

KEEPING FARMERS ON THE LAND

New Research Underscores Need To Address Farm Transition in New England

Farmers age 65 and older own or manage nearly one-third of New England’s farms, and most are farming without a young farmer alongside them. New research from American Farmland Trust (AFT) and Land For Good sheds light on what this means for the future of New England agriculture.

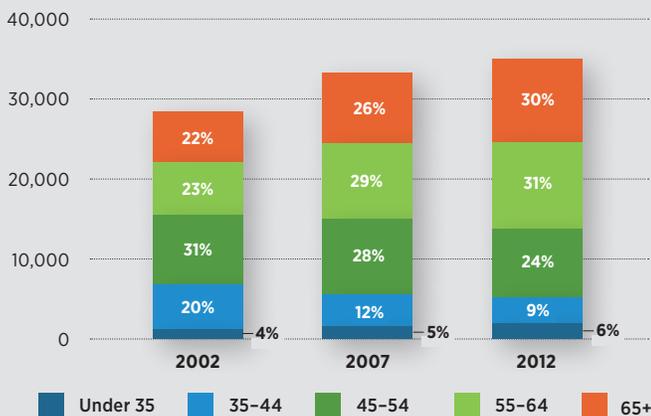
Using Census of Agriculture data from 2002, 2007 and 2012, including a special tabulation of 2012 data, the *Gaining Insights, Gaining Access* project looked at characteristics of New York and New England’s farm population at both ends of the spectrum—those at or beyond retirement age, and those young or new to farming. We also held focus groups in seven states of older farmers with no identified successors to learn more about this large, influential farmer subset: what they’re farming and with whom; their vision of retirement; and what challenges they face for the future.

We hope these findings and recommendations spur action on services and policies related to land access, farm transfer and succession. A full analysis is available on AFT’s Farmland Information Center website, at www.farmlandinfo.org.

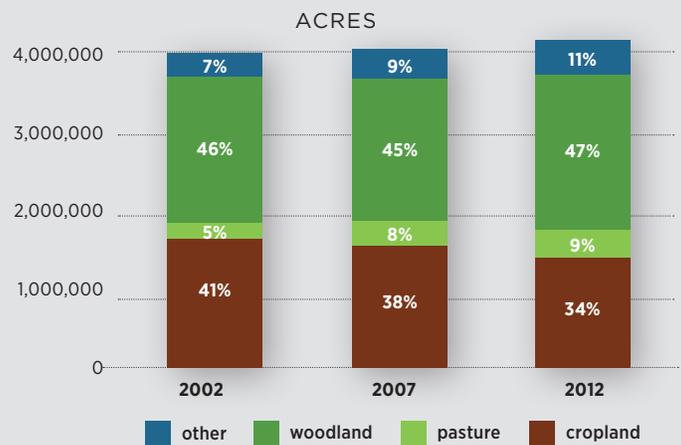
What will be needed to keep farmland in farming and farmers on the land as growing numbers of senior farmers begin to exit farming?



Trends: Principal Farm Operator Ages 2002–2012
NEW ENGLAND



Trends: Land in Farms 2002–2012
NEW ENGLAND*



* Rhode Island data not available for all land uses in 2012

Data from the 2012 Census of Agriculture

Key Findings

- *Ninety-two percent of New England’s 10,369 senior farmers do not have a farm operator under age 45 working with them.* While this does not mean that these farmers don’t have a succession plan, it suggests that the future of many of these farms is uncertain.
- *This subset of seniors farming without “young” farm operators owns a collective \$6.45 billion in farmland and buildings and manages 1.15 million acres of land in farms.* How and to whom these assets transfer will impact agriculture for generations to come.
- *Twenty-five percent of principal farm operators in New England have farmed for 10 years or less.* These beginning operators produced 10% of the market value of agricultural products sold in 2012, and manage 14% of the region’s land in farms.
- *Sixty-two percent of these beginners are 45 and older.* These older beginners are coming to farming as a second or “retirement” career; many are bringing assets to agriculture and will need to plan their own succession soon.
- *While New England has seen a significant gain in the number of principal farm operators under age*

“I wouldn’t mind retiring on the farm. I just want to work a little less.”

—FOCUS GROUP PARTICIPANT, ON RETIREMENT

35 since 2002, it has also seen a significant loss of principal farm operators between the ages of 35 and 44 over the same time period. There is a dearth of young operators in certain sectors, especially fruit, greenhouse/nursery, and the North American Industry Classification System (NAICS) sector “other crop farming” which includes hay, maple, and highly diversified farms. For senior farmers in these sectors, this shortage of young farmers may prove especially problematic.

