

Maine's Farms and Farmland: The Foundation of a Rural Future

by Stacy Brenner, Abby Farnham, Emily Gherman-Lad, and Shelley Megquier

INTRODUCTION

Drive almost anywhere in Maine, and you'll see signs of agriculture: weathered barns, rolling hayfields, rows of vegetables bright against dark soil. Our farms and the farmland they depend on are not only a beloved part of Maine's identity, but also critical infrastructure for our economy, environment, and food security. Yet, behind this familiar landscape is an urgent truth: Maine's farmland and the people who steward it are at risk. Rising land costs, the accelerating loss of productive acreage, an aging farming population, and the increasing challenges of turning a profit threaten our rural communities in ways that ripple far beyond the farm gate (USDA NASS 2024a). If we want to keep Maine's working lands working, we must see farmland protection and farm business viability as two sides of the same coin. This is not just about conserving open space. It is about ensuring that farmers today and in the next generation can afford to farm, build resilient businesses, and create jobs and economic activity that benefit all Mainers.

FARMS AS ESSENTIAL INFRASTRUCTURE

When we think of infrastructure, we might picture roads, bridges, or broadband cables. But farms and farmland are infrastructure too; they sustain communities, create economic value, and secure our future.

Farming in Maine generates more than \$1.1 billion in direct economic impact each year, supporting nearly 13,000 jobs. If you add agricultural and food processing together, those sectors pump over \$7.7 billion into Maine's economy and sustain more than 33,000 jobs (FCE 2024). It is no wonder that the state's 10-year economic development plan identifies the food and agriculture sector as one of four areas with the greatest opportunity for growth (Maine DECD 2019).

Beyond dollars and jobs, farmland brings local fiscal value. Study after study shows that farmland and open space cost local governments far less in services than the tax revenue they generate. Nationally, for every dollar in property tax revenue collected, farmland requires just \$0.37 in municipal services, compared to \$1.16 for residential development (AFT 2016). The lesson is clear: keeping land in farming keeps towns financially healthy too. There is a municipal benefit to a verdant agricultural landscape.

And let's not forget farmland's climate role. Undeveloped farmland acts as a carbon sink. A 2020 University of Maine study found that by adopting more climate-smart practices such as cover cropping and rotational grazing Maine farms could sequester enough carbon to offset their own emissions and even more (Daigneault et al. 2021). Our state's updated *Maine Won't Wait* climate plan now calls for doubling the amount of permanently protected

farmland by 2030 and ensuring no net loss of farmland (MCC 2024).

Farms sustain communities in other essential, less quantifiable ways too. How we cultivate and steward the land and our connection to the land itself can hold familial, cultural, and spiritual significance for Indigenous communities, immigrant communities, and many others across the state."

A SHRINKING, PRECIOUS RESOURCE

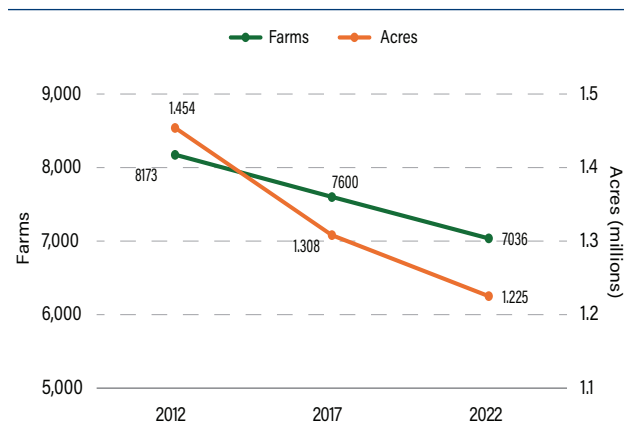
Despite all these benefits, Maine's farmland is vanishing. Between 2012 and 2022, nearly 230,000 acres fell out of agricultural production. In just the five years from 2017 to 2022, we lost over 82,500 acres (USDA NASS 2024a).

The threats are clear. Low-density residential development fragments open land, drives up land costs, and makes it harder for farms to thrive (AFT 2020). In Maine Farmland Trust's (MFT) experience, the average cost of agricultural land continues to climb, pushed even higher by buyers looking for rural escapes, hobby farms, or solar siting.

