

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



Sussex County is home to some of New Jersey's most unique and productive agricultural resources. It has long been the hub of New Jersey's dairy industry, and many viable, productive operations still remain there today. The County also supports some of the State's most innovative farmers who have implemented various farming techniques and strategies in order to overcome daunting natural and economic conditions. These farmers are greatly assisted by the Sussex County government, which is unmatched in its support of local agriculture. Through its pioneering efforts and the ingenuity of its farmers, Sussex County has been able to preserve its agricultural landscape and way of life in the face of overwhelming challenges.

Sussex County is truly unique within the State of New Jersey. It is the only county in the State that falls primarily within the Ridge and Valley Physiographic Province, where rocky mountain ranges abut fertile valleys to form a breathtaking agricultural countryside. This landscape poses both obstacles and opportunities for agriculture. Rolling topography and rocky soils often limit the success of most field crops in Sussex County. However, these conditions are much more suitable to livestock, dairy, and hay, for which Sussex County is widely known. The unique scenic beauty of the County's agricultural lands helps to attract thousands of visitors each year as well. Sussex County's farmers have taken advantage of their scenic lands and proximity to New York City by cultivating active Agritourism attractions such as pick-your-own operations, farm-stands, hay rides, and farm markets.

Despite its successes, the agricultural industry in Sussex County continues to face many threats to its long-term sustainability. The dairy industry – long the cornerstone of Sussex County's farms – is experiencing an extended and steady decline. A growing number of dairy farmers must find other sources of revenue to supplement their agricultural activities. While many have adjusted their operations to produce different livestock products or crops, such as cattle and nursery goods, others find selling their lands to be a more attractive option. Consequently, the County's stock of cropland (38,000 acres) and pastureland (16,000 acres) has decreased by 16% and 27%, respectively, over the last twenty years. Increasing costs of farming compound this trend. Record-high land prices impose dramatically increasing property taxes on farmers. More farmers than ever are renting ground and young, prospective farmers are finding the costs of purchasing land to be prohibitively high. Farmers must also contend with the virtual absence of locally available support services. At present, they rely heavily on one another's expertise and on institutional agencies, such as the Natural Resource Conservation Service (NRCS) and the Rutgers Cooperative Research Extension (RCRE).

Farmers in Sussex County face challenges from outside the agricultural realm as well. Sussex County's population has increased by more than 10% in every decade since 1950 – one of only 124 counties nationwide to experience such growth. This has changed the political climate at the local level. Residents are less amenable to agriculture than in past years, and farmers' access to necessities such as groundwater rights and road usage has been negatively impacted. Unfortunately, municipal zoning schemes currently zone most of the land in Sussex County for development densities of one unit per three to seven acres – a development pattern that, if realized, will perpetuate farmers' hardships.

Land use planning efforts at the state and county levels have aimed to minimize the impact of new development on the agricultural industry. The *State Development and Redevelopment Plan* designates most of Sussex County as Rural and Environmentally-sensitive lands, and encourages the clustering of development within defined "centers" in order to preserve the County's rural environs. Sussex County's recently endorsed *Strategic Growth Study* also advocates development clustering, and identifies centers (11 of which benefit, in part, from existing sewer and water systems) where new development would be appropriate.

In addition to promoting development in its centers, Sussex County has aggressively pursued the preservation of its rural environs. The *2003 Comprehensive Farmland Preservation Plan for Sussex County* outlined the mission statement for the County Agriculture Development Board: "*the SCADB's mission in implementing the farmland preservation program in Sussex County is to preserve both farmland and farmers. In accomplishing these goals, the Board seeks to preserve farms that are highly productive due to soil types, proximity to other preserved farms, farm size, as well as the effort and efficiency of the farmer.*" The 2003 Plan also established the goal of preserving 2,522 acres of farmland annually and maintaining this pace over a ten-year period:

One year acreage target:	2,522 acres,
Five year acreage target:	12,610 acres, and
Ten year acreage target:	25,220 acres.

Since the program's inception in 1983, the County Agriculture Development Board has preserved 9,468 acres of farmland with another 2,894 acres pending in 2007. At the end of 2007, the SCADB will have preserved a total of **12,362 acres** of farmland in Sussex County.

This *Comprehensive Farmland Preservation Plan Update* identifies ten Project Areas in which future farmland preservation efforts will be concentrated:

- Eastern Highlands 1 and Eastern Highlands 2
- Western Highlands 1 and Western Highlands 2
- Kittatinny Valley East
- Kittatinny Valley Central,
- Kittatinny Valley West 1 and Kittatinny Valley West 2
- Upper Delaware 1 and Upper Delaware 2 (see *Project Area* map in the *Appendix*).

Sussex County realizes the importance of preserving its farmers as well its farmland. In cooperation with local schools, organizations, and research institutions, the County has undertaken a number of initiatives that help to promote the economic well being of local farmers, including:

- “Commercial Kitchen” – a pilot program that allows farmers to use the certified kitchen at the Sussex County Vocational & Technical School in order to safely and legally produce “value-added” products, such as jellies and salsa;
- Goat Project – a Statewide research project facilitated by RCRE of Sussex County, which advises interested farmers on the production and marketing of goat products;
- Sussex County Dairy Project – a research and development effort aimed at implementing a viable, community-run dairy project in Sussex County where farmers will be able to produce value-added dairy products;
- Farmer’s Market – the Sussex County Division of Planning is working to expand upon the existing market at Olde Lafayette Village by establishing a permanent, three season farmers’ market at the New Jersey State Fairgrounds in Frankford Township; and
- Lusscroft Farm – 577 acres of preserved farmland in Wantage Township that is being developed as an agricultural education center and Agritourism destination for Sussex County.

In addition to these initiatives, Sussex County’s future efforts to promote the local agricultural industry will include:

- Partnering with government agencies to encourage participation in the various agricultural and natural resource conservation programs that are available;
- Encouraging municipalities to strengthen their existing Right-to-Farm ordinances, and helping municipalities without Right-to-Farm ordinances develop them;
- Ensuring the availability and humane treatment of farm laborers;
- Supporting young farmer and labor education programs;
- Continuing public outreach and education efforts;
- Assisting in the development of wildlife management strategies;
- Providing for adequate agricultural vehicle movement on County roads; and
- Advocating for regulatory flexibility of approved agricultural activities.