

Project Summary

Project Title:

Building a Stable Farmland Base in Connecticut's Eastern Uplands

Primary area for consideration:

Farmland and Forestland Stabilization

• *Develop approaches to increase farmland and forest acreage under stable land tenure with enhanced conservation management practices.*

This project seeks to demonstrate an approach that will stabilize farmland tenure and increase conservation management practices in three communities of the Eastern Uplands. The project will focus on increasing landowner readiness to restore farmland, lease farmland, and implement conservation practices.

Project duration:

09/01/2014 – 08/30/2016

Project director name:

Jiff Martin, UConn Extension, Sustainable Food Systems Associate Educator
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Names and affiliations of project collaborators:

- **Capitol Region Council of Governments** (Mary Ellen Kowalewski, AICP , Director of Policy Development & Planning, and associated staff)
- **Town of Coventry** (Eric Trott, Director of Land Use; Darby Pollansky, Coventry Agriculture Committee, Chair; and members of other related land use committees/commissions)
- **Coventry Agricultural Committee** (Nancy Messino and Darby Polansky)
- **Town of Tolland** (Linda Farmer, AICP Director of Planning & Community Development/Zoning Officer; the Tolland Agriculture Commission; and members of other related land use commissions)
- **Town of Mansfield** (Jennifer Kaufman, Natural Resources and Sustainability Coordinator; the Mansfield Agriculture Committee; and members of other related land use commissions)

Project background:

Over the past 8-10 years, many Connecticut municipalities have taken significant steps to better plan for agriculture. This might include raising funds for farmland preservation projects, hosting workshops about conservation options, exploring town-owned farmland leasing, passing Right to Farm ordinances, incorporating agriculture goals into the Plan of Conservation and Development, and coordinating a farmers market or agriculture celebration. Outreach programs led by American Farmland Trust, CT Farmland Trust, UConn Extension, Councils of Government, and the AgVocate Program (a project of Eastern CT Resources Conservation and Development, Inc.) have built much of this momentum by developing toolkits, training local champions, and sharing success models from other towns. Although better ‘planning for agriculture’ has a notable effect on the viability of farming in any given community, the actual quantity and condition of working farmland continues to drive how many and what type of agriculture enterprises can operate in each town.

Local champions are well aware that whenever farmland ownership is in flux, the potential of leasing or selling to a subsequent producer is critically important. Real estate markets for residential properties depend heavily on transparency between buyers and sellers (think of realtor.com). By contrast, owners of agricultural properties often depend on informal channels within the agricultural community to indicate when land is for sale or lease. Owners of larger operations who manage several parcels in a single community sometimes function as informal farm agents. At a point in time when farmland may be changing ownership, and the potential for considering implementation of new conservation practices or restoration is elevated, there is very little opportunity to offer timely information since the transaction is private. The lack of transparency for farmland in real estate markets also makes it nearly impossible for new farmers to find out about opportunities to buy or lease farmland.

Project Objectives

The purpose of the project is to stabilize farmland in the Eastern Uplands of Connecticut (i.e. Towns of Coventry, Mansfield, Tolland) by tapping into farming networks and engaging local agriculture champions in order to catalyze farmland restoration projects, boost farmland conservation practices, and expand farmland leasing opportunities for new and beginning farmers.

The objectives are:

- 1) To engage town planners, local champions, and agriculture commissions to work collaboratively to identify and target farmland owners for outreach about conservation management, restoration, and leasing opportunities
- 2) To provide guidance to farmland owners who are interested in conservation management, farmland restoration, and farmland leasing. This guidance will include information about the opportunity to utilize the NRCS Environmental Quality Incentive Program.
- 3) To build competency among town planners, local champions, and agriculture commission members in understanding the guidance to farmland owners, as well as farmland owner perspectives, on conservation management, farmland restoration, and farmland leasing

- 4) To build an interest among farmland owners in supporting new agriculture businesses, and thereby increase opportunities for farmland leasing for new and beginning farmers
- 5) To demonstrate a model outreach approach that can be replicated in other towns and sub-regions of Connecticut.

Project Methods

As a first step, the PI will assemble the Project Planning Team and staff, including recruiting a project coordinator. The Project Planning Team will meet monthly for the duration of the project. Once assembled, the initial task will be a mapping exercise of 490 farmland parcels in each town. The project planning team will agree on the mapping criteria and scale, in order to enable consistent analysis in the next step. Once the maps are complete, the project team will evaluate the status of parcels to identify parcels that 1) could potentially benefit from access to funding for conservation practices or farmland restoration, and/or 2) have potential for leasing to new and existing producers. Once the analysis is complete, an outreach plan for each town will be designed and implemented. The outreach plan may vary among towns, however the outreach is anticipated to include 1) a mailing to 490 landowners about tools for farmland leasing, conservation programs (EQIP), and restoration; 2) a survey of current land tenure practices and status; 3) an invitation to targeted landowners for participation in program to learn more about tenure, conservation programs, restoration programs. These events will be designed in manner that informally builds new networks among landowners, and introduces the concept that this sub-region can/should be friendly and stable for farmland seekers, and introduce some tools and resources. Ongoing one-on-one outreach to interested participants will continue based on survey results and input during the prior small group meetings. A follow up activity will be the coordination of a minimum of two farmland tours for landowners and land seekers to visit parcels, learn evaluation techniques from the project's Land use/conservation specialist, and discuss options for conservation/restoration. Finally, at the conclusion of the project there will be a summary of this approach designed for sharing with other sub-regions that may be interested in a similar program.

Location and size of project area:

The project will focus on three towns in the Eastern Uplands of Connecticut: Town of Mansfield, Town of Coventry, Town of Tolland.

EQIP eligible producer participation

This project will focus on landowners, producers and land trusts that will be eligible for EQIP programs. One of the project's objectives is to share information and resources about technical and financial assistance programs through the NRCS Environmental Quality Incentives Program and to encourage leasing mechanisms that will satisfy EQIP requirements for eligibility. The project will actively encourage leasing mechanisms that are consistent in duration with the life of EQIP contracts (which allow producer control over the land for the duration of the conservation practice). The project will also encourage applications to EQIP programs in order to implement conservation management practices that will improve the likelihood that farmland will become available for leasing to new or existing producers.