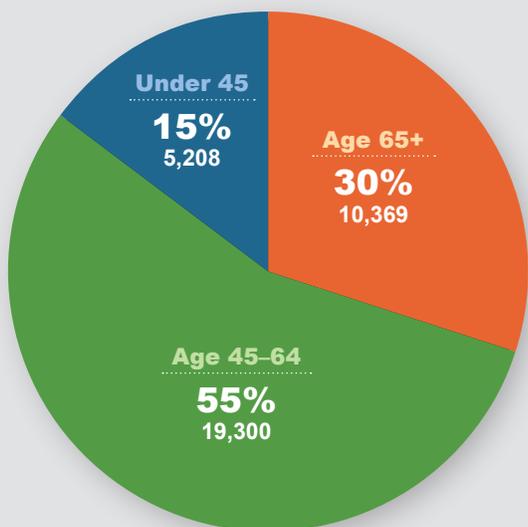
Findings

Senior Farmers: Thirty percent of New England’s principal farm operators are 65 or older. Their footprint is significant: they steward one-third of the land in farms (1,394,080 acres), and own an estimated \$6.45 billion in land and farm buildings. In 2012, they generated 24% of the market value of agricultural products sold (\$685 million).

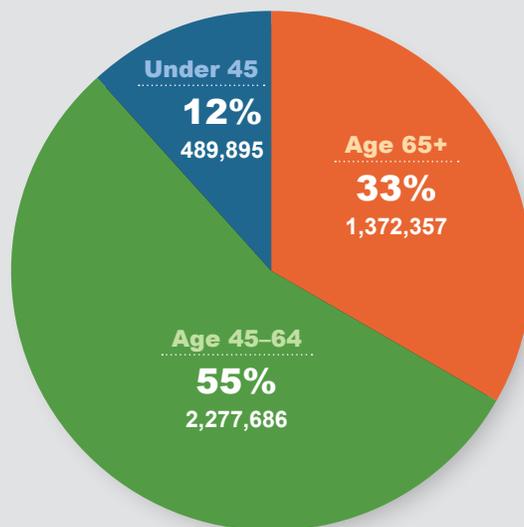
“I want to die with my boots on.”

—FOCUS GROUP PARTICIPANT, ON RETIREMENT

**Principal Farm Operators by Age in 2012
NEW ENGLAND**



**Acres Managed by Age in 2012
NEW ENGLAND***



* Excludes Rhode Island; data not available for all land uses in 2012.

A worrisome trend is the small number of young operators working alongside these seniors. The Census collects data about principal, secondary and tertiary farm operators, including ages. Every farm has a principal operator, and many have multiple operators. According to 2012 Census of Agriculture data, only 794 out of 10,369 principal operators age 65+ in New England have a second or third farm operator under the age of 45 working with them. The lack of a young operator does not necessarily mean there is no one to succeed that senior. In some cases, the farm may not be large enough to have a second operator, but there may be a succession plan. In other cases, there may be someone between 45 and 64—a spouse, child or hired manager—farming alongside who is poised to buy or inherit the farm.¹ But the lack of a young operator suggests that a farm’s future is uncertain, which is a cause for concern but also a possible opportunity for a young farmer.

Beginning Farmers: USDA defines beginning farmers as principal operators who have been on their current farm for 10 years or less; however, the experience ranges in the published Census tables

do not line up exactly with that definition. For this project, we defined a beginning farmer as a principal operator with ten years or less experience operating *any* farm, using data collected for the first time in 2012. Using this definition, 25% of New England’s farms (8,640) are operated by beginning farmers. These beginners manage 576,479 acres of land in farms, own \$3.47 billion in land and farm buildings, and generated \$290 million in market value of agricultural products sold in 2012.

“I’d kind of like to do something else for a change.”

—FOCUS GROUP PARTICIPANT, ON RETIREMENT

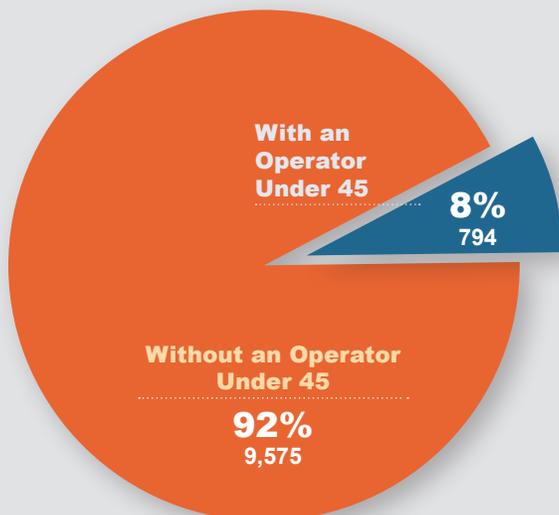
“I want to leave the land in better shape than I found it for whoever comes next.”

