American Farmland Trust

New York State Joint Legislative Hearing on 2017-2018 Executive Budget Proposal

MONDAY, FEBRUARY 13, 2017

TESTIMONY PRESENTED BY:

DAVID HAIGHT
NEW YORK STATE DIRECTOR

"The policy of the State shall be to conserve and protect its natural resources and scenic beauty and encourage the development and improvement of its agricultural lands for the production of food and other agricultural products."

- Article XIV, Section 4, New York State Constitution

NEW YORK STATE OFFICE
112 Spring Street, Suite 207, Saratoga Springs, NY 12866
Tel: (518) 581- 0078 Fax: (518) 581-0079
newyork@farmland.org
www.farmland.org/newyork
Facebook: AmericanFarmlandTrustNY
Twitter: @FarmlandNY

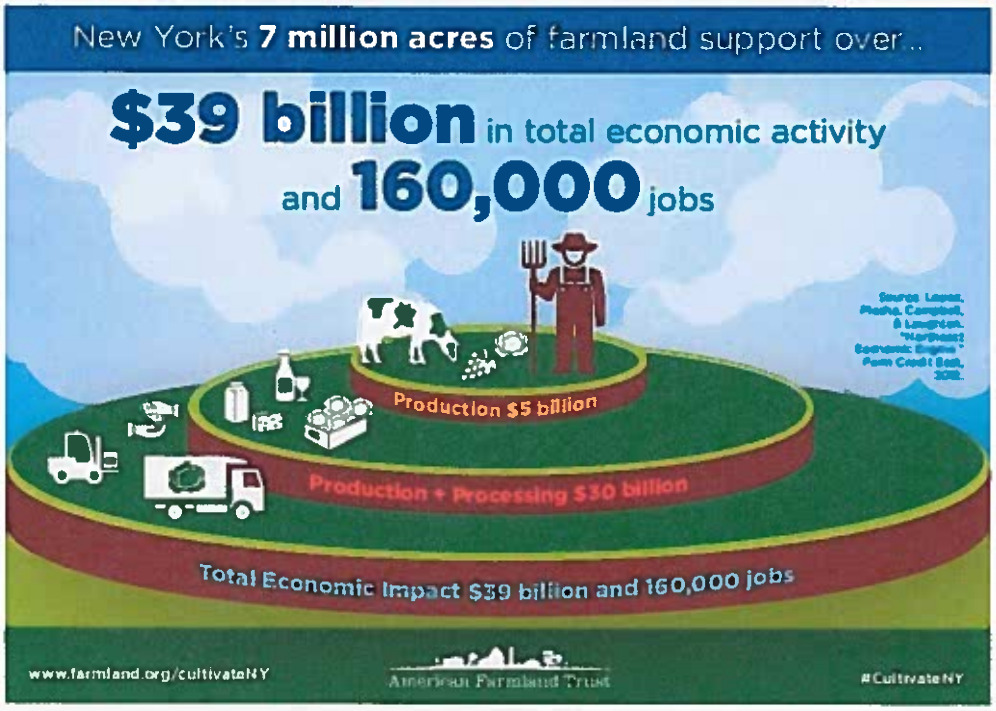
Good morning. I am pleased to be here to present testimony on behalf of American Farmland Trust (AFT).

AFT is a national conservation organization dedicated to protecting farmland, promoting sound farming practices and keeping farmers on the land. Since its founding in 1980 by farmers and citizens concerned about the rapid loss of farmland to development, AFT has helped protect five million acres of farmland and led the way for the adoption of conservation practices on millions more. AFT established its New York Office in 1990 as the state was home to some of the most threatened farmland in America.

Thank you for giving us the opportunity to address this hearing and for the New York State Senate and Assembly's strong support of our state's agricultural industry and for state programs that help farmers protect and steward their land.

FARMLAND FOR GROWING FOOD AND THE ECONOMY

Productive farmland – fertile soil – is the foundation for growing food and a robust farm economy in New York. New York is a national leader in the production of numerous fruits, vegetables, and dairy products. The state has the second highest direct-to-consumer sales of food in the nation and in 2010 New Yorkers spent $362 million purchasing local agricultural products directly from farmers. Farms serve as the cornerstone of the state's $39 billion farm and food economy and are closely tied to New York's food processing sector that processes milk, fruits, vegetables and grains into cheese, yogurt, baked goods, wine, beer, spirits and other food products - creating a total of over 160,000 jobs for residents across New York.



