



Supporting Local Agriculture through Comprehensive Planning

Presentation for the Town of Harrison's
Comprehensive Plan Committee

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Agenda

- Introduction to MFT
- General guidelines for supporting agriculture through comp plans
 - Why this matters: farm benefits and trends
- Brief overview on inventorying local agricultural resources
- Potential goals and strategies
 - Supporting viable farm businesses
 - Protecting farmland
 - Town examples
- Discussion and Q&A



Introduction to Maine Farmland Trust

Maine Farmland Trust is growing a robust future for farming in Maine by protecting our finite farmland, supporting farmers to keep land in production, and advocating for the conditions farms and farmers need to thrive.

MFT's program areas include:

- Farmland Protection & Access
 - Agricultural conservation easements
 - 58,000+ acres protected across 350+ farms
 - Maine FarmLink and land access assistance
- Farm Network
 - 500+ Maine farms
 - Farmer services - Stewardship, Individual Farm Business and Succession Planning
- Policy & Research
 - Federal, State and Municipal level





General guidelines for supporting agriculture through comprehensive plans

- Capture the **full range of benefits** that farms bring to a community
 - **Economic** – farms are local businesses; they create jobs, make purchases locally, create the rural character and activities that attract locals and tourists
 - **Fiscal** – Cost of Community Services studies show farmland (even when valued at ag use) generates more in municipal revenue than it requires in services
 - **Climate** – increasing the amount of farmland protected and local food produced are key strategies in *Maine Won't Wait*
 - **Quality of life and food security** – local food production, community events, recreation opportunities, scenic beauty, sense of rural character created by working lands
- Reference agricultural considerations throughout the plan



General guidelines for supporting agriculture through comprehensive plans

- Establish the needs, threats and opportunities relating to farms and farmland
 - Inventory farms and farmland
 - Seek out input from the local agricultural community
- Include policy goals and implementation strategies that address the **full range of farm business and land use needs**
 - More on this coming up!

“It’s the open land in your neighborhoods. When you drive by, you like seeing that open land, but you don’t understand what it takes to keep it open. So, your choices are you’re either going to see the open land taken care of, or you’re going to see it grown up, houses, or solar. Those are the choices that farmers have...something has to happen to keep it the same.”

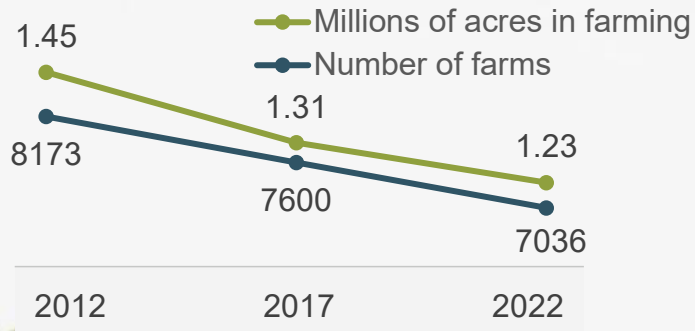
– Brad Santy, Santy Dairy



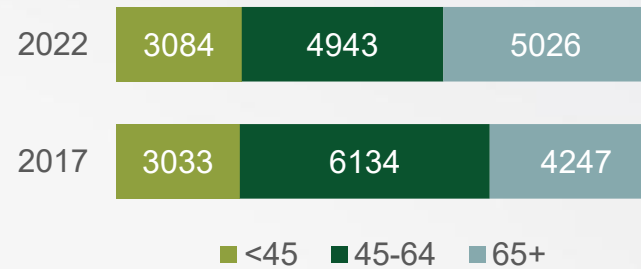
Brad Santy and his daughter Allie, Santy Dairy Farm in Skowhegan

In Maine, according to the 2022 USDA Census of Agriculture:

Since 2012, Maine lost over **1,100 farms** and almost **230,000 acres** of farmland fell out of production



Nearly 40% of Maine farmers are **age 65+**, an 18% increase from 2017; meanwhile, only 24% of farmers are under age 45, an increase of <2%



Production costs increase while the average cost of an acre of farmland in Maine **jumped by 44%** from 2017



Inventorying local agricultural resources

- Working farms and **land in active production** (incl leased land)
- Occurrence of NRCS-designated **prime and statewide-important** farmland soils
- **Locally important** farmland soils, classified by local Soil and Water Conservation District
- Land that is **suitable to agricultural production** that may be inactive (e.g., where the soils above intersect with open fields)



Potential goals and strategies



Goal: Support viable farm businesses

- Potential strategies:
 - Promote **Current Use Taxation** programs
 - Consider adopting a **Voluntary Municipal Farm Support Program**
 - Explore forming a **municipal agricultural commission**
 - Review **town ordinances to ensure they are flexible** and allow farmers to grow and diversify their businesses
 - Allow a wide range of **agricultural uses and activities by right** or ensure minimum permitting requirements
 - **Reduce or eliminate permitting fees** for high tunnels and other structures intended for agricultural use
 - Implement **development standards** beneficial to active farms:
 - Reduced setbacks for farm structures
 - Adequate setbacks & veg buffers for new, abutting non-ag development to reduce nuisance issues

