

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Agriculture has historically been, and will continue to be, one of Otsego County's most important industries. Agriculture bolsters our economy, helps maintain our county's rural landscape, attracts visitors, maintains community character, and contributes to the health of our residents. This 2017 Otsego County Agriculture and Farmland Protection Plan (AFPP) will guide County-level policymaking and serve as a reference for agricultural service agencies and organizations, environmental nonprofits, and the farming community as they work to advance the agricultural sector and protect farmland in Otsego County.

To get an idea of just how important farming is to Otsego County, a Cornell University study found that for every dollar of agriculture-related output, an additional 45 cents is distributed throughout the local economy.

Otsego County adopted its first Agriculture and Farmland Protection Plan in 1999. In the 17 years that have passed, agriculture has changed significantly but continues to play a key role in our county's identity and economy. At the same time, the agricultural sector faces several challenges which could threaten its long-term viability in the county. Some of these challenges, such as the consolidation of the dairy sector, have

been around for decades—while others, such as strengthened environmental regulations, are relatively new. The 2017 AFPP provides a pathway for Otsego County to increase the chances for success and sustainability of its farms and agricultural sectors.

To get an idea of just how important farming is to Otsego County, a Cornell University study found that for every dollar of agriculture-related output, an additional 45 cents is distributed throughout the local economy. The dairy industry is the largest contributor to Otsego County's agricultural economy. The market value of all agricultural products sold by County farmers in 2012 was over \$66 million! There are roughly 661 workers with a \$5.5 million payroll. The overarching goal of the AFPP is to increase the economic impact of our agricultural sector moving forward.

2017 OTSEGO COUNTY AGRICULTURE AND FARMLAND PROTECTION PLAN: HIGHLIGHTS

The 2017 AFPP provides a 30,000-foot view of the current conditions and challenges regarding agriculture in Otsego County. The planning process was coordinated by the Otsego County Soil and Water Conservation District (SWCD), the Otsego County Planning Department (OPD), and the Otsego County Conservation Association (OCCA) with assistance from several agricultural agencies and organizations. Funded in 2014 by a grant from the New York State

Department of Agriculture and Markets, SWCD formed the Otsego County AFPP Update Committee (AFPPUC), which brought together a broad range of agricultural stakeholders and agencies, as well as non-profit organizations active in agriculture and farmland protection. The Committee gathered community and stakeholder input through four public workshops, two rounds of stakeholder interviews, and extensive secondary research conducted by members of the AFPPUC. Five sector-specific SWOT workshops (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats) enabled the Committee to gather additional, detailed input from the community and agricultural stakeholders. The 2017 AFPP is based on this broad range of data.

The Planning Process involved

- 4 public workshops
 - 2 rounds of stakeholder interviews
 - 5 sector-specific SWOT workshops
 - 100s of hours of extensive secondary research by AFPPUC members
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Photo Credit: T. Capraro

Otsego County has many positive attributes that make it a great place to farm. Otsego County is well-positioned to access the urban markets of the Northeast coast, with a population of 40 million. A growing demand for locally grown food, both here in Upstate New York and on the Eastern Seaboard, makes for a largely untapped market for Otsego County farmers, and the county's excellent soils—especially in the valleys and in the northern part of the county, and overall positive attitudes about farming at the

municipal level serve to create a welcoming environment for agriculture. As our county's economy evolves, the county should capitalize on these advantages to ensure the growth and diversification of Otsego County agriculture.

At the same time, several challenges persist. Low milk prices, small profit margins given high input costs, high property taxes and increasingly complex regulations, an aging farm population without clear farm succession plans, inadequate baseline agricultural data, and the lack of a robust marketing and distribution program for local farm products – the County and agricultural stakeholders must address these challenges directly where possible if agriculture is to prosper here. Especially important is the integration of the agricultural sector into the County's economic development strategy.

The AFPPUC prioritized the development of a plan that is realistic and achievable. The plan provides a vision for Otsego County agriculture going forward, and then identifies six actions and four priority projects, each with strategies for implementation.

RECOMMENDED ACTIONS AND PRIORITY PROJECTS

The 2017 AFPP identifies **seven recommended actions** that will help achieve the AFPPUC's vision of sustained agricultural development and farmland conservation. These are:

- Build organizational capacity in the county to support agricultural economic development and implement policy.
- Revitalize the Otsego County Agriculture and Farmland Protection Board to better address the needs and goals of Otsego County's agricultural sector.
- Support existing and develop new agricultural economic development programs.
- Help Otsego County farmers better market their products.
- Enhance the quality and availability of agricultural data in Otsego County.
- Provide educational programs to multiple audiences and enhance technical assistance to farmers.
- Develop critical farm infrastructure and continuing to protect farmland. Related to the seven overarching recommended actions, four priority projects were identified as critical to the implementation of the plan. These are:
 - Develop a detailed plan to implement the 2017 AFPP across sectors.
 - Develop and implement technical assistance programs for agricultural producers.
 - Identify and preserve Otsego County's most at-risk farmland.
 - Improve the marketability of Otsego County's agricultural goods and services.