"I would say the number one issue farmers face is acquiring land. Farming in Cumberland has changed significantly just in my lifetime. There's been a handful of dairy farms that have gone out, older generations kind of die off, and their farms are turned into developments. If the easement weren't put in place, I'm fairly certain this wouldn't be a farm," says farmer Brendon Wormell, who runs a beef operation with his wife Brianna and their young family.¹

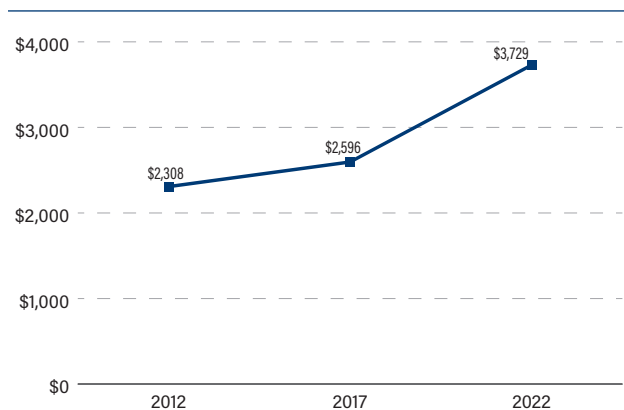
Just 15 minutes outside of Portland, their location allows them to reach target local markets for their

FIGURE 1: Changes in the Numbers of Farms and Acres of Land in Farms in Maine



Source: USDA NASS 2024a

FIGURE 2: Changes in the Estimated Market Value of Farmland and Buildings (Average per Acre) in Maine



Source: USDA NASS 2024a

beef, but also positions them in a fiercely competitive real estate market. “It’s nearly 100 acres in Cumberland. You can see the price tag on that for us,” says Brianna. “With no easement on the property, realistically there’s no way we would ever be able to touch this farm or the property itself.” The agricultural conservation easement protecting the farm, as well as an option to purchase at agricultural value provision designed to keep the farm in the hands of working farmers, helped the pair afford to purchase the farm from Brendon’s grandparents and keeps the land

available for agriculture in perpetuity.

The math is sobering: only 4.6 percent of all Maine farmland is permanently protected. When you look just at open agricultural land, the fields that actually grow crops and feed livestock, only about 3.5 percent are secured for farming in perpetuity.²

At the same time, according to the 2022 *Census of Agriculture*, Maine holds a unique position in New England: the state has more than 1.2 million acres of farmland, more than any other New England state. Together with Vermont, we anchor about 65 percent of the region’s entire agricultural base (USDA NASS 2024b). If our fields disappear, so does

New England’s chance to meet ambitious regional food security goals, like producing 30 percent of its food supply locally by 2030.

WHO WILL KEEP THE LAND IN PRODUCTION?

Farmland is only as secure as the farmers ready and able to work it. Right now, that’s not a given. Maine has over 7,000 farms, but our farm business owners are aging. The number of farmers over 65 increased by 18 percent between 2017 and 2022.

Meanwhile, the number of producers under 44 ticked up by less than 2 percent (USDA NASS 2024a).

Encouragingly, about 36 percent of Maine farmers are beginning producers who have been farming for 10 years or less, but they face enormous obstacles (USDA NASS 2024a). Land access is consistently the number one challenge, especially for young farmers and for farmers from historically excluded communities. A 2022 national survey by the National Young Farmers Coalition confirmed that securely accessing affordable farmland remains the top barrier for the next generation (Ackoff et al. 2022).

“You’re saving for years to be able to put 20 percent down. If you’re not coming from a farming background, you’re basically going to drain the resources, just getting your foot in the door,” says Andrew Toothacker, who owns and operates Hart Farm in Holden with his wife Becky, both first-generation farmers.³ After starting out on a small plot of leased land, they began their search for a property where they could scale up, each taking full-time jobs off the farm to build up their savings and working long days at the farm on weekends.

At last, they found the Holden property, which had been purchased by the Holden Land Trust and protected with an easement by Maine Farmland Trust a few years earlier. “The loan we needed to purchase the farm was reduced because of the agricultural easement, and that was the absolute maximum that we had capacity to spend,” Andrew says. “Without the easement, what that would have done to the value of the property, there’s just no way.”

