



2026 Joint Legislative Hearing

Agriculture/Parks and Recreation Hearing on FY26-27 State Budget

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“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

Executive Summary: Budget Priorities for a Resilient Farm & Food Future

American Farmland Trust (AFT) commends **Governor Hochul's FY 2026–27 Executive Budget** for advancing several key investments that align with AFT's priorities to protect irreplaceable farmland, strengthen New York's local and regional food systems, and expand support for climate-smart, regenerative agriculture.

New York agriculture is at a defining crossroads. In just five years, the state has lost nearly **364,000 acres** of farmland and **2,788 farms**. Nearly **35% of New York** farmers are now **over age 65**, stewarding almost **two million acres** that are expected to change hands this decade. Meanwhile, global market instability, including renewed trade and tariff uncertainty, adds risk to farm finances and planning. State budget choices can function as practical risk-management by anchoring land, ownership, and demand here at home.

AFT respectfully urges the Legislature to enact an **FY 2026–27** budget that maintains the **Executive Budget's** strong baseline investments and makes targeted improvements where gaps remain:

- **Maintain \$25 million for the Farmland Protection program within the \$425 million Environmental Protection Fund (EPF).** Over the past 30 years, this program has protected 134,800 acres and delivers strong regional economic returns.
- **Maintain \$10 million for the 30% NYS Farm-to-School Initiative and \$1.5 million for the Farm to School Grant Program** to strengthen local food supply chains and expand markets for New York farmers.
- **Maintain \$19.1 million for the Climate Resilient Farming Program and \$18.65 million for Soil & Water Conservation Districts** to deliver soil health, flood mitigation, manure management, and whole-farm climate planning.
- **Advance the proposed “Sun and Soil” agrivoltaics concept to integrate solar development with active farming, while ensuring projects are farm-centered and protect agricultural soils.**

AFT further urges the Legislature to strengthen the Executive Budget by:

- **Restoring and including funding for Farmland for a New Generation New York (FNG-NY)** in the One-House Budgets. Since 2018, FNG-NY's Regional Navigator network has supported land access and succession planning and facilitated 234 successful land matches on 11,285 acres.
- **Adopting AFT and New York Grown Food for New York Kids Coalition modernization recommendations for the 30% NYS Initiative.**
- **Adopting a statutory definition of agrivoltaics** to prevent loopholes and ensure projects support simultaneous agricultural production and solar generation for the life of the project, protect soil health, and are designed with producers and agricultural experts.

With these actions, New York can protect the land that feeds us, support a new generation of farmers, strengthen regional supply chains, and create more reliable in-state markets that help farms withstand severe weather and global disruptions.

New York's Farmland is the Foundation of a \$85.8 Billion Farm and Food Economy

With more than 6 million acres¹ of farmland and 30,650 farms, New York is the breadbasket of the Northeast. New York is among the nation's top 5 producers of various dairy and fruit products, including cottage cheese, sour cream, yogurt, apples, and grapes.² The breadth of food and crops grown on farmland across New York is vast (Figure 1)—with just one acre of farmland providing approximately 1,000 meals per day to New Yorkers and other eaters across the globe.³ New York's farming, fishing, and forestry sectors have a \$85.8 billion in economic impact, while supporting 291,474 jobs.⁴ Farms are often considered “anchor businesses”—

keeping rural economies strong by retaining economic opportunities. Research has shown that for every 1,000 farm jobs, there are an additional 668 jobs in industries that assist or supply farms.⁵ Agriculture's mutual dependency on upstream and downstream industries such as equipment suppliers, trucking, and the restaurant and beverage industries intimately ties the health and success of this sector with that of New York's broader economy and serves as connective tissue between upstate and downstate, rural and urban communities.

The pandemic underscored the direct ripple effects of New York's farms on the state's economy while exposing significant vulnerabilities in supply chains. At the same time, it provided a pivotal moment to address these challenges and strengthen the foundational role farms play in building a more resilient

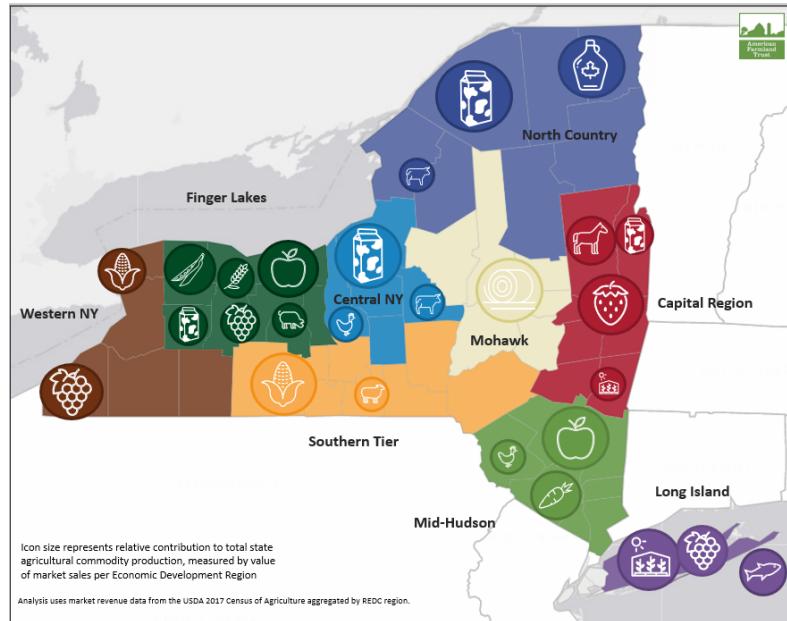


Figure 1 – Products Produced in New York by Regional Economic Development Council Region

¹ Farm Credit East. 2024. “Northeast Economic Engine: Agriculture, Forest Products, Commercial Fishing.” [Northeast Economic Engine: Agriculture, Forest Products and Commercial Fishing](#).