Strategies: Property tax support programs

- Community awareness raising: Farms generally pay more in taxes than they receive in services
 - Studies show **farmland requires \$0.37 in municipal services** for every dollar of tax revenue collected, **compared with \$1.16** for residential properties (*American Farmland Trust, Cost of Community Services, 2016*)
 - **The loss of farms due to high taxation rates will likely drive-up local taxes**, as farms are often replaced with forms of development that use more services
- Promote Current Use tax programs
 - Proactive outreach and awareness raising
 - **Example:** Monmouth conservation commission outreach letter
 - **Example:** Belfast info forum
 - **Example:** Winslow assessor brochure and one-on-one conversations
- Consider adopting a Voluntary Municipal Farm Support Program
 - Temporary easement to the town in exchange for additional property tax reduction on **eligible farmland and farm buildings**
 - Statutory updates in 2025 increase program flexibility
 - **Example:** Winslow created first program in state – great template materials for other towns



Strategy: Agricultural commissions



- Ensures that the needs of agriculture are considered and integrated into various policies, plans and initiatives
- Advisory capacity (non-regulatory)
- Can be created by a single town or by a regional entity
- **Examples** of known municipal agricultural groups in Maine:
 - Auburn Natural Products and Ag Working Group
 - Durham Agriculture Committee
 - Eliot Agriculture & Food Security Commission
 - North Berwick Conservation-Agricultural Commission
 - Winslow Agricultural Commission

Strategies: Flexible ordinances and permitting processes

- Consider changes that address the needs and issues identified by the local farming community, may include:
 - Agritourism
 - Farm-worker housing
 - Ancillary, non-farming business activities that are compatible w/ farming
 - On-farm retail, value-added products & processing
 - Climate-resilience strategies like high tunnels
 - Agricultural infrastructure
 - Setbacks
 - Conflict between farmers & non-farming neighbors
- **Examples:** Durham's 2018 comp plan strategies:
 - Add provisions in ordinances that accommodate the needs of emerging small-scale agriculture, such as roadside stands, greenhouses and pick-your-own operations
 - Consider allowing on-farm processing, agritourism, and retail sales of products by right provided best practices for soil and watershed protection are followed
- See MFT guide for town examples of farm business-friendly ordinances



Goal: Protect farmland from non-agricultural development

- Potential strategies:
 - **Avoid active farms, farmland soils**, and contiguous areas of working farms when designating local growth areas
 - **Direct new non-agricultural development** to locally-designated growth areas
 - Avoid minimum **lot sizes and road frontage** requirements that result in splitting farmland
 - Develop or strengthen **subdivision and solar development ordinance standards** to protect farmland and ag use of land
 - Consider **development fees** to encourage development in areas that support growth, to reduce sprawl & conserve working lands
 - **Collaborate with land trusts** on agricultural conservation easements



Strategies: Subdivision Ordinances

Towns could consider:

- **Limiting subdivision development** outside of local growth areas
- Adopting **different subdivision standards** for rural areas or areas that contain high-value ag soils and working farms

Cluster, conservation, or open space subdivision standards:

- May provide incentives like **density bonuses** in exchange for conserving portion of land
- In order to benefit working lands and enhance farming, must **ensure reserved land is suitable** and accessible for viable agricultural uses

Examples of subdivision standards that are designed to protect farmland and/or support agricultural land uses

- Waldoboro, open space subdivision standards
- Cape Elizabeth, density bonuses for permanently preserved ag land
- Cape Elizabeth and Topsham, design standards
- Kittery, management plan for reserved agricultural uses



Strategies: Solar Development Ordinances



Examples:

- Monmouth, increased lot coverage incentive for dual-use
- Auburn, restricts siting on farmland soils in AGRP Zone
- Topsham, mitigation fee for siting in priority natural areas
- Warren, emphasis on siting on previously developed areas and mitigation fee for impacts to farmland soils

General considerations:

- **Avoid siting on high-value agricultural soils** or otherwise causing productive farmland to be taken out of production, including land leased for agricultural uses.
- Preferentially **use previously developed, disturbed, degraded, or marginally productive** portions of the farm property
- **Encourage dual-use** projects, where agricultural production and solar energy generation occur together on the same piece of land
- Build, operate, and decommission projects in ways that **preserve the ability for the land to be farmed in the future**
- Enable projects that provide electricity to **meet the energy needs of the farm**

Case Study: Gorham 2016 Comprehensive Plan

Comprehensive Planning Process

- Farming trends and needs identified during planning process:
 - Many farmers approaching retirement and interested in conserving their farmland if financial incentives were available
 - The town could be doing more to promote the growth of farm businesses through its land use ordinance

