

# Yates County, New York

## Agricultural Development and Farmland Enhancement Plan

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### 5.0 Action Plan

Yates County's agricultural sector is extraordinarily diverse. This is its predominant strength. Farming will remain healthy as an industry if it continues to adapt and diversify. New markets, new products, new ways of doing business and new partnerships are constantly needed. The mission of the Agricultural and Farmland Protection Board should be to ensure the presence of conditions that allow Yates County's extraordinarily diverse agricultural economy to continue to grow and prosper. Accordingly, the Agricultural and Farmland Protection Board should make implementation of the recommendations that follow its primary mission over the next 3-10 years:

#### 5.1 Agricultural Business Planning Initiative

**RECOMMENDATION: Make business planning technical expertise available to existing farmers wanting to diversify or expand as well as new farmers wanting to locate in Yates County. This technical assistance could be provided through existing agricultural business consultants operating in the region or by employment of an individual with these skills on the staff of Cornell Cooperative Extension of Yates County or the Industrial Development Agency of Yates County. A Rural Business Enterprise Grant should be secured toward this end.**

Farmers and other agricultural business entities often lack the technical expertise to apply for private and public financing. Many have not previously engaged in the kind of business planning that is necessary in packaging applications for financial assistance from either governmental or traditional lending sources. There is limited technical assistance now available through Cornell Cooperative Extension (CCE), the Yates County Soil & Water Conservation District (S&WCD). Both agencies have assisted farmers with applications for NYS Department of Agriculture and Markets grants and financial help in implementing nutrient management plans. There are also private business consultants already operating in the region who provide some of this same assistance to interested farmer clients.

The Agricultural and Farmland Protection Board should broaden the availability of this business planning assistance. Smaller farmers, Mennonite farms, new wineries and agricultural support businesses are examples of the enterprises that should be targeted for business planning assistance. There are at least three means of accomplishing this; 1) offering mini-grants to interested entrepreneurs for employment of private business consultants, 2) adding staff capabilities at CCE, S&WCD or the Industrial Development Agency to provide such assistance, and 3) hiring an Agricultural Economic Development Specialist for Yates County, whose responsibilities would include this function.

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The first of these options would be easiest to fund at the outset and provide a model for testing the concept without the risk of making a new hire. A logical source of funding is the Rural Business Enterprise Grant (RBEG) program offered by the USDA Rural Development agency. An application to establish such a mini-grant program should be made with USDA as soon as possible. If the application is approved, these mini-grants could be made available in the near future for farmers and others to secure business planning assistance from qualified consultants of their choice. Providing for such choice is another advantage of this approach.

**Implementation Period:** 2004-2005

**Responsible Parties:**

- 1) Agricultural and Farmland Protection Board
- 2) Cornell Cooperative Extension of Yates County
- 3) Yates County Industrial Development Agency (IDA)

### 5.2 Niche Marketing Training Initiative

**RECOMMENDATION: Provide workable models of new niche agricultural business enterprises to Yates County's relatively large population of young individuals already motivated to engage in farming. Yates County's Mennonite farm culture is ideal for cultivating new niche agricultural ventures. Feasible models need to be developed to pursue niche opportunities in pastured poultry, dairy goats, fresh grape production and many other enterprises geared toward small farm operations that can be started with a minimum of capital.**

Yates County has a tremendous opportunity to grow agriculture as an industry by addressing the interests of the many young Mennonite farm family members who are already motivated to farm by their culture. These individuals need to be provided with viable examples of ventures they can pursue profitably to stay in Yates County.

There are numerous such examples of niche products that can be produced on both small and large farms. Pastured poultry, dairy and meat goats and fresh grapes are all possibilities. On-farm dairy processing of artisanal cheeses and yogurts is a viable option for small to medium sized dairies. Organic dairying has distinct possibilities and is already being pursued. Agricultural tourism also offers potential. Other farmers can specialize in raising newborn calves and heifers, growing forages, custom harvesting and similar ventures. Corn silage and total mixed ration (TMR) sales to smaller farmers offer profit potential for larger operations. Quality hay, frozen embryos, export cattle and high-protein milk are still additional opportunities for diversification and specialization.

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Successful models and niche marketing training are essential to the development of these opportunities. This is particularly true for smaller farmers who need higher profit margins to survive at their reduced scales of operation. Niches also have to be changed from time to time. Many small farmers have to reinvent their operations every 8-10 years. Those who do, survive and prosper - those that don't, are soon gone. The role of the Agricultural and Farmland Protection Board, through its cooperating agencies, should be to provide some of the expertise needed to pursue the possibilities. This should be accomplished with research, development of model business plans and direct technical assistance.

