



## Ag Sustainability

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### HOW IMPORTANT IS SUSTAINABLE AGRICULTURE?

In weekly "Feedstuffs" publication, the Aug. 6 issue described the decline of poultry production in the state of Connecticut.

It so happens that the Nutmeg state originally was an important leader in poultry production, dating back to Yankee Clipper ships of the early 1900s.

The broiler chicken industry in the U.S. started in this region when Alexander Hamilton directed the Clipper ships to bring back farm animals from Europe and Asia to expand the genetic diversity and quality of livestock and poultry. Early New England farmers would greet the clipper ships to purchase the new arrivals.

Breeds such as "Rhode Island Reds" were developed just a few miles from the clipper ship docks.

By the late 19th Century, the poultry industry of New England was very viable as it included layer/breeder flocks, small farms, and feed mills. In 1986 in Eastern Connecticut, the University of Connecticut started research, teaching, extension and education in poultry science and husbandry. This institution is credited as the first poultry program in the land-grant university system.

The poultry industry flourished in the New England area on many specialized farms, and included small family farms in this region. The genetic foundations of many meat birds were bred and developed in this region as well. The development of poultry vaccines for major poultry diseases and improved feeding and nutrition of poultry was pioneered by the poultrymen of Connecticut.

As of this past Aug. 14, the last poultry farm in Connecticut was depopulated and left empty, with only the poultry houses left as a reminder of the once robust and historic agriculture heritage. Progress, integration, and migration of the poultry industry to the southern states are the reasons for the extinction of this once vital industry.

Do you think that this will ever happen in Pennsylvania?

This is hard to predict. However, the importance of sustainability through direct marketing and consumer education about regional food supplies cannot be overemphasized.

Sustainability is the responsibility of every farmer or grower in the sustainable food system. Healthy environments, clean water, and crop diversity are important to everyone's future. Consumers must support local agriculture to preserve the picturesque farmland they love to gaze upon. Farmers must devote promotional time between marketing and food production. Eventually, the Pennsylvania community can contribute to healthy food systems that will preserve farms and farmland by supporting local agriculture.

Farmland preservation efforts by government and nonprofit foundations are contributing to protecting agriculture land. However, this effort, critics argue, will only preserve open space, and does not guarantee that someone will manage or be the husbandman of that land. People are required to manage and farm the land. We need to encourage new and beginning farmer programs in agriculture education at the high school and university levels. Agriculture issues and marketing need to be incorporated into both education systems.

Hands-on experience and practical instruction time should be integrated into the current system. Internships can be promoted and offered rewardingly as part of the education process. Other education areas needed should be incorporated into agriculture education are developing food processing and production of value added products.

What will agriculture look like?

In the next 20 to 50 years, do you want to read about the great agriculture heritage of Pennsylvania as a historical producer of food that made important advances to farming and livestock practices? Or would you prefer to see opportunity and sustainability generate the precedent for others to model and emulate?

Many people thought it would never happen in Connecticut. Many local consumers think it will never happen in Pennsylvania.

In some local farming communities where cheap, overabundant food and large numbers of livestock exist, the opinion of local residents deny or ignore the fateful reality that steam rolled through New England during the previous three decades.

In many local communities throughout central Pennsylvania, residents think this is impossible and "that it could never happen in their backyard." But how much longer can farmers continue to produce food at or above the cost of production? The federal government subsidizes agriculture at more than 40 percent of the total dollars returning to the farm. Farmers continually complain about the government's involvement in agriculture. However, without the government payments, many farms would go broke. The margin for profitability is very thin, and several farms are often one disaster from bankruptcy.

Many agriculture economists believe that we will have two classes of farms left in the next 10 years — the very large, and the very small.

Large farms will continue to grow larger in size as they are formed by alliances or by farms that are bailed out of bankruptcy. The production and marketing systems will retain commodity market orientation. It is hopeful that wholesale prices will remain even or above the cost of production.

Integrated food company

# Schweiker Administration Announces More Than \$1.2 Million For Farmland Conservation

HARRISBURG (Dauphin Co.) — State Agriculture Secretary Sam Hayes announced more than \$1.2 million for the state's 66 conservation districts to support conservation practices on farms.

"Our conservation districts lead grassroots-level efforts to protect our lands, and fulfill our commitment to the children who will inherit our farms and pristine lands," Hayes said. "The districts work closely with farmers, foresters and others who strive to use environmental best management practices. I commend the dedication of the State Conservation Commission, the Pennsylvania Association of Conservation Districts, and landowners who work to protect our farmland."

Hayes presented the funding to the Pennsylvania Association of Conservation Districts (PACD) on behalf of all 66 conservation districts at a recent meeting of the 11-member State Conservation Commission (SCC). The SCC is the

oversight group for the state's conservation districts. The Pennsylvania Association of Conservation Districts is a non-profit conservation organization representing those districts. The funding is channeled to individual districts through the SCC.

