

A Vision for

# Rhode Island Agriculture:

FIVE-YEAR STRATEGIC PLAN



May 2011 / Rhode Island Agricultural Partnership

The mission of the **Rhode Island Agricultural Partnership** is to foster the economic viability of the state's agricultural producers, establish a self-sustaining and coordinated delivery of agricultural services and financing to farmers, provide increased food security and access to local food for all Rhode Islanders, and cultivate support among the public and policy makers for the future of agriculture.

# our mission

## **Rhode Island Agricultural Partnership Steering Committee:**

**Jan Eckhart, Sweet Berry Farm (Chair)**  
**Richard Schartner, Schartner Farms (Vice Chair)**  
**Sandra Barden, Barden Family Orchard**  
**Al Bettencourt, RI Farm Bureau**  
**Jim Booth, Aquidneck Farms**  
**Shannon Brawley, RI Nursery & Landscape Association**  
**Kevin Breene, RI Dairy**  
**Sheila Brush, Grow Smart RI**  
**Steve Cotta, Portsmouth Nursery**  
**Eric Eacker, Ledge Ends Farm**  
**Noah Fulmer, Farm Fresh RI**  
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**Karen Menezes, RI Christmas Tree Growers**  
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**Jim Pagliarini, RI Nursery & Landscape Association**  
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**Staff Support: Gerard Bertrand, RI Rural Development Council;**  
**Kristen Castrataro, URI Cooperative Extension**

In early 2010, a statewide consortium of agricultural producers and service providers launched an effort to chart a course for Rhode Island agriculture over the next five years. Supported by a grant from the van Beuren Charitable Foundation, this effort—*A Vision for Rhode Island Agriculture: Five-Year Strategic Plan*—is the first project of the newly formed RI Agricultural Partnership, whose mission is to foster the economic viability of the state’s agricultural producers, establish a self-sustaining and coordinated delivery of agricultural services and financing to farmers, provide increased food security and access to local food for all Rhode Islanders, and cultivate support among the public and policy-makers for the future of agriculture.

The farmer-directed RI Agricultural Partnership and the van Beuren Charitable Foundation intended that the issues and opportunities, goals and strategies identified in this *Five-Year Strategic Plan* be formed and informed by the state’s farmers. The Plan culminates a year of outreach to the state’s diverse agricultural community—from greenhouse growers to orchardists, livestock farmers to beekeepers, vegetable growers to nurserymen; from producers in urban areas to those in rural communities, on half-acre farms to 500-acre farms; and from those who farm as an avocation to those who farm as their sole occupation. More than 400 attendees participated in the Plan’s development through three listening sessions, an online survey, interviews and a statewide forum at which its draft goals and strategies were shared and discussed. The Partnership’s Steering Committee—composed largely of farmers—provided outreach to the agricultural community and guided the planning process.

While too numerous to include in the Plan itself, all of the comments received and made at each of the three listening sessions and the statewide forum were transcribed and can be read on the RI Agricultural Partnership Web site at [www.RhodyAg.com](http://www.RhodyAg.com). So, too, can notes from interviews with representatives of agricultural and allied organizations who accepted our invitation to comment on opportunities and challenges facing RI agriculture.

While forestry and aquaculture are considered agriculture, they are not a major focus of this Plan. A statewide Forest Resources Management Plan was done in 2005 and updated in 2010.<sup>i</sup> Additionally, a major strategic planning effort for aquaculture occurred in 1995–1998 as an initiative of the RI General Assembly, generating a strategic plan that led to an overhaul of the state’s aquaculture laws in 1998.<sup>ii</sup>

The Steering Committee of the RI Agricultural Partnership would like to thank those who have contributed in many ways to this Plan. We are especially grateful to the service providers, state agency personnel, planners and staff from nonprofit organizations that support agriculture who served on the Plan’s Advisory Committee and to those, both farmers and non-farmers, who participated in the four workgroups that shaped the comments received through the forums into the goals and strategies presented here. We extend a special appreciation to those who helped make the listening sessions and statewide forum a success, including Heritage Hall (Slatersville), Schartner’s Farm (Exeter), St. Barnabas Church (Portsmouth), Kristen Castrataro and Rick Rhodes from the University of Rhode Island, and Gerry Bertrand and Tom Sandham from the RI Rural Development Council. And we recognize the tireless and invaluable efforts of Tom Sandham, who coordinated the planning process, and Cris Coffin and Ben Howell with American Farmland Trust, who facilitated the Plan’s development.

Most of all, we thank the farmers who took the time to share their hopes and concerns about the future of agriculture in the state. Now that the *Five-Year Strategic Plan* is done, governance and goals will continue to be representative of all farms in RI through the Partnership’s farmer-led Steering Committee, which will determine what items of the Plan are emphasized first for completion and will continue to give direction, determine importance and direct outcome.

It is without question that the farmer’s voice will be what directs the RI Agricultural Partnership now and in the future.

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<sup>i</sup> See [www.planning.ri.gov/forestplan/frmp/forestplan.pdf](http://www.planning.ri.gov/forestplan/frmp/forestplan.pdf). In 2010, this plan and the RI Urban and Community Forest Plan were updated and incorporated into the *Rhode Island Forest Resources Assessment and Strategies: A Path to Tomorrow’s Forests*, a plan that met the requirements of the 2008 federal Farm Bill.

<sup>ii</sup> See House Resolution 1995-199 Special House Commission to Develop a Plan to Promote, Protect, and Stimulate Aquacultural Commerce in Rhode Island. See also J.L. Anderson, R.J. Johnston, S.J. Jancart, et al., *A Strategic Plan for Rhode Island Aquaculture: Prepared for the Rhode Island Legislative Commission on Aquaculture*, Department of Natural Resources Economics, University of Rhode Island, 1998.



## I. A VISION for AGRICULTURE

*By 2016, we envision a Rhode Island in which:*

- Officials and citizens understand the critical importance of farms and farmlands to Rhode Island's economy, environment, public health, community character and livability;
- State and local governments support and promote agriculture, recognizing that farms are important cultural, recreational and educational centers in addition to small businesses that produce locally grown farm products such as dairy, fibers, fruits, grains, honey and other apicultural products, horticultural and nursery products, livestock, poultry, seafood, turf grass and vegetables;
- A sustainable and well-coordinated farming and food system encourages profitable farm businesses by providing:

A full range of business and technical resources and services for new and existing farmers;

Improved state and regional food and farm infrastructure;

A secure and affordable land base for agricultural operations;

- The amount of workable farmland in production has increased, and the state has successfully used voluntary and non-regulatory approaches to stop the loss of farmland while respecting and protecting the property rights of farmers and farmland owners;
- Rhode Island's agricultural sector has expanded and diversified production in response to increased demand for Rhode Island-grown farm products;
- Rhode Islanders routinely ask for and purchase Rhode Island-grown farm products in preference over similar products produced elsewhere;
- Rhode Islanders at every income level have improved access to locally grown foods, and a greater percent of the food consumed in-state comes from Rhode Island farms;
- Farmers are recognized as good stewards of 11 percent of Rhode Island's land base and will continue to follow best management practices to ensure both natural resource conservation and food safety;
- Expanded agritourism activities enable Rhode Islanders to experience farms firsthand and provide farmers with additional sources of income;
- Rhode Island farming is profitable, with farmers receiving a fair price for their products and unburdened by unnecessary and costly regulations.

During three listening sessions held in 2010, farmers were asked what is working in RI agriculture, and what more is needed. The quotes you see throughout this plan represent a few of the hundreds of comments made during the listening sessions, which, along with the discussions that followed, provided the basis for the goals and strategies contained in the plan. A complete list of comments from the listening sessions can be found on the Partnership's Web page, at [www.RhodyAg.com](http://www.RhodyAg.com).

# vision



## II. The IMPORTANCE of AGRICULTURE

### Agriculture Past and Present

Subsistence farming was the primary occupation of many early colonial Rhode Islanders, and the vast majority of the land area of RI was once farmed. As population levels increased and society and economies developed, so did the market for various agricultural products within RI and New England, other parts of colonial America and beyond. Rhode Island was well situated to take advantage of market opportunities given its proximity to Narragansett Bay, the ocean and trade routes, combined with the moderating climatic effect of the ocean and substantial coastal farmlands; commercial agriculture became an integral and important part of the early RI economy and lifestyle. Rhode Island was also the birthplace of the industrial revolution, and the ascendance of a manufacturing based economy and, later, intense real estate development, were among the causes of a dramatic decline in agriculture, particularly in the 20th century, as evidenced by the decrease in farmland by approximately 80 percent from beginning to end of the century.

After World War II, RI and New England in general became less and less dependent upon local agriculture for food production and more so upon other regions of the United States and world. Rhode Island also became unique within New England in the very high percentage of its agricultural economy attributed to the “green” industry (nursery, ornamentals, turf), which is a reflection in part of many years of a strong housing market. The loss of dependence upon local farming for food needs and the lack of understanding of its economic value in general meant that land and societal development post World War II was often at the expense of local farming.

Various laws and ordinances enacted by state and local agencies often had direct negative effects, intended or not, on agriculture, which for much of the 20th century was marginal economically and therefore highly sensitive to changes in policy or regulations at the federal, state or municipal level. The lack of big-picture perspective regarding agriculture and food is exemplified by the fact that in the early 1950s there were over 400 dairy farms in RI; many dairy farmers delivered door to door and also sold eggs, fruits and vegetables in season; and homeowners were accustomed to knowing their farmers. A state-enacted prohibition on raw milk sales, while for legitimate public health reasons, offered no corresponding countermeasure of funding or programs to assist farmers

in developing pasteurization capabilities or plants. As a result, the number of dairy farms declined drastically, and homeowners lost long-standing traditional relationships to local farmers. It was not until 50 years later with the formation of the RI Dairy Farms Cooperative with funding from RI Department of Environmental Management (RIDEM) Division of Agriculture, the RI Economic Development Corporation and later the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) that the steady decline in the economic viability of the RI dairy industry as a whole began to improve, as the cooperative developed and implemented a business model of branding and selling local Rhody Fresh milk directly to the public. However, the overall decline in farms and farmers—the dairy industry being one example—resulted in land being available for development, which combined with intense development pressure resulted in many farms being converted to residential or commercial use.

A crisis point was reached in the early 1980s, and farmers banded together with help from the RI Farm Bureau and worked with the RI General Assembly to pass several landmark pieces of legislation, such as the RI Right to Farm Act; Farm, Forest and Open Space Act; Farmland Preservation Act and agricultural exemptions to the Freshwater Wetlands Act. A gradual shift in the industry also began to emerge in the 1980s as farmers moved from dairy, wholesale marketing and mono cropping toward a retail focus that has gathered steam and is now largely the emphasis in RI.

This retail-oriented focus includes emphasis on diversification and value-added products and venues, and initiatives such as farmers markets, roadside stands, cooperative marketing and other local buying initiatives and efforts. These transforming changes in the marketplace combined with many other factors and state, local and non-governmental support and initiatives have led to a resurgence in farming. This resurgence has also been bolstered of late by the local food movement, which has its origins in the increasing recognition of vulnerabilities in the current global food system and the need to recreate a more sustainable, healthy and locally based food system.

