



**New York Agricultural Land Trust**

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**Environmental Conservation Budget Hearing**

**February 8, 2011**

**Subject: Farmland Protection**

**Speaker: Nancy Hourigan, Vice Chair, New York Agricultural Land Trust**

I'd like to start off by thanking Governor Cuomo for his enthusiastic support of the Environmental Protection Fund, and specifically the Farmland Protection Program, which was so severely cut last year, both in the budget, and then another midyear cut which took the program from \$10.5 to \$5.2 million dollars in cash allocations. The downward slide that the fund has taken over the last several years appears to have halted, and hopefully, raiding of the fund for general use has stopped. The proposed \$12 million for farmland protection is a good starting point, and also a relief in that it signals that the Governor recognizes the importance of the environment, and of preserving our state's prime farmland.

Some of you may wonder why farmland needs protection. Prime farmland, especially the land nearest urban areas, is also the land that is most suitable for development. We have all heard of urban 'sprawl without growth'. Farmers have traditionally viewed their farms as their 'nest egg', and look to sell their land for its highest and best value – not necessarily as farmland – to fund their retirement. This has gone on for decades, to the point where the state is losing more farmland than it can afford to, and still hope to feed itself.

A point that I would like to emphasize is that the NYS Farmland Protection Program is not a 'farmer benefit program'. On the contrary, the purpose of this program is to assure that the citizens of New York State have a safe, local food supply into - as the conservation easements say - perpetuity. The program is not without benefits for farmers, in that the program enables farms to cash in on some of the non-ag equity in their land, and use the money to expand their operation, update equipment and infrastructure, and, in many cases, purchase more land to farm. In the same way, this program benefits the farm communities. As has been documented time and again, farms are powerful drivers of the local economies. Most of the money spent on farms is spent locally, and it has been estimated that a dollar spent on the farm turns over from five to seven times in the local economy. I'd like to stress that the farmland protection program benefits the entire state of New York.

I come here today wearing two hats. The first is as a farmer who, along with my husband, has protected our land, which is located west of Syracuse. I am also here today representing the New York Agricultural Land Trust (NYALT), as Vice Chair and founding board member. I have volunteered my time for the past five years so that farmers across the state

can preserve their land too, if they so desire. Back in 1999, when our farm was awarded a farmland protection grant, there was no organization in our area that could help us navigate the process and hold the easement on our land. The need for NYALT was so great that in the short span of 4 years, we have closed on two easements, saving 362 acres, and are actively working with 14 other farm families in Cayuga, Onondaga, Seneca, and Montgomery counties to preserve *over 8000 acres*. We have open state contracts in the amount of \$16,859,849. This is the amount of money that the state has agreed to pay for these projects, and it includes 75% of the value of the conservation easement, plus project costs. Matching dollars in the form of landowner donation – the other 25% of the value of the conservation easement – is in excess of \$6 million dollars. This is truly a bargain for New York State.

One other budget item that needs recognition, as it is extremely important to land trusts if they are to continue to partner with the state and municipalities in their farmland protection work, is the Conservation Partnership Program, which is administered by the Land Trust Alliance – New York. This funding has been critical to NYALT as we build capacity for the workload that lays ahead of us. If not for this funding stream, which leverages other private donations, NYALT would not be here today.

The projected total of state projects (from all land trusts and/or municipalities) to be submitted by the end of fiscal year 2011 is \$39,993,661. Accordingly, you can now understand why I say that the \$12,000,000 in the Governor's proposed budget is a good start, and we are very grateful for that, but if we hope to move the backlog of these projects along, the proposed amount will not go very far. The other important consideration is that the \$12 million dollar appropriation must be backed up with cash. The budget number is meaningless if there is no cash to go along with it.

An additional consideration to keep in mind is that landowners need to pay significant up-front costs in the form of surveys, appraisals, and legal fees in order to get their project started. If they need to wait several years to get reimbursed for those costs, it often puts a strain on their cash flow, an extra stress not needed in this economic climate.

In summary, the farmland protection program:

- Benefits anyone who eats!
- Funding acts as a stimulus to local economies by bringing in farmland protection money, supporting related business and keeping jobs secure.
- Allows farms to cash in on some of the equity in their land to update and/or expand their operations.

*Respectfully submitted by Nancy Hourigan, Onondaga County. For further information, please contact Tom Larson, NYALT Executive Director: 607-591-4411; [tlarson@nyalt.org](mailto:tlarson@nyalt.org)*