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Capital Region Foodshed Assessment

The New York State Capital Region stretches across 11 counties and is home to over 1.2 million people. With almost 150 thousand individuals living with food insecurity and a slowly shrinking but strong farming industry, addressing agriculture preservation is not just important to food security but for economic development and sustainability as well.

State and Local Policy

Almost every county in the Capital Region has released some sort of agricultural protection plan in the past 15 years to highlight each county’s agricultural history and the importance of protecting the industry. Of the 11 counties that make up the Capital Region foodshed, their collective agriculture and farmland protection plans generally include sections dedicated to goals, initiatives or objectives to address issues farmers face and incentivize for growing their respective county’s agriculture industries. Every plan introduced stresses that agriculture is important to communities to create jobs, support businesses and to produce local sustainable food. Agriculture is not only an important industry to New York State’s markets but it also contributes to the aesthetics and heritage of the Capital Region.

While each county’s plan is separate, generally the plans introduced similar policies based on state laws and initiatives towards agricultural economic development. Common policy options and initiatives highlighted across the foodshed include agricultural districts, the right-to-farm, agriculture conversion easement, land use planning, state grant programs.

Agriculture districts are a New York State initiative enacted in 1971 as an article of the New York State Agriculture and Markets Law in order to, “preserve, protect and encourage the development and improvement of agricultural land for the production of food and other agricultural products” (Brenna 2014). Currently there are 38 agriculture districts across the Capital Region. Farms that are included in agriculture districts receive a variety of incentives to support the farming industry such as preferential real property tax assessments and protections against restrictive local ordinances and nuisance lawsuits.

One of the most important benefits for farms in New York is the opportunity to receive real property assessments based on the agricultural value of land rather than developmental value. This is a valuable policy tool that saves the collective agriculture industry millions of dollars in taxes every year. While this policy was originally only offered to farms included in agriculture districts, today, farms do not need to be included in agriculture districts to receive agricultural value assessment (Albany County 2004).

Capital Region Farms - 2012				
	# of farms (2012)	Geographic Size (square miles)	Total Acres of Farmland	% of land in farmland
Albany	494	533	63,394	19%
Columbia	494	468	95,378	32%
Fulton	211	533	31,869	9%
Greene	273	658	42,986	10%
Montgomery	659	410	131,386	50%
Rensselaer	495	665	88,763	21%
Saratoga	583	844	78,849	15%
Schenectady	169	210	19,868	15%
Schoharie	532	626	98,369	25%
Warren	117	932	9,528	2%
Washington	851	846	189,391	35%
Total Foodshed	4,878	6,725	849,781	20%
NYS Resources	35,537	54,556	7,183,576	21%

Comparison of the size of each county’s farming industry.

Another benefit of agriculture districts is the Right-To-Farm. This policy places the burden on the state, county or local government when trying to implement public projects in these districts. Detailed reviews of public projects in agriculture districts protect farmers by avoiding impacting farming operations (Brenna 2014). While this policy is only offered to farms in agriculture districts under New York State law, Columbia County and several towns in Saratoga County have implemented their



Agriculture conversion easement or the purchase of development rights is a common policy across the country that protects farmland by placing a voluntary legal agreement restricting the deed to agriculture property to ensure the continued use of that property to be only for agriculture. Farmers keep the deed to their land but sell the right to develop the land for non-agricultural purposes to the town, county or state. This is an important tool for communities to preserve their agricultural history. Several counties in the Capital Region including Albany, Columbia, Greene, and Fulton had either implemented or considered this policy in their agriculture protection plans. Using land for use other than what development rights were bought with the property results in penalties from the state (Barrett 1991).

Land use and zoning are important local policies to conserve farmland by preventing high density neighborhoods and protect the natural landscapes or the aesthetics that are farm friendly. Land use decisions vary across counties in the Capital Region. In most counties, land use decisions are decided by towns. Towns can approach planning and zoning to support however their community develops but are often influenced their county comprehensive plans.

The Foodshed

In 2012, The Capital Region generated more than \$546 million in agriculture commodity sales, a 26% increase since 2007. More than \$352 million came from livestock, poultry and their products and \$194 million came from crops, nurseries and greenhouses. New York State is the third largest dairy producer in the United States and roughly 10% of New York State's dairy cows, dairy farms and livestock and their product sales come from the Capital Region. The Capital Region foodshed makes up 12% of all land, 12% of farmland, 14% of all farms and is the source of 10% of agriculture commodity sales in New York State (USDA 2012). Agricultural products that the Capital Region is known for producing are short-rotation woody crops, such as those used by the paper industry, and Saratoga County sells the third most of horses and

own local initiatives to extend the right-to-farm to more farms (Albany County 2004).