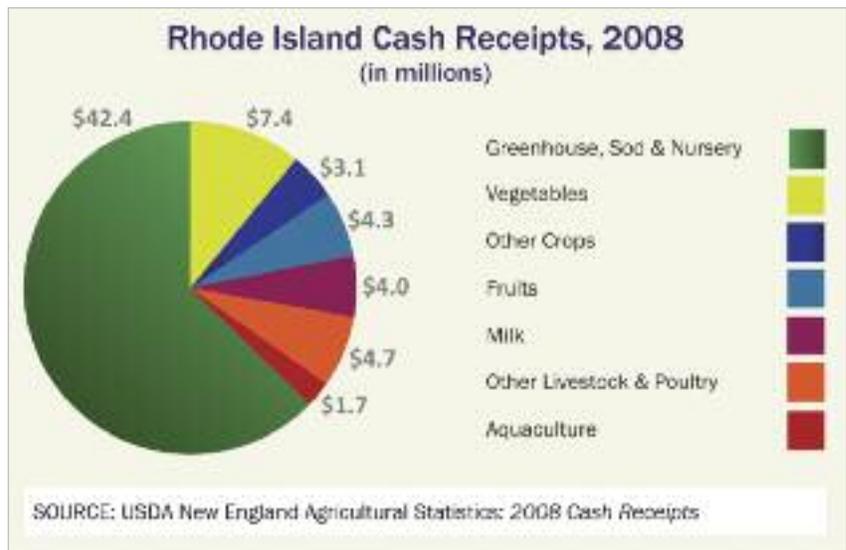
The “green” industry remains vital and the largest contributor to the economy of agriculture in RI, accounting for more than 62 percent of the state’s total agricultural market share. However, shifts within the industry are also occurring with the recent downturn of the housing market as the ornamental industry looks to diversify and adapt to changing markets. Agritourism and aquaculture have also emerged in recent years as a new and important trend in the state’s agricultural sector.

The advent of agritourism, aquaculture and direct marketing and the increasing importance of ancillary activities to overall farm viability recently caused the General Assembly to revise the Right to Farm Act (RI General Laws § 2-23-4). The state now defines an agricultural operation as:

Any commercial enterprise which has as its primary purpose horticulture, viticulture, viniculture, floriculture, forestry, stabling of horses, dairy farming or aquaculture, or the raising of livestock, including for the production of fiber, furbearing animals, poultry, or bees, and all such other operations, uses and activities as the director, in consultation with the chief of division of agriculture, may determine to be agriculture, or an agricultural activity, use or operation. The mixed-use of farms and farmland for other forms of enterprise is hereby recognized as a valuable and viable means of contributing to the preservation of agriculture.

In a remarkable turnaround from the prior century, RI is growing new farms and farmers. According to the US Census of Agriculture, the number of farms in the state swelled from 858 to 1,219 between 2002 and 2007—an increase of 42 percent that is the highest in New England and 10 times the national average.<sup>i</sup> Much of this growth has been in the state's smallest farms. Farms with less than \$5,000 in annual sales now constitute more than half of the farms in the state. These farms, however, produce less than 1 percent of the value of the state's agricultural products. The majority of the state's agricultural market value is produced by 167 farms with annual sales of between \$50,000 and \$1 million. Thirteen farms have annual sales of more than \$1 million and account for 35 percent of market share, while the 419 farms with sales between \$5,000 and \$50,000 constitute the remainder.<sup>ii</sup>

Interest in farming is coming from all ages. The College of the Environment and Life Sciences at the University of Rhode Island (URI) reports a 23 percent increase from 2006 in students majoring in what would be considered agricultural-related fields.<sup>iii</sup> Many beginning farmers are not young but transitioning to agriculture as a second career or adding farming as a part-time enterprise in addition to off-farm employment. More farms are being operated by women as well; the number of farms with women as the primary operator more than doubled



from 2002 to 2007, to 297.<sup>iv</sup> Despite this new interest in agriculture, however, the state's farm population continues to age: The average age of an RI farmer is 56 years old, and 28 percent of the state's farmers are over 65 years old.<sup>v</sup>

## Agriculture's Contributions

### ...to RI's Economy

A sector of small businesses, farms and farmers generate jobs, taxes and revenues. A rough and very conservative estimate of the sector's contribution to the state's economy is \$100 million.<sup>vi</sup> Two recent studies indicate that this figure is likely far higher. A 2010 study by the University of Connecticut of the economic contribution of agriculture in CT found that agriculture is a \$3.5 billion industry that generates more than 20,000 jobs.<sup>vii</sup> Especially relevant to RI is the study's finding that each dollar in sales generated by the agricultural industry creates up to an additional dollar's worth of economic activity statewide. Thus, RI's \$66 million in agricultural sales may generate an additional \$66 million in economic activity, not including any additional economic activity associated with agricultural processing. A 2009 economic survey conducted by the New England Nursery Association found that the horticultural and landscaping industry contributes \$354 million to the RI economy.<sup>viii</sup> While landscaping is not considered agriculture, the horticulture industry that supplies the landscaping industry is considered agriculture and may itself generate more than \$100 million of that economic output. A formal analysis of RI's agriculture sector and its impact on the state's economy is

currently underway and will be completed in 2011. The project is a cooperative effort between URI, RIDEM Division of Agriculture, RI Economic Development Corporation, RI Nursery and Landscape Association, RI Turfgrass Foundation and the RI Agricultural Partnership.

At the community level, farms are significant economic engines. A single dairy farm, for example, generates more than \$1 million annually in economic activity, according to an analysis done by American Farmland Trust of dairy farms and processing in western Massachusetts.<sup>ix</sup> Farm businesses generate needed part-time and summer jobs, while farm stands, farm stores and farm attractions attract customers whose purchases recycle through the local economy.

### ...to RI's Environment

Rhode Island farms are a diverse mix of pasture, cropland, woodland and wetlands that provide vital environmental benefits. These include carbon sequestration, surface and ground water filtration, aquifer recharge and flood prevention, and improved air quality. Farms also offer feeding and breeding areas for local bird populations and provide stopovers for migrating birds, while providing habitat for many other land and aquatic species.

A couple of studies have estimated the economic value of these irreplaceable environmental services. In its 2003 publication *Losing Ground: At What Cost?* Massachusetts Audubon Society concluded that the annual value of these services provided by cropland and pasture in Massachusetts was \$1,381 per acre. A 2004 study,

*Understanding RI's Forest Economy*, estimated the annual dollar value of ecosystem services from the state's woodlands at \$1,659 per acre. Based on these estimates, RI's 68,000 acres of cropland, pasture and woodlands owned by farmers and representing 11 percent of the land area of the state provide approximately \$90 million annually in environmental benefits.

#### ...to RI's Food Security

Rhode Island's one million consumers rely on an increasingly global food system. New England produces less than 10 percent of the fruits and vegetables consumed in the region and barely half of its milk and cheese.<sup>x</sup> Like the rest of the region, RI has a food supply that is increasingly vulnerable to short- and long-term supply and price disruptions. Natural disasters, weather events, terrorist acts, food safety scares, transportation disruptions and energy shocks can cut off food supplies in a short period of time, especially perishable items like fruits, vegetables and milk. Declining global oil reserves, rising energy prices and changing weather patterns are generating increased public support for efforts to improve food system resiliency and grow local food production capacity.

#### ...to RI's Public Health

RI-grown food is helping to improve the nutritional health of the state's residents. Over 675 families eligible for the federal Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) spent \$33,723 through Farm Fresh RI's "Fresh Bucks" program at eight farmers markets in 2010. Eligible low-income seniors and handicapped persons of any age living in senior housing redeemed 49,000 coupons totaling \$245,000 at farmers markets and roadside stands in RI in 2010 through a program administered by the RIDEM Division of Agriculture with USDA funds. The health impact is significant: customer surveys showed that a majority of shoppers who use SNAP benefits at farmers markets eat the

USDA recommended daily servings of fruits and vegetables, and more than half have increased their daily servings since their initial participation. RI farms and farmers are a growing source of nutritional food for schools around the state. Local farm products available in schools in 2009 included Rhody Fresh milk, eggs, pears, plums, eggplant, cantaloupe, blueberries, spinach and summer squash. These local foods are helping school districts meet new state nutrition requirements aimed at increasing daily consumption of fruits, vegetables and whole grains among kids.

#### ...to RI's Municipal Budgets

Farms are important fiscal contributors to their communities' tax bases. More than 150 Cost of Community Services (COCS) studies around the country have found that farmland, forestland and privately owned open space pay more in property taxes than required in local services. COCS studies use a case-study approach to determine a community's public services costs versus revenues based on current land use. Three studies conducted by the Southern New England Forest Consortium in the communities of Hopkinton, Little Compton and West Greenwich found on average that farmland required \$0.38 in services per \$1.00 paid in taxes while residential land required \$1.07 in services per \$1.00 paid. This was true even of lands taxed under the state's Farm, Forest and Open Space Act. While residential development can increase a community's tax base, it also imposes costs on communities—for schools, roads and services—that eclipse the added revenues.<sup>xi</sup>

#### ...to RI's Society

Farms and farmers attract tourists and retain residents. This is critical for a state that lost 10 percent of its population between 1991 and 2009.<sup>xii</sup> According to a 2010 national Gallup poll, the top three indicators of "community attachment"—what causes residents to be attached to their community—are social offerings,

openness and aesthetics.<sup>xiii</sup> Farms provide all three. Agricultural activities such as apple picking, corn mazes, winery tours, farmers markets and wagon/sleigh rides offer recreation and social opportunities. Farms and related venues like farmers markets are "open" places where people of all ages, genders, economic backgrounds and life histories can unite in their common enjoyment of sights, sounds, tastes and experiences. For many people, few sights are more moving than grazing animals, well-tended crops, historic barns and stone walls. People like living in proximity to farms.

By fostering an active agricultural community, Rhode Islanders are also fostering their state's community, creating a place that people love and are reluctant to leave.

<sup>i</sup> USDA National Agricultural Statistics Service, *2007 Census of Agriculture*.

<sup>ii</sup> Ibid.

<sup>iii</sup> Information provided by Richard Rhodes, Associate Dean, Research and Outreach, College of the Environment and Life Sciences, University of Rhode Island.

<sup>iv</sup> USDA National Agricultural Statistics Service, *2007 Census of Agriculture*.

<sup>v</sup> Ibid.

<sup>vi</sup> Estimate provided by the RI Department of Environmental Management.

<sup>vii</sup> Rigoberto Lopez, "Economic Impacts of Connecticut's Agricultural Industry," University of Connecticut, September 2010, <http://today.uconn.edu/?p=21744>.

<sup>viii</sup> New England Nursery Association, "\$4.7 Billion and Growing: A Summary of the Impact of the Environmental Horticulture Industry on the New England Economy," February 2009.

<sup>ix</sup> *Increasing Local Milk Processing Capacity: Benefits to Pioneer Valley Consumers and Communities*, American Farmland Trust, January 2011. The study found that the average dairy farm generated \$1.2 million in economic activity, for an average of \$13,900 per cow.

<sup>x</sup> *Blue Ribbon Commission on Land Conservation 2010 Report to the New England Governor's Conference*, July 2010, p. 16.

<sup>xi</sup> See American Farmland Trust, *Farmland Information Center, Cost of Community Services Studies Fact Sheet*, August 2010, [www.farmlandinfo.org/documents/38422/COCS\\_08-2010.pdf](http://www.farmlandinfo.org/documents/38422/COCS_08-2010.pdf).

<sup>xii</sup> See <http://blogs.forbes.com/hanisarji/2011/01/27/study-finds-rhode-islands-estate-tax-causes-exodus-of-people-and-money/>.

