



SECTION 2

IS YOUR TOWN PLANNING A FUTURE FOR AGRICULTURE?

Municipal actions and decisions can have a significant impact on the viability and future of local farms and the land they work. Below is a checklist to gauge how supportive of agriculture your town is. This list can help identify areas where additional attention could benefit your community. Consider taking this list to the various boards in town that could have a role to play in supporting agriculture and protecting farmland.

Understanding Agriculture in Your Town

Inventory: Do you know how much agriculture there is in town? People are often under the misconception that “there’s no agriculture in our town” or “there’s no future in farming.” It is important to understand the changing face of agriculture in order to appreciate and address the evolving business and land use needs of local farmers.

➤ **Action:** Consider conducting a town agricultural inventory to identify the number and types of farms in town, the acres farmed, the number of people employed by farm businesses, the property taxes paid and any other information that will help town officials understand the economic value of agriculture in your town as well as the business and land use needs of local farms (see examples on page 14).

Agricultural Commission: Does your town have a local agricultural advisory board? A town agricultural commission or advisory board can act as an advocate for agriculture. It can raise the profile of agriculture in a town, help other town boards understand the economic and land use issues that farmers face, work to preserve farmland and act as mediator and advocate on farm-related issues.

➤ **Action:** Consider establishing a town agricultural commission or advisory board. If your town has only a few farms, consider joining other towns and creating a regional agricultural commission (see examples on page 13).

Local Boards: Are there farmers serving on local planning and zoning, inland wetlands, and/or economic development commissions? All of these boards are involved in decisions that could affect the business and land use needs of farmers.

➤ **Action:** Encourage farmers to serve on town committees. This is one of the most effective ways for towns to incorporate agricultural concerns into local regulations and plans (see examples on page 42).

Definitions: The state of Connecticut defines agriculture in a broad and inclusive manner (*CGS § 1-1(q)*). Does your town apply this definition? Additionally, various agricultural businesses have very different needs that can test the balance of rules and exceptions.

➤ **Action:** Write flexibility into ordinances and regulations by using a broad definition of agriculture and thereby prevent many denials of the sort where “the rules don’t fit” (see examples on page 33).

Plan of Conservation and Development:

Does your POCD have a detailed section on agriculture? The POCD is the big picture view for the future of the town. Does your POCD refer to “maintaining rural character” but not necessarily address agriculture as a primary component?

➤ **Action:** Consider having a town appointed committee profile local farms and demonstrate the economic, cultural and environmental benefits of agriculture in your town. Including agriculture up-front can be very helpful. Update your POCD to express the value agriculture contributes to your town’s quality of life (see examples on page 17).

Assistance: Does your town publicize where to get advice and assistance on farm questions? Towns can facilitate the connection to local, state and federal agricultural and conservation organizations that can serve as resources to local farmers.

➤ **Action:** Identify and designate a key municipal official or agricultural commission member to help with such questions (see examples on page 13).



Creating a Supportive Business Environment for Farming

Economic Development: Is agriculture part of the local economic development strategy? Agricultural businesses are frequently undervalued in terms of their effect on the local economy, and opportunities for agricultural economic development are often overlooked.

➤ **Action:** Convene local farmers and producer groups to identify business needs and opportunities — such as potential processing and distribution facilities and transportation needs — and work with town and state officials, farm organizations and neighboring towns to address those needs (see examples on page 14).

On-Farm Retail: Does your town allow roadside stands or pick-your-own operations by right? Flexibility in zoning ordinances or regulations helps to promote profitable farm retail opportunities.

➤ **Action:** Consider amending your town's zoning regulations so that certain agricultural operations don't need a special exception or variance (see examples on page 18).

Signs: Are off-site signs that attract and direct farm stand customers allowed in town? Farm stands are often seasonal businesses that need to capture potential sales at harvest time.

➤ **Action:** Allow signs that give directions to the farm stand and let customers know what items are available (see examples on page 34).

Off-Farm Sales: Can farm stands sell produce purchased elsewhere? Many towns have rules that a certain percentage of farm stand produce be grown on the farm.

➤ **Action:** Allow an expanded product line that includes items not grown on the farm. This can carry farm stands through bad seasons and offers local consumers added choices (see examples on page 33).



On-Farm Processing: Does your town allow on-farm processing facilities? Farm businesses with expanded product lines and a focus on direct marketing are increasingly relying on on-farm processing facilities such as bakeries, kitchens and wineries.

➤ **Action:** Allow on-site processing facilities that enable farms to diversify and increase their viability (see examples on page 19).

Compatible Businesses: Are businesses that are compatible with agriculture allowed in your town?

