




MAINE FARMLAND TRUST

IS YOUR TOWN FARM-FRIENDLY?

Take This Test!


Land Use Ordinances and Regulations

Does your town...

...have a detailed section on agriculture in your comprehensive plan? 


Yes No

Does your town's comprehensive plan refer to "maintaining rural character", but overlook agriculture as a primary component? Agriculture shouldn't be an afterthought! Make sure to include agriculture in the sections on economy, critical natural resources, and land use, too.

...allow agricultural uses in more than one zoning district? 

Yes No

Some towns confine agricultural businesses to the commercial zone only, while other towns prohibit such uses in the commercial zone! Farm enterprises are often hybrids of several different uses; ordinances and regulations should allow farm businesses flexibility to adapt to changing markets.

...allow flexibility in regulations to accommodate the unique needs of agricultural businesses? 

Yes No

Both the land use impact and the off-site impact of a seasonal farm business are much less than that of a full-time business. Do your town's regulations provide for reduced restrictions such as expanded hours of business operation, temporary signs, parking near pick-your-own fields, or on street parking? Pick-your-own strawberries or Christmas tree farm businesses may struggle in a town that treats farms like all other retailers.

...require buffer zones between farmland and residential uses?

Yes No

The old saying "good fences make good neighbors" has a modern corollary that says "good buffer zones make new neighbors good neighbors." New development should not place the burden on existing farms to give up boundary land as a buffer zone between agricultural and residential uses. New residential development should provide for its own buffer zone and/or landscape plantings for screening neighboring farms.

...allow off-site signs to attract and direct farm stand customers?

Yes No

Farm stands are often seasonal businesses that need to capture potential sales at harvest time. Signs that give directions to the farm stand and let customers know what's available (such as strawberries, corn, apples) are vitally important.

...provide for the agricultural use of open space land created by innovative residential subdivisions?

Yes No

Some towns have adopted innovative subdivision regulations like cluster housing, which provide for setting aside open space land within the subdivision. Ideally, such land should be the most valuable agricultural land, be big enough for commercial agricultural purposes, and specifically allow long term agricultural use. Smaller plots of set aside land could accommodate community gardens.


...allow accessory uses to agriculture?

Yes No

Remember, it's not just the farmland that makes farming possible: businesses related to agriculture (veterinarians, equipment and supply dealers, feed milling and delivery, etc.) have to be close enough to serve farmers' needs.


Fair Enforcement of Local Regulations

Does your town...

...have a consistent policy approach for local land use procedures that deal with agriculture? 


Yes No

Update your comprehensive plan to express what agriculture contributes to your town's economy and quality of life through open space, wildlife habitation, watershed purification and natural resource preservation. Make sure your select board, planning board, and code officer recognize the importance of farming and build their policies and practices around that presumption.

...have a good idea of how much agriculture there is in town? 


Yes No

Consider having a town committee conduct a farm inventory, survey or economic impact analysis. You may be surprised at the number and variety of farms in your community – and the impact they have on your local economy!

...allow roadside stands or pick-your-own operations by right? 


Yes No

Consider amending your zoning ordinance so that certain agricultural operations don't need a Special Exception or Variance – or even a permit!

...use zoning definitions such as "agricultural accessory uses" in a broad and inclusive manner? 


Yes No

"Agricultural accessory uses" refers to everything from machinery sheds to housing for seasonal workers. Various agricultural businesses have very different needs that can test the balance of rule and exceptions. Write flexibility into ordinances or regulations that may apply to agricultural land uses so the intent is clearly to promote such uses.

...allow farm stands to sell produce purchased elsewhere? 


Yes No

Some towns have rules that a certain percentage of farm stand produce must be grown on the farm. Such regulation may penalize farm operators who have a crop failure or wish to offer a broad range of products.

...properly assess specialized agricultural structures? 


Yes No

Specialized structures such as silos, milking parlors, and permanent greenhouses depreciate in value over time. Providing assessors with depreciation schedules may enable more accurate valuations, which can lead to lower assessments. Even small reductions in taxes can help farmers financially.

