

## NYS Legislative Commission on Rural Resources

### Thoughts From the Chair

Greetings, and welcome to the Winter 2025 edition of *Rural Futures*. I am very proud of the work done by the Legislative Commission on Rural Resources over the past year. In addition to helping rural communities and organizations connect with one another and with sources of State and federal government assistance, LCRR staff have worked hard to make sure the entire State Legislature is aware of the needs and concerns of rural New Yorkers. This heightened awareness has brought real results in terms of both new legislation and new funding in the budget.

Some of the successes we have seen in the past year include the passage and enactment of important legislation to support rural emergency medical services — particularly a bill to allow ambulances to provide treatment in place instead of tying up time traveling to a distant hospital when they have all the means to provide immediate assistance. We also provided more funding for flood relief, rural rental and mortgage assistance, rural road and bridge repair, clean water infrastructure, and farmland protection. For the first time in decades, local municipalities saw an increase in AIM funding, which is the State's contribution to their operating costs, and the Legislature fought hard to prevent cuts to rural school districts. And after many years, the advocacy of small cideries and distilleries has finally resulted in the passage of a new law allowing them to ship their products directly to consumers, something that will allow them to compete on a level playing field with their counterparts in other states.

For my part, I have been able to take tours and attend events around the State that lift up our rural areas. The International Manure Expo was held in New York State for the first time in 2024, and it included a tour of the remarkable work Sunnyside Farm is doing in Cayuga County to manage manure from their large dairy operation while protecting both the watershed and the quality of life for their neighbors. I also toured Cayuga Milk's processing facility, which takes milk products from a number of participating farms and processes it into dried milk products, and Local Coho, which is raising fresh salmon in a state-of-the-art indoor facility in Auburn.

Please know that these tours are not just for pleasure — though I do enjoy them. They can also result in real, positive action. Last year, I toured Dutch Hill Maple Farm in southern Onondaga County, and the owners, Nate and Cristy, shared with me their frustration that the State only allows five-year leases on State forest lands, a period too short to justify leasing the land for maple production. This year, at the ribbon cutting for their new sugar house, I was able to share with Nate and Cristy that because of their advocacy, I had introduced a new bill to allow 10-year leases on State forest lands. That bill passed both houses of the Legislature this year, and was signed by the Governor this past August.

All of which is to say: I hope you will consider inviting me or Rural Resources staff to visit and learn how we might be helpful to you. And please consider attending the next Rural Fair in the State Capitol. We have held it now for two years, and everyone involved has found it to be a great opportunity for networking and for advocacy with legislators from all across the State.



*Rachel May*

Senator Rachel May  
Chair, Legislative Commission on Rural Resources

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## Winter 2025 Rural Futures

### NEWS OF INTEREST ABOUT RURAL NEW YORK STATE

A publication of the NYS Legislative Commission on Rural Resources

The NYS Legislative Commission on Rural Resources is a joint bipartisan commission of the State Legislature with a mission to promote the viability of rural communities.



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## LCRR: 2024 Updates

*By LCRR Staff*

It's been a busy year for the Commission, going all the way back to our last edition of *Rural Futures* in the fall of 2023. Since then, we have been occupied with site visits across the entire State, advocating for key budget priorities, and advancing our first piece of legislation.

Going back to last year's State Fair, we had a chance to meet Neil and Greg Rejman, owners of Sunnyside Farm in Scipio Center, as they won the distinguished PRO-DAIRY Agriservice Award from Commissioner Ball and the NYS Department of Agriculture and Markets. That prompted us to accompany Senator May on a dairy tour of Cayuga County, starting with Cayuga Milk Ingredients in Auburn. There, we were able to see how local dairy farmers have collaborated to develop their own processing plant due to the needs of the region. Over time, it has grown into a massive operation that uses state-of-the-art technology to efficiently receive, process, and ship dairy products.

From there, we went to see Sunnyside Farm. After spending a few hours there and discussing their soil practices and recent outputs, it was easy to see why the Rejman brothers have an award-winning farm; they are both efficient in their operations and models of safety and cleanliness in the industry.