Cornell Cooperative Extension can supply the educational support required. However, much of the expertise needs to be provided in the context of an advocacy, rather than strictly educational, role. Therefore, others may also need to be involved. Assistance in transitioning from one type of business enterprise to another will often require hands-on assistance as well as business planning education. Help in developing and managing projects from start to finish will be demanded. This needs to be done using a holistic approach that meets the self-sufficiency and income needs of farm families, keeps those families together and on the farm, rather than working off farm. It is also critical that niche farm operators appreciate the demands of consumers for food safety and high quality products. Education in these areas needs to be part of any niche marketing training program.

**Implementation Period:** 2004-2010

**Responsible Parties:**

- 1) Agricultural and Farmland Protection Board
- 2) Cornell Cooperative Extension of Yates County
- 3) Yates County Soil & Water Conservation District
- 4) Finger Lakes Resource Conservation and Development (RC&D) District

### 5.3 Yates County Culinary Promotion

**RECOMMENDATION:** Establish a local version of the Finger Lakes Culinary Bounty program linked to that initiative and building upon it to promote Yates County's diverse array of farm products. This should be accomplished using a local magazine or website with a theme that allows the packaged promotion of multiple products. "Yates County...Breadbasket of the Finger Lakes," is one possibility. Promotional efforts should be targeted at high-end consumers and tourists already attracted to the lakes and wine trails.

Yates County is unique in the number of lakes it fronts, the number of wineries it

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possesses, its extensive organic industry and the diversity of farm products it grows. The County needs to exploit these competitive advantages with some self-promotion. This needs to be done in the context of regional programs that already exist (e.g. Finger Lakes Culinary Bounty, multi-county tourism promotion programs and the Bountiful Harvest brochure) but with an emphasis on Yates County's unique offerings.

A local quarterly magazine or website building on the Fingers Lakes Culinary Bounty Program and fully complimenting it (as opposed to competing with it) should be the vehicle for accomplishing this. Such a magazine or website should include promotion of food ideas, food quality and food availability. It should promote the availability of every kind of good food available in Yates County, from pancake mixes to vegetables to wine to meats to milk products. It should promote both small and large farm images, woodcraft enterprises, farm stores and wineries with high quality photography, stories and information on awards. It should promote quality products. It should make readers or users familiar with individual farms, telling their stories. It should explain farm practices, blending the old with the new and modern farm technology. It should, however, avoid too much quaint sentimentality and instead give readers and users a better understanding of where good foods come from (Yates County), how they're produced and what makes Yates County special.

Such a magazine or website could be initially launched as part of the County tourism promotion program and later spun off to a separate organization of either a public or nonprofit private nature in the model of the wine trails. It need not be extravagant at the outset but must include high quality photography and good storytelling to create the desired images. A partnership for this purpose among various groups could, perhaps, be established by initially developing a website with links from and to other organizations including local wine trails. Cornell Cooperative Extension has the capabilities to produce such a website but will need contributions from others.

The website should be direct at high-end consumers and tourists from the lake areas, Rochester, Corning and similar communities. An appropriate example of a theme is "Yates County... Breadbasket for the Finger Lakes." It is important to target to visitors and high-end consumers to create out-of-County markets that avoid accelerating new development and competition for land within the County.

**Implementation Period:** 2004-2005

**Responsible Parties:**

- 1) Agricultural and Farmland Protection Board
- 2) Cornell Cooperative Extension of Yates County
- 3) Yates County Chamber of Commerce

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### 5.4 Strategic Alliances Initiative

**RECOMMENDATION:** Arrange for pooling of purchases, cooperative endeavors and other strategic alliances to reduce costs of doing business for commodity agricultural enterprises. Commodity agricultural businesses can only compete successfully in what are mostly becoming national and global markets by consistently reducing costs. Small and medium sized farm operations must align themselves in strategic alliances to achieve economies of scale and realize the cost reductions that will keep them competitive. Technical assistance with the assembly of such alliances is a critical task for the Board.