² Office of Budget and Policy Analysis. 2018. “Agriculture of New York State.” Office of the New York State Comptroller. <https://www.osc.state.ny.us/files/reports/special-topics/pdf/economy-agriculture-2018.pdf>.

³ Peters, Christian J., Jennifer L. Wilkins, and Gary W. Fick. 2006. “Testing a Complete-Diet Model for Estimating the Land Resource Requirements of Food Consumption and Agricultural Carrying Capacity: The New York State Example.” *Renewable Agriculture and Food Systems* 22 (2): 145–53.

⁴ Farm Credit East. 2024. “Northeast Economic Engine: Agriculture, Forest Products, Commercial Fishing.” [Northeast Economic Engine: Agriculture, Forest Products and Commercial Fishing](#).

⁵ Schultink, Gerhardus. 2009. “Land Use Planning and Open Space Preservation: Economic Impacts of Low-Density Urbanization and Urban Sprawl.” *Journal of Civil, Environmental, and Architectural Engineering* 3 (1).

and adaptive food system. This effort includes positioning farmers and the land they steward as essential contributors to climate change resilience—mitigating the impacts of extreme weather events—and as leaders in advancing sustainable solutions through the implementation of innovative, climate-conscious practices.

Today, renewed uncertainty tied to federal trade policy and retaliatory tariffs adds another layer of risk. When export markets tighten or become more expensive for buyers, products that would have been shipped overseas can be redirected back into domestic channels—intensifying competition and pushing down prices. Even farms that do not export directly can feel these impacts through weaker farmgate prices, more volatile demand from processors and distributors, and increased difficulty planning production and cash flow. Tariff-driven volatility can also raise the cost of essential inputs—equipment, parts, construction materials, and certain farm supplies—making it harder for farmers to invest in climate resilience and modernization.

In this context—where supply chain disruptions, extreme weather, and tariff-driven market volatility can quickly reverberate through every link of the food economy—public investments are not optional add-ons; they are essential risk-management tools. Programs that protect farmland, support farm transitions, and enable schools to purchase local products have consistently delivered strong returns for taxpayers by keeping land in production, strengthening local supply chains, creating jobs, and stabilizing in-state demand for New York farm products. Thanks to sustained leadership from the Senate and Assembly, these initiatives have earned broad, bipartisan credibility and support across rural and urban constituencies. For these reasons, we strongly urge the Legislature to collaborate with Governor Hochul to ensure these proven programs receive robust funding in the FY 2026–27 State Budget.

Farmland Protection Programs Save Land, Support Farmers, and Protect the Environment

New York is fortunate to have abundant water resources and fertile soils capable of producing “the full plate” while supporting a diverse network of farm and food businesses that connect urban and rural communities across the supply chain. According to the **2022 Farms Under Threat 2040: Choosing an Abundant Future** report by the American Farmland Trust, 54% of New York’s farmland is classified as nationally significant, meaning it possesses ideal characteristics for sustaining food and crop production while sequestering carbon with minimal environmental impact. However, this critical resource faces severe threats from high land prices and mounting development pressures⁶.

⁶ Hunter, Mitch et. al. 2022. “Farms Under Threat 2040: Choosing an Abundant Future.” https://farmlandinfo.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2022/08/AFT_FUT_Abundant-Future-7_29_22-WEB.pdf

To keep land in farming in New York, the state has invested in the Farmland Protection program within the Environmental Protection Fund (EPF) since 1996, purchasing voluntary agricultural conservation easements so land can remain in farming forever. Over the past three decades, New York has permanently protected **more than 134,800 acres** through this program—an essential tool for securing working lands, supporting farm viability, and enabling farm transition by reducing speculative development value. Yet, as noted above, the pace of farmland and farm loss in recent years far outstrips the pace of protection, underscoring the need to scale this proven program to meet current conditions. Demand is strong, with a substantial pipeline of shovel-ready projects seeking EPF support, reflecting both rising development pressure and increasing interest from landowners who want to keep farms in production.

Pressure on lands around urban areas threatens local food security and resilience—**over 80% of the fruits, vegetables, and dairy products produced in New York State are grown on farmland immediately surrounding urban areas**. As pandemic-era development trends and the rapid expansion of proposed solar projects signal new and intensified competition for these acres, New York must ramp up protection efforts to sustain the state’s economy and food security into the future. Projections indicate that by 2040, an additional **452,000 acres** could be lost to urban and low-density conversion, potentially resulting in the disappearance of **2,500 farms**, a **\$288 million** reduction in farm output, and the loss of **7,200 jobs**.⁷

Economic Benefits of Farmland Protection for Farmers and Surrounding Communities

Farmland protection programs help support farms and the communities that rely on them by permanently protecting farmland from development, while providing farmers with the funds they need to invest in business viability and longevity. Research has shown that farmers use the proceeds from the sale of their development rights to pay down debt, put money towards savings, purchase leased land, expand and diversify operations, upgrade farm equipment, and transfer farms to the next generation.⁸

Investments spurred by farmland protection funding have positive impacts that reverberate throughout the community, including keeping jobs in rural areas and fostering economic development. A study in Pennsylvania found that every dollar invested in farmland protection programs re-circulates within the