The funding is used to support five program areas:

- Agricultural Conservation Technician Program (36 counties), \$600,000, enables conservation districts to employ and train engineers and technicians to design and oversee the installation of best-management practices

- Farmland Preservation Administrative and Technical Support (38 counties), \$200,000, provides funds to eligible conservation districts that provide administrative and conservation planning support to approved county farmland preservation programs

- Leadership Development (66 counties), \$100,000, pro-

vides funds for the development and delivery of leadership development and capacity building tools (strategic planning, personnel management, fiscal planning and management) that are tailored specifically to the needs of conservation district directors and staff

- Ombudsman Pilot Project (Berks, Chester, and Lancaster counties), \$185,000, for the development of new tools and techniques to help conservation districts facilitate the review and consideration of nutrient-management plans for livestock operations, to create a better understanding among the public of the changing nature of agricultural production methods, and to recognize agricultural producers that are meeting or exceeding state and federal conservation standards and

- District Manager Cost-Share (66 counties), \$125,000, which helps to enable conservation districts to employ qualified managers.

farms are growing very rapidly in many regions of the U.S. Farmers are producing animals, milk, eggs, and crops under contract arrangements with several companies. This production system is good for companies, but serves as a risk management tool for large farms.

The small farms and part-time farms will continue to grow as many farmers work in jobs off the farm. The small farm has the potential to be a very profitable enterprise in the sustainable farming system. Community supported agriculture that builds relationships between consumers and a farmer develops trust in this food system.

Preserving a food system that is closer to home, and a system that preserves and protects local agriculture, inspires consumers and farmers alike. This system can function without government support payments. Many regions in Pennsylvania have begun "partnerships" that make their communities sustainable.

Technology is a valuable marketing tool for this size or production system of farms. E-commerce could make this small farming system more profitable than many large farms. Farmers will have to take advantage of education and training opportunities to capitalize in this marketing system.

What can be done to enhance the sustainable farming food system?

Agriculture changed more rapidly in the year 2000 than it did the previous 30 years. There will always be a need for larger production types of farms to feed the masses. However, local-based agriculture that is sustainable system is valuable to the community it provides food and fiber for. The need for local "connections" to the food supply is important to producers and consumers alike.

Sustainable agriculture protects the environment and serves as a mechanism to "clean the air" from urban pollution. The woodlots serve as habitat for wildlife. Local farms serve as a filter to protect valuable water resources and provide wetlands to

improve the water quality of our rivers and streams. These ecosystems also filter out excess nutrients and pesticides.

Farms that have soil conservation plans in practice are saving valuable topsoil and preventing the silting of our waterways. This sustainable practice in combination with livestock farms that have nutrient management plans are helping to improve the quality of life for all people that live in both rural and urban communities.

Sustainable agriculture accomplishes three important objectives:

1. It contributes to long-term farm profitability.
2. Provides for environmental stewardship.
3. Improves the rural quality of life.

What can be done to preserve sustainable farms?

There are several important transformations that farmers and agriculture enterprises can do in order to remain important to rural and urban communities.

Farmers can learn more about implementing management practices that will help them become more profitable:

- Develop a business plan.
- Be familiar with risk management tools.
- Manage your finances.
- Incorporate technology wherever it is practical.
- Learn to market your crops, livestock, and farm-produced products.
- Eliminate the phrase "get rid of" from your marketing language.
- Form alliances, networks, or merge your farming efforts with other local farms. Utilize and organize cooperatives to decrease your input costs, or increase your bargaining power in the market place. Consider forming limited liability corporations (LLC) to become efficient and competitive in commodity markets.
- Learn and apply sustainable agriculture management practices. Realize that your nonfarming neighbors do not always understand your business. Be considerate of your neighbors

when deciding to apply manure to fields. Be considerate of holidays and weekends when scheduling fieldwork or manure applications whenever practical.

- Become active and involved in your community and local government.

- Take an active role in agriculture education of children in schools, or adults in community projects.

As consumers and neighbors, several key objectives in keeping local farms in your community should be emphasized:

- Buy local foods whenever possible. Support your local farms.

- Become familiar with the seasonality of food crops you consume. Inquire about how your food is produced. Farmers love to share information about what they do.

- Develop working relationships with local farmers. Share your food preference and food safety concerns. Realize that organic agriculture production systems are not practical on every farm.

- Encourage local farms to try and add one new sustainable management practice that protects or improves the environment.

- Be reasonable and try to understand the individual challenges farmers face. Realize that milk, meat, and eggs have a management side that includes odors and dust that farmers have to cope with every day.

- Become active and involved in your community and local government.

- Participate in the education process of children in schools, or adults in community projects.

It is everyone in the sustainable food system's responsibility to ensure that it never allows farming in local communities to end.

*Do you think what happened in Connecticut would never happen here?*