Strategic alliances between small and large farmers and grain and dairy farmers need to be furthered as a means of reducing costs and staying competitive in commodity agriculture businesses. Grain farmers need to be encouraged to grow crops for dairy farms as part of their rotation program. Intra-County sales of grain and other commodities need to be encouraged with the establishment of a local "forage finder" program and the promotion of commodity sheds. Informal cooperatives or pooled purchase programs should be initiated to negotiate better pricing at both the input and output side.

Such alliances should also be employed as a vehicle for identifying new markets and product lines. There may also be opportunities to expand upon the Finger Lakes Produce Auction or develop similar shipping point market that would facilitate access to urban markets. Commodity agricultural enterprises especially need help in addressing labor supply issues, costs of insurance and costs of utilities, all of which would benefit from group negotiation.

Forward contracting and other risk management tools, although they have traditionally had limited impacts on Yates County farmers, will clearly be a part of the future. Strategic alliances of farm operators prepared to use these tools will provide the best opportunities to secure education and maximize the benefits regarding them. There is a concurrent and related need to encourage alliances among farmers, educational/research institutions, agri-businesses and County government.

The Agricultural and Farmland Protection Board can promote these various strategic alliances simply by bringing the parties together through conferences and seminars. Its cooperating agencies need to take a more proactive posture in assembling such alliances, however. Education, alone, will not bring the parties together in the critical second step of organizing into alliances. This needs to be addressed with direct technical assistance. One way to accomplish this is to provide more extensive business planning assistance to strategically allied farmers, followed up by assistance in packaging financing requests for

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farm improvements and other new investments.

**Implementation Period:** 2004-2010

**Responsible Parties:**

- 1) Agricultural and Farmland Protection Board
- 2) Cornell Cooperative Extension of Yates County
- 3) Yates County Farm Bureau

### 5.5 Yates County Organic Initiative

**RECOMMENDATION:** Promote and expand the organic agricultural industry in Yates County as a niche economic sector. Yates already has a large number of organic producers, including hay and grain producers who can support dairy and other organic producers with certified organic inputs. Having this critical mass of organic producers gives Yates County a major competitive advantage over other regions hoping to exploit this niche opportunity. While competitors will eventually find their way to this higher margin sector, it provides a unique advantage for Yates to build upon and attract buyers.

Organic agricultural production is already a niche industry for Yates County. It has many organic producers already growing hay, grain and other products for sale to buyers outside the region. It also possesses an organic feed mill. The potential to increase the size of this sector, therefore, given the core businesses already present, is great. This should be encouraged with specific attention as a means of building recognition for Yates County, giving the County a marketable competitive advantage in attracting additional farmers and increasing profit margins for existing farmers.

The organic industry can be grown further using a combination of marketing and financial incentives. Promotion of Yates County as an organic production area should be focused on both organic products and the value of the area as an organic production area. It should help sell Yates County organic products to consumers and Yates County itself as the place to be if a farmer wants to grow such products. It should emphasize the critical mass of organic producers already present, the markets available as a result and the high quality that production in Yates County ensures.

Financial incentives and technical assistance should include priority attention to organic producers as these programs are extended to agricultural enterprises. Such priorities should, of course, not exclude other farmers from the opportunities but, nonetheless, give special attention to organic production as a niche enterprise for Yates County, in much the same manner as wineries are a niche for the Finger Lakes as a whole. The value of organic

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production is, for this purpose, in their niche economic aspect.

**Implementation Period:** 2005-2010

**Responsible Parties:**

- 1) Agricultural and Farmland Protection Board
- 2) Cornell Cooperative Extension of Yates County
- 3) Yates County Soil & Water Conservation District
- 4) Yates County IDA

### 5.6 Finger Lakes Wine Marketing Initiative

**RECOMMENDATION:** Bring together local wineries, the Wine Alliance, the Wine and Grape Foundation and wine trail organizations in a Finger Lakes wine marketing program. It should be linked to the new Finger Lakes Magazine and promote the Finger Lakes as a wine “terroir.” It should offer marketing training to wineries. It should promote expansion of vineyard acreages, new varieties, more vinifera, conversion of vineyards from juice grapes to wine grapes and promote specific food and wine pairings. It should include incentives and technical help in these endeavors.

“Terroir” is a French term. It is used to describe a territory or region by a combination of geography, attitudes, culture and history. It goes beyond the concept of “appellation” as used in the wine industry to encompass a broader sense of what an area is all about. The New York Wine and Grape Foundation has done an exemplary job of promoting New York State wines and the growth of the industry. The Federal government also recognizes appellations for the State, the Finger Lakes and some of the individual Finger Lakes. However, continuing efforts are needed to specifically promote the Finger Lakes as a wine “terroir.” No new organization is demanded. Rather, this can be done (and already is being done to a large extent) as a cooperative effort among existing parties. The key is to keep putting more emphasis on the region as the marketing niche.