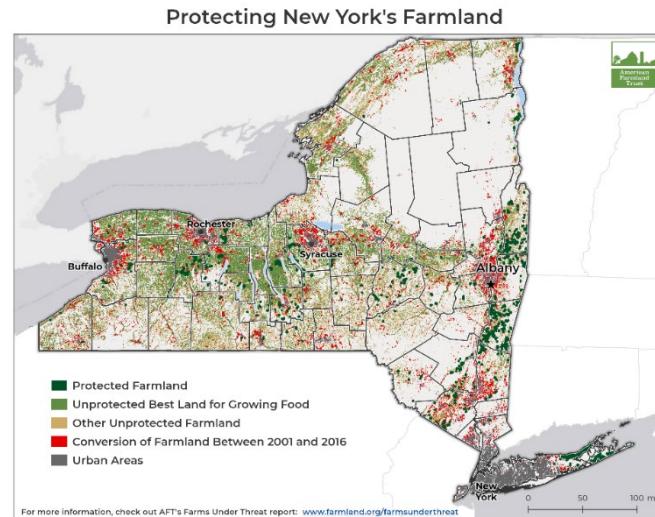


Figure 2 – Farmland Conversion and Protected Farmland in NYS

⁷ Hunter, Mitch et. al. 2022. “Farms Under Threat 2040: Choosing an Abundant Future.”

https://farmlandinfo.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2022/08/AFT_FUT_Abundant-Future-7_29_22-WEB.pdf

⁸ Seidl, Andrew, Ryan Swartzentruber, and Rebecca Hill. 2018. “Estimated Economic Impact of Federal Agricultural Conservation Easement Programs (ACEP) on Colorado, 2009-2017.” <https://s30428.pcdn.co/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2020/02/csu307173-RuralLandResearch-bk-www.pdf>.

local economy, with an economic multiplier of \$1.62-\$2.00.⁹ Protecting farmland also encourages other local farmers and business owners to invest in their own operations because they have greater confidence in the stability and longevity of the local agricultural sector. Protected farmland has also repeatedly shown to increase nearby residential property values between 1.2% and 2.6%, and local property tax revenues far more than “developable” agricultural land.¹⁰ Finally, on average, an acre of farmland in New York costs municipal governments \$0.34 per acre in services, compared to \$1.34 for residential land use.¹¹

Farmland Protection Facilitates Intergenerational Transition

Over a third of New York farmers, who own or manage nearly 2 million acres of farmland, are at or have surpassed retirement age. Farmland protection funding allows these senior farmers to retire without having to sell their land to a developer by freeing up equity in what is often their most valuable asset—their land. This, in turn, enables them to sell the farm at agricultural value, making land affordable for farmers looking to start new farm operations or invest in their existing operation. Bridging this financial gap is critical to keeping land in farming in New York as the state is beginning to enter a period of significant intergenerational transition of farmland.

Farmland Protection Helps Fight Climate Change while Providing Other Environmental Benefits

Keeping land in farming also retains environmental benefits that combat climate change and protect the health of New Yorkers. According to AFT’s 2017 *Greener Fields* report using NYSERDA data, **human activity on an acre of farmland produces 66 times fewer greenhouse gas emissions than human activity on an acre of developed land**, and strategic farmland protection coupled with smart growth planning can have significant greenhouse gas emission reduction benefits.¹²

Participation in farmland protection programs has also been shown to encourage the adoption of new, improved, and more widespread climate-friendly conservation practices. These practices aid in sequestering carbon, improving the quality of the air, soil, and water, and increasing farm viability when adopted long term.¹³ The healthier our soils, the greater the capacity of farmland to store carbon and convert the agricultural sector from a carbon source to a carbon sink—critical for meeting our climate goals. In addition to carbon sequestration, farmland also provides a range of reliable yet often-

⁹ Daniels, Tom. 2019. “An Analysis of the Economic Impact of Pennsylvania’s Farmland Preservation Program.” University of Pennsylvania.

https://www.agriculture.pa.gov/Plants_Land_Water/farmland/Documents/PA%20Farmland%20Preservation%20Economic%20Impact.pdf.

¹⁰ King, Jonathan R., and Christopher M. Anderson. 2004. “Marginal Property Tax Effects of Conservation Easements: A Vermont Case Study.” *American Journal of Agricultural Economics* 86 (4): 919–32.

¹¹ American Farmland Trust. 2016. “Cost of Community Services Studies.” Northampton, MA. https://s30428.pcdn.co/wpcontent/uploads/sites/2/2019/09/Cost_of_Community_Services_Studies_AFT_FIC_201609.pdf

¹² Arjomand, Sanaz, and David Haight. 2017. “Greener Fields: Combating Climate Change by Keeping Land in Farming in New York.” American Farmland Trust. https://s30428.pcdn.co/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2019/09/AFT_NY-GrFields-RPT_FNL2lo.pdf.

¹³ Esseks, J. Dixon, and Brian J. Schilling. 2013. “Impacts of the Federal Farm and Ranch Lands Protection Program: An Assessment Based on Interviews with Participating Landowners.” University of Nebraska-Lincoln: Center for Great Plains Studies. <http://farmlandinfo.org/publications/impacts-of-the-federal-farm-and-ranch-lands-protection-program-an-assessment-based-on-interviews-with-participating-landowners/>.

unaccounted-for cost-saving environmental services such as air pollution removal, wildlife habitat, and flood mitigation.