A recent state report found that Indigenous and African American farmers often face compounded barriers: lack of outreach about available

resources, a history of land dispossession, and loan requirements that do not reflect diverse farming traditions (PCS-RITP 2022). Only 38 percent of Black or African American producers in Maine own all the land they farm, compared to 80 percent of white producers (USDA NASS 2024a). The bottom line is that even when the land stays open, there's no guarantee it stays in production. And even when a young person wants to farm, they may not be able to afford to do so.

FARM VIABILITY: KEEPING THE FARMGATE OPEN

A farmland easement might prevent a subdivision, but it doesn't pay the electric bill or rising property taxes or cover the cost of seed and labor. Keeping a farm business profitable is its own puzzle. The average cost of production per farm in Maine jumped by 24 percent between 2017 and 2022, while net farm income rose but still left many farmers in the red. In 2022, 63 percent of Maine farms operated at a net loss (USDA NASS 2024a).

This is where farm viability programs make all the difference. Business planning, marketing assistance, land-succession support, investment in agricultural infrastructure, and climate resilience funding help keep conserved farmland in productive use and keep farm families in business. Maine Farmland Trust's network of more than 550 farms shows how impactful this "protection plus viability" model can be.

"Early on, we were really using every ounce of energy and creativity just to keep cash flow coming in, even though we weren't being particularly profitable because we were running ourselves ragged," says Hannah Hamilton of The Buckle Farm, which she co-owns with her husband Jim Buckle on an easement-protected property in

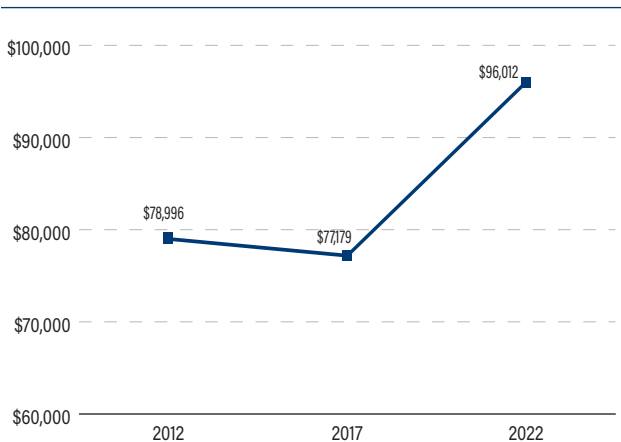
Unity.⁴ Participating in MFT's two-year farm-business-planning program helped the couple pivot toward wholesale markets and sharpen their focus. A \$55,000 implementation grant from MFT also helped them invest in efficiencies, including a wash conveyor that saves them about a day's labor per week.

"I will admit, I thought it was a bad idea to have such a strict business plan," Jim reflects. "But even if a plan doesn't go perfectly, at least you have an understanding of where you're heading, like, I know what my cost is, so how much do we put into it? How much can we sell it for? Where do we become profitable? It's easy to point to [the wash conveyor] to show that the grant was very powerful on the farm, but the mindset was really one of the key changes for me, to work smarter, not harder."

The dramatic need for support for infrastructure development was clearly demonstrated in 2022 when the state's Agriculture Infrastructure Investment Program received nearly \$850 million in funding requests for farm infrastructure needs, far surpassing the \$20 million that was available (Office of Governor 2022).

Maine farms spend more than \$675 million annually on local inputs like feed, fertilizer, labor, rent, and fuel money that recirculates in rural economies (USDA NASS 2024a). And yet, only about 3.4 percent of total food spending in Maine is local or regional (NEFSPP 2024). Boosting this share would keep more dollars close to home,

FIGURE 3: Changes in the Average Production Expenses per Farm in Maine



Source: USDA NASS 2024a, 2014

creating jobs and opportunity far beyond the farm itself.

FARMS AND CLIMATE: PARTNERS IN ADAPTATION

Farmers are already living with the realities of climate change. Unpredictable weather, heavier rains, and longer droughts are becoming the norm. A University of Maine survey found that over half of producers surveyed didn't have enough water during the 2020 drought (Schattman et al. 2021).