The Finger Lakes Wine Country promotion program, which encompasses Chemung, Schuyler, Steuben and Yates Counties, is an excellent start. It gives relatively little attention to Yates County, however, with the exception of a Windmill mention and simple listing of wineries. A number of agricultural attractions (e.g. the Produce Auction) are left out and opportunities are missed to promote unique aspects of the region and its wines. The brochure also inadequately captures the attractive qualities of Yates County’s panoramic working landscapes and the farm culture that supports them. It does little to explain the themes that serve to create a Finger Lakes terroir, focusing instead on collections of individual attractions. It is excellent effort in so far as it goes, linking the four counties

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together and packaging many of the tourism resources, but much more is needed to explain what is different about Finger Lakes wines - what makes them special.

A coordinated effort on the part of wineries, the Wine Alliance, the Wine and Grape Foundation, trail groups and tourism promotion entities is needed to market the Finger Lakes as a wine region. Marketing training using the Australian model needs to be repeated regularly. Technical assistance is needed with specific types of marketing. Virginia and Washington wine region marketing aspects need to be emulated. Expansion of vineyard acreages and planting of new varieties (particularly vinifera) should be promoted. Incentives for using the Finger Lakes appellation and technical help in marketing need to be created. Conversion of acreages from juice grapes to wine grapes should be encouraged where possible although there are a number of factors to consider in making such a shift. Specific food and wine pairings need to be identified and promoted.

This initiative is underway but continued technical support is needed to realize the full benefits of such a program. Cornell Cooperative Extension's wine and grape specialist can and should perform this service at the behest of the Agricultural and Farmland Protection Board, working with similar groups in adjoining counties. Technical assistance and support should also be sought from the publisher of the new Finger Lakes Magazine, with whom a continuing relationship should be established.

**Implementation Period:** 2004-2006

**Responsible Parties:**

- 1) Agricultural and Farmland Protection Board
- 2) Cornell Cooperative Extension Wine & Grape Specialist
- 3) Regional Wine Trails

### 5.7 Labor Development and Management Training Initiative.

**RECOMMENDATION:** Establish a continuing program to develop farm labor and train farm managers. Professional development for occupations such as vineyard manager and dairy manager should be a major focus of Cornell Cooperative Extension. Students who can grow into higher level agricultural careers need to be encouraged using agricultural awareness programs at the school and community level, Penn Yan's Ag Leadership program being an excellent example. Increase support by School Boards is essential and will need to be solicited.

Perhaps the most critical challenge in maintaining a vibrant agricultural economy is producing a next generation of farmers, farm workers and farm managers, to take over the

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operation of the industry. Fortunately, Yates County has many motivated farm youth in the Mennonite community, but preparing these and other future farmers and farm workers with the skills needed to prosper in agriculture is still essential.

Among the needs is agricultural education in schools. There should be increased efforts to introduce and maintain agricultural vocational training in BOCES and local high schools. A program of seminars and courses should be developed, particularly in the areas of agricultural diversification and specialization with emphasis on the high-tech nature of agriculture today and the many applications of science that it involves. The "Agri-Core" curriculum programs used in Cortland, Ontario and Cayuga Counties are excellent models.

Internet use among younger generation farmers to further trade, create feeding programs, monitor pricing and keep abreast of the latest technology must be promoted. Progressive farmers are using this tool to a great degree. The County Agricultural and Farmland Protection Board needs to promote its use in every way possible to keep Yates farmers abreast of the available technology. Seminars, demonstrations and hands-on training are all needed. Those farmers who integrate Internet technology (and GPS use) into their management systems will offer the best potential to grow and attract labor as well as investors.

Labor management skills among farm owners also need improving. Farmers have found it extraordinarily difficult to attract and retain farm workers with the economy at full employment. The work is sometimes unappealing, the hours can be long and benefits have typically not been available. Most farmers have had little experience or training as labor managers. As their farms have grown in size, dealing with farm workers has, therefore been a challenge.