NY is Increasing the Pace of Permanent Protection and Farmers Continue to Show Strong Interest in Permanently Protecting Their Farmland

Farmer interest in permanently protecting working farmland remains exceptionally strong, and in recent years the Governor and Legislature have taken important steps to make New York's Farmland Protection Implementation Grants (FPIG) program more accessible and better resourced. Most notably, Governor Hochul announced a **record \$67 million** now available through FPIG—described as the highest funding level offered in the program's near-30-year history and boosted by the Environmental Bond Act.¹⁴

At the same time, New York's audit work underscores that *how* funds are allocated and deployed will determine whether this historic investment delivers maximum impact. The State Comptroller found that while the Department of Agriculture and Markets has effectively awarded and distributed funds in compliance with contract requirements, there are clear opportunities to improve program performance statewide—especially by increasing **speed, equity, and fit with today's land market**:

- **Speed (reduce avoidable delays):** In FPIG rounds 18 and 19, the reallocation process contributed to lengthy waits after conditional approvals—averaging **233 days** in round 18 and **181 days** in round 19. The audit also noted that allocating funds equally across regions without considering eligibility and participation can contribute to delays, particularly because the NYC region has been allocated funds despite being ineligible in recent rounds due to the lack of approved agricultural plans.
- **Fit to market (modernize constraints):** The audit found that the **\$2 million award cap** (set in 2014) can disproportionately constrain projects in higher-value regions facing greater development pressure. With farmland values rising substantially since the cap was set, the same cap can translate into fewer acres protected per project over time.
- **Equity and participation (expand access statewide):** Protected acres are concentrated in a few regions, and **27 of New York's 62 counties (44%)** have never received a farmland preservation grant. The audit also found evidence that some local partners may not be fully informed about the program or its requirements—highlighting an opportunity for targeted outreach and technical support.

Taken together, the message is clear: **New York is scaling up investment, and demand is real—but the state can increase the return on this record funding by reducing delays, updating key program parameters, and strengthening participation in underrepresented regions.**

¹⁴ The River Reporter. (n.d.). *Hochul announces \$67 million available to protect New York farmland*. Retrieved January 24, 2026, from <https://www.riverreporter.com/stories/hochul-announces-67-million-available-to-protect-new-york-farmland,237351>

Regional examples of demand include:¹⁵

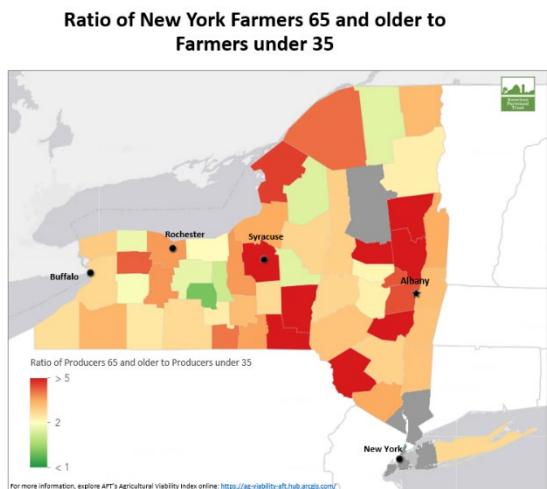
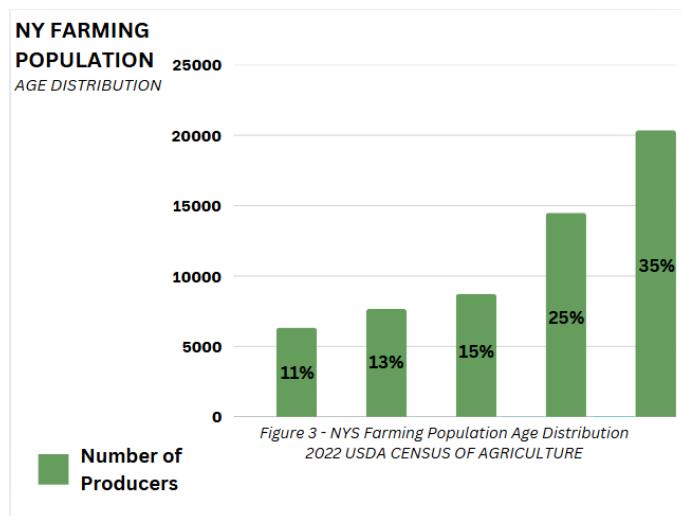
- **Hudson Valley:** Farms in the Hudson Valley are at high risk of being lost due to farmers aging, urban flight, and development pressure. Orange County Land Trust has 12 farmers wanting to protect their farms totaling over 1400 acres of farmland. Dutchess Land Conservancy is working with eight farmers willing to protect 1,198 acres of farmland. The Hudson Valley currently has among the highest rates of local food sales in the state and is a key part of the foodshed for multiple downstate urban centers.
- **Capital Region:** The Agricultural Stewardship Association (ASA), a land trust that conserves farmland in Washington and Rensselaer counties, is working with 25 farmers that are interested in this program, with a potential to protect an additional 5,125. They also report frequent calls from farmers who are seeking more information about protecting their farms. Columbia Land Conservancy is working with 2 farmers to protect 595 acres and Saratoga PLAN is working with 9 farmers to potentially protect 1,017 acres. farmers.
- **North Country:**
Tug Hill Tomorrow Land Trust serves Jefferson, Lewis, Oneida, Oswego, Herkimer, and Saint Lawrence Counties. They have 13 farmers interested in protecting an additional 4,500 acres who meet the requirements for the FPIG program and have approached the land trust about applying to the next round of funding.
- **Mohawk Valley:** The Mohawk Hudson Land Conservancy works in Albany, Montgomery, and Schenectady counties and receives about two calls monthly from farmers interested in conserving their land or finding farmland.
- **Central New York:** The New York Agricultural Land Trust (NYALT) consolidates and submits applications from Cayuga, Cortland, Onondaga, Oswego, Seneca, and Madison counties. Between these counties, 17 farmers with 3,884 acres have expressed interest in protecting their farms.
- **Finger Lakes:** Finger Lakes Land Trust is working with five farmers to protect 2000 acres, Genesee Land Trust is working with 16 farmers to protect 7,422 acres, and Genesee Valley Conservancy. has 32 farmers interested in participating in the farmland protection program, adding 15,628 acres of potential protected farmland.
- **Western NY:** Western New York (WNY) Land Conservancy is working with 7 farmers that are willing to participate in the farmland protection program, adding 1,912 acres of farmland.
- **Long Island:** Peconic Land Trust is working to protect thirty-eight acres of farmland in Suffolk County, an area with a large population, high land prices, waning farmland acres, and enormous development pressure. North Shore Conservancy has two farmers interested in protecting 86 acres.

