



# **Cayuga County Agriculture and Farmland Protection Plan 2014**

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# Executive Summary

Cayuga County is the second largest producer of agricultural commodities in New York State, producing goods with a market value of \$293.4 million and providing nearly 2,900 jobs in 2012. Our community is fortunate to have good weather, fertile soils and abundant water resources as well as excellent technical services to support this major economic sector. Many of our farmers have years of experience while new and young farmers are eager to start their own agricultural businesses or take over the family farm.

Farms must be able to respond to changing economic pressures in order to survive. While these pressures are leading many farms to consolidate into larger and larger operations, many small farms are thriving and exhibit a tremendous diversity in what they produce. Farmers are optimistic about new opportunities that are opening up through the surging interest in locally produced foods, niche crops such as hops, and value-added products such as wines, cheeses, and wool yarn.

This Agriculture and Farmland Protection Plan seeks to assess current conditions that affect Cayuga County's agricultural economy and farmland protection efforts, and propose policies and laws to strengthen its agricultural base. In 2012, Cayuga County was awarded an Agricultural and Farmland Protection Planning Grant from the New York State Department of Agriculture and Markets and allocated matching funds to update the original County Agriculture and Farmland Protection Plan, adopted in 1996. Expanding on the original document, this plan largely bases its recommendations and implementation strategy on input from county farmers, support businesses, service providers and the general public. Its scope is expanded from the original plan's focus on farmland protection to also address trends in the local agricultural economy and the ways in which our communities, farmers, support businesses and service providers can bolster this vital economic sector.

The Cayuga County Agriculture and Farmland Protection Board (AFPB) established a steering committee made up of the AFPB and additional farmers, agriculture-related business representatives and agricultural service providers to focus the plan and guide outreach efforts. The Cayuga County Department of Planning and Economic Development managed the public participation process and drafted the plan.

There were a number of meaningful opportunities for public input during the 18-month planning process, as well as an extensive public

outreach campaign. A project website was launched where meeting dates, public input notes and the draft plan were posted as they became available. Three public discussion meetings were held throughout the county, followed by seven focus group meetings and interviews with farmers and others involved in the local agricultural economy. Two public hearings were held, one by AFPB and one by the County Legislature.

## **Components of the plan include:**

- a summary of the strengths, opportunities, needs and challenges of the major agricultural economic sectors found within the county as well as an overview of existing natural resources and support programs;
- an overview of sound farm-friendly land use policies that local municipalities can incorporate into their zoning, subdivision, and site plan review laws;
- an analysis of development pressures on farmland and an improved suitability index for prioritizing farmland protection at the county level;
- and an implementation plan with a list of 49 actions to strengthen the county's agricultural economy and protect farmland for future farmers.

## **Implementation**

The AFPB, after collecting and reviewing participant input from public discussion meetings, focus group meetings and one-on-one interviews, developed a plan of action to support the county's agricultural economy and protect farmland in the next ten years, from 2015 to 2025. This implementation plan centers around three priority goals:

**Goal 1: Improve economic opportunities for agriculture-related businesses in Cayuga County;**

**Goal 2: Achieve widespread awareness and appreciation in the county of the economic, health and cultural importance of local food and local agriculture;**

**Goal 3: Ensure a vibrant future for farming in Cayuga County.**

# Key Actions

The AFPB and its partners should begin implementing this plan as soon as it is approved by the County Legislature and the New York State Department of Agriculture and Markets by focusing on five key high priority actions. These actions were chosen based on a number of factors, including the long-term impact of the action on the community, the ease of accomplishment, and their influence as first steps to build off of as other implementation actions are taken.

- 1. Action 1-1.4: Launch a “buy local” campaign that will focus on the economic and health benefits of supporting local agriculture. Raising local consumer awareness of the opportunities to purchase local foods and the benefits of doing so can spur local demand for farmers’ goods.**

**Potential Partners:** County Chamber of Commerce, CCHD

**Funding Resources:** NYSDAM Regional “Buy Local” Campaign Development Grant

**Priority:** HIGH

**Estimated Time to Complete Once Action Begins:** 1-3 years

Well-executed “buy local” campaigns have a proven track record of boosting sales of small businesses, including agriculturally-based ones. There is growing interest on the local, regional and national levels about local food production. However, there is still much work to be done in Cayuga County to spread the word that buying locally produced foods would benefit not only our local economy but could benefit our health, as well. A successful “buy local” campaign may have a multitude of benefits that can help meet several objectives in the implementation plan; it can raise awareness and appreciation of the local agricultural economy by the general public, boost farmers’ local sales of their products, and generate consumer demand for restaurants and schools to serve meals with more locally-sourced ingredients.