In addition to providing increased economic opportunity for New York farmers, improved access to fresh, healthy, locally-grown fruits, vegetables and other foods can also help address the urgent diet-related problems of obesity, diabetes and cardiovascular disease affecting millions of New Yorkers. In addition to the threat posed to public health, the public cost of diseases related to a poor diet is substantial. For example, New York's health care costs for treating obesity are approaching a staggering $12 billion annually.

Farmers are also critical allies in protecting drinking water at its source as they manage nearly 25% of the land in New York. Nearly half of all New Yorkers – including almost 9 million residents of New York City and the City of Syracuse – consume largely unfiltered public drinking water that is kept clean in part by efforts of public and private partners to assist farmers with protecting and stewarding their land so it acts like a natural water filter.

THREATS TO FARMING AND GROWING FOOD IN NEW YORK

Yet, access to locally grown fruit, vegetables, dairy and other farm products is under threat. More than 90 percent of the fruits and vegetables and 80 percent of the dairy products produced in New York State are grown in counties facing development pressure.

Tragically, nearly 500,000 acres of New York's farmland has been paved over due to poorly planned development since the 1980s, the equivalent of nearly 5,000 farms. This land could have been capable of producing as much as 500 million local meals annually.

Additionally, according to the 2012 Census of Agriculture, 30 percent of the farmers in New York are age 65 or older. They are farming some 2 million acres of land. Importantly, 92 percent of farmers are not working with an operator under the age of 45 alongside them poised to take over the farm

operation. Such demographics indicate that millions of acres of farmland currently in agricultural production in New York must transition to a new generation of farmers in the next decade, or risk being lost to development.

At the same time, a diverse, new constituency of people are looking to enter farming. Some of them grew up on a farm, others did not. They include young people, mid-career professionals, people of color, veterans, immigrants and others interested in getting into farming. However, they face major barriers. Studies from American Farmland Trust, United States Department of Agriculture, National Young Farmers Coalition, GrowNYC and others have identified that finding the right farmland under secure, affordable conditions is one of the biggest barriers for new farmers – particularly those that are not from farming families.

PROTECTING FARMLAND FROM REAL ESTATE DEVELOPMENT

New York's Farmland Protection Program was established by Governor Mario Cuomo and the New York State Legislature in 1992 to support local efforts to strengthen the future for the state's agricultural industry. Since then the Farmland Protection Program has provided funding for two primary purposes: 1) grants to municipalities and counties for the development of agricultural and farmland protection plans; and 2) grants to municipalities, counties and land trusts to purchase permanent agricultural conservation easements on farms.

To date, the state's Farmland Protection Program has awarded planning grants totaling $4,780,252 to 53 counties and 77 towns to assist in the development of local agriculture and farmland protection plans, outlining strategies for strengthening the economic viability of agriculture and retaining agricultural lands through farm friendly land use planning.

Last year (2016) marked the 20th anniversary of state funding for permanent farmland protection through the Farmland Protection Implementation Grant (FPIG) program. Since 1996, New York State has awarded nearly $238 million for farmland protection projects, with 236 farms permanently protected encompassing 59,800 acres of agricultural land. In October and November 2016, Round 14 of the state's Farmland Protection Program saw approximately $24 million being allocated to protect more than 11,860 acres of active farmland on 29 farms in 17 counties across New York. This is a tremendous accomplishment.

Last year, American Farmland Trust released **Cultivate New York**, a report highlighting the impacts of New York's FPIG program over the last 20 years. The report identified new threats to farmland and made recommendations for action to protect another 100,000 acres of farmland by 2026 to grow food and the economy in New York.

<u>SUSTAINING HISTORIC FUNDING FOR THE ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION FUND (EPF)</u>

Governor Andrew Cuomo's SFY 2017-18 Executive Budget Proposal maintains a historic increase to the EPF to record annual funding level of $300 million. The proposal includes $20 million for New York's Farmland Protection Program – the same level of EPF funds provided in SFY 2016-2017.

AFT strongly supports Governor Cuomo's proposal to fund the EPF at $300 million in SFY 2017-2018. A $300 million EPF will allow the State to better meet current demand and implement critical programs

to conserve open space and farmland, protect and improve water quality, build community resilience to a changing climate and achieve other important state environmental goals.

MAKING NEW YORK A NATIONAL LEADER IN PROTECTING FARMLAND

AFT encourages the Senate and Assembly to build on Governor Cuomo's proposal for $20 million for the State's Farmland Protection Program as part of the EPF. The $20 million proposed for the Program represents the same funding provided in SFY 2016-2017 - a fraction of the 65 applications requesting $49 million that were submitted in 2016.