American Farmland Trust and the Alliance for New York's Farmland urge the Legislature to maintain and strengthen farmland protection at **\$25 million** as part of an EPF of at least **\$425 million** in the FY 2026–27 one-house budgets—and to pair that investment with targeted reforms that improve timeliness, equity, and acreage outcomes statewide.

¹⁵ Data comes from a survey of land trust staff across NYS conducted in November/December 2024.

Transitioning Land to a Diverse New Generation of Farmers

New York is at the beginnings of a large-scale intergenerational transition of farmland. According to the 2022 USDA Census of Agriculture, 35% of New York's farmers were over 65 with an additional 25% nearing retirement age (Figure 3). **These senior farmers own or operate nearly 2 million acres of land vulnerable to being lost forever as it changes hands, and AFT's research shows that more than 90 percent of these senior farmers do not have a young farmer-operator involved in the ownership or management of the farm ready to take over.**¹⁶



in Figure 4, which spatially color-codes each county by the ratio of senior to young farmers working within that county with yellow, orange, and red counties representing those where there are more than two farmers over 65 for every farmer under 35. These ratios are highest in Broome (9:1), Onondaga (6:1), Greene (5.5:1), and Saratoga (4:1) counties, which are all above the median ratio for the state (3:1). **For the future of the state's farm and food system, we must work to ensure that this land makes its way safely into the hands of a diverse new generation of New York farmers.**

Farmland Protection Program Keeps Land in Farming and Contributes to Farmland Affordability

As stated above, a well-funded farmland protection program plays an integral part in a successful intergenerational transition by helping aging farmers afford retirement without having to sell their land for development. Extinguishing the right to develop a property also lowers the market value of

¹⁶ USDA/NASS. 2019. "2017 Census of Agriculture - Volume 1, Chapter 1: State Level Data." Accessed January 4, 2021. https://www.nass.usda.gov/Publications/AgCensus/2017/Full_Report/Volume_1_Chapter_1_State_Level/New_York/.

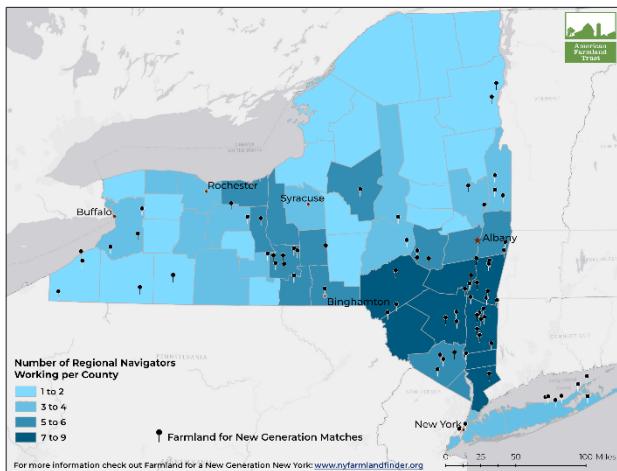
¹⁷ USDA/NASS. 2019. "State Agriculture Overview for New York." Accessed January 4, 2021. https://www.nass.usda.gov/Quick_Stats/Ag_Overview/stateOverview.php?state=new%20york.

farmland, keeping it affordable for new generation of farmers. There are numerous examples across New York of the farmland protection program enabling the intergenerational transition of land by bridging the gap between what farmers need to sell their land for, and what younger farmers – even within the same family – can afford to pay. Farmland for a New Generation New York works in complement with the farmland protection program to bring a diverse new generation of farmers onto farmland in New York to sustain a thriving agricultural sector to feed New Yorkers in the future.

Farmland for a New Generation New York Brings a New Generation of Farmers onto the Land -

Farmland for a New Generation New York (FNG-NY) is a state-funded partnership between the New York State Department of Agriculture and Markets, American Farmland Trust (AFT), and organizations statewide that helps farmers gain access to land while supporting retiring farmers in transferring their farms to the next—and increasingly diverse—generation. State funding supports a free, one-stop shop for farmers and landowners, including NYFarmlandFinder.org (farm and farmer profiles, a farm job board, resources, and events), AFT staff who serve as a first point of contact for guidance, and a statewide network of Regional Navigator organizations that provide one-on-one, on-the-ground support in all 62 counties. (Figure 5).

Farmland for a New Generation New York Matches Across the State



Beginning farmers often need hands-on support to clarify their personal and business goals, identify and evaluate farms, navigate lease or purchase options, and connect with financing, legal advice, and other key resources. Likewise, senior farmers and farm families frequently need coaching to develop succession, and retirement plans that enable intergenerational transfer and keep land in active agriculture. FNG-NY's Regional Navigators—now a network of **40 organizations**—provide this practical, relationship-based assistance and serve as trusted connectors across New York's diverse farming regions.

FNG-NY continues to deliver measurable results with modest public investment. Through 2025, the partnership has facilitated **234 matches** connecting farmers to **11,285 acres**, with an additional **58 matches currently in progress**. NYFarmlandFinder.org has recorded **370,574 visits through 2025**, and as of December 31, 2025, includes **412 active profiles** (138 farm profiles and 274 farm seeker profiles). The platform also reflects continued market activity and demand, with **over 250 farm seekers and nearly 12,000 acres of farmland listed for sale or lease**. Importantly, FNG-NY is not just a “matchmaking” service—**1,765 farmers and landowners received education and direct support from Regional Navigators and AFT in 2025 alone**, underscoring the scale of coaching and technical assistance required to convert interest into successful land access and farm transitions.

