

State streamlining farmland preservation process

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New Jersey's Farmland Preservation Program has come a long way over the past 20 years in establishing itself as a national leader.

While only 15 farms were preserved in the first few years of the program, more than 100 farms now annually enter it. While counties had the sole authority to purchase development rights at the outset, the program has expanded to enable the state, municipalities and nonprofits also to take the lead in farmland preservation acquisitions.

While funding averaged \$15 million a year prior to the establishment of the Garden State Preservation Trust in 1999, an average of \$87 million in new annual funding has been available since.

Although the program's goal to permanently protect farmland and strengthen the agricultural industry remains the same, our mission is much more urgent today in the face of unrelenting development pressures on our remaining agricultural lands. Therefore, it is critical we do everything we can to ensure the Farmland Preservation Program operates as effectively and efficiently as possible in meeting that increased demand.

The State Agriculture Development Committee earlier this year established a process review committee to undertake a comprehensive review of its farmland preservation programs. Based on that committee's recommendations, the committee is preparing sweeping measures to streamline the program.

Our county grants program — our oldest and largest program — is due for some of the most significant changes. The agriculture development committee considers and approves farms for preservation on an individual basis. Farms are ranked to prioritize them for funding twice, first at the county level and then at the state level.

Under the current process, it can take more than a year from initial application for landowners to learn if they have been approved for preservation and sometimes more than two years before funding is available. We think there's a better way — one that still protects the public's interest in preserving our best farmland but does so more efficiently given the volume of applications we process today.

The agriculture development committee is developing rules to provide an alternative to our current county grants program in which we would approve funding not for individual farms, but for entire project areas identified by each county.

This would offer a number of advantages over the current system. By streamlining the administrative process, we could shorten the time frame from application to preservation by six months or more. We could encourage a more comprehensive planning approach to farmland preservation at the county level and reward counties that expeditiously complete acquisitions with the incentive of additional funding. Farms from one county would no longer have to directly compete against farms in other counties that may have greatly varying characteristics. Counties could accept and process applications all year round rather than on a once-a-year basis.

We're undertaking similar changes in our other programs to provide more consistency and predictability, and further improve the efficiency of the preservation process across the board. The agriculture development committee has circulated these and other proposed changes — all part of the process review committee's recommendations — for comment prior to formally proposing rules to implement them. A copy of the recommendations is available on our Web site at www.nj.gov/agriculture/sadc/rulesnotice.htm. We welcome additional input.

More than 139,000 acres of farmland have been permanently preserved, amounting to 17 percent of the state's agricultural lands, a higher percentage than any other state. At this critical juncture, however, we cannot afford to rest on our laurels. We're continuing to work to make the Farmland Preservation Program better, more accessible, more efficient and just as accountable. We owe it to landowners who participate in the program, our preservation partners, and current and future generations who will benefit from our best efforts to retain our farms and all they have to offer.

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