

Farmland Preservation and Conservation in Litchfield County, Connecticut

Danielle Breakell
Environmental Studies (B.A.)
Brown University
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Executive Summary

During the 1950s and 1960s, urban sprawl began to encroach upon rural areas. Public concern over the conversion of farmland to nonagricultural uses exploded in the 1960s and 1970s as rural and suburban Americans began to witness the disappearance of farms firsthand. Governmental programs and private organizations have been established throughout the country to combat farmland loss by encouraging agriculture and protecting farmland.

Agricultural lands provide significant services which are lost when they are converted to developed uses. Farms provide ecosystem services, help to ensure food security, are a vital economic sector, and contribute tax surpluses for local governments. Farmland also provides rural amenities, recreational and educational opportunities, and preserves the cultural heritage of rural America.

Connecticut, like the rest of the country, has been losing farms and farmland to development and conversion for decades. Although the number of farms in Litchfield County is growing, farms are becoming smaller, and farm operators are an aging group. Suburban sprawl is encroaching upon the rural land in Litchfield County, and development interests and demand for housing drives up land and real estate prices.

As rich agricultural lands are lost, so are the ecosystem services, economic benefits, and other amenities which they provide. Many private and governmental organizations seek to conserve and preserve farmland in multiple ways. Federal and state governments have enacted environmental protection and purchase of conservation easement programs that protect farmland. Land trusts and other conservation organizations such as the Nature Preserve and the Working Lands Alliance participate in and encourage conservation efforts and encourage legislation that supports farms.

This study seeks to answer the following questions: Which farmland preservation or conservation program/organization is the most effective at protecting farmland? What opportunities and barriers to farmers in Litchfield County face in participating in farmland preservation and conservation programs? It seeks to determine why farmers participate in some programs, and why they do not participate in others, and what farmers know about conservation and preservation programs.

Farmers are motivated to participate in farmland preservation programs by economic benefits, the prospect of their land indefinitely remaining in agricultural uses, and as an estate planning tool. Barriers that they face include a lack of knowledge about programs and opportunities to protect their land and owning land that does not qualify under these programs. Stringent regulations and high costs also prevent farmers from participating in some farmland protection programs, such as EQIP manure management. Communication gaps between farmers

and conservation organizations create a significant barrier, in that farmers are less likely to participate in programs because they simply are not knowledgeable of them.

Purchase of development rights programs are significant tools in protecting farmland and making agricultural lands available to farmers. The Farmland Preservation Program administered by the Connecticut Department of Agriculture is the most influential farmland preservation player in the state. The program has preserved more farmland throughout the state and Litchfield County than any other single organization.

Policy initiatives such as Public Act 490 have been helpful in protecting farmland from conversion. Public Act 490 discourages land conversion by encouraging landowners to leave their property as open space, forested, or agricultural lands. The Community Investment Act provides funding for farmland preservation programs, and has resulted in the protection of numerous farms.

In other cases, improvements in policies can significantly benefit farmers. Municipal right-to-farm policies, for example, can help to support farms and ease the demographic transition that accompanies the expansion of urban sprawl. Reforming local zoning regulations that are intended for residential areas but have adverse affects on farming operations will also prove beneficial.

The current real estate lull provides an opportunity for the success of conservation and preservation efforts. Large tracts of farmland, as well as conservation easements, can be purchased at lower values, and greater amounts of land can be protected for future generations. Putting aside land now, before it is converted to agriculture, is necessary to ensure that future farmers in Litchfield County will have access to land to farm.

Efforts to make programs more accessible to farmers and to increase farmer knowledge about conservation and preservation efforts are invaluable in ensuring the protection of land. Bridging communication gaps and encouraging farmers to utilize farmland protection programs as a form of estate planning can help to ensure that land is available for the benefit of future generations.