FNG-NY's strength is also reflected in on-the-ground outcomes that illustrate how trusted, timely support can prevent farmland fragmentation and stabilize farm businesses. For example, one Regional

Navigator reported supporting a transition involving a **larger former dairy operation**, where the landowners clarified their goals and began interviewing potential matches—an important breakthrough in a space where large properties often transfer privately or become fragmented. Another report highlights culturally responsive assistance to two Latino/a farmers who were unexpectedly displaced; with rapid support and facilitated connections, one farmer secured a **30-year lease**, and both farmers were assisted in forming **LLCs** to strengthen legal and financial security.

Funding need: Demand for these services continues to outpace available resources. In 2025, Regional Navigator support needs totaled **\$553,920.47 requested**, but only **\$330,302.59 was awarded**, leaving a **\$233,617.88 deficit**—a gap that directly limits the program’s ability to meet farmers where they are and respond to urgent transition and land access needs statewide. For these reasons, we respectfully urge the Legislature to restore and include **at least \$700k** for FNG-NY in the FY26–27 One-House Budgets to sustain and expand direct assistance that helps keep land in farming, supports farm succession, and ensures that New York’s next generation of agricultural entrepreneurs can access land and build viable businesses.

This is exactly why sustained funding for FNG-NY is so critical. When Regional Navigators have the capacity to respond quickly and consistently, they don’t just post listings—they guide complex, highly personal transitions, help landowners explore options, and build the trust needed to move from “interest” to a signed agreement that keeps land in farming. The newest Regional Navigators are strengthening that approach by combining farmland protection, succession planning, and matchmaking into a more holistic framework. The Genesee Valley Conservancy, a new Regional Navigator, described this expanded role clearly:

“We are excited and proud to be expanding our role in farmland protection work to be more holistic and intentional as we support farmers and farmland owners in planning for the next generation. With a new framework and process guiding our initial exchanges with prospects and the development of programs to bridge the gap between farmland owners and farm seekers, we are able to offer options that go far beyond just ensuring the land is available for agriculture. Especially for our aging landowners with no heirs interested in farming, people seem eager to learn about other opportunities for their land to stay in operation and continue the agricultural legacy they continued from the farmers before them. We can’t wait to use these processes to begin making matches in the coming months and better serve the agricultural community in the Genesee Valley.”

— Genesee Valley Conservancy, Regional Navigator

Investing in FNG-NY is how New York makes sure the next generation—including BIPOC, immigrant, and Spanish-speaking farmers—can access land and build viable businesses, rather than being priced out or pushed out

New York State's 30% Initiative and Farm to School Grants are Strategic Investments in Reliable Markets for Farmers, Resilient Supply Chains, and Child Health

The COVID-19 pandemic underscored how essential it is to strengthen regional food systems that can withstand shocks—whether from public health emergencies, climate disruption, or market volatility. Today, that resilience challenge is paired with ongoing affordability pressures for families: New York households with children have faced some of the highest food insecurity rates since 2020 (as high as 16% in 2022), and even in early 2024 roughly **one in nine** families with children reported they sometimes or often did not have enough to eat.¹⁸

Public schools are one of the strongest public “intervention points” we have—both because meals directly support learning and because higher-quality, healthy meals help address rising childhood obesity trends. Farm to school is also a **market strategy** for New York agriculture. Institutional purchasing provides farmers with more stable, local demand that is less exposed to export disruptions and price volatility—conditions that can intensify under shifting federal trade policy and retaliatory tariffs. A strong farm-to-school pipeline helps keep more food dollars circulating in-state, supporting producers *and* the local processors, distributors, and regional food hubs that move food from farm to cafeteria.

The 30% Initiative is a proven tool—but it's still reaching too few districts

New York's 30% New York State Initiative was designed to increase the share of New York-grown food served in school lunches by increasing per-meal reimbursement **to 19 cents per lunch**, for School Food Authorities (SFAs) that spend at least 30% of lunch food costs on eligible New York products.

However, the State Comptroller's audit makes clear that participation remains far below what the program was built to achieve. While **762 SFAs** are eligible outside New York City, only **73 (10%)** were approved for reimbursement, and as of June 2025 only **\$2.9 million of the \$10 million** annual appropriation (29%) had been reimbursed for the 2024–25 school year. This is also reflected in AFT's 2026 policy priorities: “just 10% of eligible school districts participate, and over 70% of available reimbursement dollars went unused.”

The audit clarifies why participation is low—and where modernization can unlock demand

The Comptroller's audit identifies the dominant barrier as the **administrative burden** of tracking lunch costs separately from other meal costs (breakfast, snacks).

Among surveyed SFAs, 42% cited administrative burden, with additional barriers including difficulty sourcing eligible products (24%) and cost concerns (16%). The audit also notes that legislative changes would be needed to expand beyond lunch and to adjust reimbursement, but it points to the core

¹⁸ New York State Office of the State Comptroller, Division of State Government Accountability, *Department of Agriculture and Markets: 30% New York State Initiative* (Report 2024-S-13, Oct. 2025), Audit Highlights / Background (food insecurity rates for NY households with children).

problem: the current structure makes participation unnecessarily hard for many districts. This is exactly why the **NY Grown Food for NY Kids Coalition** and AFT's 2026 policy platform emphasize a modernization framework that preserves program integrity while lowering barriers and expanding equitable access statewide.

A modernization pathway that expands farmer opportunity and school participation

AFT's 2026 policy priorities outline a consensus framework built around **tiered entry, inclusion of all meals, hold-harmless protections, and a clearer reimbursement structure**—designed to increase participation without destabilizing current participants.