Farm-based compatible businesses, such as machinery repair shops, sawmills, bed and breakfasts, and other businesses, can help farm families improve profitability.

➤ **Action:** Allow such infrastructure and businesses that are necessary for thriving farm businesses (see examples on page 19).

Celebrate Agriculture: Does your town have an agricultural fair or apple festival, sponsor a farm tour, or have any other events to demonstrate the value of local farms?

➤ **Action:** Sponsor or hold such events. Incorporate agriculture education in school activities and curriculum. When students and residents learn about agriculture, they will better understand the benefits of having farms in town (see examples on page 44).

Buy Local: Does your town support the purchase of local foods? Farmers' markets, farm-to-school programs and farm-to-institution sales can support family farmers by increasing local demand for their products.

➤ **Action:** Consider purchasing food from local farmers and encouraging institutions to do the same (see examples on page 43).

Supporting Appropriate Tax Policies for Farmland and Buildings

Use Assessment: Does your town publicize and apply Public Act 490, assessment of farm and forest land by use? Connecticut General Statutes provide for owners of eligible farm or forest land to apply for classification of their land as farm or forest land and thus pay taxes based on this use value (CGS §12-107).

➤ **Action:** Tax land based upon its use; work with assessors to establish reasonable acreage thresholds (see discussion on page 24 and full statute in Appendix A).

Tax Exemptions: Does your town publicize and apply state tax exemptions for farm tools, products and seasonal greenhouse structures? Farmers are eligible for a number of property tax exemptions, including:

- farming tools (CGS §12-81 (38))
- farm products, including produce and animals (CGS §12-81 (39))
- sheep, goats, and swine (CGS §12-81 (40))
- dairy and beef cattle, oxen, asses and mules (CGS §12-81 (41))
- poultry (CGS §12-81 (42))
- nursery products (CGS §12-81 (44))
- temporary structures, such as hoopouses, for seasonal production of plants (CGS §12-81 (73))

➤ **Action:** Encourage the use of these tax exemptions to help keep farms viable in your town (see full statute in Appendix A).

Property Tax Abatement: Does your town make use of enabling legislation that allows an abatement of up to 50 percent of property taxes for most farms? A municipality may vote to abate up to 50 percent of the property taxes of a dairy farm, fruit orchard, vineyard, vegetable farm, nursery or tobacco farm, as well as any farm that employs nontraditional cultivation methods (CGS § 12-81m).

- **Action:** Consider allowing these abatements in your town to recognize the many values that local farms provide (see full statute in Appendix A).

Additional and Enabling Tax Exemptions:

Does your town make use of enabling legislation that allows exemptions for farm machinery and farm buildings? Farm machinery (except motor vehicles) up to \$100,000 in value is automatically exempt from local property taxes. A municipality may vote to provide an additional \$100,000 exemption from property taxes for machinery. A town may also vote to provide an exemption from property tax for any farm building, including those used as housing for seasonal employees, up to \$100,000 per building (CGS § 12-91).

- **Action:** Enact this legislation in your town to help keep local farms viable (see full statute in Appendix A).

Developing Strategies to Protect Your Town's Best Farmland

Prioritized Farmland: Are areas identified where your town wants to support agriculture over the long term? Does your town know where its best farmland soils are located? Do you know which farmers in your town might be interested in protecting their farmland or are planning to sell in the near future?

- **Action:** Collaborate with the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), University of Connecticut Center for Land Use Education and Research (CLEAR), local land trusts and other organizations to identify important farmland as well as areas threatened by development (see examples on page 14).

Farmland Protection Program: Does your town encourage the use of conservation easements on farmland? Conservation easements can protect farmland in perpetuity while keeping farms in private ownership. Does your town support applications to the state or federal farmland protection programs, which provide funding for permanent conservation easements? Does your town meet the qualifications to participate in Connecticut's Joint State-Town Farmland Preservation Program? Does your town have an established fund for farmland preservation?

- **Action:** Consider holding a public forum to educate landowners about farmland protection options.

Establish a fund to support local applications and take steps to meet the criteria for the Joint State-Town Farmland Preservation Program (see examples on page 25).

Lease Land: Does your town lease town-owned land to farmers? A municipality may also purchase farmland outright and lease the land to local farmers.

- **Action:** Conduct an inventory of town-owned land and ensure that land suitable for agriculture is available to local farmers. Support farmers leasing town land by helping to meet infrastructure needs. Encourage a CSA or community garden on smaller parcels (see examples on page 39).

Infrastructure Limits: Does your town limit the expansion of infrastructure into areas where the town wants to support agriculture over the long term? Avoiding the extension of water and sewer lines through or near farmland can be a great deterrent.