—FOCUS GROUP PARTICIPANT, ON THE FUTURE OF THE FARM

Senior Farm Operators

MORE THAN 90% HAVE NO YOUNG FARM OPERATOR FARMING ALONGSIDE

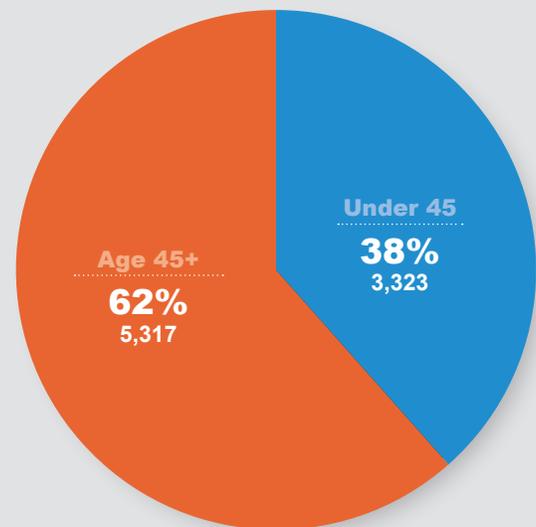
NEW ENGLAND



Beginning Farm Operators

A MAJORITY OF THEM ARE AGE 45+

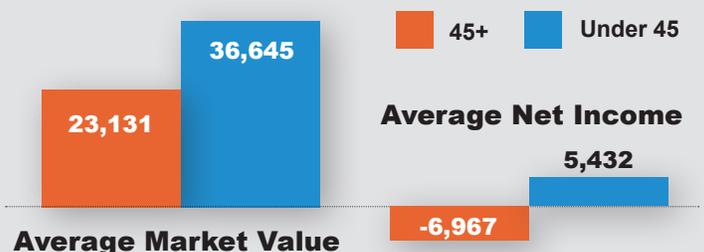
NEW ENGLAND



Older beginners have smaller market value and net farm income

IN NEW ENGLAND

BEGINNING FARMERS ECONOMICS



A surprising finding is that a significant majority of these beginning farmers are not young: 62% of New England's beginning farmers are 45 or older. Comparing beginners 45+ to beginners under 45, on average older beginners farm slightly less acreage (63 acres compared to 73) and generated less in agricultural sales in 2012 (\$23,000 compared to \$37,000). The average net farm income for older beginners in 2012 was negative, at \$-\$7,000; for younger beginners, it was a positive 5,000.

These findings have important implications for services and policies needed for beginning farmers. For young beginners, financing and access to capital is likely to be a significant need. For older beginners, who may have assets from prior careers, production and business support may be more important. In addition, these older beginners will need encouragement to start planning for farm succession, even while many are focused on growing their farm businesses.

Young Farmers: The 2012 Census of Agriculture does not define “young” farmers. For this project, we defined “young” as under 45. While a majority of young farmers are also beginning farmers, some are not. Thirty-six percent of New England’s

principal operators under 45 have more than a decade’s experience.

Using our definition, just 15% of New England’s principal farm operators (5,208) are considered young. Adding in secondary and tertiary operators, the region had 11,052 young operators in 2012, which represents 20% of all principal, secondary and tertiary farm operators. While the number of under-35 principal, secondary and tertiary operators increased by 1,518 (45%) between 2002 and 2012, the number of operators ages 35 to 44 dropped by 2,506 (29%) in the same period.

