

Reconnecting Food, Agriculture, and Our Communities.

Video Project - DRAFT SCRIPT -

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As many farmers – but few non-farmers – realize, sweeping changes are taking place in agriculture and our food system. Powerful trends and forces are affecting farmers and the future of farming around the world and in our communities. Global price competition, the rise in contract production, a changing regulatory environment, and the rising cost of quality farmland are just a few of the external forces dramatically altering the economic environment in which farmers must survive let alone thrive. As farmers seek to remain viable in this context, they are often forced to make choices that impact their own operations as well as the structure of local agriculture. Changes in farm size, commodity priorities, a loss of farms, changing environmental impacts, farm diversity, and the variable economic contributions that local farms make to our communities are all examples of the impacts many communities have witnessed over the last couple of decades. As many communities are starting to realize, these changes are having profound impacts on our communities, natural resources, and landscapes.

At the same time, however, a growing number of farms and communities are successfully adapting to this changing environment. They are doing so by coming together to employ innovative strategies and create new partnerships that only a few years ago seemed almost unheard of. Indeed so many communities are beginning to address these issues that communities and farmers in areas that are not actively seeking innovative solutions will increasingly be in jeopardy of losing much of what they value about a rural quality of life rooted in a vital and economically sustainable agriculture. Survey after survey tells us that agriculture is a key aspect of the rural quality of life that residents in this state and throughout the Northeast treasure. This video is designed to help you better understand these issues and the options your community has for doing what it can to ensure agriculture remains a viable and important aspect of your community.

While we often talk about agriculture's contribution in terms of its direct economic impact, it's important for us to keep in mind the many other contributions agriculture makes to our communities.

The first is that agriculture is an important source of jobs and income, particularly in some rural areas. Farming may not be our largest industry but it does employ a significant number of residents and has a major economic impact in many rural communities. It helps contribute to a diversified economy, helping many states and local communities better withstand economic downturns. In addition, farming is a highly productive, economic, and renewable use of local resources.

Secondly, farms are an essential source for local and healthy foods that don't have to travel great distances to get to our tables. They provide a local face on food production, helping people better understand where food comes from, and often times creating a special relationship between farmer and consumer. Consumers know how the food they consume is raised or produced. Local production and direct marketing, such as through farmers markets and roadside stands, also provide consumers with more choices, particularly of fruits and vegetables that do not ship well.

One of the biggest benefits of local foods is that consumers' food dollars stay within a community and are re-spent locally, increasing the local economic impact of farming. Dollars spent on food grown elsewhere leaves the community immediately, reducing the economic multiplier effect that economists and economic development experts recognize as essential for local job growth and well-being.

Many businesses also depend upon farming and a healthy farm economy. A variety of different businesses depend directly or indirectly upon farms for their survival. This includes the large food processing industry, who get much (but not all) of the commodities they handle from local farms; farm supply and input businesses, such as feed stores, machinery manufacturers and dealers, large animal veterinarians, and farm financial institutions, who sell the inputs necessary for farm production to occur; and the tourism industry, which thrives on the tourists who come, among other things, to see rural farm landscapes.

Farming also provides open space and other critical environmental benefits. Agriculture accounts for large percentage of many communities' total land mass. Farms provide a wide array of valuable and unique contributions including wildlife habitat, storm water runoff, carbon sequestration, aquifer recharge, and scenic vistas.

Agriculture also provides considerable tax and revenue benefits. Studies show that farms provide more in tax revenue to local governments and school districts than they require back in public services. For every dollar of revenue that farmland provides to its local township government and school district, for example, it only requires back between 4 and 15 cents worth of services. This occurs even with tax reduction programs. Farms thus benefit non-farm property owners by keeping tax rates lower than they would be otherwise.

Lastly, farming is also an integral part of our history and culture, being one of the primary reasons many parts of our states were settled. Historical farm houses and barns are testament to the cultural and historical role of farming. Some historical areas, revel in, and derive considerable tourism revenue from, their agricultural heritage.

While agriculture clearly plays an important role in many of our communities, its continued viability in many of our communities is by no means certain. Importantly there is a good bit that we can do at the local level to ensure agriculture continues to remain vital. Research from around the country tells us that creating a vibrant agriculture economy is more successful in those communities where citizens and local leaders are engaged in local agriculture, who view farming as an important part of their community, where adequate off-farm employment opportunities exist, where a critical mass of suppliers and buyers is readily accessible, where consumers are aware and actively engaged in purchasing local produce, and where the regulatory and land use climate effectively and reasonably balances the needs of farmers and communities. Thus preserving agriculture in the face of its growing challenges requires the active involvement of everyone – farmers, consumers, local elected officials, land use planners, economic development professionals, and the business community.

In essence, the options for addressing agricultural issues in your area amount to thinking about the aspects of your community that are either influenced by agriculture or have influence on it. In general these fall into two distinct but related categories – 1) community attributes and

conditions that affect agriculture and its profitability and 2) agricultural production and marketing opportunities and responses.

Let's first think about community attributes. To do so, what we really need to do is to ask the question: "Is our community farm friendly?" Other questions we might ask include: "Does our community have a vision about what kind of agriculture it wants and what it needs to achieve that vision?" and "Are we doing all that we can as a community to ensure the long term success of agriculture in our community?" The methods you use to find the answers to these questions vary, but increasingly, experience across the country is telling us that those that don't ask these things are almost guaranteeing a less competitive and sustainable local agriculture.

