



## **FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**

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### **In Wake of Rising Farmland Prices and Loss of Farmland, National Young Farmers Coalition, Land Trusts, American Farmland Trust, and New York Farm Bureau Back the Working Farm Protection Act**

*Bill A10301A would strengthen New York's farmland protection program by funding conservation easements that protect the affordability of land for working farmers.*

**Albany, NY (May 2, 2018)** – The National Young Farmers Coalition, along with its New York chapters, New York Farm Bureau, American Farmland Trust, and land trusts from around the state, celebrate Assemblymember Didi Barrett (D-106) today for taking a stand for farmers with the introduction of the Working Farm Protection Act. The Act would strengthen the New York State Farmland Protection Implementation Grant Program by funding conservation easements that make farmland permanently affordable to working farmers.

“Farmland ownership is the foundation of a successful farm,” says Lindsey Lusher Shute, Executive Director of the National Young Farmers Coalition and co-owner of Hearty Roots Community Farm in Clermont, “but in today’s real estate market, selling vegetables or raising livestock doesn’t pay the mortgage. If we want working farms in this state, we must take action to ensure that the price of protected farmland is affordable to the farmers who need it. Without addressing farmland affordability and the needs of the farmers working the land, the farmland protection program will not fully realize its intended purpose. As non-farmers buy these parcels and bid up the price for land, the farmers will leave and our farm communities will be lost.”

The Working Farm Protection Act comes at a critical time—farmland values are on the rise and New York’s agricultural land is being lost to non-farmer owners. According to USDA data, average New York farm real estate prices rose by 124 percent between 1997 and 2016. Non-farmer interest in farmland not only impacts real estate prices, but, according to American Farmland Trust, has also resulted in an estimated loss of three farms per week over the last thirty years.

### **Building on Success to Establish New York as a Conservation Leader**

The Farmland Protection Implementation Grant program, which was established to sustain New York’s valuable farm economy and the land base associated with it, has had a significant impact on conserving the most valuable and threatened farmland across the state. Through the program, New York residents

have invested over \$145 million to protect 61,000-plus acres of viable agricultural land on more than 240 farms. For twenty years, this work has enabled farmers to keep working their land, providing fresh and local food to communities, creating jobs, and supporting the rural economy. In fact, New York's 35,500 farms support more than 160,000 jobs and generate in excess of \$39 billion annually.

While traditional agricultural easements successfully protect farmland from development and are an important financial tool for established farmers, easements funded under this bill would also ensure that future farmers can own and operate conserved land by keeping it affordable at the time of sale. Unlike traditional easements, where land can be sold to a non-farmer, easements promoted by the Working Farm Protection Act would require farmers to sell their farm to another working farmer. These voluntary easements have been the key to transitioning hundreds of farmers in Massachusetts and Vermont, and are being used by an increasing number of New York land trusts.

"Agriculture has seen a rebirth in our Hudson Valley region and New York farms are increasingly feeding our families and stocking our farmers markets and restaurants," said Assemblymember Barrett. "I have introduced The Working Farm Protection Act, A10301A, to strengthen the existing Farmland Protection Grant Program and help make farmland more accessible to young farmers. With the cost of farmland increasing and pressures to develop land growing, we need these new measures in law to permanently provide a path to farm ownership for our young farmers."

### **Farmers and Land Trusts Call for Action**

This bill reflects a growing interest in the use of working farm easements. Farmers and land trusts in New York are already putting them into place, but the pace of adoption is slowed by the fact that they must rely on limited private funding to cover the additional costs of these easements. Making these costs eligible for state funding would increase the number of organizations using working farm easements.

"Valuable farmland is at risk of being lost for good, especially in areas where development pressure is high," says David Fisher, New York Farm Bureau President. "New York Farm Bureau is supportive of the Working Farm Protection Act, which will provide state funding for working farm easements that will allow new and beginning farmers to purchase land at a more affordable rate. In order to open up farming to the next generation, we must work to reduce barriers to starting up a farm, and Assemblywoman Barrett's bill would be a good step in that direction."