Farms included in agriculture districts receive protections by the New York State Department of Agriculture and Markets from restrictive local ordinances. When local laws restrict or impact farming operations the Department of Agriculture and Markets will work with local governments to mend the laws. Finally, the Commissioner of Agriculture and Markets has the authority to declare what farming practices are considered sound in agriculture districts. This decision avoids nuisance lawsuits by determining what specific practices should be allowed.

Two tax incentives to support agriculture in New York are farm building tax exemptions and farmers' school tax credits. Barns, greenhouses and other buildings on farmland that are proven to be essential to farm operations are exempt from property tax increases. Farms must be at least 5 acres large to receive this tax benefit. Farmers are also eligible to receive an income tax credit incentive from their local school district tax. To be eligible for this credit a farm must only contribute to New York agriculture and receive 2/3rds of their gross income from farming. This tax credit is funded by the state and does not affect local school district's funding (Albany 2004).

Total Market Value of Agriculture Commodities Sold - 2012

	Total in \$1,000	Crops, including nursery and greenhouse crops in \$1,000	Livestock, poultry, and their products in \$1,000
Albany	45,957	31,072	14,884
Columbia	66,524	35,906	30,618
Fulton	9,301	3,368	5,933
Greene	22,392	9,733	12,659
Montgomery	86,791	21,498	65,293
Rensselaer	53,066	28,075	24,991
Saratoga	79,968	19,456	60,512
Schenectady	4,161	2,943	1,218
Schoharie	39,500	15,388	24,112
Warren	(D)	(D)	(D)
Washington	139,147	26,934	112,213
Total Foodshed	546,807	194,373	352,433
NYS Resources	5,415,125	2,249,227	3,165,898

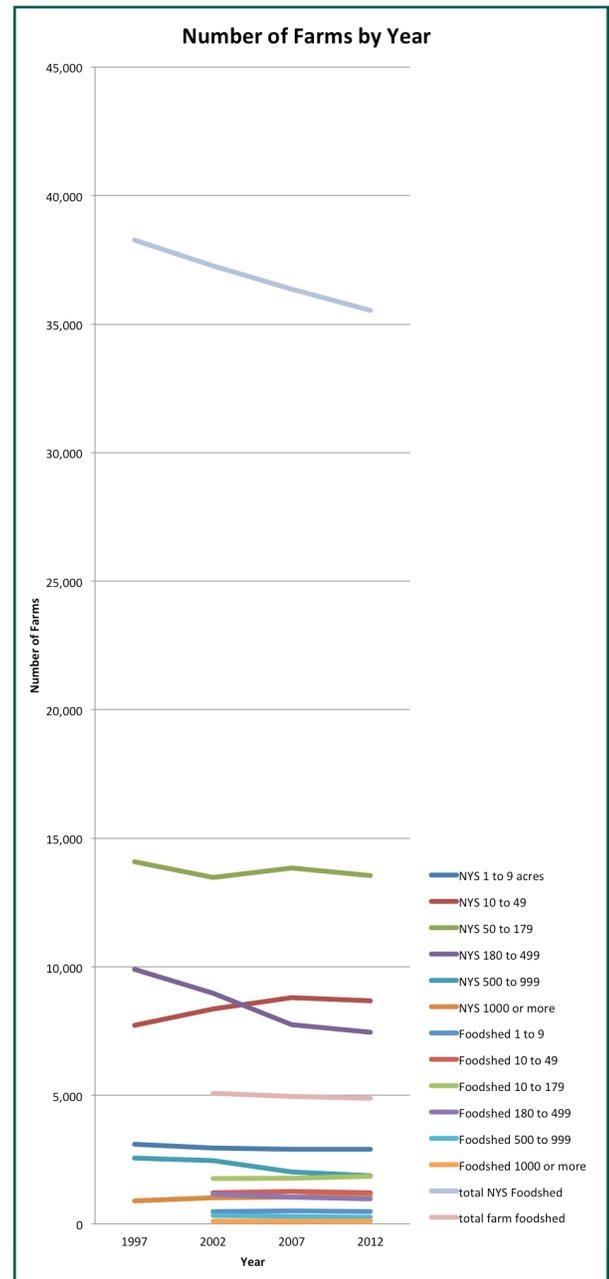
The agriculture industry in New York State and in the Capital Region earns most money from animal products.

ponies in the state (DiNapoli 2015).

