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“Working Lands in Lyme”

In Webster’s Dictionary there are three parts to the definition of the word rural: “1. Of or relating to the country: RUSTIC. 2. Of or relating to people who live in the country. 3. Of or relating to farming: AGRICULTURAL.” All three aspects of this definition refer to the rural quality of life in our town of Lyme and we are fortunate that they do. It is the third aspect of rural identity that is threatened in many places around our country today, as family farms close in the face of economic and social pressures. I write this article as a means of directing our preservation focus toward the working farms and other land-based businesses that exist in our town.

The existence of farms and the lands that support their operations are currently being threatened in Connecticut as we experience a rapid loss of farmland. Currently, there are 4191 farms left in CT, comprised of 357,000 acres of land. Of this total, 170,000 acres are prime cropland, with the remaining acres being composed of hay and pasture lands, wetlands, forest, orchards and farmstead. The state of Connecticut is losing farmland faster than any other state in our country. Between 1997 and 2002, Connecticut lost over 12% of its farmland. In this time period, the greatest percentage loss of farmland occurred in New London county (-23%) and Middlesex county (-22%). We are losing between 7,000 and 9,000 acres of our land in farms to non-agricultural uses each year. At this rate of loss, there will be no farmland remaining in Connecticut by the year 2040.

There are many economic and societal forces that put pressure on the existence of farmland. As development continues, the price of land is increasing throughout CT. Rising land prices are often accompanied by increases in property taxes. Tax and land price increases mean that farmers have a difficult time buying land to start a new farm or adding to their existing acreage. Many farmers are forced to rent land as their total or partial land base. The CT farmers are aging, 1 in 3 CT farmers are over the age of 65. Many farmers do not have heirs that are interested or able to continue cultivating the land. The burden of inheritance taxes can create an insurmountable burden on heirs who might want to continue the farm. As farms cease to exist, the remaining farms struggle with the disappearing network of farms and other businesses that support farms.

At this time, the state of CT has protected a total of 30,087 acres on 213 farms, less than 10% of the total farmland, leaving 90% of farmland vulnerable to development. There is a state Farmland Preservation Program (also known as the Purchase of Development Rights or PDR) that was created in 1978. In 1974, the Governor’s Task Force for the Preservation of Agricultural Land that led to the creation of the PDR program recommended a goal of protecting 100,000 acres. Over the past thirty years the program has managed to protect less than a third of that goal, mostly due to a lack of funding.

In our town of Lyme, we are very fortunate to have a number of working farms, as well as a farmer’s market and other land-based businesses. I know of four working farms: Tiffany Diary Farm, Sankow’s Beaverbrook Farm, Falls Brook Organic Farm, and

Ashlawn Farm. There is a Lyme farmer's market that operates May through October. There are two local sawmills and a gravel operation. There are likely other land-based businesses of which I am not aware.

Local working lands contribute to the quality of our lives in many ways. Farms and other working lands can deepen our sense of connection to the land and contribute to understanding that we are part of larger natural systems. Ultimately, our food (and lumber and gravel) come from the land and when we can witness that first hand we can develop our understanding of ecology, agriculture and sustainability. Farms contribute to the local economy by providing jobs and creating local circulation of currency through farm products and farm inputs. Sustainably practiced land-based businesses can be a positive contributor to a healthy environment. Farmland can contribute to wildlife habitat, filter drinking water, protect wetlands, reduce flooding, and maintain open space. Local farms contribute to food security, by maintaining the capacity of local food production. Access to fresh, local food also can contribute to food education and health of the local population, especially children.

This article is the first in a series about working lands in our town. The Land Trust is interested in preserving open space and the rural quality of life in Lyme. Sustainably practiced land-based businesses can be a positive contributor to a healthy environment and to rural society.