

Ontario County Agricultural Enhancement Plan



September 2000



From an adaptation by Francis Hole, in *Songs of the Soil*, which echo the emphasis of Aldo Leopold on landscape community (date unknown).

*'Tis a gift to have soil;
'Tis a gift to have land;
'Tis a gift to belong to the place whereon we stand;
And if we are contented with the work that we are doing,
We've discovered a community that's energy renewing
When true community is gained,
To bow and to bend we shall not be ashamed;
To turn and to turn will be our delight,
Till by turning, turning we come 'round right.*

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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PREFACE

Agriculture is an integral component of Ontario County's economic diversity and overall well-being. In addition, farms provide valuable scenic open space, recreational and tourist opportunities, food and habitat for wildlife, and add to the overall quality of life for employers and residents.

At the same time, agriculture faces considerable challenges and obstacles. For this reason, Ontario County enlisted the services of Cornell Cooperative Extension to prepare an *Agricultural Enhancement Plan for Ontario County*, funded by the New York State Department of Agriculture and Markets and the County.

The *Agricultural Enhancement Plan for Ontario County* identifies trends, as well as specific obstacles and opportunities, facing agriculture. Descriptions of the dairy, livestock, vegetable, orchard, grape, greenhouse, and ornamental horticulture segments of the agriculture industry are presented. More importantly, conclusions and recommendations for enhancing agricultural businesses and fostering new opportunities are suggested (see *Sections VI and VII*).

The goals described in this report were developed with input from farmers, agribusinesses, agencies, and the general community. One clear overlying message was heard time after time -- **a multi-faceted, community-wide approach is essential for protecting agriculture and farmland in Ontario County. No single activity will provide the answer.**

Because a cooperative effort amongst farmers, agribusiness, local and county governments, agencies and other organizations is necessary to implement this plan, the Agriculture Enhancement Board recognizes that it will play an important role in providing direction and facilitating an overall collaborative strategy.

The Board will encourage the formation of a working group comprised of agency members, organizations, public officials and farm leaders to develop a detailed work plan, based on the various suggestions described in this plan.

In the end, this plan and its recommendations will provide the foundation for future agriculture preservation and enhancement efforts; however, it is simply a starting point.

*Norbert Amberg, Chairman
Ontario County Agriculture Enhancement Board*

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The purpose of this plan is to:

- 1) create general awareness for community leaders and the general public about the significance, challenges, and economic potential of agriculture in Ontario County;
- 2) identify agricultural resources in need of protection and present appropriate farmland protection techniques; and
- 3) present options to strengthen the economic vitality of agriculture and retain productive farmland.

A strong and sustainable agricultural industry provides many economic and quality of life benefits to residents and local communities, including:

- \$252 million annually to the local economy (based on 1997 data)
- thousands of full and part-time employment opportunities
- a net tax surplus for local economies
- recreational and tourism opportunities
- readily available produce that is locally grown and fresh
- protection of environmental quality and natural resources
- scenic open space and working landscapes
- food and habitat for wildlife
- quality of life/rural character that attracts other employers

The climate of Ontario County, as well as the soil and water resources it possesses, supports a very diverse agriculture industry. **In fact, there are few areas of the world that host the combination of agricultural resources (soil, fresh water, and favorable climate) that we do in Ontario County.** *Approximately 50% of Ontario County's land is classified as prime farmland.*

Agricultural producers in Ontario County are an important part of the national food system and compete *nationally and internationally* to supply U.S. consumers with milk and meat products, vegetables, fruits, cereal grains, and various other agriculture products.

Farmers play a significant role in protecting the health and sustainability of soil, water, and wildlife resources. To minimize the impact that farming practices may have on the environment, the agricultural community is continually adapting its management methods according to most current management practice recommendations, including use of agriculture environmental management programs, integrated pest management, and rotational grazing.

The soils and climate of Ontario County offer the opportunity for many types of farming and a diverse range of agricultural products. Dairy, horse, beef, sheep, poultry, swine, cash crops, vegetable, vineyards, orchards, small fruit, nursery and greenhouse farms all play a significant role in food and agriculture industry in Ontario County.

The **total sale of agricultural products in Ontario County was \$78 million in 1997.** Because each dollar generated by the agriculture industry is subsequently recirculated throughout the local economy, **the annual sale of agricultural products yields an annual impact of \$252 million to the local economy.**

The loss of one **100-cow dairy farm in central New York yields a loss to the County's gross product (total goods and services annually produced in the County) of \$796,356.** This is an annual loss unless the farm is restarted or leased in whole or in part. This translates to a **per cow economic loss to the County of \$7,964.** The **economic loss per acre of tillable land is \$2,719** (based on 297 acres of tillable land on a 455 acre farm).