As of 2012, the Capital Region is home to 4,878 farms. Of all the farms in the foodshed 3,911 have cropland, 1,695 raise cattle, 293 raise hogs and pigs, 378 raise sheep, 923 raise chickens for eggs, 489 harvest vegetables to sell, and 252 farms own land in orchards. Farms in the Capital Region occupy 850 thousand acres and 56% of this farmland is land for crops. Farmland makes up almost 20% of all land use in the Capital Region. In 2012, the collective agriculture industry across the eleven counties owned about \$474 million in machinery and the total value of every farm was more than \$2.5 trillion (USDA 2012).

On average, Columbia county has the most valuable farms and farmland per acre, though Washington county has the most farms and acres of farmland (USDA 2012). The average farm size is 159 acres, but the median size is only 83 acres so the region is dominated by smaller farms. Almost 75% of farms around the region are smaller than 180 acres. In comparison, New York State's average farm size is 202 acres and the national average is 434 acres (DiNapoli 2015). Of every farm in the region, 2,803 principal operators identify farming as their primary occupation while 2,075 identify another job as their primary occupation. Of all farm principal operators in the region, 1,730 worked another job off their farm at least 200 days in 2012 (USDA 2012).

From 2002 to 2007, there was a decrease of 114 farms and 93,554 acres of farmland around the Capital Region. This was about a 2% decrease in farms and a 10% decrease of farmland. Similarly, New York State saw a 2% decrease in farms and a 6% decrease in farmland (USDA 2007). From 2007 to 2012, the reduction of the local agriculture industry repeated again, but not as severely. In 2012 there were 81 less farms and 7,303 less acres of farmland in the Capital Region than there were in 2007. From 2007 to 2012 the Capital Region experienced 2% decrease in farms and a 1% decrease in farm land. New York State instead experienced a 2% decrease in farms but a less than 1% increase in farm land (USDA 2012).



There has been a slight decrease in farm operations around New York State and the Capital Region in recent years.

Farms with Cattle - 2012					
	All Cows and Calves			Milk Cows	
	# of farms	# of livestock		# of farms	# of livestock
Albany	147	9,765		21	1,431
Columbia	150	13,811		38	5,457
Fulton	63	3,466		22	1,549
Greene	90	2,362		22	556
Montgomery	312	30,483		191	13,660
Rensselaer	170	11,366		34	4,061
Saratoga	135	18,690		34	8,301
Schenectady	15	761		4	292
Schoharie	241	13,290		72	5,285
Warren	8	136		1 (D)	
Washington	364	49,807		164	22,336
Total Foodshed	1,695	153,937		603	62,928
NYS Resources	13,559	1,419,365		5,427	610,712

Dairy is one of New York State's largest agricultural product markets, see how each county compares in New York's Capital Region.

Policy Options

Option 1

Revisit County Agriculture Protection Plans:

More than half of the county plans were drafted longer than ten years ago. To provide policies most specific to each county's needs, new plans should focus on recent industry trends.

Option 2

Increase Market Opportunities:

Farms should focus on providing consumers in the community with produce to develop the Capital Region's local markets. New agriculture plans should focus on how helping farms can help consumers too by implementing farm to table initiatives that reflect local and recent consumer spending.

Option 3

Diversify Agriculture Products:

The plurality of agricultural products sold from the Capital Region are cattle and dairy. Increase vegetable and specialty crops to provide more diverse products and become a more self sufficient and food secure region.

Key Organizations

There are many organizations that address local food security and agriculture protection around the Capital Region:

- **The New York Farm Bureau:** The New York Farm Bureau is a nonprofit farming advocacy organization. The Farm Bureau offers resources and information to farmers and helps to develop agriculture in New York State.
- **The New York State Department of Agriculture and Markets:** The New York State Department of Agriculture and Markets is a state agency tasked with implementing many of the policies of the New York State and federal government related to agriculture.
- **The Cornell Cooperative Extension:** The Cornell Cooperative Extension is a nonprofit organization operating under Cornell University. The organization provides a vast variety of information and services to farmers often at little to no cost.



Glossary of Terms

Capital Region Foodshed: A foodshed is a geographic area that serves as a population's food source. The Capital Region Foodshed is made up of eleven New York State counties including Albany, Columbia, Greene, Fulton, Montgomery, Rensselaer, Saratoga, Schenectady, Schoharie, Warren and Washington.

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For a complete list of county agriculture protection plans please contact the CPI team VISTA, Emma Bettiol, at ebettiol@siena.edu

Community Policy Institute

The Community Policy Institute builds capacity surrounding policy within the Capital Region. We provide researched-based policy information to our community partners who use the information to modify best practices and advocate for policies that will further the development and effectiveness of direct community engagement.

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