Around the same time, we attended the Farm Bureau's Annual Legislative Farm Tour, which focused on Columbia County. As always, it was a great snapshot of the wide variety of farms we have here in New York State. We saw sustainable dairy practices at Dutch Hollow Farm in Schodack, agritourism in action at Samascott Orchards in Kinderhook, and the intricacies of running a local organic farm at Little Seed Gardens in Valatie, among other examples. The event was both informative and inspirational, reminding us of how adaptable our farms are and how much diversity New York has in terms of size, outputs, and purpose.

One of our final visits before winter was to see Massena Central Schools. We'd been hearing a lot about their successes as a community school in the North Country, and you can read more about Massena later on in this issue.

In November 2023, we hosted our first webinar! With assistance from the New York League of Conservation Voters and its president, Julie Tighe, we welcomed local government officials, briefing counties and municipalities on funding opportunities through the Inflation Reduction Act and New York's Bond Act. You can find a recording of the webinar on our YouTube Channel (@NYSRural), and we're looking forward to hosting more outreach events like this in the future.



## LCRR: 2024 Updates Continued

As our current staff began our second Legislative Session together, we built on the experiences of our first year. We hosted our second annual Rural Resources Fair in Albany — this time with over thirty advocacy organizations and inaugural informational breakout sessions hosted in collaboration with Cornell College of Agriculture and Life Sciences. Topics in the breakout sessions included farm-to-school initiatives, soil health, rural development, and tick prevention. (Mark your calendars: next year's Rural Resources Fair will be March 26, 2025 in the Well of the Legislative Office Building in Albany!)

Again this year, for each stage of the budget process, we developed a summary of how various proposals would impact rural New York. Our final summary of the enacted budget can be found on our website: <https://www.nysenate.gov/committees/legislative-commission-rural-resources>. Throughout the process, we were opposed to Governor Hochul's proposed cuts to rural schools, and while the Legislature was able to restore funding, the enacted budget set up a study of the Foundation Aid formula before the next fiscal year. We are going to be highly engaged in that process to make sure the needs of rural schools and districts are amplified and a part of the equity conversation.

As the Legislative Session wound down, we were proud to have our first piece of legislation pass both chambers. S.8486C (Hinchey, May) is a product of our engagement with the EMS community throughout 2023 and early 2024. The bill authorizes Medicaid reimbursement to EMS providers for treating patients at the scene of a call or for transporting them to a more appropriate healthcare destination beyond emergency rooms. We believe that the bill will financially shore up EMS providers and assist them in serving patients more effectively, reduce the burden on overcrowded emergency rooms, and save New York State money. We are honored to say that Governor Hochul signed that bill into law in September, and it went into effect on October 1.

So, as we move into strategizing for another upcoming Legislative Session, we welcome your input on the rural issues and positions that matter to you. Please feel free to reach out to us using the contact information listed in this publication. We hope that you enjoy this edition of *Rural Futures*!



Senator May with the guest of honor at the 2024 Rural Resources Fair in Albany

## Massena: Our Kids, Our School, Our Community

*By Kristin Colaruso-Martin, Community Schools Director, Massena Central School District*

Tucked away in the farthest northern corner of New York, bordered by Canada and a nearby Native American Reservation, you'll find the village of Massena, New York. Massena isn't just any town — it's a place of wonders, of perseverance, of faith, and of a whole lot of spirit. From fighting to keep Alcoa alive to prioritizing excellent education, Massena and its people have shown what's possible when a community comes together.

If you step into one of our schools to escape the cold, you'll notice a slogan proudly displayed: "Our Kids, Our School, Our Community." This mantra, chosen by students, staff, and community partners, embodies the essence of the Massena Central School District. It's with this spirit in mind that I was hired as our first full-service Community Schools Coordinator back in the fall of 2017. With around 2,500 students, I work to integrate the community into our three elementary schools, junior high, and high school, making Massena a pioneer among the 18 school districts in the County.