...allow non-traditional or retail-based farm businesses in an agricultural zoning district? 

Yes No

Agricultural businesses don't all look alike. Your town should recognize that newer types of farm businesses such as agritourism, horse arenas, landscape nurseries, or greenhouses are more intensive in land use, but still carry valuable elements of rural character that benefit the town.

...address agricultural structures in building and safety codes? 

Yes No

Building practices that are state of the art for a specialized use in agriculture may not fit the specifics of codes meant for housing or commercial structures, while bringing agricultural buildings that are historic structures up to code may destroy the very qualities that make them special.

Understanding and Encouraging Farming

Does your town....

...consider farmland a natural resource and encourage conservation easements and purchase of farmland? →

Yes No

Easements and outright purchases of farmland ensure preservation of the natural resource base for agriculture. Farmland costs less to taxpayers than land developed for residential uses, and protecting it will ensure it is available for future generations to farm.

...have any visible demonstration of the value of agriculture? →

Yes No

Does your town have a county fair, an apple festival, or an Old Home Day parade? Making agriculture visible to the general public helps establish the economic, cultural, and resource stewardship value of having active farms in a town.

...respect the state Agriculture Protection Act, which helps protect farmer's rights? →

Yes No

Local control is an important tradition for Maine towns. Conflicts between agriculture and other land uses can be reduced when town officials are informed about Best Management Practices (BMP's) that may alleviate nuisance complaints. The University of Maine's Cooperative Extension Service writes BMP's about various agricultural practices based on sound scientific research.

...encourage farmers to take advantage of the current use tax programs to help relieve their tax burdens? →

Yes No

By reducing the tax burden on agricultural land, towns can encourage the maintenance of open space at a relatively low cost. The Voluntary Municipal Farm Support Program is a new tool that towns can use to help further reduce the tax burden on farmers in exchange for keeping land in farming.

...have farmers serving on local planning, comprehensive plan, ordinance review boards, or conservation commissions? →

Yes No

There are few better ways to incorporate agricultural concerns into local land use ordinances and regulations than having farmers serve. Farmers can help your town's land use boards keep a broad perspective by asking "Have you thought of the consequences...?"

...have farmers serving on the local Economic Development Committee? →

Yes No

Agricultural businesses are frequently undervalued in terms of their effect on the community. Much of the economic activity generated by farms stays within the community. And the regional economic impacts of farming in Maine are growing each year!

...know where to go to get advice and assistance on farm questions? →

Yes No

Make the connection to resources such as:

- the Department of Agriculture, Food and Rural Resources (industry regulator, statewide perspective)
- UMaine's Cooperative Extension (technical questions, BMP's)
- Maine Farm Bureau (non-governmental farm lobby, broad experience); Natural Resource Conservation Service (land and water resource management)
- Maine Farmland Trust (farmland conservation, technical assistance).

For more information on any of these topics, or about farming in Maine, go to www.mainefarmlandtrust.org or call Maine Farmland Trust at (207) 338-6575.



IS YOUR TOWN FARM-FRIENDLY?

Your Results...

FARM CHAMPIONS - If you answered YES on 17-21 questions, your town is especially helpful to farmers.

FARM SUPPORTERS - If you answered YES on 11-16 questions, your town knows that farmers are good neighbors who provide lots of benefits to the quality of life, but you may be able to take other steps to encourage them.

FARM AMBIVALENT - If you answered YES on 6-10 questions, your town may be less farm friendly than you think. It's time to get to work helping your fellow citizens understand the importance of protecting its agricultural base.

FARM UNFRIENDLY - If you answered YES on 5 or fewer questions, your town is not farm friendly, but there still may be hope. Seek help immediately from farmers, farm groups and organizations like a local land trust or Maine Farmland Trust.

Presented by Maine Farmland Trust – adapted from “Is Your Town Farm Friendly – A Checklist for Sustaining Rural Character” by the New Hampshire Coalition for Sustaining Agriculture and UNH Cooperative Extension.