<sup>xiii</sup> See [www.gallup.com/poll/144476/Social-Offerings-Openness-Key-Community-Attachment.aspx](http://www.gallup.com/poll/144476/Social-Offerings-Openness-Key-Community-Attachment.aspx).



### III. OPPORTUNITIES and CHALLENGES

To achieve our vision for RI agriculture in 2016, we will need to address the opportunities and challenges facing the industry today. The opportunities are exciting: Agriculture is on the upswing, thanks to growing consumer interest in local farm products and the entrepreneurial skills of the state's farmers, who, assisted by a number of new support entities, are employing new market and business strategies to meet demand. However, like other southern New England states, RI must overcome significant challenges in order to ensure the future viability of family farms and to enable future generations to enjoy the many benefits that family farms provide.



#### Opportunities

##### **Consumer demand for fresh, local foods has increased markedly.**

The first decade of the 21st century saw a marked shift in American attitudes toward food. Until recently, most Americans shopped solely in supermarkets for their foods and were generally unaware of, and uninterested in, their foods' origins. However, a rise in incidences of food contamination, both domestic and foreign, has heightened awareness of food safety issues and of American dependence on imported foods. Concern about the sharp increase in obesity has focused public attention on food security and nutritional health. A growing interest in cooking has also sparked demand for fresh foods, ethnic cuisines and new products. This shift in attitudes has been clearly evident in RI. Even the recent recession did not appear to slow rising consumer demand for locally sourced farm products.

In response, farmers are increasing production and broadening their product mix to include things such as sweeter varieties of carrots, heirloom vegetables and livestock, mushrooms, and wheat and rye for local flour processing. Farms and start-up food manufacturers are experimenting with a wide variety of new value-added products—from canned salsas and pasta sauces, to specialty goat and cow cheeses, to chocolates flavored with local honey, herbs and fruit, to dried teas.

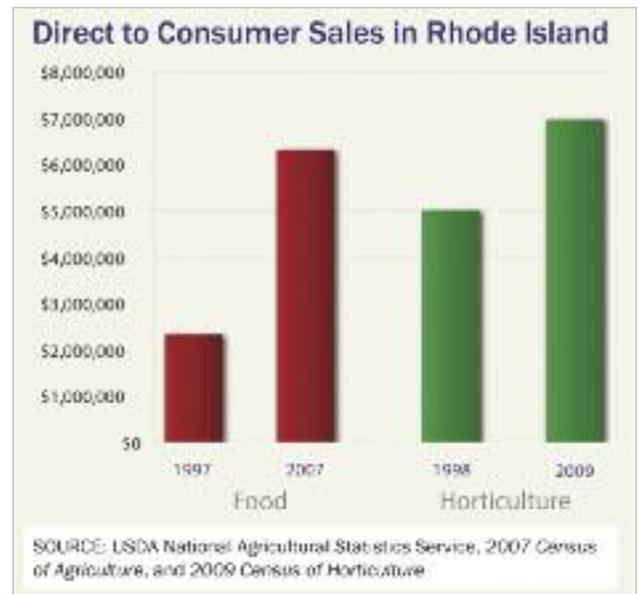
This renewed interest in local food is fueling new market opportunities and new jobs in the agricultural sector.

##### **Environmental remediation and green infrastructure hold promise for the state's horticultural sector.**

Bioremediation—a type of environmental remediation—uses microbes and plants (trees, shrubs and grasses) to restore soil health. A highly cost-effective way to decontaminate abandoned and often toxic industrial and commercial sites, its use is growing on brownfields in many urban areas in the Northeast.<sup>i</sup> Similarly, RI communities are recognizing the value and cost-effectiveness of green roofs, bio-retention systems and permeable pavements in managing stormwater runoff, especially after

the state's catastrophic flooding in 2010. Green roofs retain 40–60 percent of the stormwater that hits them;<sup>ii</sup> they also lower air temperature and can provide communities with roof-top parks, farms and natural habitats for wildlife. This new emphasis on plant materials in environmental remediation and green infrastructure offers market potential for RI nurseries and sod farms.

A renewed focus on the state's forest health through invasive species management is also generating demand for locally sourced native plant materials for wildlife habitat restoration. The RI Nursery and Landscaping Association sees potential for business expansion among nursery growers and garden centers to meet the needs of the state's restoration community, as well as homeowner interest in plant materials for rain gardens and green and edible landscaping.





**Direct-to-consumer sales are improving farm profits.**

Once driven almost exclusively by wholesale markets, today's agricultural industry is more diverse, with greater emphasis on direct-to-consumer sales. While many farmers continue to sell through wholesale markets, more than 27 percent of farms in the state are selling at least some of their product directly to consumers. In 2002, direct-to-consumer sales of agricultural products for human consumption totaled \$3.7 million; by 2007, it had grown to \$6.3 million, or nearly 10 percent of all agricultural market sales in RI.<sup>iii</sup> Similarly, from 1998 to 2009, the number of horticultural operations with over \$10,000 in annual sales marketing directly to consumers rose from 77 to 88, with retail sales rising from \$6.12 million to \$7.2 million.<sup>iv</sup> In fact, RI now leads the country in the percentage of agricultural market sales derived from direct marketing.<sup>v</sup>

Eliminating the middle man is helping to improve farm profits. According to the 2007 Census of Agriculture, the 281 RI farms that are marketing raw foods directly to consumers had, on average, more than double the annual net cash farm income in 2007 than farms that were not involved in these types of ventures.<sup>vi</sup>

The number of farmers markets is growing, bringing local farm products to new communities of urban and rural consumers. There are now more than 40 markets statewide, and at least three—in Pawtucket, North Kingstown and South Kingstown—operate year round. Consumers are also flocking to farm stands, pick-your-own operations and Community Supported Agriculture, or CSA, farms. To build their retail operations, many farms and nurseries with direct-to-consumer sales are adding additional attractions, like corn mazes, hayrides and butterfly houses, which are helping to improve profitability.

**RI farmers are finding new and profitable ways to aggregate their farm products and brand and market products as locally grown.**

One of the most successful efforts to aggregate and market local farm products has been the RI

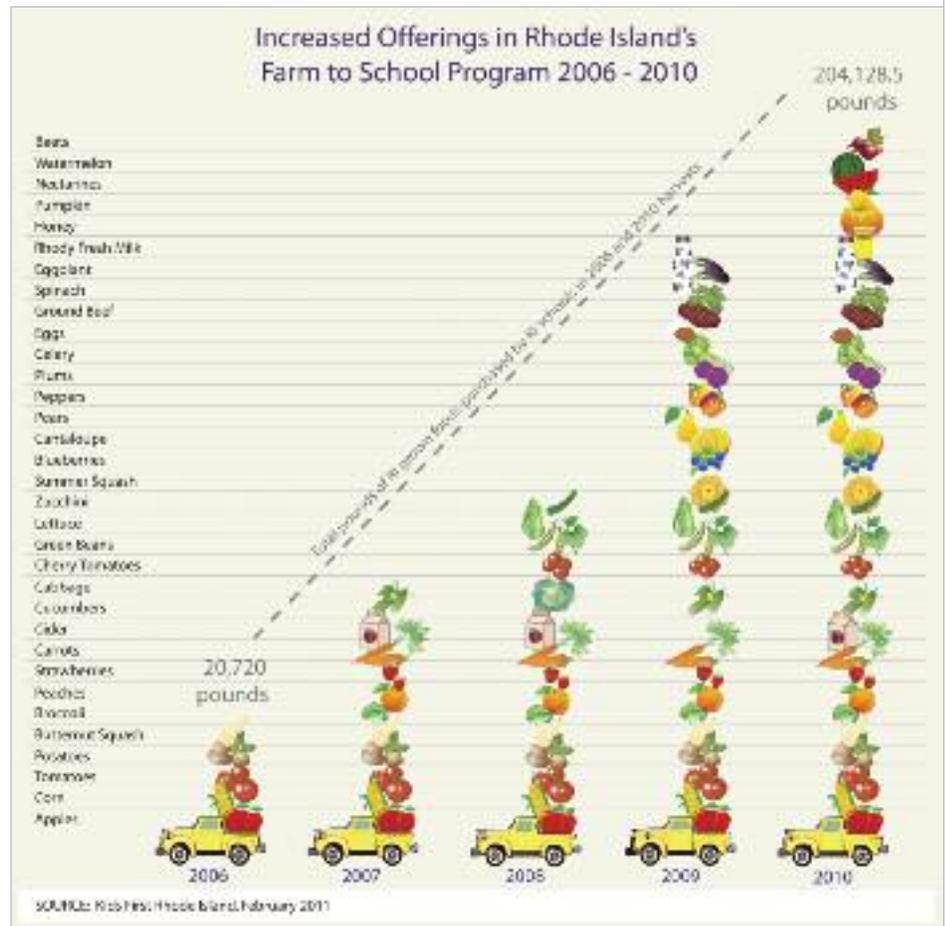
Dairy Farms Cooperative, which began marketing Rhody Fresh branded milk in 2004. Gross sales revenues in 2009 reached \$2 million, and the cooperative repaid a \$125,000 start-up loan in full to the RI Economic Development Corporation. Rhody Fresh has spawned a number of other collaborations, including: RI Raised Livestock Association, which was founded in 2005 and contributes over \$300,000 to the state economy annually; RI Sheep Cooperative, which connects and supports sheep producers while promoting alternative markets for the state's wool supply; RI Royal Potatoes, a new cooperative marketing venture among several of the state's potato growers; and Farm Fresh RI's Market Mobile. Started in 2009, this pooled farm-to-

business delivery service has facilitated \$1 million in new sales in its first two years and expects to grow to \$2.5 million in annual sales within four years.

These collaborative efforts to aggregate, brand and distribute RI farm products are helping to improve profitability.

**Institutional purchases of RI-grown farm products are also on the rise.**

Rhode Island is the only US state in which every school district serves some foods grown in the state.<sup>vii</sup> Through the RI Farm to School Project, a successful collaboration between state agencies, public and independent schools and several nonprofit organizations



“**[Look at] incentives... for purchase of locally grown products by restaurants, large and small food markets, institutions, etc.”**



coordinated by Kids First RI, schools are purchasing everything from local milk to grass-fed beef to eggs and offering students new options like fruit and veggie bars. To meet new state school food nutrition requirements, schools are continuing to expand the amount and variety of locally grown, healthy foods offered in their cafeterias.

RI restaurants, too, have become important buyers. Over 200 culinary and hospitality businesses now buy from local farms, both directly and through Farm Fresh RI's Market Mobile. The commercial customer base for local food is diverse and runs the gamut from major hotel chains to boutique inns, from high-end restaurants to no-frills diners to the cafeterias in RI's hospitals, workplaces and colleges. Fresh, local food produced by RI agriculture complements the state's strength in the tourism, culinary, healthcare and higher education sectors.

The success in promoting local foods to public school systems, restaurants and institutions suggests further opportunities to encourage more institutions and businesses to buy local. These opportunities could be enhanced through full implementation of the state's current procurement preference for RI farm products and expansion of that preference, including a preference for RI-grown plant materials for state and municipal landscaping and green infrastructure.

**Greater access to healthy, local food is improving the nutritional health of RI residents.**

The expansion of farmers markets into traditional food deserts, along with new Electronic Benefit Transfer (EBT)

technology, new policy innovations and new partnerships, is improving access to healthy local foods for RI seniors and low-income families. At the same time, farmers benefit from a broader customer base and food dollars can recycle in the local economy.