Key elements include:

1. A **one-time lower-threshold onboarding year (25–29%)** plus a one-time grace year for current participants,
2. Expand eligibility to **include all meals** (breakfast, lunch, and reimbursable snacks),
3. Increase reimbursement from \$0.19 to \$0.30 per meal with a 1.5% annual CPI adjustment for five years and clarify “per meal,”
4. Add a hold-harmless transition for three years, and
5. Clarify the reimbursement is separate from other state and federal school meal reimbursements so districts do not lose or conflate funding streams.

Including breakfast and reimbursable snacks in the **30% Initiative** is an important modernization step that aligns the program with how school meal operations function on the ground and helps reduce the administrative burden of separating lunch purchasing from other meals. However, the **Department of Agriculture and Markets' 30% Initiative analysis** makes clear that expanding the program's scope also changes the math in ways that can unintentionally penalize current participants if the transition is not structured carefully.

Specifically, when breakfast and snacks are included in the calculation, the total pool of “counted” meal costs increases—raising the effective purchasing requirement needed to reach the 30% threshold. In the Department's own analysis of SY 2023–24 calculations, when breakfast/snacks were included, **only 37 of the 73** School Food Authorities (SFAs) that were originally approved under the lunch-only model would still have qualified. This illustrates a real risk: districts could be pushed out of the program not because they reduced their purchases of New York food, but because the structure of the calculation expanded around them.

For that reason, a **hold harmless** provision is essential to ensure continuity for SFAs that have already built procurement systems and supplier relationships around the existing program. A temporary hold harmless gives current participants time to adapt menus, contracts, and operations to meet the expanded “all meals” threshold—while protecting farmers and food businesses from losing stable institutional demand due to a formula change.

The Department's analysis also reinforces why modernization must be paired with a stronger incentive. As the program expands to include additional meal categories and qualifying purchases, the required local purchasing amount increases accordingly, meaning districts must spend more on New York products to qualify. Maintaining reimbursement at **\$0.19 per meal** risks weakening the program's

purchasing power at the exact moment the state is asking schools to meet a higher effective threshold. Increasing reimbursement to **\$0.30 per meal** helps preserve the incentive's effectiveness under the modernized framework and supports districts in scaling New York food purchasing across breakfast, lunch, and snacks.

Modernizing the 30% Initiative is also a matter of equity across school districts. As the Department of Agriculture and Markets' 30% analysis highlights, districts with a high Community Eligibility Provision (CEP) percentage—often districts serving higher-need student populations—can face structural disadvantages in qualifying under the current approach. When CEP participation increases, districts typically have fewer paid meal transactions and **lower a la carte sales**, which reduces a la carte revenue. Under the current qualifying dynamics, lower a la carte revenue can make it **harder** for districts to qualify, because a la carte revenue effectively lowers the program's "required to spend" amount—meaning districts with more a la carte revenue can reach the threshold more easily. In other words, districts serving more CEP students may be inadvertently penalized by financial and operational conditions tied to the populations they serve. A modernization framework that simplifies and standardizes the calculation across total meal costs, expands eligible meals, and includes transitional protections helps ensure the program does not reward districts based on their ability to generate a la carte revenue, but instead supports equitable participation and consistent New York food purchasing across all communities.

Modernization matters not only for participation, but for impact: AFT's priorities document notes that **every dollar spent on New York-grown food multiplies by \$1.54** through local communities—supporting jobs, farm viability, food security, and climate-resilient regional food systems.

Farm to School Grants Works Hand in Hand with the Incentive Program to Help Schools Succeed

The Farm to School Grants Program offers vital support to schools by providing funding to help them overcome their lack of time, knowledge, or capacity to purchase and serve local food. These grants can be used to employ a local or regional farm to school coordinator, train staff on how to procure and prepare locally produced food, or make capital improvements to support the transportation, storage, and preparation of local food. Since Andrew Cuomo launched New York's Farm-to-School Grant Program in 2015, more than \$6.8 million has been invested to support 116 Farm to School projects, benefiting almost 750,000 students in 255 school districts across the State. Since 2018, NYSDAM has received double the requests for Farm to School projects than the \$1.5 million funds available to award each year, dollars that would help schools buy more New York grown food.

Many schools use these grants to hire farm to school coordinators who provide food service directors with the expert guidance and additional capacity they need to participate in farm to school purchasing. Farm to school coordinators are consummate professionals that help schools connect with farmers, design menus, procure local foods, and foster kids' curiosity and excitement for eating healthy foods. In interviews conducted by AFT during the summer of 2019, food service directors that intentionally procure New York grown food recognized farm to school coordinators as essential to their success in reaching 30%.¹⁹

19 Levy, Samantha, and Kali McPeters. 2020. "Growing Opportunity for Farm to School: How to Revolutionize School Food, Support Local Farms, and Improve the Health of Students in New York." American Farmland Trust.

www.farmland.org/growingopportunity

The FY22 budget established a statewide regional farm to school coordinator program to help ensure that all schools have access to the capacity and expert knowledge they need to build strong relationships with New York farmers and serve more New York grown food to students at school meals. These regional coordinators have been helping connect schools with producers in their region, preparing and tracking documentation, and designing menus and educational events to highlight local products and get kids excited about eating fresh foods. It is also important to note that past research has shown that each new farm to school job creates up to 2.35 additional jobs in the local community, and so continued investment in these roles is a job creator for the state.²⁰ Schools surveyed by AFT in both 2019 and 2020 repeatedly identified farm to school coordinators as critical to their ability to successfully increase purchases of New York grown food and qualify for the Farm to School Incentive program.²¹ Schools celebrated the launch of the new Regional Farm to School Coordinator Program established through a partnership between the Department and Cornell Cooperative Extension. Farm to school coordinators have been hired to provide additional support to schools in the lower and upper Hudson Valley, Long Island, Central New York, New York City, and the North Country.

