

Ag Preserve Movement Plows New Ground In New Jersey

BY ED SHAMY

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TRENTON, N.J. — Just as the vultures had begun wheeling over the top of New Jersey's farmland preservation program, the effort has shown signs of finally coming to life.

There has been a flurry of activity in Trenton and in Northern New Jersey in recent weeks that has shown the body isn't a corpse yet.

And while the 1983 Farmland Retention Act hasn't yet lived completely up to its billing, it has begun to attract the attention of legislators and landowners.

Just before Christmas, the legislature sent to Gov. Thomas Kean a bill that would allow six of New Jersey's most rural counties to offer farmers low-interest loans in exchange for the development rights to their farms. Kean hasn't yet signed the bill into law.

In the last days of 1986, the Hunterdon County Agriculture Development Board quietly purchased the permanent development rights to three farms, and the state revealed the county was eyeing a fourth farm for preservation.

And Hunterdon's neighbor to the north, Warren County, made some noise of its own on the preservation front by approaching a group of utilities about preserving a tract of the land they own.

There are still hurdles for New Jersey's farmland preservation program to overcome. Some can be solved with legislative tinkering and others are a quirk of the state's booming economy.

The New Jersey Assembly's Economic Development and Agriculture Committee staged a hearing near Flemington in late November on how it could help the preservation law become more effective.

The message from farmers and preservationists rang clear: Cut us a swathe through the massive pile of red tape between an interested landowner and the purchase of his development rights and we will deliver the acreage for farmland preservation.

Bureaucratic Maze

Raritan Township, Hunterdon County dairy farmer Ernest Kuster, who chairs the county's agriculture development board, told the committee that the 18-month-long bureaucratic maze that

farmers had to put up with was discouraging them from entering the program.

He asked the committee to figure out a way to speed up the process. Kuster suggested to the committee, which included the Farmland Retention Act's primary sponsor, Assemblyman Richard Zimmer (R-Hunterdon-Warren) that the state and the counties join financial forces to hire more full-time workers to administer the program.

Assemblyman Robert Shinn (R-Burlington) suggested that the state contemplate contributing 75 percent of the cost of purchasing development rights from farmers.

Under the existing law, the state and counties split the cost of buying the development rights. Municipalities are free to contribute to the counties' share, though few have done so.

It was left to the state's Secretary of Agriculture, Arthur R. Brown Jr., to advise the Assembly committee of the sober reality of the farmland preservation program. It will soon need more money.

The state is now using \$50 million in bond money approved by voters

in 1981 to pay its share of development rights purchases.

But New Jersey's healthy economy has driven the price of farm real estate above \$3,500 per acre; on the average, higher than any other state in the country.

Brown declined to put a price tag on the program, but told the committee a successful push to preserve farmland from developers will cost taxpayers a lot of money.

The quickened pace of development has taken its toll in Warren County, where county freeholders found their facilities inadequate and had to build a new county jail and a new administration building.

The county also financed the construction of a \$45 million energy-from-refuse plant — New Jersey's first — to combat growing solid waste disposal woes.

Freeholders have been reluctant to seek more bond money to fund farmland preservation in the heavily rural county, despite a non-binding referendum in 1983 in which voters overwhelmingly approved \$3 million for the program.

Low Interest Loans

The freeholders asked the Warren County Agriculture Development Board to devise a less costly strategy, and the board came up with the idea of loaning to farmers, at low interest, enough money to buy farmland.

In exchange for the loans, the farmers would agree to forever prohibit development on the land. The revolving loan fund could be used to help more farmers compete with developers in the bidding for the county's diminishing farmland.

There was only one catch to the plan. Counties in New Jersey were not permitted to loan money to

private individuals.

Zimmer sponsored legislation in the Assembly and State Sen. Wayne Dumont Jr. (R-Warren-Sussex) sponsored the bill in the Senate that would clear the way for the preservation loans.

While the Warren development board waited for Gov. Kean to sign the bill — which would allow Warren, Hunterdon, Sussex, Gloucester, Cumberland and Salem counties to offer the loans — it opened a new front on the preservation push.

The board asked the Merrill Creek Owners Group to voluntarily enroll about 100 acres of farmland it owns in Harmony Township in the farmland preservation program.

The proposal, now under owners group scrutiny, would preserve the acreage that has been eyed by the county's five vocational agriculture teachers as a field classroom.

The owners group — made up of seven power companies from New Jersey, Pennsylvania and Delaware — is building a 650-acre reservoir in Harmony and owns several thousand acres on the site.

Hunterdon County was busy as well, spending \$570,000 to buy the development rights to about 240 acres of farmland in Delaware Township.

A 90-acre farm belonging to Mr. and Mrs. Henry Fisher; a 70-acre farm belonging to their sons, Charles and Robert Fisher; and a 80-acre farm held by the New Jersey Conservation Foundation were officially enrolled in the preservation program at the end of 1986.

The county opted to buy the development rights without the state's financial assistance to accelerate the purchase and to

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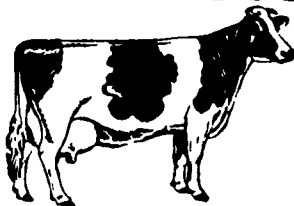
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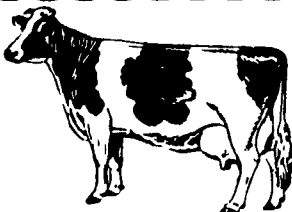
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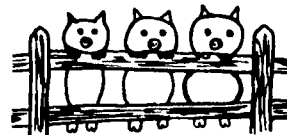
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