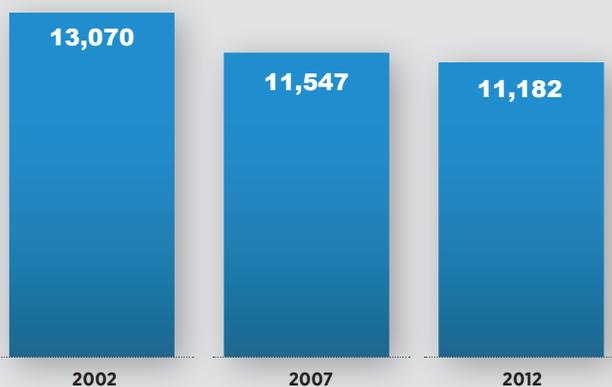
The Commodity Disconnect: An important finding is the difference in the type of commodities produced by young and senior farmers. Using the Census’ North American Industry Classification System (NAICS) codes, we compared the primary commodities produced by senior farmers without young secondary or tertiary operators to all young principal operators. For a few commodities—notably fruit, greenhouse/nursery and the NAICS code “other crop farming,” which includes hay, maple, and highly diversified farms—there are significantly fewer young farmers growing these crops. Conversely, there are more young farmers than seniors growing vegetables as their primary commodity.

“Sometimes I don’t feel I have the right to sell the farm outside the family. But sometimes I feel it’s someone else’s turn.”

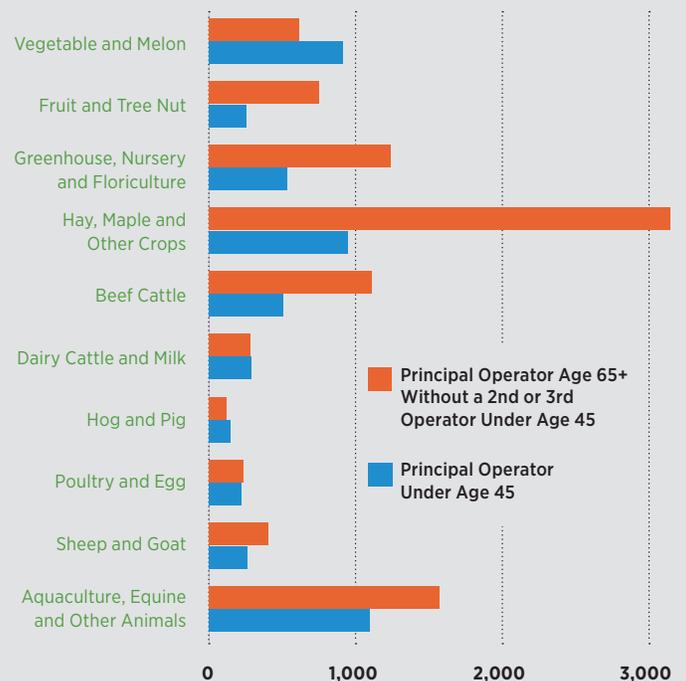
—FOCUS GROUP PARTICIPANT,
ON THE FUTURE OF THE FARM

Trends: Young Farm Operators 2002–2012 NEW ENGLAND

PRINCIPAL, SECONDARY & TERTIARY
FARM OPERATORS UNDER AGE 45



Farmers by Primary Commodity Type NEW ENGLAND



Two obvious concerns around this disconnect are the prospect of reduced production of certain commodities in the future, and the potential loss or abandonment of associated land and infrastructure. A less obvious but equally important concern is how seniors who are producing hay, maple, and fruit will be able to finance retirement if there is little demand for their operations among young farmers. While some of this land and infrastructure may be easily converted to different crops, some may not without a significant investment. This difference points to a need for research into what is needed to facilitate entry into these commodities or into those that make use of similar land base and infrastructure.

Focus Groups: Farmers Age 45+ Without Identified Successors

To augment the census data analysis, AFT and Land For Good conducted seven focus groups (one in each state covered by this project) of older farmers who self-identified as having no farm successor. A total of 67 farmers participated, ranging in age from 46 to 85 and representing diverse agricultural sectors. Farmers shared their vision of retirement and their farm's future, the challenges they face in finding a successor and transferring their land, and the services and policy changes they feel are needed to help. Participants filled out a questionnaire providing information about the farm transfer and succession services they've used, if any, and what resources they would like to have available.

Findings

Among our 67 focus group participants:

- *All want to see their land remain in farming if at all possible.*
- *Virtually all are interested and willing to look outside the family for a successor.*

"I've mentored some young people over the years, but when it came time for them to think about transitioning the farm, they didn't have the money to buy it."

—FOCUS GROUP PARTICIPANT,
ON POSSIBLE SUCCESSOR

- *Most are open to innovative approaches and strategies around farm transfer and succession.*
- *Most see farmland protection as an important tool in farm succession and transfer.*
- *Most see financing and future economic viability for younger farmers as an obstacle.*
- *Many want help navigating the complex process of choosing the right succession strategy and finding a suitable successor. Many also want technical assistance on specific aspects of succession and transfer.*
- *Most see a need for policy improvements.*

In general, many participants felt overwhelmed by succession. A number of factors played into this: lack of time to devote to it; complicated family dynamics; and issues around financial security and future farm viability. A large number of participants said they were grateful for the opportunity to discuss succession informally with peers.

