

Agricultural commissions: A new resource for sustaining New Hampshire farms and communities

Final Report for CNE06-008

Project Type: Sustainable Community Innovation

Funds awarded in 2006: \$10,000.00

Projected End Date: 12/31/2008

Region: Northeast

State: New Hampshire

Project Leader:

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UNH Cooperative Extension

Project Information

Summary:

The project addressed the challenges to agriculture presented by residential and commercial growth of NH towns and cities, those ag unfriendly tax, zoning, signage and other policies and regulations, as well as conflicts with new residential and commercial developments that make farming increasingly difficult.

The project researched, developed and made available a new, innovative local governance board, the Agricultural Commission (Ag Com), to represent a municipality's agricultural community and interests, support a sustainable agricultural industry, promote ag-based economic development, act as mediators, advocates, educators and or negotiators on agricultural issues, policies and or conflicts, serve as agricultural advisors to town boards and commissions (bringing in outside agricultural experts as needed), work for the preservation of agricultural land and facilitate communication among farmers. An Ag Com brings farmers and non-farmers together to think and talk about agriculture in communities and create an awareness of agriculture as a business as well as a cherished view or valued open space. It gives farmers and communities a means of institutionalizing agricultural needs into local governance. The desired results are communities that are ag - conscious and ag - friendly.

The project created Ag Com information materials, conducted planning/input workshops for farmers, conservation organizations, land trusts, planners, legislators, municipalities and other stakeholders and launched the program, including adoption of enabling legislation. Twenty-five NH communities have either established or are in the process of organizing Ag Coms. Success derived from a participatory bottom-up networked approach that involved diverse stakeholders in project design, decisions and outcomes.

Project Objectives:

Performance Target: NH farmers and NH towns and cities have a new local governance tool they can use to sustain agricultural enterprises. At least 75% of NH

farmers will know where to get information about this tool, know the process for getting this tool adopted in their town or city and how to use the tool in their communities. Adoption will happen according to the specific needs/ issues/ relationships between ag and town governance. While we recognize that Ag Coms may not be needed in all NH towns, the tool should be available in our state. Given the urbanizing pressures in southeastern NH, Ag Coms will be adopted first by towns and cities in Rockingham, Hillsborough and Strafford Counties.

Led by farmers, 25 towns have either launched or are in the process of organizing Ag. Coms in NH towns.

Objective 1. After researching the experience of Ag Coms in MA and other states, and obtaining broad input from farmers, conservation organizations, planners, legislators, municipalities and other stakeholders, the Study Committee developed criteria for Ag Coms in NH to fit NH needs, NH statutes and local governance structures.

Objective 2. Materials explaining what Ag Coms are, what they can do, how to organize and how to structure as well as providing sample warrant articles, press releases, etc were developed and published on the web and in CD and print formats.

Objective 3. Ag NH farmers and communities learned about Ag Coms by reading articles, attending workshops and through print and e-mail communication.

Introduction:

Growing populations in New Hampshire present opportunities and challenges for working agriculture and for communities. Farming provides essential environmental, social, and economic benefits that support sustainable communities. At the same time, farming and other land-uses can conflict; local public policies and regulations, even when well-intentioned, can make farming difficult, if not impossible. If not resolved farms are threatened along with the ability of the town or city to hold on to wildlife habitat and other natural resources, agricultural support businesses, local food sources, its identity and other characteristics.

Though the work of Ag Coms, communities—farmers, residents, officials, schools, non-farm businesses, etc.—can understand agricultural practices, value agricultural contributions and create a civic culture that supports farming and works to reduce and prevent conflicts. The project researched, developed, implemented enabling legislation and supported the formation of a new, innovative local governance board, an Ag Com, to represent a municipality's agricultural community and interests, support and enhance a sustainable agricultural industry, promote ag-based economic development, act as mediators, advocates, educators and or negotiators on agricultural issues, policies and or conflicts, serve as agricultural advisors to town boards and commissions, work for the preservation of agricultural land and facilitate communication among farmers and between farmers and non-farmers.

Research

Materials and methods:

The NH Ag Com Project made a direct connection between agriculture and sustainable communities. It began with the premise that agriculture provides important environmental, economic and social benefits that contribute to a sustainable community and built on the assumption that communities need to

understand and support agriculture in order to support their own sustainability.

The NH Ag Com Project used a participatory bottom-up networked approach to involve agricultural and community stakeholders in project design, decisions and outcomes. The approach ensured the Ag Com resource fit our state and had broad based support from farmers and communities.

The NH Ag Com Project:

- a. Worked with stakeholders—farmers, local, state and regional planners, the Municipal Association, legislators, ag resource providers, conservation organizations and others—to research and adapt the Ag Com concept to fit NH needs, statutes and local governance structures.
- b. Worked with the Town of Lee to pilot an Ag Com in NH.
- c. Developed Ag Com information and organizational materials for farmers, selectboards, planners, etc. to explain what Ag Coms are, what they can do, how to organize and how to structure, including sample warrant articles, press releases, and published the materials on the web and in CD and print formats.
- e. Created a marketing campaign using agricultural networks to direct people to the web site and the CD.
- f. Planned and conducted meetings/workshops to introduce Ag Coms to NH farmers, resource providers, planners, communities, etc. and supported farmers in Ag Com development efforts.