- **Action:** Focus water, sewer and other services in already developed areas to limit the development of your town's best farmland. Consider incorporating these policies into town documents such as the POCD and zoning regulations (see examples on page 20).



Limiting the Impacts of New Development on Agriculture

Neighbors: Does your town have policies to mitigate conflicts between farmers and non-farm neighbors? Right-to-farm ordinances can ensure that new residents are made aware that they are moving into an area where farming occurs. These ordinances can also prevent unnecessary lawsuits between farmers and non-farm neighbors by establishing a process to resolve conflicts before the courts are involved.

- **Action:** Helping residents to recognize that agriculture is usually a business, not just a lifestyle, can ease potential tensions. Adopt a local right-to-farm law to express support for agriculture and reinforce protections provided by state law (see examples on page 23).

Buffers: Does your town require buffer zones between farmland and residential use? Non-farmers who live next to active agricultural businesses may soon realize they do not enjoy all aspects of the neighboring farm.

Buffers can reduce potential “nuisances” and prevent neighbor frustrations.

➤ **Action:** Require new residential development to provide for its own buffer zone and/or landscape plantings for screening when necessary (see examples on page 22).

Conserve Farmland: Does your town have policies aimed at limiting the impact of non-agricultural development on productive farmland? Does your town have strategies for limiting the footprint of new development? Creative site planning can accommodate new development while maintaining the agricultural base. While increasing minimum lot sizes may seem helpful, it reduces landowner equity and can increase land fragmentation.

➤ **Action:** Consider conservation subdivisions and cluster housing, which can minimize the loss of productive agricultural land. In some communities,

transfer of development rights regulations can help protect farmland in a “sending area” while directing development to a designated “receiving area” (see examples on pages 20-22).



This questionnaire was developed based upon a section of *Preserving Rural Character through Agriculture*, written by Gary Matteson for the New Hampshire Coalition for Sustaining Agriculture.

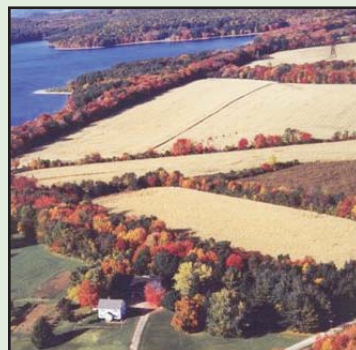
How did your town do? Consider the action steps below each question that received a “no.” Share the checklist with others in your town, especially other municipal officials. They may be better able to answer some questions and will benefit from thinking about the options that exist for your town.

CASE STUDY: TOWN OF TOLLAND — INVOLVING FARMERS IN PLANNING

In preparation for a 2007 update of its Open Space and Conservation Plan, local officials in Tolland invited farmers to discuss steps the town could take to support their businesses. This listening session, held in conjunction with the town’s involvement in the Capitol Region Council of Government’s (CRCOG) development of model regulations governing agriculture, marked the beginning of a more supportive environment for farms in Tolland.

One issue raised at the listening session was signage. Farmers voiced concern that, under local zoning regulations, they were not allowed to use seasonal signs by right. After reviewing the CRCOG-recommended language for signage, town officials changed the zoning regulations, effective November of 2007, to allow signs that advertise the seasonal availability of farm products.

Another issue discussed was land preservation. Although Tolland had been actively acquiring open space — passing two bond referendums of \$2 million each for an Open Space Fund — these funds had been used to acquire land in fee, not the purchase of conservation easements. Working with the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service, the town planner helped persuade town officials to partner with the federal Farmland Protection Program to permanently protect a 155-acre farm



(the town expenditure was \$365,000). The town’s third bond referendum of \$2 million for land protection, passed in 2006, includes language allowing expenditures for conservation easements on farmland.

Taxes were a third topic of discussion. Farmers encouraged the town to make use of a property tax reduction that allows municipalities to provide an exemption from property tax for any farm building, up to \$100,000 (see Appendix A, CGS § 12-91). The Town Council is currently considering enacting this tax program.

Lastly, the listening session helped make town officials aware that local farmers are increasingly using value-added processing and agritourism to support their farm businesses. As a result, the town revised its regulations governing commercial facilities and on-farm events. Farmers may now apply for a special permit for structures used for the retail sale, “storage, packing, processing and bottling of Connecticut grown farm products, provided a portion of the product is produced on land owned or leased by the proprietor.” These regulations also cover roadside stands, accessory food service, as well as animal petting zoos and carriage, wagon and sleigh rides.

Tolland’s initial gesture of inviting farmers to a listening session proved to be an important catalyst for municipal actions that will help preserve the viability of local farms and the community’s rural character.