A number of common themes emerged from the focus groups, including:

- *Participants wanted to see their land remain in farming.*

While participants differed in their views of retirement, they shared a universal vision of wanting to see their farms continue. Some want to remain on the farm and "die with their boots on"; these farmers are largely interested in finding someone to lease or take gradual ownership of the farm. Others are ready to sell to a suitable farm buyer and leave the farm. Many indicated that their land is their only appreciable asset, and their ability to finance retirement rests on their ability to extract equity from the land. Those in this situation voiced concern about the capacity of younger farmers to buy them out, and the lack of public funding available for the purchase of agricultural conservation easements.

- *Participants are interested and willing to look outside the family for a successor.*

This was true for participants with or without children. A number of participants expressed regret

"Mentoring a new farmer who could take over the farm would be ideal."

—FOCUS GROUP PARTICIPANT, ON RETIREMENT

about the possibility of the farm leaving the family. Many felt their children might have stayed had the economics of farming been better, and some hoped to find a way to keep the farm in the family for grandchildren. Others prioritized keeping the land in the family, even if the business transferred or discontinued. Of those who have children, some said that the non-family successor would need to be someone the children are comfortable with, while others said that children would not have a say in the decision.

- *Participants are open to innovative approaches and strategies around farm transfer and succession.*

When asked if they were looking for a specific type of arrangement with a successor, participants were open to different options and interested in learning more about strategies and successful models. A large number were interested in a gradual transfer of the farm to a new owner. Many expressed willingness to mentor a younger farmer. Many also expressed reservations about finding a suitable younger farmer. One participant voiced the sentiment of many in saying “there’s nobody out there who will work as hard on this farm as I have.” A number of participants interested in leasing and mentoring felt it would be valuable to have help in identifying qualified farmers.

- *Most participants see farmland protection as an important farm succession and transfer strategy.*

Participants included farmers who have sold agricultural conservation easements on some or all of their land, and those who have not. Of those who had not, a majority saw the sale of development rights as a way to finance retirement and facilitate the sale of their land to a farmer. Many of these farmers have been unable to sell an agricultural conservation easement because of a lack of state funding or, in some states, because their land is ineligible; others had tried but felt the valuation of the easement was too low. Not all were enthusiastic. A few participants expressed reservations about restricting their land with an easement that might limit future farm viability or salability. Of those who had protected their land, a few wished they could subdivide the farm

“I’m not sure who to go to for what information. I need one person to go to who can listen and point me to the appropriate place.”

—FOCUS GROUP PARTICIPANT,
ON CHALLENGES OF TRANSITION

into smaller parcels to make it more affordable and appealing to young farmers.

- *Participants see financing and future economic viability for younger farmers as an obstacle.*

An almost universal concern of participants was the economic viability of farming. Many felt their children or grandchildren would come back to or stay on the farm if it were more profitable. Most are concerned that a younger farmer will be unable to purchase their farm, especially at its current size, and cash-flow a farm enterprise; a number told of having promising farm workers or lessees who were interested in doing so but unable to afford it. While some participants felt they could assist with financing, many said they could not. “We can’t be expected to be benefactors,” one participant noted. “We need to take enough value with us into retirement.” Most farmers had not considered gradual transfer strategies that might make acquisition by a successor more affordable.

- *Participants want help navigating the complex process of choosing the right succession strategy and finding a suitable successor. They also want technical assistance on specific aspects of succession and transfer.*

Many participants had taken steps toward finding a business successor or a farmer to lease their land. Some had been to workshops or found resources online, but a large number expressed the need for help. As one participant noted: “Not sure who to go to for what info. Need one person to go to who can listen and point me to the appropriate place.” Participants also felt it would help to have information about successful transfer models, especially gradual transfer. Many wanted technical assistance or a screening service to identify a suitable successor, transferee or tenant, and some said they would like financial assistance to hire someone to help with that process.

“Protecting our land is a precursor to succession.”

—FOCUS GROUP PARTICIPANT,
ON THE FUTURE OF THE FARM

- *Participants see the need for policy improvements.*

Participants expressed a wide range of opinions about federal, state and local policies that impact farm viability. A number of policy changes were suggested to address challenges around farm transfer and succession. These include:

- Changes to federal and state estate tax laws;
- Increased and reliable funding for the purchase of agricultural conservation easements;
- Allowing subdivision of agricultural conservation easements to enable the sale of smaller protected parcels;
- Financial incentives for young farmers to gain farm management skills, enabling them to become credit worthy;
- Establishing a pension program for younger farmers.