New York Grown Food for New York Kids Coalition Recommendations for FY26-27 Budget

Governor Hochul proposed maintaining funding for the incentive program for lunch at \$10 million and the Farm to School grants program at \$1.5 million in the FY27 budget. The **New York Grown Food for New York Kids coalition**, a group of farm to school experts from the school, farm, food, public health, academic, environmental, and anti-hunger sectors, appreciates this proposed continued commitment and encourages the legislature and the Governor to implement these proposals in the enacted FY26-27 state budget by:

- Modernizing the 30% Program, per the outlined recommendations.
- Allocating at least \$1.5 million for the Farm to School Grants program split between agriculture and education, so long as this does not compromise funding for other agricultural programs, to meet current demand for support.

²⁰ National Farm to School Network. "The Benefits of Farm to School," May 2020. https://assets.website-files.com/5c469df2395cd53c3d913b2d/611027419232d281ad2f51ff_BenefitsFactSheet.pdf.

²¹ Levy, Samantha, and Mikaela Ruiz-Ramon. "Growing Resilience: Unlocking the Potential of Farm to School to Strengthen the Economy, Support New York Farms, and Improve Student Health in the Face of New Challenges." Saratoga Springs: American Farmland Trust, December 9, 2020. <https://farmlandinfo.org/publications/growing-resilience-for-farm-to-school-in-new-york/>;

Levy, Samantha, and Kali McPeteres. "Growing Opportunity for Farm to School: How to Revolutionize School Food, Support Local Farms, and Improve the Health of Students in New York." Saratoga Springs: American Farmland Trust, January 27, 2020. <https://farmlandinfo.org/publications/growing-opportunity-for-farm-to-school-in-new-york/>.

Agrivoltaics and the Governor's proposed “Sun and Soil” program

New York can meet its clean energy targets *and* protect the land base that feeds New Yorkers by scaling “true agrivoltaics”—solar development that is intentionally designed to keep land in **active, marketable agricultural production** for the life of the array. AFT’s recommended approach is straightforward: agrivoltaics should mean a ground-mounted solar system that is **planned and designed with agricultural producers and experts** and operated to achieve **integrated, simultaneous production of solar energy and marketable agricultural products**—including crop production, grazing, or animal husbandry. Just as importantly, agrivoltaics should not be defined so loosely that a project qualifies simply by planting pollinator habitat as the sole “dual use,” which can create loopholes that do not sustain farm viability.

Governor Hochul’s proposed **Sun and Soil** program is a timely opportunity to operationalize this approach. The program is framed as a way to help farmers and farmland owners maintain working farms while supporting solar development through agrivoltaics—pairing research and demonstration projects with guidance and incentives that encourage responsible co-location of solar and agriculture. If designed well, Sun and Soil can help New York avoid a false choice between renewable energy and working lands by scaling practical models that keep farms producing food and fiber while also producing clean power.

To ensure Sun and Soil delivers farmland protection *in practice* (not just in name), the program should be strengthened by aligning program eligibility, incentives, and accountability with what farmers actually need to continue operating on solar sites:

- **Set a strong “what qualifies” definition:** Require marketable agricultural production and a farm-led plan that demonstrates how agriculture will operate across the life of the project—not just at the start.
- **Tie incentives to real agricultural outcomes:** Incentives should reflect (1) the added cost of modifying array design to support farming and (2) the share of the site kept in active agricultural production (with stronger incentives for higher production use).
- **Require monitoring and enforce performance:** Establish clear reporting and annual monitoring to confirm agriculture is occurring as planned, with corrective actions and clawbacks when it is not.
- **Build equity into program design:** Prioritize projects that support beginning farmers, underserved producers, and/or existing farm operators and tenants, so the benefits of solar development do not bypass the communities most impacted by land access barriers.

With these guardrails, New York can create a national model for agrivoltaics that strengthens farm viability, protects soils, maintains local food production, and advances climate goals—without sacrificing the long-term agricultural productivity of the state’s best farmland.

Conclusion

In closing, I want to thank the Chairs and Members of the Legislature for your continued commitment to the programs that underpin a resilient farm and food system for all New Yorkers. New York's farmland is not only an irreplaceable natural resource—it is the foundation of an **\$85.8 billion** farm and food economy that supports **nearly 300,000 jobs** and serves as connective tissue between upstate and downstate, rural and urban communities.

Yet the challenges facing farmers are compounding: accelerating development pressure, more frequent extreme weather, intergenerational farm transitions, and renewed uncertainty in global markets—including trade and tariff volatility that can destabilize farm finances and make long-term planning more difficult. In this context, state budget investments function as practical risk management—anchoring land, ownership, and demand here at home.

American Farmland Trust respectfully urges the **Legislature** to enact an **FY 2026–27** budget that maintains the **Executive Budget's** strong baseline investments and makes targeted improvements where gaps remain. Specifically:

- **Maintain \$25 million for the Farmland Protection program within an EPF of at least \$425 million.**
- **Restore funding for Farmland for a New Generation New York (FNG-NY)** so land access, succession planning, and farmer-to-farmer matches continue in all regions of the state.
- **Maintain \$10 million for the 30% NYS Farm-to-School Initiative, \$1.5 million for Farm to School Grants, and Modernize the 30% NYS Initiative with AFT's outlined framework.**
- **Maintain funding for Climate Resilient Farming (\$19.1 million) and Soil & Water Conservation Districts (18.65 million).**
- **Advance the Governor's proposed "Sun and Soil" concept with clear guardrails and a strong statutory definition of agrivoltaics.**

Taken together, these investments protect the land that feeds us, strengthen regional supply chains, and expand reliable in-state markets that help farms withstand climate shocks and global disruptions. I appreciate the opportunity to submit this testimony and look forward to working with the Legislature and the Administration to ensure New York's farms remain viable, our food system remains secure, and our working lands remain protected for generations to come.