Sample Comp. Plan Strategies

- Adopt a process for spending **density transfer funds** to protect open space and include farmland as a priority
- Amend the Land Use Ordinance to better support farming by **removing unreasonably burdensome ordinance language and permitting processes** for farm operations, including provisions related to setbacks, signage, commercial sale of products grown, and required parking for farm stands

Case Study: Gorham 2016 Comprehensive Plan

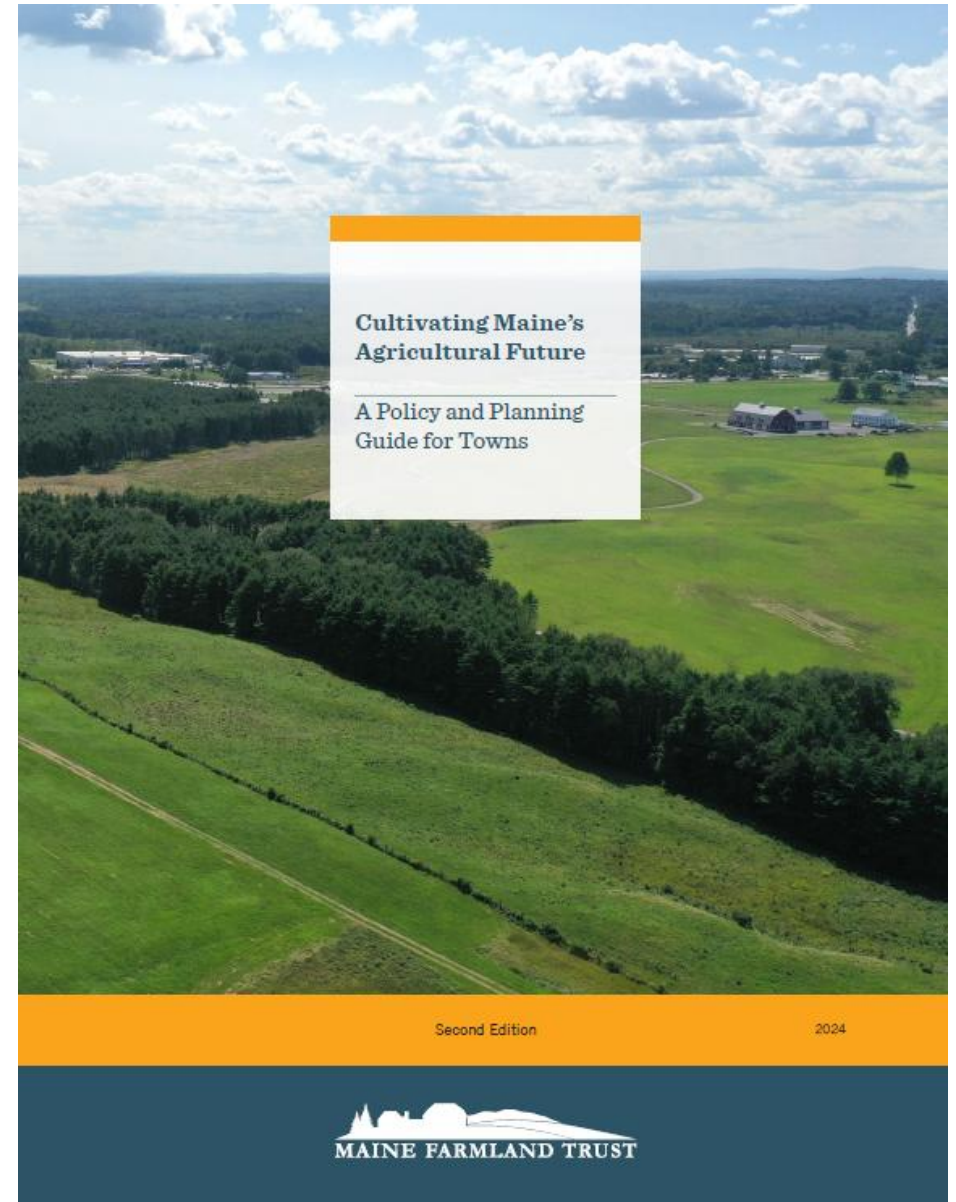
Comp. Plan Implementation



- **Amended land use ordinance** to allow the construction of farm stands through a building permit as opposed to the lengthier administrative review process
- Approved spending policy for density transfer funds that favors farmland with prime soils and high development potential
- **Added agritourism as a defined use** in its land use ordinance, and identified various agritourism activities that are permitted by right for active farms

Much more on policy and planning strategies to support local agriculture in MFT's municipal guide resources:

www.maine farmlandtrust.org/future/policy-and-planning-resources-for-towns



Discussion and Q&A



Thank you!

Reach out anytime:
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