Maine's farms are also key to the solution. Keeping land in farming and equipping farmers to adopt climate smart practices is one of the best solutions we have. The *Maine Won't Wait* climate plan calls for ambitious farmland protection goals and investments in climate-smart farming techniques (MCC 2024). In addition, effective climate adaptation strategies deployed on farms support the business viability of the operations. Prioritizing soil health was the keystone goal at the time of the inception of the USDA's Natural Resource Conservation Service (NRCS)

in the 1930s in response to the dust bowl.⁵ Farmers need to be able to weather climate change disruptions to stay in business and to keep working lands working.

“Farmers are really creative, really hard-working, really smart folks. There are financial barriers to climate resiliency, though, and they’re going to lose us if we don’t get back up after tragic, extreme weather events. But, we’ve got this—just help us out through climate-smart agriculture investments because we’re here to stick it out and we’ve got ideas,” says Molly DellaRoman, who runs 5 Star Nursery & Orchard in Brooklin with her husband Tim Skillin.⁶ “We can do this, with the capital and infrastructure to make it work.”

A CALL TO ACTION: POLICY SOLUTIONS

Maine has the tools and resources to secure a resilient farm and food system if we use them wisely. Policy experts, farmers, and rural advocates agree on several clear steps:

- Expand dedicated funding for farmland conservation on the municipal, state, and federal levels, especially for protecting high-quality soils and land that can support viable farm operations.
- Increase support for next generation and historically underserved farmers, including by implementing strategies outlined by the Permanent Commission for land-linking programs, fair financing, and culturally relevant outreach (PCSRITP 2022)
- Invest deeply in farm viability, including investments in agricultural infrastructure, business planning and succession,

marketing, and climate resilience.

- Embed farms in economic development strategies recognizing that they are not only producers of food, but also job creators, climate stewards, and community anchors.
- Ensure that existing tax programs support farmers to the fullest extent possible by providing adequate incentives for robust agricultural production alongside farmland conservation and exploring new solutions to secure land access for farmers looking to start, build, and grow agricultural businesses.

CONCLUSION

At first glance, a hayfield in summer or a snow-covered orchard in winter may look timeless. But Maine’s working farms and farmland are anything but guaranteed. They require bold investment, thoughtful policy, and an unwavering commitment to ensuring that the next generation of farmers can securely put down roots, build businesses, and keep the land working for all of us.

If we protect the land and invest in the people who farm it, we don’t just preserve a landscape, we build stronger, more resilient rural communities, a climate solution rooted in shared heritage, and a food system that can nourish Maine for generations to come.

NOTES

- 1 Brendon and Brianna Wormell, Wormell Farms, interviewed Oct 18, 2023, by Mark Fleming in Cumberland, Maine for Maine Farmland Trust’s 2023 video “Thriving Farms, Thriving Maine.”
- 2 All agricultural land: MFT 2024 analysis of MFT Farmland Protection Database, State of Maine Conserved Lands Data, and 2022 Census of Agriculture for Maine; open agricultural land: MFT 2024 analysis of MFT Farmland Protection Database, State of Maine

Conserved Lands Data, and 2021 National Land Cover Database.

- 3 Andrew and Becky Toothacker, Hart Farm, interviewed Oct 19, 2023, by Mark Fleming in Holden, Maine for Maine Farmland Trust’s 2023 video “Thriving Farms, Thriving Maine.”
- 4 Jim Buckle and Hannah Hamilton, The Buckle Farm, interviewed August 8, 2024, by Chris Battaglia in Unity, Maine for Maine Farmland Trust’s 2024 video “Growing a Resilient Future: The Buckle Farm Story.”
- 5 NRCS History, <https://www.nrcs.usda.gov/about/history/brief-history-nrcs>
- 6 Molly DellaRoman, 5 Star Nursery and Orchard, interviewed by Shelley Megquier with Maine Farmland Trust on June 7, 2024, in Brooklin, Maine.

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Stacy Brenner is the president and CEO of Maine Farmland Trust. Before stepping into the role in 2024, Stacy had been engaged with the organization for 20 years as a farmer, a board member, and on staff as senior advisor. Her resume includes work as a barista, cotton farmer, nurse-midwife, and Maine state legislator.

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Shelley Megquier manages Maine Farmland Trust's federal, state, and municipal policy work and oversees its research work as policy and research director. Megquier's background includes domestic and international health and development policy and advocacy.