriculture as a business and not just a source of pretty, open space. Strategies to sustain the industry married with preservation and planning efforts, economic development activities and natural resource conservation practices, position New Jersey agriculture for a profitable, strong and bright future.