My role involves reaching out to various community partners — law enforcement, firefighters, nonprofits, faith-based organizations, and colleges — to organize accessible resources for students and families in need. From basic necessities like clothing and food to providing



*Massena's Ready 4 School Event*

guidance and support, I strive to make a difference every day. (Case in point: the Corner Boutique we run in our high school; here, students have access to donated clothing items and hygienic products, free of charge.) And while I'm known for my larger initiatives, it's the small gestures — a backpack filled with school supplies, a comforting smile — that often go unnoticed, but make a world of difference to our students.

But it's not just about what happens within our school walls; sometimes, events in the community affect our students' ability to learn. That's why the Massena Central School District partnered with local law enforcement to implement the Handle With Care initiative. When officers respond to incidents involving children, they notify me, allowing us to provide extra support and understanding to those students at school. Through our coordination, we are able to be more responsive to the needs of our students.



*High School Job Fair*

One of the highlights of our community's collaboration is the "Ready 4 School" event held every August. With the realization that many students start the year without essential supplies, we come together to level the playing field. From donated school supplies and clothing to free haircuts and informational tables, it's a testament to what we can achieve when we work as one.

As we wrap up our seventh year as a full-service community school, I've transitioned into the role of Community Schools Director, with Emily Kimble taking over as Coordinator. Together, we continue to support students and families while also collaborating with schools across the State and the Nation to further the community schools movement. The community schools model is a valuable asset, particularly for rural areas, where there may be a lack of resources or services — but also a tight-knit sense of belonging. With the role of schools evolving in a post-pandemic world, we see every day how buildings like ours can become community hubs, adapting to the needs of our residents beyond just providing an education.

In the end, community schools are about more than academics; they're about lifting up our entire community. It's about recognizing that our ambitions should encompass the needs of others, for their sake and for our own. As Cesar Chavez said, "We cannot seek achievement for ourselves and forget about progress and prosperity for our community." That sentiment is at the heart of everything we do in Massena.



*Family home visits for incoming kindergarten students*



## New York Sea Grant

*By Barry Udelson, Aquaculture Specialist at New York Sea Grant*

Aquaculture is the farming of organisms that live in the water; it is also a growing sector of New York's agriculture industry. It can be done on land, in tanks or ponds, or in the ocean in floating nets or cages, even sitting on the bottom in some circumstances. Aquaculture operations can grow crops for food, ornamental species (pets), or for restoration to enhance wild populations and support recreational angling.

New York has a long history of aquaculture dating back to the 1820s with early shellfish aquaculture efforts.<sup>1</sup> In 1864, the first fish hatchery in the country was started and still operates in Caledonia,<sup>1</sup> New York. Since then, the industry has grown to about 40 land-based finfish operations, mostly located in the upstate region, and over 60 shellfish operations on Long Island. One oyster farmer has diversified and is New York's first commercial producer of sugar kelp (i.e., seaweed), with others sure to follow.

Many finfish farms produce fish for bait or stocking while several produce fish for food. Newer recirculating technology has allowed large-scale, land-based operations, such as Hudson Valley Fish Farm and Local Coho, to annually produce hundreds of metric tons of fish. Smaller operations also exist, such as Hicklings Fish Farm, which is family-owned and operated since 1986. The owners were previously dairy farmers, and, seeing a new opportunity, they now raise several fish species for stocking and largemouth bass for the live-food market in New York City. Skytop Springs, also a family-owned and operated farm, started in 2020. They raise rainbow trout in spring-fed ponds on their property in the Catskills, smoke their fish on the premises, and sell them locally.

To support the State's fisheries, aquaculture and seafood sectors, New York Sea Grant (NYSG) provides technical support, resources, and training on various topics relevant to current and future producers. NYSG is a multi-partner organization between the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Association (NOAA), Cornell University, and the State University of New York (SUNY). It has over 20 extension specialists that work statewide with community members, researchers, and agencies to protect and enhance the State's coastal resources. Three of these specialists have supported New York's seafood sectors by coordinating annual events and meetings to bring together various sectors, providing technical assistance and training related to production, processing, safety, nutrition, and the development of topical guides and resources for the industry and the public.