Like other states, RI uses EBT to distribute federal Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits (formerly known as food stamps) via debit cards. The installation of EBT machines at almost half of the state's farmers markets has enabled SNAP recipients to use EBT cards to purchase fruits, vegetables, food-producing plants and food products at participating markets. With "bonus bucks," a program offered by Farm Fresh RI and several partners, SNAP recipients at eligible markets in Providence, Pawtucket and Woonsocket can receive up to \$5 more for food products when they use their EBT cards. SNAP recipients can also use EBT cards to purchase a seasonal Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) farm share through Farm Fresh RI's "market basket" program.

Another successful program has expanded access to local foods for seniors. In 2009, nearly 20,000 income-eligible seniors were given Senior Farmers Market Nutrition Program coupons that could be redeemed at any of 36 farmers markets, 18 farm stands or a mobile farmers market that visited 14 different senior meal sites. According to the RI Division of Agriculture, which administers the program, the program had an 86 percent redemption rate and has been a win-win for seniors and farmers—helping seniors stretch limited food budgets while expanding market opportunities

for the 120 farmers who participated. A similar farmers market coupon program exists for the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants and Children (or WIC) program.

**Farms have become destinations.**

No longer just places where farm products are grown and sold, farms and nurseries across the state are developing new recreation, entertainment, hospitality and educational offerings that have made them popular destinations for Rhode Islanders and tourists alike. Between 2002 and 2007, the number of farms offering "agritourism" activities increased seven-fold, and sales generated through agritourism increased from \$23,000 to \$689,000. From bed and breakfasts and farm stays, educational tours and hands-on learning programs, corn mazes and hayrides, weddings and harvest dinners with locally produced wines and foods, agritourism is a growing segment of RI's economically important tourism sector.

In 2006 the RI Center for Agriculture Promotion & Education (RICAPE) launched "RI FarmWays" to create a hub for marketing support, technical assistance and training for destination farm operators and a promotional and event hub for the public. Since then, the initiative has re-launched as "New England FarmWays," incorporating farms in nearby CT and MA.

**New nonprofit organizations are joining with the old to provide services and advocacy support for RI farmers.**

Long-standing farm organizations like the RI Farm Bureau and established



commodity groups like the RI Nursery and Landscape Association have been joined by new organizations such as Farm Fresh RI, Kids First RI and the RI Center for Agricultural Promotion and Education, and by new commodity associations. Cumulatively, these organizations support farmers with a wide range of technical assistance and training in the areas of marketing and business development and also work directly to develop markets for agricultural products and establish new distribution systems.

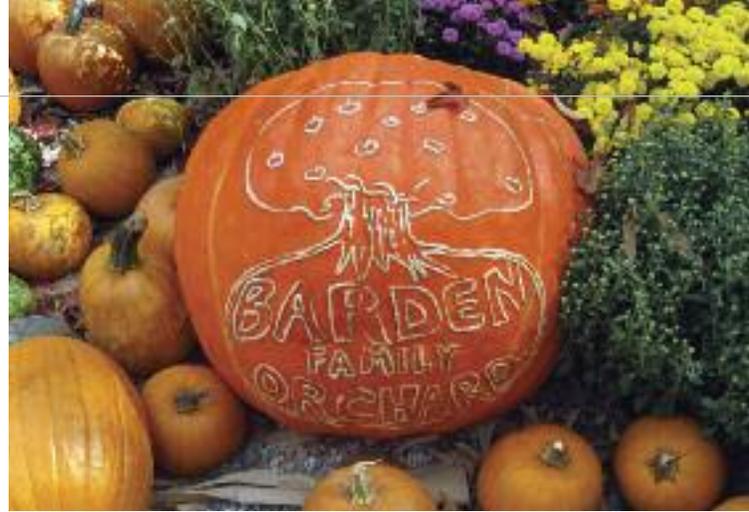
The nonprofits have also identified sizable new private and public resources and opportunities for RI agriculture. Because they work outside the government realm, they can be very effective in mobilizing expertise and funding from multiple state departments and agencies and streamlining public and private efforts to achieve common goals.

**RI farmers and the organizations that support them are coordinating efforts to identify needs, mobilize resources and deliver services.**

The newly created, farmer-driven RI Agricultural Partnership offers a valuable coordination of efforts within the agricultural industry to identify needs, mobilize resources and deliver services. Representing farms and farmers of all types and scales, the Partnership intends to be a voice of and for all farmers in RI and to encourage new public and private sector investments and collaborations in the industry.



**“Right to farm should not just be a nuisance law but an actual right of a Rhode Island citizen to farm their property in all zones and sell the products of their farm on their farm.”**



### Challenges

#### Land availability and affordability are significant obstacles to expanding or starting farm operations.

The land base needed to sustain and expand RI’s agricultural production faces continual threat from residential and commercial development pressures. In the 25 years between 1982 and 2007, RI lost 13,900 acres, or 22 percent, of its agricultural land to development.<sup>viii</sup> In that same period of time, the state converted to development a higher percentage of its prime agricultural land—the most productive of its farmland—than any other state: nearly 30 percent.<sup>ix</sup>

Today, RI’s working farms comprise approximately 68,000 acres, of which about 40,000 acres are used for crops and pasture.<sup>x</sup> (The remaining acreage is woodland, wetlands and land containing farmhouses, barns and other outbuildings, roads and irrigation ponds.) As of January 2010, only 10,000 of those 40,000 acres of cropland and pastureland were permanently protected. The other 30,000 acres—many located in some of the most attractive areas of the state—remain vulnerable to development.

Farmland protection involves many partners, including the state, the US Department of Agriculture (USDA) and other federal agencies, municipalities, private foundations and conservation organizations, and more than 40 municipal and private land trusts now operating in RI. Of the state’s 10,000 protected acres, more than 6,200 have been protected through the state’s Agricultural Lands Preservation Program, with a state

investment of \$26.5 million. Since 1996, the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service has contributed approximately \$17 million through the federal Farm and Ranch Lands Protection Program toward the permanent protection of 2,300 acres of some of the state’s most productive farmland.<sup>xi</sup> The remainder has been protected by municipalities, private and municipal land trusts and other conservation organizations.

Fortunately, public support for permanent farmland protection remains strong. The 2008 statewide open space bond, promoted as a way to protect the state’s farmland, passed with 68 percent voter approval. A May 2010 public opinion poll showed that the strongest voter support for any statewide bond options was for farmland protection.<sup>xii</sup> Another statewide open space bond was approved by voters in 2010.

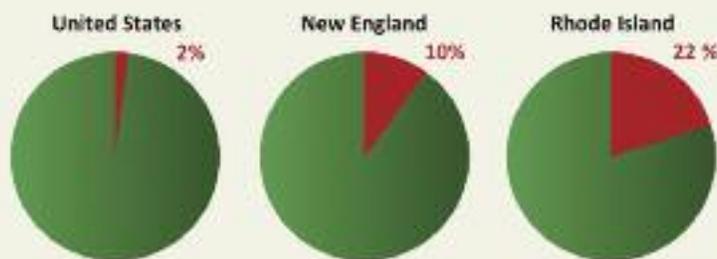
Preventing the further loss of workable farmland, using voluntary and non-regulatory approaches, must be a high priority over the next few years, as should efforts to identify and bring additional land into agricultural production. Continued public education will be needed to remind elected officials and taxpayers about the benefits of investing in farmland protection, and policy innovations will be required to ensure that protected farmland stays in agricultural production and remains affordable to farmers when it transfers from one owner to the next.

The cost of farmland also continues to rise, and farmers identify the lack of access to affordable farmland as a key challenge to agricultural growth and stability.<sup>xiii</sup> At \$13,600 per acre, the value of RI’s farm real estate is the highest in the country.<sup>xiv</sup> Finding ways to keep farmland affordable for current and new farmers will require innovative new state policy tools that do not diminish the rights and equity that current farmers and farmland owners have in their property.

#### Regulatory issues challenge farm profitability.

A web of overlapping, complex regulations at the local, state and federal levels constrains what, where and how farmers may grow, process and market their products. Given the nature of their business, farmers deal with a larger number of federal, state and local regulations than most other small-business owners. Regulations range from those that govern farm operations—including livestock vaccination and care, pesticide storage and use, water use, environmental compliance, workforce housing and farm labor standards—to those that govern marketing, health, and food

**Percent of Agricultural Land Converted to Development (1982-2007)**



SOURCE: USDA National Resources Conservation Service, 2007 National Resources Inventory



safety standards. Redundant or inconsistent regulations among municipalities and state and federal agencies often increase compliance costs.

Another regulatory area that has tremendous impact on farm viability is municipal land regulation. While most RI municipalities have indicated an interest in supporting agriculture and retaining the open space that working agricultural lands provide, many have not updated their land use and zoning regulations to allow the variety of on-farm activities and ancillary uses that are vital to continued farm viability and profitability.

Streamlining local, state and federal regulations and permitting processes is a high priority for the state's farmers, just as it is for other small businesses. Also needed are periodic trainings for farmers on regulatory compliance.

**Lack of processing, marketing and distribution equipment and infrastructure limits the ability of RI's farms to meet the demand for their products.**

Development of the production, processing, marketing and distribution infrastructure required to respond to new consumer demand is still in the early stages. The entities responsible for infrastructure development will need continued organizational and capital support until self-sustaining business models mature.

Custom farm equipment is expensive and outside the financial reach of many farm operations; creating a cooperative or other entity to purchase and share equipment would allow more farms to grow crops not currently viable because of equipment limitations. Similarly, scaling up production of RI livestock will require additional slaughter and processing capacity. Shared mobile slaughter and processing units may provide a cost-efficient option for smaller-scale growers.

Additional processing and kitchen facilities are needed to enable the state's farmers and start-up food processing businesses to develop value-added products. These products increase employment and revenue in the state's agricultural sector, and the additional wages and profits retained in state then have a "multiplier" effect in the local economy. The state must expand its light processing capacity—to cut, chop, wrap and freeze fruits and vegetables—and develop a better system for tracking and identifying RI-grown food products through the distribution chain. At the same time, while continuing to ensure food safety, the complex state health regulations that challenge the viability of young food processing businesses should be reviewed and streamlined.

Farmers markets have developed rapidly, and different markets are experiencing uneven balances of supply and demand. Farmers selling at some markets are restricted in what they can sell from other farms to supplement their own product, making it difficult for them to meet the needs and demands of customers. The number, locations and operating guidelines for farmers markets around the state need to be carefully reassessed.

Aggregation and distribution services and support are needed to facilitate purchase of local product by restaurants and institutions. One model with potential for expansion or replication is Farm Fresh RI's successful Market Mobile—a pooled farm-to-business delivery service that compiles orders from and delivers local farm products to chefs, grocers, hospitals and schools. The more mature and clearly successful farmer cooperative entities, such as the RI Dairy Farm Cooperative, all required technical and financial support in their formative stages, and new cooperative and other collaborative ventures will require

support as well. Coordination and continuation of statewide marketing, branding and promotion activities, such as the RIDEM Division of Agriculture's Get Fresh Buy Local campaign, are also necessary and require financial support. Efforts to educate consumers about where and how to find RI-grown farm products, such as Farm Fresh RI's comprehensive online guide, must also be supported.<sup>xv</sup>

The nonprofit organizations that have launched programs to support agriculture and expand access to local foods would not have been able to do so without the support of private RI philanthropies. In many cases—particularly the new marketing and distribution systems on which many of the state's farmers now depend—the long-term goal of these organizations is to develop programs with self-sustaining business models. However, until these programs can expand sufficiently, funders who are willing to provide "patient capital" will continue to play an essential role in fostering growth in RI's agricultural sector.

