

Lancaster Farmland Trust Reports

LANCASTER (Lancaster Co.) — Lancaster County is at a generational crossroads. As hundreds of baby boom-era farm owners now near retirement, many are deciding if they want to — and can afford to — continue farming. The State of Pennsylvania has paved over a land mass equal in size to the entire state of Connecticut since 1950. Today, Lancaster County loses over 1,000 acres of rich farmland each year to development; that figure could rise rapidly in coming years if retirement-aged farmers elect to sell.

Could Lancaster become the next Los Angeles? With the aging trend coinciding with years of depressed milk prices and escalating land/tax values, county extension officer John Schwartz believes that is a possibility. That's why Schwartz serves as president of the Board of Trustees of Lancaster Farmland Trust, a private, non-profit organization that has worked to preserve Lancaster County's productive farmland, thriving agricultural economy, and rich farm-related heritage for the last 10 years.

When naming Lancaster County to its endangered list, WMF officials urged local and national authorities, as well as private citizens, to take action to save the entire "cultural landscape" of Lancaster — not just the county's "pristine farmland," but also its historic urban towns and rural villages.

Lancaster Farmland Trust is — and has been — taking such action, primarily by using a legal tool called a permanent conservation easement. Permanent conservation easements establish legally binding land-use restrictions and ensure that land can never be used for non-agricultural purposes, such as housing developments. Those restrictions affect all future owners of that land and they can never be reversed. Farmers who donate or sell a permanent conservation easement to Lancaster Farmland Trust still own and control every other aspect of their land. They still determine how and what to farm. In fact, Lancaster Farmland Trust structures most easements to suit farmers' personal requirements.

Ten of the 17 owners of farms

Lancaster Farmland Trust preserved last year donated their permanent conservation easements, saying farming was such a critical part of their family's identity that they wanted their farms protected. These farmers recognize that farming is the backbone of Lancaster's economic and cultural heritage. Most also understand that by preserving their farms, they reassure neighboring farmers that a continuing commitment to

agriculture makes good economic sense. That reassurance often triggers renewed area-wide commitment to the idea of farming — rather than viewing farmland as an investment to be cashed in to "grow homes" at retirement. Thus, it is becoming increasingly common to see many adjoining farms in some communities preserved.

By donating their easements, most farmers can qualify for signi-

ficant income tax benefits, and a possible estate tax benefit — benefits that may make it more economical to remain in farming. Lancaster Farmland Trust does pay some farmer for their easements an average of \$300 per acre. The difference between that payment and the actual easement value — often over \$2,000 per acre — represents the value of the donation for federal tax purposes.

Agronomy Day March 12

HONESDALE (Wayne Co.) — The "1998 Wayne County Agronomy Day" is scheduled Thursday, March 12, from 10 a.m. to 3 p.m., at Marshall Machinery, Inc. located between Indian Orchard and Beach Lake.

Speakers and topics for Agronomy Day include:

- Morning Session (10 a.m. to noon) - Lynn Hoffman, Agronomy Department, Penn State, "Corn Planter Adjustment and Maintenance."

- Dr. Dennis Calvin,

Entomology Department, Penn State, - "Potato Leafhopper - Resist Alfalfa."

- Afternoon session (1 p.m. to 3 p.m.), Lynn Hoffman, "Soil Quality Indicators" and Dr. Dennis Calvin, "Biotechnology - The New Science of Seed."

Other topics to be covered at Agronomy Day include "1998 Wayne County Chemsweep Program" presented by Chris Santore, Pennsylvania Department of Agriculture and "What's New for Agronomic Weed Control?" (a video presen-

tation) from the Penn State University Office of Pesticide Education.

Pesticide update education credits will be offered at this Agronomy Day for those area farmers who need the credits to maintain their pesticide licenses.

Those interested in attending the Wayne County Agronomy Day are asked to call the Wayne County Cooperative Extension at (717)253-5970 ext. 239 with their lunch reservations

Few people know the strong agricultural heritage Los Angeles had before development. In 1944, Los Angeles County ranked #1 in the nation in total agricultural production at \$129.4 million; Lancaster ranked 15th at \$47 million. In 1992, Los Angeles County ranked only 92nd nationally in agricultural production; Lancaster County ranked 13th.

Today, Lancaster County produces \$815 million in agricultural products per year. That's more than any other non-irrigated county in the United States — meaning that our production quantity, quality, and costs aren't unduly dependent upon water availability. What's more, most of the County's 380,000 acres of remaining farmland is predominantly Type I or Type II soil — some of the richest, most productive, and scarcest farmland in the world. Lancaster County is also a strategic, low-cost, national food resource since we're located within 500 miles of 35 percent and 60 percent of the respective populations of the United States and Canada.

Agriculture is also important in that it directly employs more than 39,000 people in Lancaster — many of them the very Amish and Mennonite (often called Plain Sect), or other conservative peoples whose traditions have shaped the cultural and economic makeup of Lancaster for nearly three centuries. Lancaster County farmers are generally viewed as the best of the best production-wise because of their unwavering cultural dedication to farming and their extensive use of low-cost family labor.

Although Lancaster Farmland Trust works with farmers of all colors, races, and creeds, it has been especially successful in preserving Plain Sect farms. Plain Sect peoples won't work with the County Agricultural Preserve Board, which also carries out preservation work, because it is a government entity. They will, however, work with the Trust since it operates and obtains funding privately. Lancaster Farmland Trust's outstanding relationship with Plain Sect farmers should prove even more important in coming years since Amish farmers now purchase the majority of all farms that are sold — and kept in farming — in Lancaster County.

Lancaster Farmland Trust is, however, an active partner with other preservation groups. In fact, that partnership recently contributed to Lancaster County's being named to the prestigious World Monuments Fund's (WMF) 1997 "List of 100 Most Endangered Sites." The Taj Mahal in India, Ellis Island in New York, and the ancient ruins of Pompeii in Italy are also on that list of imperiled and irreplaceable treasures that are threatened by war, weather, pollution, development, and other perils. WMF is supported by American Express Company, as well as by contributions from 10 philanthropic foundations.

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