The budget for this action would primarily consist of partner staff labor to design the campaign, recruit and coordinate meetings of participating businesses, and manage the campaign once it is launched. Marketing materials such as flyers, posters, window decals, newspaper ads and a website would also likely require dedicated funds. At least one funding source has been identified to help defray these costs, the NYSDAM Regional “Buy Local” Campaign Development Grant.

- 2. Action 1-3.1: Provide agricultural economic development services through identified and trained staff by coordinating economic development efforts for all agricultural sectors and providing one-on-one assistance to farmers and agriculture-related business owners for start-up and existing growth opportunities. Staff should coordinate with other entities such as CCE, NYS Department of Agriculture and Markets Division of Agricultural Development and Farm Credit East.**

**Potential Partners:** CEDA

**Funding Resources:** CEDA staff time, CEDA and CCPED loan programs, USDA Rural Business Enterprise Grant Program, USDA-FSA loan programs, Finger Lakes Grants Information Center

**Priority:** HIGH

**Estimated Time to Complete Once Action Begins:** 1-3 years

A common refrain from farmers during public meetings and focus groups was the frustration with working with the many entities that provide assistance to farmers and the need for access to local, coordinated business support. Integrating the needs of the agricultural business community with the one-stop model at the Cayuga Economic Development Agency (CEDA) will provide much-needed business support to agricultural operations of all sizes as they work to grow and sustain their businesses. This action compliments CEDA's 2011 strategic plan, which calls for improving service delivery to small farmers.

The budget for this action would likely primarily consist of partner staff time to coordinate existing business support efforts and continue outreach to agricultural businesses to identify their needs and how best to serve them. CEDA has identified existing staff capacity to address this action without the need of creating a new position.

**3. Action 2-2.3: Organize fun, family-friendly annual informational and educational events for schools and the general public and/or organize Farm Day events on K-12 school campuses.**

**Potential Partners:** Farm Bureau, CCE, School Districts, BOCES  
**Funding Resources:** Farm Bureau, USDA Farm to School Grant Program

**Priority:** HIGH

**Estimated Time to Complete Once Action Begins:** 1-3 years

Organizing fun farm events for children and their families will increase the agricultural literacy and appreciation by our communities for local agriculture as a major economic engine and a source of healthy foods. This increased awareness and appreciation is essential to the long-term viability of our farms, and over time may help maintain a diversity of farm sizes and production types by developing and sustaining a robust local market for locally produced foods. These events also have the potential of introducing children to farming who may not otherwise have an opportunity to discover a career in agriculture.

The budget for this action would likely primarily consist of staff and volunteer time to recruit participating farms, schools and other organizations, and plan the events. Other budget expenses may include transportation costs for school trips and marketing materials to publicize the events.

**4. Action 2-1.2: Provide trainings, information and one-on-one technical assistance for local and county planning board, zoning**

**board of appeals, town board, and village board members about agriculture-related land uses and impacts of local regulations on the viability of agriculture.**

**Potential Partners:** CCPED

**Funding Resources:** CCPED staff time

**Priority:** HIGH

**Estimated Time to Complete Once Action Begins:** on-going

Cumbersome or restrictive land use regulations can significantly impact farm business growth and viability. Addressing existing issues and working with towns and villages to prevent the creation of future impacts is essential to the diversity and long-term viability of our agricultural economy, especially for niche producers, small-scale retail outlets such as farm markets, and value-added activities that some may not view as “traditional” agricultural activities. CCPED already provides technical support to town and village governments for all their planning and zoning needs, including those related to agriculture, and will continue to prioritize trainings and informational outreach on this topic. Specific outreach efforts and training topics, such as farm-friendly land use policies, Cost of Community Services Studies and other farmland protection tools like PDR can initially be based on the needs and challenges identified as the County Agriculture and Farmland Protection Plan was developed.

The budget for this action would likely primarily consist of CCPED staff time.

- 5. Action 3-2.1: Provide one-on-one technical assistance to address farmers’ nutrient, resource and farm management challenges, with a focus on improving the quality and implementation of farm plans. Assist farmers in identifying relevant state and federal loan and grant opportunities to help meet their needs.**

**Potential Partners:** SWCD, CCE

**Funding Resources:** partner staff time

**Priority:** HIGH

**Estimated Time to Complete Once Action Begins:** on-going

A sound farm plan and its effective implementation is essential to sound stewardship of natural resources. There already exists strong technical support in the county to address farm management needs, but particular attention should be paid to ensuring that the quality of farm plans remain high and that all farmers know how to effectively implement their plans. SWCD and CCE will continue to prioritize addressing these priorities by engaging with farmers, farm planners and other agencies as needed.

The budget for this action would likely primarily consist of partner staff time.

The AFPB, with assistance from the Cayuga County Department of Planning and Economic Development (CCPED), will work closely with interested partners to progress with plan implementation in a timely manner. The AFPB is also responsible for reviewing the implementation plan annually to determine the level of progress completed, to reevaluate priorities and to make necessary revisions.

