

Why Municipalities Should Support Local Farms

By Sarah Curran

Governor Baldacci's Quality of Place Council found that future economic development in Maine will need to build on our "quality of place." Maine is unique. Our sense of place is defined by our history and our culture, by our village centers and downtowns, and by our open spaces and scenic landscapes. Agriculture is critical to our quality of place. It is part of our heritage. It is part of our landscape. Agriculture is a source of Maine's great, fresh foods. It is a source of income and jobs.

The common perception is that agriculture in Maine is dying. This is not true. Agriculture in Maine is alive and well. According to the U.S. Census of Agriculture, the number of farms in Maine increased 13% between 2002 and 2007, from 7,196 to 8,136. The market value of products sold rose even more, from \$463,603,000 to \$617,190,000, a 33% increase; more than the State Gross Domestic Product increased during that same time (24%). Despite conservation efforts, the loss of farmland continues to be a threat to Maine agriculture. At the same time, increased interest in buying local food has created a new opportunity for farmers in Maine, particularly those who want to sell directly to consumers.

Agriculture contributes tremendously to our communities. Economically, it is an important industry. Maine's farms produce a wide variety of goods, including fruits, vegetables, grains, eggs, milk, meat, maple syrup, fibers, nursery stock and Christmas trees. Maine farms purchase local products and services. They provide jobs. Maine's farms are critically important to tourism, providing hundreds of thousands of acres of open space that make scenic Maine such an attractive tourist destination. They create opportunities for recreation (ac-

tivities such as apple-picking and cross-country skiing) for both residents and visitors. Farms demand less in services than they pay in local property taxes. They help offset the expense of residential development which requires infrastructure, education, and emergency services.

The rural landscape appreciated by Maine's tourists is important to Maine residents. Maine's open spaces contribute to our sense of community character. Historic farmhouses and barns remind us of our heritage. Maine's farms are beneficial to our environment. Fields and forests filter and protect groundwater. They provide habitat for wildlife.

The farmers who live and work on Maine's farms today are important members of our communities. They are our neighbors and our friends. They volunteer on town boards and organizations, bringing valuable perspectives and diversity. They provide our families with food that is healthy, fresh and delicious.

Although it is true that Maine agriculture is alive and well, farmers in Maine today face many challenges. There are many things Maine municipalities can do to support local agriculture. They can review existing regulations for those that unintentionally discourage agriculture, and be willing to make changes that support local farms. They can buy local products from farms in their community. Conducting an agricultural assessment can help the community as a whole better understand how and where agriculture exists in their community today, and what can be done to support it.

Review local regulations. A community that wants to preserve rural character and support local agriculture may not be aware of the impact that certain land use ordinances are having. Often, the negative impacts of regulations for farmers are unintended. It's important to talk to the farmers in your community, and ask them

what the rules and regulations are that they would like to see changed.

One type of ordinance often identified by farmers as problematic is a sign ordinance. Many sign ordinances don't allow farms to put up temporary, off-site signs for seasonal events such as pick-your-apple harvesting. Farm stand regulations are another example of ordinances that may unintentionally make business more difficult for local farms. Many towns require that a certain percentage of farm stand produce be grown on the farm. But customer demands for variety and consistency in what is available may make purchasing from other local farmers necessary. A town's definition of agriculture may be in need of updating, for example to include the local Christmas tree farm or landscape nursery.

Buy local. Municipalities can support their local farms directly, by buying from them. Consider providing for the purchase of local products in the school lunch budget. Buy local products to serve at committee meetings and community gatherings. Many areas in Maine have a growing season that is longer than you might expect. From radishes and peas in early spring through broccoli and spinach well into the fall, local farms provide a wide variety of products.

Community Food Assessment. A Community Food Assessment identifies a broad range of community food assets (such as farms and other related businesses). It explores local food issues as well as considers the connections between food and community goals. A community food assessment is a collaborative process involving a wide variety of community members, from farmers and residents to local government, businesses and organizations. It helps a community to better understand its food system, from farm to table, and is research-based. A community food assessment is action-oriented, producing recommendations that lead to actions. Cape Elizabeth recently conducted a community food assessment. The process helped the community identify new ways to support local farmers, and encouraged community members to get involved.

Agriculture in Maine is alive and well. It faces numerous opportunities and challenges. With support from Maine municipalities, it will continue to be an integral and invaluable part of our communities. [\[mf\]](#)

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