**Insufficient business and technical support challenge the stability and growth of RI agriculture.**

Like other small-business owners in RI, farmers need business and technical support to grow their businesses and increase profitability. While farmer-based cooperatives and nonprofit entities provide some business and technical support, their work does not and cannot substitute for the essential services offered by the RI Division of Agriculture and the agricultural research and extension activities of the University of Rhode Island (URI). Decimated by years of budget cuts, these entities are severely understaffed and underfunded. This lack of resources is a major challenge to RI agriculture's stability and growth. With the newly revitalized agricultural sector growing



faster than most other parts of its economy, RI must provide adequate resources for the state entities that work with farms.

Other state agencies, particularly the RI Economic Development Corporation, should also play a larger role in building the agricultural sector, just as it does in building other economic sectors. The many regulations around food processing and food safety make the Department of Health another critical partner.

Rhode Island is already notable for the collaborative atmosphere between state agencies, nonprofits and the farming community. Continued coordination among and between these nonprofit organizations, URI and state and federal agencies will be critical to maintaining a thriving and revitalized agricultural sector. The development of a communications network that provides farmers with information about all the programs and services these entities offer is essential.

**Access to healthy local foods for low-income Rhode Islanders remains a problem.**

Having recognized the health benefits of fresh, local food, public and private interests are challenged to ensure that all Rhode Islanders, regardless of income level, can share those benefits.

Food insecurity remains a problem in RI,<sup>xvi</sup> and many families continue to lack access to affordable healthy foods. Expansion of EBT technology to more farmers markets and farm stands would offer healthy food options to more SNAP and WIC recipients. While these programs will always depend on philanthropic and government assistance, it is important to recognize that allocating resources to continue the popular “bonus

bucks” and farmers market coupon programs is a cost effective way to improve nutritional health while keeping food dollars recycling through the local economy.

<sup>i</sup> See American Society of Landscape Architects, [www.alsa.org/sustainablelandscapes](http://www.alsa.org/sustainablelandscapes).

<sup>ii</sup> See Environmental Protection Agency, *Green Roofs for Stormwater Runoff Control*, February 2009; [www.epa.gov/nrmrl/pubs/600r09026/600r09026.pdf](http://www.epa.gov/nrmrl/pubs/600r09026/600r09026.pdf).

<sup>iii</sup> USDA National Agricultural Statistics Service, *2007 Census of Agriculture*.

<sup>iv</sup> USDA National Agricultural Statistics Service, *2009 Census of Horticulture*.

<sup>v</sup> USDA National Agricultural Statistics Service, *2007 Census of Agriculture*.

<sup>vi</sup> Ibid.

<sup>vii</sup> Information provided by Gerard Bertrand, with RI Rural Development Council.

<sup>viii</sup> RI Raised Livestock Association: [www.rirla.org](http://www.rirla.org).

<sup>ix</sup> See Kids First RI: [www.kidsfirstri.org](http://www.kidsfirstri.org).

<sup>x</sup> USDA National Agricultural Statistics Service, *2007 Census of Agriculture*.

<sup>xi</sup> Ibid.

<sup>xii</sup> American Farmland Trust, Farmland Information Center, *2007 National Resources Inventory: Changes in Land Use/Cover-Analysis*.

<sup>xiii</sup> Ibid.

<sup>xiv</sup> USDA National Agricultural Statistics Service, *2007 Census of Agriculture*.

<sup>xv</sup> Remarks given by USDA Deputy Secretary Kathleen Merrigan on September 10, 2010, in Tiverton, RI, celebrating the protection of the Ferolbink Farm.

<sup>xvi</sup> Information provided by Rupert Friday, Executive Director of the RI Land Trust Council.

<sup>xvii</sup> RI Land Trust Council, *Farmland 2.0 Summary of Proceedings*.

<sup>xviii</sup> USDA National Agricultural Statistics Service, *Land Values and Cash Rents: 2010 Summary*. August 2010. <http://usda.mannlib.cornell.edu/usda/current/AgriLandVal/AgriLandVa-08-04-2010.pdf>.

<sup>xix</sup> Guide can be found at [www.farmfresh.org](http://www.farmfresh.org).

<sup>xx</sup> The USDA Food Environment Atlas indicates that every RI county has food insecurity that approximates the US average. Nationally, about 15 percent of American households are food insecure.

**“ [We need] better advertising for the state that farms are alive and producing in Rhode Island.”**

**“ Promote farm kitchens as a cottage industry—provide education, training, and supervision.”**



## IV. GOALS and STRATEGIES

The goals and strategies developed through the Plan have been segmented into three broad areas:

- Building markets
- Business and technical support to farmers
- Agricultural land availability, protection and regulation

**A note on terminology:** “Farm products” as used in this Plan encompasses food and non-food agricultural products, including (but not limited to) fruit, vegetables, livestock, dairy products, aquaculture, apiculture, agritourism enterprises, fiber, products from vineyards, sod, nursery and other horticultural products.

### I. BUILDING MARKETS

#### **GOAL I.1: Production and consumption of RI farm products will increase concurrently.**

The long-term sustainability of RI’s agricultural sector depends on balanced growth in both supply and demand. Policies and actions to encourage and facilitate additional consumption of RI farm products must be paired with policies and actions that enable farmers and growers to increase production accordingly.

#### **GOAL I.2: Rhode Islanders will increase consumption of RI farm products.**

Rhode Island residents spent an estimated \$2.65 billion on fresh, prepared and processed food from supermarkets, restaurants and other sources in 2009. At most, 1 percent of this, or \$25.2 million, was spent on RI-grown food.<sup>1</sup> Increasing this number to 3 percent or more would have a significant impact on the state’s economy and help to support new farms and farmers.

Even though out-of-state sales make up a significant portion of total sales for RI sod and nursery products, increasing in-state consumption of these products while maintaining out-of-state sales could have an equally important impact on the economy and improve the profitability of the largest sector of RI agriculture. Agricultural production is true production and is wealth-creating for all RI citizens, with a high economic multiplier effect.

#### **I.2 STRATEGIES**

##### **A. Establish a baseline estimate of current in-state consumption of all RI farm products**

Estimate should examine percent of RI farm products that are identified as such through distribution channels

##### **B. Recommend state-level programmatic and policy changes and/or initiatives needed to increase in-state consumption of RI farm products**

##### **C. Calculate the estimated economic benefit to the state associated with specific levels of increase in in-state consumption of RI farm products**

##### **D. Increase access to RI-grown farm products for low-income residents**

Work with programs that are purchasing and serving food to low-income residents to assist them in connecting with RI-grown foods and promoting these foods to their participants (as public schools are doing)

Increase federal Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) Program coupon usage at farmers markets

Continue use of double coupon programs for the federal Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) and expand to Senior Farmers Market Program and WIC Program

Expand acceptance of SNAP and WIC at farm stands, Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) farms and farmers markets

Encourage additional farm stands and farmers markets along public transportation routes to increase access for low-income, elderly and disabled people

Expand use of local foods by Meals on Wheels and other programs that use state and federal dollars to purchase food, such as prisons, congregate senior dining sites, and adult day centers

##### **E. Support establishment of a state-wide RI Food Council**

**GOAL I.3: Rhode Islanders will have greater appreciation of the benefits of RI farms and agriculture and increased awareness of where/how to find RI farm products.**

While some of the public benefits of the state's farms and farmland are readily apparent, many are not—including ways in which farms improve the environment through carbon sequestration and water recharge and filtration, contribute to local quality of life, and help balance municipal budgets. A better understanding by RI residents of the value and importance of farms to the state's economy, environment and quality of life will help strengthen public support for local agriculture. Consumption of RI farm products is also likely to increase with heightened public awareness of where to purchase local farm products.

**I.3 STRATEGIES**

**A. Coordinate a statewide, broad-based marketing effort for RI farms, agriculture and RI farm products**

Improve coordination of existing marketing efforts and initiatives being conducted by various agricultural partners

Create a team of marketing specialists from within and outside the agricultural community to develop a long-term marketing strategy that employs and supports multiple players (rather than a single agency or public relations marketing firm) and can be sustained via multiple funding channels

- Identify priority concepts, themes, products, program and services to promote RI farms and products
- Identify first target audiences such as consumers, legislators, schools, restaurants and supermarkets
- Identify first priority promotional mechanisms
- Encourage use of [www.RhodyAg.com](http://www.RhodyAg.com)
- Conduct pilot multi-dimensional and multi-themed marketing campaign(s) to a broad range of potential customers
- Evaluate results; refine campaign(s) accordingly and replicate on broader scale

**B. Create a series of public messages around RI farms, agriculture and RI farm products**

Highlight the benefits/ value of RI farm products to local economy (including multiplier effect), public health, environment, food quality and flavor, sense of place and local quality of life

Educate consumers to look for RI farm products and brands and to ask questions about where the food and farm products they purchase are produced

Educate consumers about diversity and availability of RI farm products and ways to use them at home

Showcase institutions and businesses that increase purchase/consumption of RI farm products

- Help build positive publicity for institutions and businesses that engage in purchasing practices that support local farmers and practice transparency from farm to the end user

Highlight importance of farmland protection and value of farm conservation to the state and communities

Highlight importance of agricultural land being passed on from one generation to the next and need for changes to state and federal inheritance tax laws

**C. Create a series of public messages around RI's "destination" farms**

Recognize and support RI farms for their historic, educational and recreational value as destinations for the public (agritourism)

Recognize and support current and new efforts to grow and promote agritourism

Ensure that state and local tourism officials recognize and promote the connections between RI farms and agritourism, ecotourism and nature-based tourism

- Ensure sufficient funding for the RI Economic Development Corporation (RIEDC) Tourism Division and associations to promote farm destinations and tourism itineraries that include farm destinations

- Collaborate with the RIEDC Tourism Division, Tourism Councils and independent associations to develop and distribute marketing collateral materials and hold media events year-round
- Expand forest and aquaculture destinations and programs into the tourism promotional mix

**D. Support and promote existing and new training and professional development programs to farmers and organizations on farm site development, effective marketing and sales techniques, and the importance of branding and farm and product differentiation**

**E. Increase funding for RI Division of Agriculture's Farm Viability Program**

**F. Work with State Aquaculture Coordinator at the RI Coastal Resources Management Council to better integrate aquacultural marketing initiatives as part of the RI farm marketing programs.**

**G. Clarify marketing terms such as "local," "natural" and "sustainable"**

**GOAL I.4: Rhode Island farmers will increase production of RI farm products to meet increased in-state consumption.**

Strategies included in the Business and Technical Assistance and Land sections of the Plan will serve to increase production of RI farm products through such approaches as expanded access to affordable farmland, a more supportive regulatory environment for farm businesses and an increase in business and technical support services to current and new farmers to better meet new market opportunities and expand direct-to-consumer sales.

**I.4 STRATEGIES**

**A. See Goal II Business and Technical Support strategies**

**B. See Goal III Agricultural Land strategies**



**GOAL I.5: Rhode Island farmers will have the ability, the infrastructure and the regulatory support to add value to their products.**

Even as demand increases for locally grown farm and food products, a number of barriers limit farm businesses from expanding or scaling up. Infrastructure gaps limit the ability to expand both processing and distribution. Regulatory hurdles at the local, state and federal levels continue to challenge farm operations as they seek to diversify and capture greater market share.