Research results and discussion:

As a result of this project, statutes to enable Agricultural Commissions in NH communities were developed by Farm Bureau and adopted by the State legislature. Led by farmers, 25 towns either have or are in the process of establishing Agricultural Commissions. Efforts are underway to form a network of Ag Com members to support their work and provide a speakers bureau for those wanting to start new Ag Coms. More than 70 members and start-up organizers attended a training program for Ag Coms at the 2009 Farm & Forest expos. Many towns reported that the guidebook and related materials helped leaders develop successful Ag com organizational initiatives.

Participation Summary

Education & Outreach Activities and Participation Summary

PARTICIPATION SUMMARY:

Education/outreach description:

Outreach for this project was conducted through the communications networks of the NH Coalition for Sustaining Agriculture, including:
University of New Hampshire Cooperative Extension*
New Hampshire Department of Agriculture, Markets & Food*
New Hampshire Office of Energy and Planning
New Hampshire Division of Historical Resources*
USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service*, RC&D's*
New Hampshire Farm Bureau*, NOFA-New Hampshire*, NH Beginner Farmers*, NH Farmers Market Association* and other farmer organizations*
Society for the Protection of New Hampshire Forests

Center for Land Conservation Assistance
New Hampshire Association of Conservation Districts
NH Association of Conservation Commissions
USDA Farm Service Agency*
NH Rural Development Council
NH Timberland Owners*
Regional Planning Commissions
NH Municipal Association
Vital Communities*

The target audience was farmers, as they will lead Ag Com organizational efforts in their communities. Those organizations marked with an (*) are the primary points of contact with farmers. Each used their newsletters, list servs, web and e-mail communication systems to distribute information about Ag Coms and post announcements for workshops and web based info. The farmers in the Lee pilot project took the lead in sharing their story with other farmers.

A secondary audience was environmental, municipal and planning organizations, civic leaders and planners. The other organizations were primary points of contact for this audience. Their communication systems were used to spread the word about Ag Coms to NH towns and cities.

Project materials are posted on a web page hosted by Cooperative Extension and though e-links with key organizations.

<http://extension.unh.edu/Agric/AgComm/NHAGCom.htm>

Creating an Agricultural Commission in Your Hometown includes an organizational guide with support materials and a PowerPoint presentation. The guide provides information on how to establish an agricultural commission to promote, enhance and encourage the interests of farming, agricultural resources and rural aspects of community life where you live. The PowerPoint introduces citizens to the value of New Hampshire agriculture, and to agricultural commissions as a new tool for supporting local agriculture.

Project Outcomes

Project outcomes:

- * After researching the experience of Ag Coms in MA and other states, and obtaining broad input from farmers, conservation organizations, planners, legislators, municipalities and other stakeholders at numerous workshops involving hundreds of people, the Study Committee developed criteria for Ag Coms in NH to fit NH needs, NH statutes and local governance structures.
- * Materials explaining what Ag Coms are, what they can do, how to organize and how to structure as well as providing sample warrant articles, press releases, etc. were developed and published on the web and in CD and print formats.
- * Statutes to enable Ag. Commissions in communities were drafted and adopted by the State legislature.
- * Extensive outreach through agricultural, planning and conservation networks as well as workshops and town by town presentations served to educate and create awareness about Ag Com purpose, roles, responsibilities, activities and organizational how-to's.
- * Farmers led efforts to establish Ag Coms in 25 NH communities.
- * Ag coms are active in natural resource surveys, barn/farm surveys, farmers markets, master planning and agritourism.

Assessment of Project Approach and Areas of Further Study:

Potential Contributions

An Ag Com is a means of changing and uplifting the relationship between the agriculture and the community. Towns and cities do want to retain farms and farmland and it is upon this shared interest that the Ag Com is established: to provide voice and visibility for farmers and their businesses, to be a mediator or advocate of farm related issues, to support profitable agricultural enterprises in the local economy, to strength the farm to farm network, to sustain ecological benefits of the farm's natural resource base.

From the first efforts to organize an Ag Com, to its approval by Town Meeting or City Council, through to the work of the Ag Com, the process gets farmers and non-farmers thinking and talking about the role of agriculture in the community. Ag Coms create an awareness of agriculture as a business, as well as a cherished view. Ag Coms give farmers and communities a means of institutionalizing concern for agricultural needs into local governance, in the same way that economic development commissions look out for commercial interests or heritage commissions look out for cultural interests.

In so doing, Ag Coms become a much needed voice and advocate. Selectboards can delegate issues to an Ag Com; Planning Board, Conservation Commissions and Heritage Commissions can seek advice through case-by-case referrals. Ag Coms can help resolve ag/community conflicts, develop local right to farm by-laws, facilitate pre-easement discussions, encourage agricultural business development and promote agricultural enterprises, conduct cost of services studies, inform master plans, survey barns and farms, host discussions on emerging issues such as carbon sequestration, energy, bio-security, eminent domain, taxation, and more. Because Ag Coms are primarily made up of farmers, the 'lived ag experience' can be tapped for wise community decision-making. The end result is an environment that is ag - conscious and ag - friendly.

Future Recommendations

Future work includes: an Ag Com network/association; training programs for members; speakers bureau.

Any opinions, findings, conclusions, or recommendations expressed in this publication are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the view of the U.S. Department of Agriculture or SARE.



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