# Vision Statement and Defined Terms



## Vision Statement

This Agriculture and Farmland Protection Plan seeks to assess current conditions that affect Cayuga County's agricultural economy and farmland protection efforts, and propose policies and laws to strengthen its agricultural base. However, before we can identify goals and a strategy to achieve them, it is essential to first identify what the desired outcomes are of existing and future efforts. These outcomes are expressed as the vision statement that serves as the overarching goal of the plan. The vision statement below was developed over several months by the steering committee and draws heavily from the ideas and values expressed in the public discussion meetings held for this plan in November, 2013.

### **Our vision of the future of agriculture in Cayuga County:**

*Viable and sustainable farms and agriculture-related businesses are the major economic drivers of our local economy. Agriculture is understood and celebrated by our local communities as a significant contributor of jobs, open space and beautiful rural character, and as a healthy source for fresh, local foods. Our farms, businesses, institutions and governments strengthen our agriculture's economic viability through: improved farm management and technology; generation of on-farm energy; increased access to quality agricultural education and training for farmers, farmworkers and the general public; enhanced support of new and young farmers; outreach to increase the awareness that agriculture is vital to our communities; implementation of sound environmental stewardship practices and encouragement of agriculture-friendly land use policies. Our farmland supports a diverse array of farm sizes and farming methods that produce a wide variety of food, fiber and energy products. Our local communities have ready access to fresh, locally grown foods and value-added agricultural products that also serve to enhance our agri-tourism industry. Our farms access all available market channels for niche and traditional products and have growth opportunities for value-added processing, packaging, and marketing.*

## **Agricultural Practices**

Farming is more than raising animals and crops. Agricultural enterprises, by their nature, often comprise a variety of land uses. Given the narrow profit margin of many agricultural operations, farms often include accessory commercial operations intended to supplement the primary sources of farm income. These may include timber production, feed manufacturing, food processing and manufacturing facilities, slaughterhouses, wineries, farm stands, tourism features and more. These accessory activities help stabilize farm incomes and maintain farming as a sustainable and viable way to support local families by allowing farmers to take advantage of their existing land assets, add value to farm products and direct market their products for additional income.

With these considerations in mind, the following definition of an agricultural practice was developed by the steering committee and is based on New York State definitions of agricultural practices:

***Agricultural practice:** Any activity connected with the raising or sale of crops, livestock or production of livestock products, including but not limited to field crops, fruits, vegetables, horticultural specialties, livestock and livestock products, furs, apiary products, maple sap, Christmas trees, aquaculture products and woody bio-mass. This shall encompass any activity or use now permitted by law, engaged in by or on behalf of a farmer in connection with farming including, but not limited to: housing for farm workers; stables and other tourist activities; the collection, transportation, distribution and storage of animal and poultry waste; storage, transportation and use of equipment for tillage, planting, harvesting and marketing; transportation, storage and use of fertilizers, limes, and legally permitted insecticides, herbicides, and fungicides; construction of farm structures and facilities including farm wineries and other on-farm food processing; construction and maintenance of fences and other enclosures; use of roadside stands, farm stands or farm markets for wholesale or retail sales provided that a substantial portion of the annual gross sales of such wholesale or retail facilities are from agricultural outputs grown on said farm; and the use and/or maintenance of related pastures, idle or fallow land, woodland, wetland, farm ponds, farm roads and certain farm buildings and other structures related to agricultural practices. Agricultural practices may take place on one or more parcels of owned or rented land, which may be contiguous or noncontiguous to each other.*

Farmers are also the stewards of their soil and water resources, which are vital to farming and to the community as a whole. Therefore all agricultural practices should be implemented according to the most current sound environmental management principles in order to minimize negative environmental impacts on water, soil and air quality. This plan seeks to support and encourage environmentally responsible agricultural practices, particularly with regards to the implementation of USDA - Natural Resource Conservation Service (NRCS) Best Management Practices (BMPs).

## **Farmland Protection**

There are many ways to protect farmland. For the purposes of this plan, farmland protection is defined as a collection of laws, policies and programs that foster a vibrant agricultural economy and seek to limit the conversion of land from agricultural uses to non-agricultural uses caused by development pressures and use conflicts. Various types of farmland protection strategies are already employed in Cayuga County, at the federal, state, county and local levels. Examples of these tools include the Cayuga County Consolidated Agricultural District No. 5, agricultural value assessments, local and state right-to-farm laws, infrastructure support, economic development, conservation easements and land use planning that is sensitive to the needs of farms and agriculturally based businesses. One of the purposes of this plan is to evaluate existing farmland protection policies and laws, and propose ways to strengthen or add to them (see Part II of this plan). It is important to keep in mind that not every tool is right for every community, and that often one must employ a combination of these methods to be successful.