**I.5 STRATEGIES**

**A. Conduct a statewide, comprehensive needs assessment and feasibility study related to agricultural processing and distribution infrastructure**

Infrastructure would include fixed and mobile, on- and off-farm:

- Processing facilities
- Distribution facilities
- Farm equipment and servicing

Analyze current and potential capacity of existing infrastructure

Examine need for and financial feasibility of additional infrastructure, both mobile and fixed

Consider options for coordinated custom operators/fieldwork

Identify specific privately owned business opportunities for providing agricultural services

**B. Develop partnerships between farmers and existing entities with certified kitchens and other facilities and equipment for making value-added products**

**C. Reduce regulatory and permitting barriers to processing and sales of local products**

Develop templates for quicker municipal, state and federal permitting processes

Work with RI Department of Health and/or US Department of Agriculture (USDA) to create lists of acceptable materials/ practices that meet construction codes for design of processing/value-added facilities

**D. Provide training to farmers in product quality control for the marketplace (such as ServSafe trainings)**

**E. Encourage adoption of consistent food safety and handling practices**

**GOAL I.6: More RI farm products will be available for purchase at multiple retail points of sale and wholesale and distribution outlets, and clearly identified as RI produced through the production/distribution channel.**

Expanding the number of outlets where RI farm products are sold—especially at schools and other institutions—is important to increasing



consumption of RI farm products. Equally important, however, is ensuring that RI farm products are identifiable through the distribution chain, so that consumers can be assured that their purchases are supporting the state's farms and farmers. More focus is needed on product identification, as well as on development of distribution models and relationships that offer producers a greater share of the consumer dollar.

**I.6 STRATEGIES: Retail**

**A. Conduct a needs assessment/ financial review of existing farmers markets to consider whether markets might be realigned or consolidated to better serve both farmers and consumers**

**B. Improve capacity of farmers markets and farm stands to offer more RI farm products**

Assist farmers and farmers market purveyors to supplement RI farm products with other (to be defined) products in order to expand retail offerings; encourage source identification of off-farm products

Allow sales of RI wines at farm stands and farmers markets

Provide technical support to farmers markets based on findings of needs assessment

**C. Improve technical assistance for farmers developing or expanding on-farm sales (e.g., farm stands, retail meat sales, etc.)**

**D. Improve support services for farmers engaged in or interested in selling on-line (e.g., through Facebook, Web sites, etc.)**

**I.6 STRATEGIES: Wholesale and Institutional**

**E. Provide education and technical assistance to farmers interested in transitioning to a brand-identifiable wholesale model**

Such a model would identify farm name/brand through the distribution channel, allowing farmers to command a better price for RI farm products

Develop a best practices model for farmers, distributors and buyers to engage in supply chain relationships with transparency, where all parties benefit and get what they need from the relationship/transaction

- Identify needs of supply chain partners and facilitate face-to-face meetings among all parties

**F. Review state policies to reduce/eliminate barriers to increased sales of RI farm products to state institutions and state and municipal agencies**

Implement existing state law regarding state procurement preference for RI farm products and consider expansion of that preference to include other programs for which state and federal dollars are used to purchase food, such as Meals on Wheels

Require state and municipal agencies to prioritize use of RI-grown food and non-food agricultural products.

**G. Provide education, training and technical assistance to buyers and suppliers of institutions to facilitate purchase of more RI farm products**

Work with state institutions to require wholesalers they do business with to provide food and farm product origin information. Help buyers, distributors and producers to develop RFP language that creates product sourcing and pricing transparency

Develop and disseminate "best practices" models that will encourage institutions and businesses to buy RI farm products

**H. Explore opportunities with other New England states to increase regional demand for New England identified farm products**

**I. Provide technical assistance and marketing support for farmers marketing product outside of RI, including export markets**

**I.6 STRATEGIES: Distribution**

**J. Support new and existing efforts and other current and emerging outlets and mechanisms to expand distribution of RI farm products**

Identify one or more sustainable funding sources for these types of economically sustainable distribution initiatives

**K. Assist farmers in cultivating better value chain distribution relationships and in differentiating/branding their RI farm products through the distribution channel**



**“ The RI Economic Development Corporation (needs to see) farms as a major economic engine and treat the industry as the multimillion dollar enterprise that it is.”**

## II. BUSINESS AND TECHNICAL SUPPORT TO FARMERS

**GOAL II.1: State agencies will formally recognize and encourage agriculture as a valuable and important business sector.**

Agriculture is generally undervalued in terms of its impact on the RI economy, and opportunities for agricultural economic development are often overlooked. Yet farming is a vital primary tier sector that supports the existence of many other businesses such as farm equipment stores, wholesale fuel suppliers and garden centers as well as many packaging, marketing and distribution businesses. State agencies should recognize farms as important small businesses and expand business and economic development support to the agricultural sector.

### II.1 STRATEGIES

**A. Work with RIEDC and other state and independent agencies to have agriculture identified as a specific business sector and work with state agencies to fully incorporate agriculture into state economic development planning**

RIEDC should identify a staff person to liaison with the agricultural sector

**B. Work with RIEDC and other state agencies to increase their business support services to the agricultural sector and to coordinate these services**

Business planning directed at agricultural businesses

Labor recruitment, retention, training, management, and system for informing farmers about new labor regulations

Bookkeeping for farm businesses (including software training)

Basic financial management training for new/immigrant farmers, especially around small business management

**C. Periodically quantify and qualify the economic and non-economic contributions of the agricultural sector to the state's economy and publicize information broadly**

Establish mechanisms to measure income and job growth in the agricultural sector. The RI Department of Labor and RIEDC should have better methods to measure growth in agricultural sector beyond nursery and landscape, and use a broad definition of agriculture that encompasses forestry, aquaculture and small-scale and urban food production

Continue efforts between the RI Agricultural Partnership, URI, RI Nursery and Landscape Association and others to assess the economic impact of agriculture in the state

**D. Review and consider the role of the RI Agricultural Council**

Conduct a planning meeting of the Agricultural Council's Executive Committee to reevaluate the mission of the Agricultural Council

Assist Agricultural Council in creating and implementing definable goals

**GOAL II.2: The RI Department of Environmental Management's (RIDEM) Division of Agriculture will have sufficient financial resources to fulfill its federal and state-mandated responsibilities regarding agriculture, public health and the environment, and to coordinate with other state agencies and agricultural service providers to deliver needed business and technical support to the agricultural industry.**

The RIDEM Division of Agriculture is highly regarded among the state's farmers and growers for the services and support it provides. However, the Division continues to suffer from budget cuts and is severely understaffed. From a staff of near 30 in the 1980s, the Division had been reduced by 2010 to a staff of 15, despite additional federally and state-mandated regulatory responsibilities and the increased number of farms in the state. Without additional resources, the Division will be unable to meet current responsibilities or the increased demand for services from an expanding agricultural sector.

### II.2 STRATEGIES

**A. Study feasibility of RIDEM Division of Agriculture's retaining the licensing and registration fees that it collects and using those fees to support its programs and to leverage federal funding**

The Division takes in \$2 million to \$3 million annually in pesticide and fertilizer registration fees. These fees should be retained by the Division and dedicated to Division programs rather than deposited in the state's General Fund

**B. Develop a coordinated campaign among agricultural entities and stakeholders to promote an increase in the Division's annual budget**

Group could develop materials that:

- Showcase importance of the Division to state's food safety and security
- Educate state lawmakers and public about services the Division provides and how those services are helping a sector that has a significant impact on the state's economy
- Encourage private entities to contribute to a fund designated for use by the Division to accomplish specific goals for the agricultural sector

**GOAL II.3: URI will engage and assist the agricultural community by providing relevant, research-based, extension activities.**

As the number of farms and farmers in the state declined in the 20th century, so, too, did the resources devoted to agriculture by URI, the state's land grant university and home to the RI Agricultural Experiment Station (research) and RI Cooperative Extension Service (outreach). With the recent rise in farm numbers, the growing interest in farming as an occupation and the reality that RI's farmers compete in a national—and even global—marketplace, URI agricultural research and extension services are needed more than ever. To fully meet the needs of the agriculture sector, research and outreach endeavors must

be expanded. While most states provide one-to-one cash match for federally funded agricultural experiment station and extension service efforts, RI does not. With access to state matching funds, agricultural research and outreach efforts by the RI Agricultural Experiment Station and RI Cooperative Extension Service will be increased, with emphasis on services for commercial agricultural producers. Additionally, meeting the needs of RI stakeholders will also be enhanced by fostering collaborations with other agriculture service providers and land grant universities in the region to increase access to research, technology, learning and empowerment opportunities.

### II.3 STRATEGIES

**A. Establish mechanisms for the agricultural community and land grant programs (RI Agricultural Experiment Station and RI Cooperative Extension Service) to work cooperatively to identify current production challenges and research and extension needs**

**B. The land grant programs will cooperate and collaborate with the agricultural community to address identified needs by dedicating resources, including personnel, to extension activities**

**C. Encourage the General Assembly to provide the University's land grant programs with the mandated 1:1 (federal: non-federal) cash match**

**D. Continue to expand RI Cooperative Extension Service collaborations with other land grant institutions and agricultural service providers**

Where there is no in-state expert at RI Cooperative Extension Service for a specific agricultural need, URI will:

- Seek to identify an appropriate provider
- Identify and collaborate with other universities in the region who have expertise for which there is identified need
- Identify and collaborate with other universities on distance learning opportunities

**GOAL II.4: All RI students will have age-appropriate opportunities to learn about agriculture and to receive academic and vocational preparation for agricultural careers.**

Many students and adults today are disconnected from farms and food and therefore know very little about this vital industry. Students of all ages should have opportunities to learn about agriculture and become more educated consumers. Elementary, middle and high schools and colleges should also offer programs to encourage and educate the next generation of farmers in the state.

### II.4 STRATEGIES

**A. Incorporate agriculture, aquaculture, horticulture and gardening into education at the elementary, middle and high school levels**

Increase school garden education programs coupled with agriculture, aquaculture, horticulture and nutrition education

Offer continuing education courses (with credit) to teachers and administrators about using an agricultural context to meet educational standards

Expand opportunities for participation in 4-H and FFA

**B. Expand/revitalize agricultural programming in high schools**

Align vocational agricultural courses to the State Educational Standards in required subject areas so that college-bound students can take these courses while fulfilling college pre-requisites, not just as electives

Include farmers and other agriculture-related professionals in Career Days

Invite schools to attend Agriculture Day at the State House and request that presenters inform students about job opportunities in their field

Provide speakers from agricultural community to make in-school presentations

Secure funding for students to attend farm tours

Expand/provide support for FFA

Direct some federal funds for vocational programs to agriculture programs in non-vocational public high schools

Establish a formal vocational agricultural program at one or more of the RI vocational-technical schools

**C. Provide access to post-secondary academic preparation for agricultural careers**

The College of the Environment and Life Sciences at URI should offer majors in areas of agricultural production, including but not limited to food production (including livestock), aquaculture, turf and ornamental production.