Much training is needed, with regard to managing labor, devising attractive benefit packages, offering better working conditions and identifying alternative sources. Where such sources are used (e.g., migrant labor), several other issues must also be addressed, including language skills, general education and housing. The cultural divide can be troublesome if farmers are not properly equipped to meet the needs of their workers. Just knowing how to legally access this labor source is a subject on which many farmers need training. Those Yates farmers who have taken the time to learn labor management skills and have invested in their workforce have had little difficulty keeping good help. The Board should use the Pro-Dairy program and other resources to help spread this attitude among all farmers.

There is a simultaneous need for more generous immigration regulations with regard to migrant labor employed by the agricultural sector. A more open market in legal immigration will help to reduce illegal immigration, meet farm labor needs and reduce costs paid out in

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referral fees to migrant labor agents, benefitting both employees and employers. The Agricultural and Farmland Protection Board needs to be supportive of Farm Bureau in lobbying for such policies.

Specific programs are also needed to develop occupations such as vineyard managers and dairy herd managers. A farm labor data base is also needed with links to the Mennonite community. High school links to multiple colleges with college credit for certain agricultural courses should be created to reward those students choosing agriculture as a career. The Penn Yan program in this regard should be emulated.

**Implementation Period:** 2004-2010

**Responsible Parties:**

- 1) Agricultural and Farmland Protection Board
- 2) Cornell Cooperative Extension
- 3) Yates County School Districts
- 4) Yates County Workforce Development Office
- 5) Farm Bureau

### 5.8 Farm and Farmland Protection Initiative.

**RECOMMENDATION:** Right to farm laws should be encouraged for all Yates County towns. Members of the Agricultural and Farmland Protection Board should meet with local officials of each town on an individual basis over the next two years to explain the benefits of agriculture and advocate the adoption of a Right-to-Farm law.

Right-to-Farm laws are intended to complement the New York State Agricultural District Law and provide a means for resolving farm-neighbor conflicts. They do so by protecting the rights of farmers using sound agricultural practices to continue those practices and to grow and expand within the community. They establish a policy which recognizes agriculture as a priority land use and puts the burden of proof that a farm practice constitutes a nuisance squarely upon those who would oppose such practices.

A model Right-to-Farm Law is attached as Appendix 2. It establishes specific criteria broadly defining the nature of sound agricultural practices and make it extraordinary difficult for such practices to be declared nuisances. The real strength of such laws, however, is that they create a mechanism to discuss problems, educate the parties and resolve conflicts on a local level by balancing the needs and requirements of all parties. They also set forth a statement of town policy which, it is hoped, will carry over to other aspects of local government.

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Right-to-farm protections are not intended to create rights exclusive to agriculture at the expense of other community members. Rather, their purpose is exactly the opposite - to avoid farm neighbors unreasonably interfering with the employment of sound agricultural practices. The suggested provisions would ensure all interests are considered but on a foundation principle that agriculture has a right to exist and is a desired use that should not be prevented from employing sound management practices. They establish a mechanism to address the relevant issues in a practical way that balances interests while allowing agriculture to move forward.

Protecting farms and farmland is more than dealing with conflicts among neighbors. It is also about effectively addressing agricultural interests in land use regulations and using other tools to protect critical farmland for agricultural use. Towns with subdivision, site plan review or zoning laws need to consider special provisions that establish buffers adjoining active farms, limit density in agricultural areas, restrict the location of incompatible uses within agricultural districts and ensure that farmers can pursue secondary processing and ancillary businesses on the farm. Examples of such provisions are found as Appendix 4 of this Plan. Towns without these land use regulations should consider using them for the purpose of protecting farms and farmland, incorporating similar provisions in their new local laws or ordinances.

Other tools that could help in meeting Goal 4.3.3 (which calls for maintaining no less than 50,000 acres of prime harvestable cropland in the County) are identified in Section 3.0 of this Plan. Among them is the Purchase of Development Rights (PDR), which is a program that Yates County should consider for some of its land areas with excellent grape-growing potential if and when they are threatened by lakeside development. Other prime agricultural areas for vegetable production or other high-value crops should also be considered. The County Agricultural and Farmland Protection Board should identify prospective properties that might fit into these categories and consider making application for State PDR funds for these purposes if the threat of development is real and the land of sufficient value to produce a competitive application. The Board should partner with the Finger Lakes Conservancy in developing a program, if one is warranted.

**Implementation Period:** 2004-2006

**Responsible Parties:**

- 1) Agricultural and Farmland Protection Board
- 2) Cornell Cooperative Extension of Yates County
- 3) Yates County Planning Board/Department
- 4) Yates County Farm Bureau