There a number of tools available to help your community, but the bottom line is that successful communities need to assess what they are doing or need to do to identify and address agricultural issues in their community. Areas to include in your assessment include planning for agriculture, (such things incorporating agricultural business strategies into traditional economic development plans, ensuring that agriculture is fully addressed in local comprehensive plans, ensuring that the impacts of local ordinances and regulations take into account the needs of farmers, actively seeking the input of farmers regarding local and public policy issues that affect them, and resolving and preventing local conflict ensuring effective public policy education, and undertaking comprehensive strategic planning and visioning). Another important area of consideration is agricultural business planning and capital investment – including ensuring that local farmers and agricultural businesses have access to the technical resources and assistance they need, ensuring access to grants, loans, cost share, tax incentives and other capital investments based on sound business plans, and ensuring that agricultural producers, processors, and retailers are actively engaged in local economic development activities and resources. Effective land use policies too are important. Developing an effective agricultural preservation programs, ensuring agricultural operations are appropriately considered and prioritized in land use planning, community visioning, and regulatory designs, providing for effective agricultural zoning and/or transfer of development rights programs, and ensuring an equitable taxing structure are all example of things successful farming community consider.

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Developing this capacity requires engaging your community and farmers in creating a new vision, in bringing new partners into the discussion, and thinking about these things in new and

innovative ways. In the old days, partnerships for addressing agricultural issues usually involved primarily state, county and federal agencies in addition to local farmers and farmer organizations. Many communities today, however, are finding that addressing these issues involves these partners as well as local government officials, economic development professionals, consumers, the local business community, restaurants and chefs, churches, schools and civic organizations, and institutional food services such as prisons and nursing homes and others. Broadening involvement in this way builds relationships and community capacity, educates citizens about their role in agriculture, informs farmers about the things that are important to their neighbors, improves quality of community plans, expands the political base and resources for future action, and ensures that agriculture's goals are achieved in a way that is consistent with other community development goals.

[interview - several short questions (about why its important to have a vision York or Cumberland County Future of Ag person – max 30 seconds of footage]

We also want to think about the many opportunities there are to expand local markets – many of which can be thought of as exploring ways to better bridge the gap between producers and consumers. What we are really talking about is enhancing community based marketing and value-added opportunities. We focus on these kinds of strategies because many of the future opportunities for local agriculture will come from these types of efforts. These include: expanding local retail sales through direct sales to local customers. Examples of these things include increasing the quantity and quality of farmers markets; expanding Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) arrangements; developing producer directories and databases; and helping to develop Food Circles, u-pick operations, roadside stands, and home delivery opportunities. Increasing direct wholesale opportunities between producers and retailers is another important consideration. Options in this arena include developing regional wholesale markets, auctions, supermarkets, institutional food services, gourmet shops and food cooperatives. Increasing wholesale sales through or to a middleman including wholesalers, brokers, jobbers or other distribution networks are also important considerations. Some farms and cooperative have also expanded contract purchasing or fixed price sales based on volume. These are increasingly being developed for meat fruit, grains and other specialty processors. Many have also developed or expanded wholesale options through farmer owned cooperatives increasingly being developed

for dairy, fruit, and vegetable cooperatives in addition to food processing cooperatives and value-added marketing.

[interview – someone from Centre County Farm to Table about local efforts to expand local markets – max 30 seconds of footage]

And/or segway to....

A quick interview with Craig Whitehead from Wegman's about farmers working with grocers 30 seconds max

Which of these arrangements provide your community with the greatest opportunity will depend on many things including the type of local agriculture you have, the size of your local population or the distance to nearby markets, the responsiveness of local producers to undertake such innovative efforts, the awareness of local consumers about the value of local farms and produce, and the willingness of your community to come together to help develop these kinds of new approaches.

While we have been focusing on those things that communities can do to support agriculture in their communities, we obviously cannot overlook the fact that much of the success of these efforts relies on the flexibility and responsiveness of local farmers. In the past the only options farmers were believed to have were 'getting bigger' or 'getting out'. While there are powerful market forces shaping the rationale decisions farmers must make in this regard, a third option has emerged over the last couple of decades that is increasingly both a successful model that other farmers can follow and one that communities can support – namely becoming entrepreneurial and sustainable.

While the options for moving from a narrow commodity focus to more diversified "flexible specializing" varies from location to location and farmer to farmer, there is no shortage of opportunities for moving in this direction. Some of these are embedded in the things we have just talked about – ideas like value-added processing and direct marketing. Others include diversifying or shifting a farm's product mix or changing its production methods such as growing for the rapidly growing organic market or other niche markets. In either case these

types of changes require farmers to embrace new ways of doing business, forging new alliances, and learning new things that may or may not have been able to imagine before. Without a critical number of farmers willing to make these kinds of changes, community efforts to address the local issues that it can to preserve agriculture will be at best only partially successful.

[interview - several short questions (about what have you learned? Kim Tait) – max 30 seconds of footage]

As we've seen, agriculture in our communities is facing a number of growing challenges and opportunities. Because agriculture is such a critical component to the quality of life in many of our communities, these challenges and opportunities pose a special responsibility on all those that care about these things to learn and contribute all that they can to this changing landscape. Doing so effectively, however, can only be achieved in an environment where both the farming and non-farming community understand each others concerns and respond in an atmosphere of mutual respect and partnership.