- In circumstances in which the URI does not offer certain agricultural-based majors, provide access for the state's students to programs offered by other New England land grant institutions through the New England Board of Higher Education (NEBHE) Program
- Partner with other state university systems to ensure students have access to a full range of majors through distance learning

Encourage farm groups to meet regularly with URI officials to voice their support for agricultural programs at URI

Encourage private colleges and universities in RI to provide educational opportunities and support services for agriculture

**GOAL II.5: Ensure that farmers have access to loans and credit.**

Like all businesses, most farm operations need credit for multiple purposes. Farms of all sizes use short-term loans to finance annual operating expenses and longer-term loans to finance capital expenses including equipment, buildings and land acquisition. While start-up farms have the most difficulty obtaining loans, expanding farms and even mature farm businesses in RI can also experience difficulty, particularly with the overall tightening of credit since 2008. The need for credit calls for action in three areas. The first is ensuring that farmers' main source of collateral—land—retains its developable value. The second is increasing the extremely limited number of RI lending institutions that are willing to make loans to farm businesses. The third is addressing the chief reasons that farmers are denied loans. Insufficient cash flow and lack of well-formulated business plans can often be addressed by providing business technical assistance. Lack of credit history and lack of collateral might be addressed by alternative financing programs.





**“As an aspiring farmer who will be looking for farmland, access and affordability are my top concerns. I hope in the next five years more land will be preserved through Farmland Trusts and other conservation efforts.”**

## II.5 STRATEGIES

**A. Recognize that for many farmers land is the major source of collateral and prevent planning and zoning actions that reduce the non-farm, developable value of the land (see also Goal III.3, Strategy D)**

**B. Educate commercial lenders that have not traditionally made agricultural loans that well-run farms are credit-worthy businesses**

**C. Establish relationships with local banks and credit unions and help create options for agricultural loans**

Encourage financing of agritourism activities in addition to traditional farm activities

**D. Identify barriers to accessing USDA lending and grant programs and develop strategies to minimize those barriers**

**E. Ensure programs are in place to offer credit to beginning farmers**

**F. Work with the RIEDC and private funders to explore creation of a new agricultural business start-up grant program and/or revolving fund**

**G. Explore the potential to use equity financing to provide new sources of capital for farmers**

**H. Work with the RIEDC, the Small Business Development Center and others to provide farmers with technical assistance in evaluating financing options, developing business plans and improving cash flow**

### **GOAL II.6: RI farmers will have on-going access to education and training.**

To remain competitive in changing local and global markets, farmers, nurserymen and sod growers need continuing education and training in market and product development, promotion and sales, and labor, environmental, biosecurity and food safety standards. Learning opportunities, including mentoring and apprenticeships, and business planning services are especially important for the many beginning farmers seeking to enter and those looking to expand in the marketplace.

## II.6 STRATEGIES

**A. Provide formal training for beginning farmers**

Create a formal farmer apprentice program to increase farmer-to-farmer training (the RI Agricultural Partnership, URI and the RI Farm Bureau could partner) Establish a farm incubator program that includes assistance in moving farmers onto new sites

Expand new farmer courses such as the Exploring the Small Farm Dream course

**B. Ensure that all RI farmers will have access to multiple training opportunities each year**

Increase support, coordination and advertising of existing state and regional trainings

Coordinate training topics among RI agricultural groups

Facilitate networking/trainings among and between farmers

Existing agricultural groups should be encouraged and supported in providing training to their membership

Local agricultural service providers should advertise notice of regional trainings to RI farmers.

Statewide farmer mailing/email list should be compiled and updated to ensure timely, comprehensive communication and limit redundancy; list could also be used for policy updates and action alerts

Expand URI “Lending Library”

**C. Provide regular training to farmers on biosecurity, food safety and other health-related agricultural topics**

Facilitate awareness of current and pending biosecurity concerns

Continue and encourage increased participation in RI Good Agricultural Practices (GAP) program

**D. Make available education and assistance in acquiring the newest technology in water distribution (irrigation) systems**

**GOAL II.7: Business and technical support services will be easily accessible and available to farms of all types and scales.**

A gradual decline in agricultural support services over the past few generations has left farmers with fewer choices and limited access to farm equipment sales and repairs, and to large animal veterinarians. In some cases, resources may exist but only for certain types or scale of farm operations. Lack of skilled farm labor is a deep concern of many of today’s farm, nursery and sod businesses. Increased focus on farm labor issues is essential, and improvements in and expansion of support services are needed to meet the needs of the state’s growing and diverse agricultural sector.

## II.7 STRATEGIES

**A. Address shortages of skilled and seasonal labor**

Provide technical training to farm workers

Provide labor management training courses

Facilitate partnerships between farmers and other seasonal businesses so that employees can have better access to year-round employment (e.g., nursery in spring, fruit/vegetable farm in summer/fall, snow plowing in winter)

Provide internship opportunities for high school and college students that include community service hours, lab hours or practicum credit

Develop a statewide farm apprentice and training program, such as a Collaborative Regional Alliance for Farmer Training (CRAFT) program as is in place in New York, Vermont and Massachusetts

**B. Explore feasibility of creating statewide Equipment Bank and Custom Operator Network with specialty items and infrequently used equipment that can be rented by farmers**

Conduct a feasibility study and needs assessment to determine the financial feasibility as well as the items most likely needed

Develop a business plan that includes a scheduler/operator as well as funds for equipment maintenance

Approach URI and RIDEM for facility space to house the equipment

Coordinate custom farm work opportunities

Promote sharing of high-cost specialized equipment

**C. Develop solutions for current difficulties in obtaining affordable supplies and services due to a limited market**

Assist agricultural groups and associations to form buying groups and negotiate with in-state and out-of-state providers

Hire a statewide coordinator for group buying, classified posting, etc.

Bring a large animal veterinarian to RI

- Train farmers on the importance of providing safe handling facilities so more veterinarians feel comfortable treating large animals
- Educate large animal producers on the necessity of performing routine herd health practices
- Support the Large Animal Veterinarian Working Group headed by the State Veterinarian. Facilitate communication between livestock farmers in specific regions to make it financially feasible for vets to do routine vaccinations, etc.
- Provide training for farmers and veterinarians on holistic herd health (e.g., mineralization, nutrition, parasite control)

**D. Provide technical assistance to farmers in developing collaborative entities or joint ventures related to marketing, equipment, land, labor and/or distribution**

**E. Provide technical assistance to farmers on energy efficiency and renewable energy options**

**F. Ensure options to provide farmers, their families and employees with access to affordable health insurance**

Explore opportunities for farmers to access group rates for health insurance (possibly around commodity or associations)

**G. Review use and availability of farm plates, especially for beginning farmers**

**H. Coordinate/organize information and links to available resources in one centralized online location**

Compile resources, grants, guides, online training modules and service providers to one central online location—*RhodyAg.com*—for use by RI farmers

Establish a perpetual funding stream for maintenance of the *RhodyAg.com* Web site

Develop or improve “advanced” capabilities on *RhodyAg.com* and/or other existing and frequently-used sites:

- Online land linking (perhaps in coordination with New England Small Farm Institute and Southeast Massachusetts Agricultural Partnership)
- Online “Guided Decision-Making Tool” to help farmers work through farm-planning issues and direct them to the correct resource the first time
- Online Agricultural Classifieds (Help Wanted, Equipment Wanted, etc.)
- Online Farmer Networking (blogs, social networking sites, etc.)
- Resources designed specifically for beginning farmers
- Calendar of Events with regional and statewide training opportunities across the agricultural sectors

Identify one person to serve as point of contact and coordinator of all above services

**GOAL II.8: Small farms will have training and technical support on collaborative opportunities for reaching wholesale markets.**

The largest increase in RI farms has been in small farms—those with sales of under \$25,000 annually. Most of these farms are operated by part-time farmers, often with limited time and resources to devote to their farm businesses. Helping these farms flourish will create new job opportunities for RI residents, help grow the state’s economy and expand the availability of RI farm and food products. These farms may

benefit from collaborative opportunities where economies of scale may be achieved.

**II.8 STRATEGIES**

**A. Provide formal training on different collaborative structures and their associated costs/benefits**

**B. Assist in developing collaborative entities**

**GOAL II.9: Create a sustainable funding stream for RI agricultural activities.**

Many of the strategies and activities envisioned in this Plan will require new or additional financial resources. At a time of increased competition for limited state resources, it will be especially important to explore ways to leverage state dollars with federal, local, philanthropic, and corporate funding, and to coordinate services and resources among state and federal agencies, independent service providers and nonprofit organizations across the state.

**II.9 STRATEGIES:**

**A. Develop strategies to raise and leverage private and public funding**

**B. Coordinate with state-funded agricultural entities to identify needs and priorities**

**“ Greatly expand curriculum in public schools to demonstrate the importance of local farms and to teach/expose kids to this potential career path.”**





**“ The Division of Agriculture has done a tremendous job in bringing attention to agriculture in Rhode Island.”**

### III. AGRICULTURAL LAND AVAILABILITY, PROTECTION AND REGULATIONS

**GOAL III.1: Using voluntary and non-regulatory strategies that protect the property rights of farmers and other farmland owners, stop the loss of workable farmland and increase the amount of farmland in production.**

Land is a finite resource, and as a resource-based industry, agriculture depends heavily on productive land and soils. Yet over the past 30 years, RI has converted over 22 percent of its agricultural land to development. This is the highest percent loss of the best agricultural land of any state in the country. Access to affordable farmland is a significant concern to farmers of all ages and across the agricultural sector.

One of the most effective means of preserving farmland is to ensure that farming remains profitable, and the goals and strategies discussed under I Building Markets and II Business and Technical Support focus on improving farm profitability and viability. Reducing land use regulatory hurdles is another means of improving profitability and viability. The purchase of development rights is a voluntary and non-regulatory strategy that has been effective in reducing farmland loss and in providing farmers who wish to do so with a source of capital to reinvest in their farm business, facilitate the transfer of land to a child, and/or finance retirement or pay family expenses. Ensuring that RI has the public and private resources needed to purchase development rights from willing farmers and fostering other voluntary and non-regulatory approaches to farmland protection will be critical to stabilizing the state’s agricultural land base.