According to Census of Agriculture statistics (1997), **agricultural producers in Ontario County support a wide range of businesses.** Ontario County farms spent \$10.3 million on feed, \$10.0 million on hired labor, \$7.7 million on commercial fertilizers and agricultural chemicals, \$5.5 million on maintenance, and \$3.3 million on petroleum products in 1997. Agricultural producers support the following businesses:

- Construction, plumbing and general contractors
- Feed/grain suppliers and consultants
- Insemination services
- Veterinarian services
- Milk/cheese manufacturing, bottling, distribution, etc.
- Business management services
- Crop consultants
- Machinery dealerships/repair shops
- Processing and marketing businesses
- Seed, fertilizer, pesticide suppliers
- Inspectors, packers, haulers, shippers

Many factors influence development and land use patterns in Ontario County. Among them are the physical characteristics of the environment, proximity to regional resources and markets, the economy and employment opportunities,

transportation and other infrastructure systems, government regulations, and community attitudes.

Approximately 76% of Ontario County (311,900 acres) is classified as prime, unique, or of statewide significant agricultural soils according to the U.S. Dept. of Agriculture, Natural Resource Conservation Service. In the last seven years alone, 15,776 acres of prime soils were converted to non-agricultural uses. That means that **of the 311,900 acres of important farmland in Ontario County, 61% (119,876 acres) have already been converted to other uses.**

The agriculture industry in Ontario County faces considerable challenges and obstacles as it evolves from a conventional system to a new form of agriculture, which is more consumer-oriented, regionally connected and specialized. As the County becomes more urbanized, both internal and external pressures can weaken the economic feasibility of farming. Current local, state, and national pressures include:

- Maintenance of a Critical Mass
- Profitability
- Property Taxes
- Regulations
- Economic Policies/Growth Initiatives
- Lack of Community Awareness
- Land Use Policies
- Non-Farm Development
- Extension of Public Utilities
- Lack of Available Workforce
- Estate Taxes
- Wildlife Damage
- Limited Recognition for Change
- Economies of Scale
- Seasonality and Competition
- Federal Food Policies

Although the agricultural industry of Ontario County faces considerable challenges as it strives to adapt to new economic, social, and environmental circumstances, **the County also has a number of characteristics, which provide advantages to create new opportunities.** Opportunities include:

- Agri-tourism
- Proximity to urban markets
- Diversity

-
- Small scale food processing
 - Food Venture Center
 - Cooperatives
 - Wine industry

The Ontario County Agriculture Enhancement Board believes that land use controls alone will not maintain the County's farmland and critical mass of its agricultural community. Economically strengthening agriculture enterprises, increasing public awareness about the importance of agriculture, and gaining supportive local public policies provide the most effective and affordable means to agriculture and sustain farmland.

Goal 1 -- Enhance agricultural economic development.

Goal 2 -- Increase the awareness of the economic and social importance of agriculture.

Goal 3 -- Examine and adjust local government policies to protect farmland and enhance agriculture.

Goal 4 -- Acknowledge and enhance the environmental stewardship of farmers.

It is suggested that the Ontario County Agriculture Enhancement Board (AEB) form **task groups to discuss, research, evaluate and prioritize** the feasibility of implementing the strategies presented in this report.

The task/working groups should include AEB members, representatives of organizations, government, businesses, and individuals in the community who are interested in supporting agriculture and protecting farmland.

Strategies for enhancing agricultural economic development include:

- Farm business planning and development
- Integrating agriculture in State and local economic development initiatives
- Marketing, promoting, and developing local agricultural products
- Estate planning and ownership transfer
- Developing agricultural workforce

Strategies for increasing the awareness of the economic and social importance of agriculture include:

- Educating non-farm public through programs and development of educational materials

Strategies for examining and adjusting local policies and actions include:

- Addressing infrastructure development
- Agricultural conservation easement/purchase of development rights initiatives
- Local government finance impacts
- Planning review and coordination
- County referral review process

Strategies for acknowledging and enhancing environmental stewardship of agricultural businesses include:

- Support and expand voluntary programs
- Expand the "Lake Friendly Farmer" program
- Conduct a public information and education campaign

