

Current Activities Supporting Agriculture Viability



Photo by Donna Traylor

In Sussex County there are numerous programs, both new and traditional, that support agriculture and complement the County Agriculture Development Board's (SCADB's) program of farmland preservation. The SCADB works cooperatively with many agencies to promote agriculture viability.

Although the trends in agriculture described above indicate that there have been significant changes in acres under cultivation, in the size of farms, and only minimal increases in value of products sold between 1992 and 1997, the current outlook for agriculture is positive. Considerable effort to insure that farm business strategies remain successful is underway. This business component is vital to a farmland preservation program because it is the farmers and the benefits they receive from farming that will play a significant role in determining who will steward the preserved land.

The promotion of agritourism is a significant example of current activity to increase agricultural viability. Sussex was the first county to develop a countywide agritourism program to bring the farm markets to the public's attention to bolster profitability. An agritourism brochure entitled "The Four Seasons of Agriculture in Sussex County" was developed for use with targeted audiences in New York, New Jersey, and Connecticut. The current brochure lists 124 Sussex County farms to visit during all seasons. The Sussex County Agriculture Development Board (SCADB) with sponsorship from the Sussex County Board of Agriculture (SCBA) developed this brochure. Additionally, the SCADB and staff work with the Sussex County Chamber of Commerce Tourism Committee and the Skylands Tourism Council in promotion efforts to further these goals. The scenic vistas and recreational opportunities that are plentiful within the region contribute to the potential success of this program. Farms, particularly Pick-Your-Own operations, can provide numerous opportunities for educational and fun filled family outings. The County is working to turn "daytrippers" into "overnight visitors." This would increase revenues to not only farmers but to ancillary tourism businesses as well.

The Farmers Market at Olde Lafayette Village, created by the Sussex County Farmers Marketing Association, plays a role in increasing the potential for direct marketing by bringing farmers' goods directly to a location frequented and accessible to consumers. The Market at Olde Lafayette Village started with six vendors and has been expanded to include ten with potential for additional expansion. Food sampling and other organized activities, e.g. a "Garlic Gathering," are designed to bring people out to the market and contribute to its success. There are plans for additional marketing promotions, which will target the population outside of Sussex County.

Vendors at this market and at other local farm stands may use the Jersey Fresh logo on their produce. This logo indicates to consumers that the product meets prescribed standards for quality and is grown in New Jersey. Utilizing the Jersey Fresh brand, created and promoted by the New Jersey Department of Agriculture, is another means of adding value. The New Jersey Department of Agriculture also provides a Jersey Bred logo for horses and livestock that meet certain standards and are bred in New Jersey. A Jersey Made logo may be used in the future for products that contain New Jersey produce.

In an effort to increase profitability for the dairy industry in Sussex County, Rutgers Cooperative Extension, the New Jersey Department of Agriculture (NJDA), and the Sussex County Board of Agriculture embarked on an initiative in 1999 with the objective of adding value to the milk produced by Sussex farmers. This initiative became the Sussex County Dairy project, which sought and subsequently received funds to study the feasibility of processing local milk to produce a high-end dairy product within the County. The Interim Report on the Dairy Project, published in June of 2001 by Rutgers Center for Management and Entrepreneurship, indicated that bringing such a processing plant to the county, perhaps using a business incubator model, would be feasible. Maximizing the quality of the local product and initiating and maintaining a positive marketing program were described as being key to the success of this plan.

The Sussex County Cooperative Milk Producers Association has initiated a second study to further this effort, which is receiving funding from the United States Department of Agriculture, the New Jersey Department of Agriculture, and Rutgers Cook College. It will explore the possibilities associated with the milk producers owning and operating their own plant to create value added branded dairy products produced in Sussex County.

The North Jersey Agriculture Business Incubator Project is a similar project seeking to bring greater return to the farmers by providing assistance through research, outreach and education. The Sussex County Agricultural Agent, proposes that these services be provided from a facility which might include: a kitchen or lab for new product development, production capabilities for start up products, and other services not normally available to a start up company. Rutgers Cooperative Extension is also working with each producer group to expand the potential for direct marketing and explore new areas of agricultural production. With a Department of Environmental Protection 319 Watershed Grant, Extension is developing Grasslands Agriculture, Integrated Pest Management, Integrated Crop Management and Nutrient Management in the Wallkill watershed.

The Sussex County Farm and Horse Show/The New Jersey State Fair, in Augusta, Frankford Township, provides another important showcase for Sussex County agriculture. In 2002, 215,000 people attended the fair, which is the largest agricultural fair in New Jersey.

The Fair has been in existence for over 60 years and has continued to mirror the face of agriculture in Sussex County and in New Jersey. Exhibits have changed from focusing predominantly on dairy to a more inclusive array that includes horses, ornamental shrubs, and goats. New breeds, like boer goats, get a showcase at the Fair. Many “shows” - Farm Fun children’s exhibit, Ag Central educational center, Landscape Competition Gardens, Honey Show, and Poultry Show - provide fun and education. The Jersey Fresh exhibit makes dairy based products each day and provides free samples of milk punch, cheese products and ice cream. The 4-H organization in Sussex County contributes significantly to the success of the Fair. Children prepare their animals and maintain the displays. Children are frequently interviewed by the press and share information about the care of their animals.

Sussex County agriculture has the support of many organizations that help maintain agricultural viability and the cultural components of a farming community. These organizations include: The Sussex County Board of Agriculture, which is made up of representatives from many of the commodity organizations in the County, the New Jersey Farm Bureau, Rutgers Cooperative Extension, 4 H, Future Farmers of America, Sussex County Soil Conservation District, Natural Resource Conservation Service and the Sussex County Farm and Horse Show/ The New Jersey State Fair. A more complete list is included in the Appendix.

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