



NEWS

New Jersey State Agriculture Development Committee

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE:
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New Jersey Ranks #1 in the Nation for Addressing the Loss of Farmland

The American Farmland Trust (AFT) has just issued its multi-year study on farmland loss across the nation titled “Farms Under Threat: The State of the States,” that concludes New Jersey ranks first in the nation for implementing policies and programs to stem the loss of farmland. AFT is the only nation-wide nonprofit agency whose focus is exclusively on the preservation and protection of America’s farmland resources.

According to the report, 11 millions of acres of America’s agricultural land were developed or converted to uses that threaten farming between 2001 and 2016 – an area equal to all the U.S. farmland devoted to fruit, nut, and vegetable production in 2017—or 2,000 acres a day paved over, built up, and converted to uses that threaten the future of agriculture.

The report’s Agricultural Land Protection Scorecard is the first-ever state-by-state analysis of policies that respond to the development threats to farmland and ranchland, showing that every state can, “and must”, do more to protect their irreplaceable agricultural resources. The Agricultural Land Protection Scorecard analyzes six programs and policies that are key to securing a sufficient and suitable base of agricultural land in each state and highlights states’ efforts to retain agricultural land for future generations.

New Jersey earned the top spot in the ranking due first and foremost to its long and impressive record of preserving farmland under the State’s Farmland Preservation Program (FPP). The FPP is administered by the State Agriculture Development Committee (SADC) – an eleven-member board comprised of farmers, public members, state agencies and the NJ Secretary of Agriculture. To date, New Jersey’s Farmland Preservation Program has resulted in the permanent protection of over 2,600 farms, accounting for more than 237,000 acres – or roughly one-third of all farmland in the state – and has made a bigger financial investment in farmland protection than any other state in the country. And while NJ earns the top rank for protecting its farmland it is also ranks 3rd among states with the most threatened agricultural land (Texas is #1 and North Carolina #2), evidencing the continued need for a strong Farmland Preservation Program.

The study found that coordination between state and local governments is essential in creating and implementing successful programs to permanently protect farmland, support agricultural viability, and provide access to farmland now and for future generation to come. New Jersey earns high scores for policy tools beyond its Farmland Preservation program, including 1) the program’s requirement

that counties and municipalities adopt comprehensive farmland preservation plans in order to receive state funding; 2) creation of Agricultural Development Areas that encourage New Jersey counties to protect and support farms that form large contiguous areas of protected farmland; 3) New Jersey's Farmland Assessment law that enable farmland owners to pay property taxes based on the agricultural value of their land; 4) giving farmers access to state-owned farmland through agricultural leases; and 5) the SADC's creation of a 'farm-link' program – an on-line tool that helps farmers looking to find new properties to farm, and landowners seeking farmers – to connect and create new farming opportunities.

“We are incredibly proud that New Jersey has been recognized by AFT as a leader in the nation for thinking ahead and working smart to create the best environment to support the preservation of farmland and the agricultural industry” said Agriculture Secretary Douglas H. Fisher. “This accomplishment would not have been possible without the strong commitment of everyone involved – from state, county and municipal governments and our land trust partners, to farmers and farmland owners, and of course, ultimately to the voters of New Jersey who have consistently voted their support for raising public funds needed to make farmland preservation a reality.”

“I, like Secretary Fisher, am so proud our efforts have been recognized at the national level” said Susan Payne, Executive Director of the SADC, “but this is no time to rest on our laurels. New Jersey farmers have new and evolving challenges facing them, from everchanging market demands to more volatile weather patterns associated with climate change. The task before us is to protect the best of New Jersey's farmland and support farmers in sustaining the viability of their agricultural operations over the long term”.

“Farmers, land trusts, public officials at all levels and the people of New Jersey deserve tremendous credit for seeing that farms were being destroyed by poorly planned real estate development and taking action in multiple ways over decades to protect this land and keep farmers on it,” said David Haight, Vice President of Programs at American Farmland Trust. “But, the job is not done. The state has some of the most expensive farmland in America making it difficult for a new generation of farmers to find land, while more needs to be done to help farmers use regenerative practices on this land and increase resilience to climate change. We look forward to working with the State of New Jersey and our many partners to sustain their position as a national leader and push for innovative approaches for addressing these emerging needs.”

Secretary Fisher pointed out that the SADC also administers other programs that were not highlighted in AFT's report including grants that enable preserved farmland owners to improve the viability of their agricultural operations by implementing conservation practices, upgrading irrigation and drainage systems and installing deer fencing to protect their crops. In addition, the agency administers the State's Right to Farm (RTF) act which protects responsible farmers from unduly restrictive municipal and county regulations as well as from nuisance complaints from neighbors.

“We can, and must, strive to preserve the State's farmland base, help farmers continue to be good stewards of the land, and create an environment where farm businesses can thrive now and, in the future” says Fisher. “AFT's report shows we're on the right track, but we must continue to forge ahead to remain a model of the best farmland protection practices for many years to come.”

AFT Farms Under Threat Study <https://farmlandinfo.org/publications/farms-under-threat-the-state-of-the-states/>