Recommendations

Over the next 10–20 years, thirty percent of New England’s farmers are likely to exit farming. The 1.4 million acres they manage and \$6.45 billion in land and agricultural infrastructure they own will change hands in one way or another. This project’s findings suggest the need for expanded services and policy changes to help facilitate this transition in a way that keeps farmland in farming, offers seniors a secure exit from farming and provides farming opportunities for the next generation. Our broad recommendations include:

- ✓ *Improve technical assistance for older farmers related to farm transfer and succession.* This includes both technical and financial assistance to help older farmers identify a suitable successor, transferee or tenant, and additional resources on transfer and succession models and topics.
- ✓ *Increase funding for the purchase of agricultural conservation easements, and ensure that easements are sufficiently flexible to allow farms to adapt to changing conditions and markets.* Easements can facilitate farm transfers in ways that benefit both exiting and entering farmers.
- ✓ *Expand services to older farmers.* Enhanced services will require more, trained service providers

better networked and equipped to help more farmers address transfer and succession needs and guide them to specific assistance and resources.

- ✓ *Improve outreach to all farmers and incentivize succession planning,* to encourage more farmers to focus on succession earlier in their business life cycle.
- ✓ *Further investigate the “commodity” disconnect to determine what may be needed to support the transition of farms and land in certain agriculture sectors.*
- ✓ *Promote public policies that encourage and support young and beginning farmers.* These include policies and programs that strengthen education resources for farmers, improve access to land and capital, encourage business and management skills, and address transition and retirement needs.

NOTE

- 1 Our initial Census special tabulation did not examine the number of seniors with a second or third operator between the ages of 45 and 64. A request to USDA-NASS for this information is pending.

“Four things to do before I die:

- ✓ I want to make sure we have enough income till we die.
- ✓ We have worked hard, [and] I would like to step away from the work...and have a chance to do a lot of the things we have on the back burner.
- ✓ We built up a really great business and it has a lot of reputation in the community and there would be a lot of people that would really have their feelings hurt if it disappeared...so I would like to see the business keep going.
- ✓ I would like to preserve the farm, intact if possible for forestry and agriculture.

If I could do all four of those things I would die a happy person.”

—FOCUS GROUP PARTICIPANT



“I want someone else to put their heart and soul into [this farm].”

—FOCUS GROUP PARTICIPANT,
ON POSSIBLE SUCCESSOR

Acknowledgments: We thank the 67 farmers who shared their stories and perspectives with us. We also thank our Advisory Team who helped shape the research and distill the findings of this project. The team included: Gary Anderson, University of Maine Cooperative Extension; Ken Ayars, RI Department of Environmental Management; Erica Buswell, Maine Farmland Trust; Jennifer Hashley, New Entry Sustainable Farming Project; Jon Jaffe, Farm Credit East; Kelly McAdams, University of New Hampshire Cooperative Extension; Jon Ramsey, Vermont Land Trust; Holly Rippon-Butler, National Young Farmers Coalition; Warren Shaw, Shaw Farm; Lyn Spinella, RI Farm Bureau; and Henry

Talmage, Connecticut Farm Bureau. We are grateful to Matt Feder and Gary Keough with the National Agricultural Statistical Service for their help with the special tabulation. We could not have done this project without the help of two talented graduate students, Taylor Jang and Sarah Stevens, and the generous support of the Claneil Foundation, the John Merck Fund and supporters of American Farmland Trust. Land For Good was a key collaborator on this project, and we are grateful to Kathy Ruhf for her input and guidance. The project was managed by Cris Coffin with American Farmland Trust, with assistance from AFT staff Lisa Bassani, Tim Biello, and Jennifer Dempsey.

Cover photo courtesy of Land For Good; back cover photo courtesy of Dave Simonds.



Gaining ground for farmers

39 Central Square Suite 306 • Keene, NH 03431 • (603) 357-1600

landforgood.org



NEW ENGLAND OFFICE: 1 Short Street Suite 2 • Northampton, MA 01060 • (413) 586-4593 ext. 29

NEW YORK OFFICE: 112 Spring Street Suite 207 • Saratoga Springs, NY 12866 • (518) 581-0078

www.farmland.org

© American Farmland Trust, January 2016