We encourage the Senate and Assembly to work with Governor Cuomo to increase funding for the Farmland Protection Program by at least 10 percent annually by allocating at least $22 million from the EPF or other sources as part of a long-term effort to invest $300 million to protect another 100,000 acres of farmland by 2026.

AFT also encourages the Senate and Assembly to work with the Cuomo Administration to ensure that new farmland conservation projects are completed in less than two years. This change in expectations and improved program efficiency is critical for meeting farmers' needs and achieving the program's goals. This can be achieved by:

- Allowing greater flexibility to local farmland conservation partners in the design and implementation of state-funded projects;
- Improving capacity at the Department of Agriculture and Markets to consistently complete projects in less than two years;
- Providing financial support for building land trust capacity to work with communities and farm families to protect farmland and keep farmers on the land through programs such as the Conservation Partnership Program.

SUPPORTING FARMLAND FOR A NEW GENERATION

The significant generational transition occurring in New York's farm community requires strong action by the State of New York. This support should include both increased funding for permanently protecting farmland and provide coaching and individual assistance to farmers looking to find land and aid farmers and landowners looking to transition their farms or find someone to farm on their land. These needs were heard strongly in meetings convened by Governor Cuomo's Beginning Farmer Workgroup led by Department of Agriculture and Markets Commissioner Richard Ball.

We appreciate that Governor Cuomo has proposed to create a Beginning Farmer Program at the Department of Agriculture and Markets to make it easier for beginning farmers to navigate available resources and has suggested that the Department support local efforts to inventory farmland and connect farmers with non-farming landowners. However, it does not appear that Governor Cuomo's Budget Proposal includes staff to administer the new Beginning Farmers Program or additional funding to support local efforts to connect farmers with land.

AFT urges the Assembly and Senate to ensure that the necessary resources for such a program are included in the SFY 17-18 State Budget. This will provide aid and counsel to a new generation of

farmers searching for land in New York, and will ensure that new programs that are proposed do not take away resources from important existing programs like the state's Farmland Protection Program.

One approach to achieve these outcomes would be to create a Farmland for a New Generation Program. This could foster strong partnerships between the Department of Agriculture and Markets and the American Farmland Trust and other agricultural service providers to significantly expand support for new and next generation farmers in accessing and acquiring farmland. Such a statewide program is based on a promising regional model coordinated by AFT in the Hudson Valley, which has helped more than 100 farmers find land in the last two years. This network of support could include Cornell Cooperative Extension offices, land trusts, nonprofit organizations such as GrowNYC, and farm credit institutions among others.

A Farmland for a New Generation Program could be launched with $700,000 in funding allocated from the Farmland Protection Program funding line of the Environmental Protection Fund. This modest investment would enable the State of New York to significantly expand support for new and next generation farmers in a time of fiscal restraint. AFT is ready to work with the Department of Agriculture and Markets in any way to launch this new program.

EMPOWERING INSTITUTIONS TO BUY 25% OF THEIR FOOD FROM NEW YORK

Another way to protect farmland is to create more economic opportunities for farmers. Institutions that receive state funding for feeding people, including colleges, hospitals, schools, senior centers, emergency food providers and others, annually feed millions of New Yorkers. If state-run institutions were to spend at least 25% of their food dollars on food grown in New York, it would create a major new market for New York farmers.

The State has responded to this opportunity with new state initiatives such as Buy NY, and funding for the State's Farm to School program. Each school day, more than 1.7 million children are receiving lunch at school, and 500,000 also receive breakfast in New York. These meals are often their main source of nutritious food with schools in New York spending $366 million each year on food purchases.

Governor Cuomo has proposed to increase Farm to School Funding to $750,000 in the SFY 17-18 budget, a 50% increase from 2016-17. We encourage the Senate and Assembly to:

- support Governor Cuomo's proposal to increase Farm to School funding to $750,000 in SFY 17-18;
- expand state per meal reimbursements from the pilot program in Jefferson and St. Lawrence Counties included in the SFY 16-17 State Budget to other regions of New York to expand school buying power and increase children's access to fresh, minimally-processed food grown in New York;
- create additional staff capacity at the Departments of Agriculture & Markets and Education to facilitate continued growth of Farm to School in New York.

Thank you again for the opportunity to speak with you today and for the New York State Assembly and Senate's strong support of farmers, our state's farm and food economy and state programs that help farmers protect and steward their land.