#### III.1 STRATEGIES

**A. Educate state/municipal officials and public that an essential part of stopping the loss of farmland is strengthening the economic viability of RI farms**

**B. Double the amount of permanently protected farmland in RI by protecting 10,000 acres of farmland over the next 10 years through the voluntary participation in purchase of development rights, transfer of development rights, donation of development rights and other voluntary mechanisms**

Establish one or more consistent and dedicated sources of funding for the state’s farmland protection program

- Propose \$2 million annually (\$4 million in each two-year bond cycle) in bond funding for voluntary farmland protection to match federal Farm and Ranch Lands Protection Program (FRPP) funds and other private funds contributed for land conservation. Bond funds for farmland protection should be released on a regular and predictable basis.
- Partner with land conservation, affordable housing and historic preservation advocates to establish a statewide program that would provide a dedicated and permanent source of funding for farmland protection and other community preservation purposes, including land conservation, affordable housing and/or historic preservation. Examples of programs that could be considered include the RI Housing and Conservation Trust Fund and a program modeled on the Massachusetts Community Preservation Act.
- Work with US Department of Homeland Security on possible funding for farmland protection

Work with the RI Congressional delegation and with USDA-Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) officials in RI and in Washington, DC, to make full and effective use of FRPP funds, including expansion of FRPP eligibility to include land currently in sod or nursery production

Work with the RI Congressional delegation and through the New England Governors’ Conference’s Blue Ribbon Commission on Land Conservation and its *New England Farm and Food Security Initiative* to encourage or require NRCS to tailor its easement and cost-share assistance programs, including FRPP, to reflect the unique soils and growing conditions of the region and its high development pressure

Ensure that municipalities and land trusts are eligible for NRCS funding programs for farmland protection and stewardship

Add additional staff capacity at RIDEM to work on farmland protection projects

Increase the technical and financial capacity of land trusts to protect farmland in addition to open space and natural resources

**C. Limit or defer state and federal inheritance taxes on farmland provided the farmland remains in agricultural use**

**D. Ensure that state and municipally owned farmland is permanently protected from development and put inactive public farmland into production by leasing to farmers who need land**

**E. Build broader support for farmland preservation by expanding advocacy outreach to important audiences, such as the economic development community, the tourism industry, restaurants and chefs, local food providers, historic preservationists, land trusts and others**

**F. Develop and maintain an inventory of all agricultural soils, working and inactive farms in RI and their current protection status and agricultural use**

**G. Develop a statewide farmland preservation strategy to offset any loss of prime agricultural soils or working farms converted to development**

**H. Work with municipalities to increase farmland protection efforts**

Enact enabling legislation for all RI communities to allow additional transfer taxes to fund land protection efforts, provided the transfer tax is approved via financial town meeting or referendum

Encourage municipalities to enact voluntary transfer of development rights programs that protect farmland, natural resources and open space

Provide technical assistance regarding farmland protection strategies, such as model easement language

Work with the RI Division of Planning on revisions to the Comprehensive Planning and Land Use Act to include Strategic Plan's agricultural issues within municipal comprehensive plans

Work with and encourage municipalities to pass municipal bonds for farmland, open space and natural resource protection

**I. Create and fund a statewide program to increase outreach to landowners around land protection options and farm transfer and succession planning. (Program should include land linking efforts described in Goal III.2, Strategy A)**

Landowner education about land protection options should include:

- Guidance on working with land trusts
- Guidance on easement language
- Coaching through the state Agricultural Lands Preservation Commission and NRCS application processes

Farm transfer and succession planning should include:

- A coordinator who can coach farm families and landowners through succession and farm transfer options
- Regular workshops on farm transfer options
- Information on farm transfer options made available to farmers through agricultural service providers
- Development of a dynamic data base of existing and aspiring farmers to help encourage and facilitate the transfer of farms and farm businesses from farmers with no family successor to other farmers (This is element of land linking strategy described in Goal III.2, Strategy A)

**J. Work with the State Conservation Committee and RIDEM to revise and strengthen the existing state Farm, Forest, and Open Space program**

Provide sufficient resources to the Farm, Forest and Open Space Sub-Committee to continue to revise/update the formula used to determine farmland values and ensure wider use of the State Conservation Committee recommended values

Activate the legislatively authorized Commission to Study Farm, Forest and Open Space Program. The Commission should report to the Legislature by December 31, 2011.

**K. Work with the State Conservation Committee to continue periodic training for town assessors on farm forest and open space taxation and on the impact of conservation easements on property values. Training would include program rationale and updates**

**L. Obtain necessary funding to conduct new Cost of Community Services Studies to illustrate the fiscal benefit of farmland and open space to communities and highlight that profitable farm businesses are essential to rural character, the retention and protection of farmland and open space**

**M. Maintain the economic viability of farms on protected land (see goals and strategies under I Building Markets and II Business and Technical Support)**

**GOAL III.2: Current and new farmers will have increased access to affordable farmland.**

Competing demand for farmland for residential and commercial development continues to drive up the cost of farmland across the state; indeed, at \$13,600 an acre, farm real estate values in RI are the highest in the nation. While high farmland values are a valuable farm asset and a vital nest egg for retiring farmers, the high cost of farmland is making it difficult for current farmers to expand and young farmers to get started. Land owned by non-farming landowners can be especially vulnerable to development and conversion to nonagricultural uses. This is particularly important if land is passed on to heirs who have little connection to either the land or to the farmer working it. More can and should be done to connect farmland sellers with farmland seekers and to incentivize the sale of farmland to farmers.

**III.2 STRATEGIES**

**A. Establish a statewide or regional land linking program (using inventory from Goal III.1, Strategy F) to match farmland seekers with farmland owners**

As part of program, provide access to model farmland leases for landowners, land trusts and municipalities and provide education to these entities about types of lease arrangements

Develop and implement program in coordination with farm transfer and succession planning in Goal III.1, Strategy I.

To encourage sale or lease to farmers, conduct outreach to owners of identified land, including: protected farmland that is not in production, portions of large suburban lots and vacant urban lots

Increase length of lease allowed on state and municipally owned lands, from five to 10 years

**B. Create state and regional mechanisms to maintain affordability of farmland for production**

Possible options for land already permanently protected:

- Provide state incentives for owners of protected farmland to sell to farmers, such as reduced capital gain or reduced real estate transfer fees on sale of land
- Purchase an "Option to Purchase at Agricultural Value" (similar to MA and VT programs) from landowner and revise existing easement terms accordingly

Possible options for land protected in the future through the state farmland protection program:

- Purchase an "Option to Purchase at Agricultural Value" as part of easement acquisition (similar to MA and VT programs)
- Include in easement terms an affirmative covenant to farm
- Provide incentives for owners of protected farmland to sell to farmers, such as reduced capital gain or reduced real estate transfer fees on sale of land

**“ As a passionate farmer who has only been working for others, I would love the opportunity to own and cultivate my own land [but] find myself drawn to less expensive land outside of New England. My biggest concern is not being able to farm in a community with my family who are established already in Rhode Island.”**

C. Explore ways for municipalities and home owners associations to encourage agricultural uses on permanently protected open space that is part of a cluster/conservation development or residential compound

**GOAL III.3: State agencies and local governments will value farms as small, local businesses that provide essential products and services and will enable farmers to make full use of their land's agricultural potential.**

As with businesses generally, a supportive regulatory environment is important to the success and sustainability of farm businesses. A supportive environment for agriculture is one that provides the flexibility needed to accommodate growth and diversification in farm businesses, such as through season-extending structures, renewable energy projects, value-added processing, direct-to-consumer marketing and agritourism activities. Strengthening the state right-to-farm statute will help in this regard, as will increased outreach to municipalities to facilitate the adoption of farm-friendly ordinances and creation of local Agricultural Commissions.

### III.3 STRATEGIES

A. Work with the RI Division of Planning to include Plan's goals and policies in appropriate existing State Guide Plan Elements

B. Work with the Legislature to review and improve the RI Right-to-Farm statute and expand the state definition of agriculture to include ancillary activities

C. Statutorily define key terms related to agriculture used in state law, such as: *farm, agriculture, urban agriculture, non-traditional agricultural activity, value-added processing, direct marketing and others*

D. Encourage municipalities to address land use and business needs of farmers and specifically recognize importance and value

of farms as local businesses in local comprehensive plans

Encourage communities to undertake an inventory of farmland and farm businesses

Encourage communities to seek out members of farming community to serve on Planning and Zoning Boards

Encourage communities to recognize that land is generally a farmer's major form of collateral and to prevent planning and zoning actions that reduce the non-farm, developable value of the land

Encourage communities to review and revise standards to expand the permitted agricultural and ancillary uses on the property to support on-farm operations

E. Develop model ordinances related to agriculture and assist municipalities with their adoption; these ordinances would include those that:

Allow and support farming by right within appropriate zoning districts

Allow and support agritourism and accessory uses on farms

Allow and support farm product processing, both on- and off-farm

Allow and support on-farm direct-to-consumer sales

- Provide guidelines for definitions of agricultural terms that may appear in zoning ordinances

- Provide technical assistance for development and implementation of ordinances

F. Require the state and municipalities to consider the potential impact of any new regulation or ordinance on the viability of agriculture and, through an agricultural impact assessment, to offer strategies to reduce any likely adverse impacts on agriculture

G. Educate municipal officials and land trusts about how to draft easement terms and conditions that support farm viability

H. Work with the Water Resources Board, RIDEM, and, where applicable, the RI Coastal Resources Management Council to maintain current riparian water rights and continue to make agriculture, aquaculture and horticulture and allied businesses a priority in accessing water. Ensure irrigation access to establishment of newly installed landscapes

I. Review composting regulations with goal of making them less burdensome for farmers

J. Encourage creation of municipal agricultural commissions. These commissions could serve several important functions in both urban and rural communities, including:

Educate town officials and residents about the RI Right-to-Farm statute and other agricultural matters, including the value of farmland to their community

Assist with recommendations for development of farm-friendly ordinances

Help mediate conflicts between farmers and neighbors and between farmers and the municipality

Work with local law enforcement to reduce trespass and vandalism on farms

<sup>1</sup> \$25.2 million is the approximate value of all RI-grown food crops, derived by subtracting \$40.7 million in horticultural receipts from total farm receipts of \$65.9 million. The consumption figure is an estimate based on national consumption figures. In 2009, US households spent \$607.4 billion on food at home and \$574.5 billion away from home (USDA Economic Research Service: "Food CPI and Expenditures: Table 1). Food ingredients are approximately 30 percent of the total expenses for the food service industry (food away from home), so \$172.4 billion for the value of food consumed away from home. \$172.4 + \$607.4 = \$779.8 billion. RI's portion of the total US food spending is calculated at \$2.65 billion (0.34 percent of US population).

**“ What about a network for renting or sharing equipment? Small farms may not be able to afford all their own equipment, but by connecting them with other farms in the area they could rent, borrow, or share.”**





next steps

## V. IMPLEMENTATION and NEXT STEPS

Development of the *Five-Year Strategic Plan* has been farmer-driven. The RI Agricultural Partnership's farmer-led Steering Committee will continue to shape and direct the Partnership's actions and activities, including which strategies of the Plan the Partnership emphasizes first for completion. In this regard, implementation of the Plan, and its ultimate success, will depend on action by many entities, public and private, that recognize the importance of agriculture to the state. As with the planning process itself, collaboration and coordination will be essential. The accompanying Matrix of goals and strategies lists partners already engaged in or committed to pursuing specific strategies. To encourage and assess implementation, the RI Agricultural Partnership will conduct an annual review of the Plan and will provide periodic progress reports to the state's policymakers and agricultural community along with recommendations for additional strategies needed.

A few strategies are already underway. One such strategy is a formal analysis of the agricultural industry's impact on the RI economy. A cooperative effort between URI, RIDEM Division of Agriculture, RI Economic Development Corporation, RI Nursery and Landscape Association, RI Turfgrass Foundation and RI Agricultural Partnership, this analysis will provide quantitative data about agriculture's impact on job creation and retention and the direct and indirect economic impacts of farms, nurseries and allied businesses. This analysis will inform other strategies and help demonstrate the importance of agriculture to policymakers and the general public. When completed, the analysis will be available on the Partnership Web site, [www.RhodyAg.com](http://www.RhodyAg.com).

Another strategy already in progress is the development of a comprehensive online directory of resources available to farmers of all types and scales throughout the state. This directory is under construction by the Partnership, in cooperation with URI. Please visit [www.RhodyAg.com](http://www.RhodyAg.com) for updates and additional information.

A Plan is only as successful as its implementation. Every Rhode Islander has a stake in the sustainability and future of the state's farms. The RI Agricultural Partnership encourages all Rhode Islanders to support this Plan's goals and implement the strategies necessary to realize a vision that reflects the importance of and need for RI's agriculture.

“ [We need] a comprehensive guide to what is available from state, private, and federal sources. I don't know what's out there now.”

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Learn more about the Rhode Island Agricultural Partnership at [www.RhodyAg.com](http://www.RhodyAg.com)

