



NEW YORK STATE SENATOR

Thomas F. O'Mara

Senator O'Mara's weekly column 'From the Capitol' -- for the week of December 2, 2024 -- 'A season to remember the importance of farming'

THOMAS F. O'MARA December 2, 2024

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Senator O'Mara offers his weekly perspective on many of the key challenges and issues facing the Legislature, as well as on legislative actions, local initiatives, state programs and policies, and more. Stop back every Monday for Senator O'Mara's latest column...

This week, **"A season to remember the importance of farming"**

One of the time-honored traditions throughout this holiday season is to gather around the table to share a meal, express thanks, and count blessings in the company of family, friends, neighbors, and even sometimes the community at large.

It's a chance, as well, to reflect on the contributions of farmers and the entire agricultural industry here at home in the Southern Tier and Finger Lakes regions, throughout New York State, and across America. A recent state report, "A Profile of Agriculture in New York State," does just that and stands as a timely reminder.

"Agriculture is an important part of New York State's economy, and farmers make significant contributions to the State," State Comptroller Thomas P. DiNapoli notes in the new report from his office (the full report can be found here: www.osc.ny.gov). "In New York's rural counties, farming can be a significant driver of the regional economy, spurring a suite of support businesses supplying equipment, repair services, seed and soil conditioners and veterinary services, as well as sustaining employment."

The latest figures from the federal Department of Agriculture show that farming is practiced in every county in the state. Nearly 31,000 farms and farmland account for over 21 percent of the state's area. New York's agricultural sector contributes \$2.7 billion to the state's gross domestic product and directly supports over 163,000 jobs. In short, the industry is a foundation of the statewide economy and the food supply networks vital to the future.

Over the past two decades, working through the "Harvest for All" program linking Farm Bureau and Feeding America in every state in the nation, New York's farmers have been national leaders. In 2023, our farmers donated eight million pounds of food to regional food banks, the second highest donation total in America.

In short, farming and agriculture remain the anchors of a way of life that has long defined and sustained so many communities and regions. New York has many agricultural products that consistently rank in the top tier nationwide, including maple syrup, grapes, wine, red table beets, apples, cabbage and milk, yogurt and cheese.

The comptroller's report also found that:

--Agritourism and recreation in 2022 saw the largest increase in farm-related income, a 78% jump since 2012.

--Research from Cornell University found that farming and related supporting businesses directly supported 163,148 jobs in New York in 2019.

--In 2022, New York's farms paid a total of \$6.2 billion in expenses, an increase of \$1.9 billion from 2017. From 2012 to 2022, hired labor expenditures grew by 68%, far surpassing other categories.

--Despite economic growth, between 2012 and 2022, the state lost close to 14% of its farms and over 9% of farmland. New York is losing farms and land at a faster rate than the U.S. and all neighboring states except Connecticut (farms) and Massachusetts (farmland).

--The overall decline of farmland is troubling, as conversion to other uses, particularly residential, commercial or industrial, may prevent its use for farming in the future. This includes 1,728 acres located in agricultural districts classified as solar electric generation facilities.

"New York's diverse farms are an essential part of the state's economy, but there are increasing challenges that are changing the agricultural landscape," according to the comptroller. "Volatile commodity prices, labor pressures and extreme weather are adding to the unpredictability of farming that is contributing to the consolidation and the loss of farms. Policymakers must consider the ways in which state programs and policies affect this sector."

Approaching the start of a new legislative session in January, it will be important for New York's lawmakers and policymakers to renew a strong commitment to ensuring that our actions will not undermine an industry and a way of life that has defined the regions we represent. We cannot afford to change the face of New York State agriculture as we have known it for generations. We can't risk the future of high quality, local food production or take steps that could spark the loss of more family farms and the livelihoods these farms support throughout hundreds of local economies.

Now is no time to risk regulating and mandating an even more uncertain future for family farmers, farm workers, farm communities, and New York's agricultural industry overall.

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