The American Farmland Trust, which represents land trusts around the state, supports the bill. "As more and more farmers reach retirement age in New York, we must find ways to lower the barriers that keep new farmers from accessing land when it changes hands," says Samantha Levy, New York Policy Manager for American Farmland Trust. "Preemptive Purchase Right provisions as part of agricultural conservation easements are an important option for farmers, and the New York State Department of Agriculture and Markets should make these provisions eligible for state funds. After all, it isn't farmland without farmers."

Annie Metzger, who owns and operates Laughing Earth Farm with her husband, Zack, in Cropseyville, NY, is encouraged by today's announcement. Protecting their farm with a working farm easement enabled Annie and Zack to purchase the land on which they run their business, successfully transitioning ownership and operation of the farm from one generation to the next. "Starting a small business is hard, no matter the business, and starting a farm business is impossible without access to reasonably priced land," she says. "If New Yorkers want to continue to eat food grown here in our state, then we need to ensure that the farmers who grow that food can afford access to viable farmland. Farmland conservation easements that include a preemptive purchase right are an important tool in accomplishing that goal. Our farm dream was made possible through a conservation easement and the further price reduction offered

by a preemptive purchase right. We feel that we are doing the right thing for the next generation by being restricted to selling our farm to farmers someday, rather than being tempted to sell to the highest bidder.”

## **Voices of Support**

Land trust leaders and farmers are eager to see the bill passed. Below is what some of them have to say.

"There are many challenges facing farmers in New York including development pressure in suburban areas and places like the Hudson Valley where my family farms. There is significant competition for prime land, which pushes up the cost of purchasing farmland. Assemblywoman Barrett's bill provides another tool to help ensure that protected farmland is used as farmland by farmers.”

— Eric Ooms, Columbia County Dairy Farmer and Vice President of New York Farm Bureau

"The Preemptive Purchase Right (PPR) can play a critical role ensuring farmer access to farmland, and ensuring that protected farms remain affordable and in active agriculture. For a number of farm protection projects in the Hudson Valley, Equity Trust has been able to bring in private funding for purchase of PPR. This has been useful to demonstrate the effectiveness of PPR, and the enthusiasm for this tool within the farming community. Private resources can and should continue to be brought to the table, but they need to be supplemented by public dollars if we are to reach more farms and bring this tool, and the positive impact it can have, to scale.”

— Jim Oldham, Executive Director of Equity Trust

"Scenic Hudson has been working with farm families for 20 years to help create a stronger future for agriculture in the Hudson Valley. But there's no future for farming if farmers can't afford farmland. We strongly endorse NYFC's efforts to bring together farmland conservation and farm affordability so our farmers and region's supply of fresh food will be more secure."

— Steve Rosenberg, Senior Vice President of Scenic Hudson and Executive Director of the Scenic Hudson Land Trust

“The Columbia Land Conservancy uses a variety of different tools and techniques to help farmers gain long term and secure access to farmland. As land prices in our region continue to rise, we believe the Preemptive Purchase Right will become one of several critically important mechanisms we can use to help ensure that our best and most productive farmland remains affordable for the farmers who need it. We are grateful for the leadership of Didi Barrett in bringing forth this bill, and hope others will support this important effort.”

— Peter Paden, Executive Director of Columbia Land Conservancy

“Protecting farmland is just part of the solution. Ensuring that our protected farmland is in the hands of working farmers—today and for the future—is equally important. On Long Island’s South Fork, in recent years we have seen protected farmland sold to non-farmers for as much as \$380,000 per acre, raising the average value of protected farmland to over \$185,000 per acre—values well beyond the reach of the vast majority of farmers who grow food. The Working Farm Protection Act would help address this challenge. Working farm easements with affordability provisions help keep farmland in the hands of farmers by lowering the value of protected farmland to its ‘true agricultural value’ for food production.”

— John V.H. Halsey, President of Peconic Land Trust

NYFC hopes to soon see a companion bill introduced in the Senate, and for the language to be enacted by the end of this year’s legislative session. After enactment, NYFC would look to coordinate with farmers, land trusts, and the Department of Agriculture and Markets to help inform the implementation process.

*The National Young Farmers Coalition (NYFC) is a national advocacy network of young farmers fighting for the future of agriculture. Visit NYFC on the web at [www.youngfarmers.org](http://www.youngfarmers.org), and on [Twitter](#), [Facebook](#), [YouTube](#) and [Instagram](#).*

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