With the abundance of people, land, and water in New York and increased federal and State support for domestic seafood production, there is significant room for growth of the aquaculture industry in the State, diversifying and augmenting New York's agricultural economy. Not only will this sector increase the amount of locally produced seafood, but it will also create additional jobs and enhance local and statewide commerce. Aquaculture has a long history here in the State and, if current trends continue, an even richer future ahead!



*Sea Grant tabling at the 2024 Rural Resources Fair*

<sup>1</sup>Squires, D. and Wise, B. (1985). Aquaculture Development in NY State. [White Paper] NY Sea Grant Report.

## Municipal Broadband: Offering Access, Choice, and Affordability

*By Steve Gamache, Deputy Director of the Legislative Commission on Rural Resources*

Mayor Bill Acee, Village of Sherburne, had been envisioning a municipally owned broadband fiber network for the past 20 years, and as that dream became a reality, his community quickly bought in. When the now-innovative project was still in its planning phase, the Mayor had to decide where construction would start. Luckily, one of his residents in an underserved part of the community helped him make that decision. “This individual went door-to-door in her neighborhood and got her whole road to sign up, so we said, ‘Okay, we’ll do that road first now,’ because she encouraged everyone to get on our system.”

Sherburne is not alone; Diana, Pitcairn, and Nichols also recently completed broadband pilot projects as part of New York’s Municipal Infrastructure Program (MIP). Under these projects, communities that were previously unserved or underserved when it came to high-speed internet are now reaping the benefits of municipal broadband — essentially, internet that is built and maintained by local governments. These projects collectively demonstrate what rural municipalities can do for their residents when provided with the resources: they provide better access to the internet at faster, more reliable speeds for a fraction of the cost when compared to private internet service providers (ISPs). One family in the North Country was paying \$400 per month for DSL service, which has been outdated and inadequate for decades. Now, their monthly internet bill has been reduced to \$100 and they are enjoying speeds of 1 Gbps, affording them all of the benefits that high-speed internet has to offer. All told, with an initial \$10 million investment, more than 3,000 homes across the North Country and Southern Tier now have access to broadband.

And more projects are underway to serve New Yorkers who live in “the last mile.” Whereas investment from private ISPs has been slow to reach the most rural or remote communities due to the costs associated with building infrastructure, the federal government and New York State are stepping in to make it easier for municipalities to build their own broadband infrastructure and connect New Yorkers to information and opportunities regardless of where they live.

In January 2024, [Governor Hochul announced over \\$228 million in funding](#) from the American Rescue Plan would be directed to the MIP to fund municipal broadband projects, resulting in high-speed internet access for tens of thousands of homes statewide. Additionally, last year, the Governor signed S.289 (May) into law, which gives local governments the option to

finance their own broadband projects — making New York State the first state to explicitly allow this type of bonding authority. Through these efforts, in the coming years, New York is able to lead the way in connecting all of its residents to remote work opportunities, access to education and telehealth, countless entertainment options, fortified social connections, and all of the other aspects of modern life that many take for granted.

The first highlight here, of course, is serving our rural areas. Low population density means fewer subscribers per square mile for telecommunication companies, so the progress of building in these communities has been slow. But when a municipality builds and owns the infrastructure, removing the profit motive, money from subscribers flows back into maintaining and operating the system, and people are better served. Travis DuBois, Superintendent of the Village of Sherburne Electric, explains: “We’ve broken infrastructure from service. So our customers are paying



*Mayor Acee (center) and Travis DuBois (right) receiving an award from the New York State Conference of Mayors for their work on the municipal broadband project in Sherburne.*



## Municipal Broadband: Offering Access, Choice, and Affordability Continued

\$10 or \$30 [per month] for the ISP, and they are paying us \$30 for the infrastructure. That \$30 is set up in buckets of money to maintain the system.” So, after the initial investment, subscriber fees self-propel the system and residents can choose between two private ISPs, which both offer two plans: a \$10 plan that is adequate for most online activities, or a \$30 plan that can handle multiple users streaming or video conferencing simultaneously. For sake of ease, the fiber is open-access, meaning multiple ISPs can serve people using the same line and customers can switch providers with literally the click of a mouse, encouraging competition and affordability. Ultimately, for \$60 per month, those connected to the new broadband infrastructure are saving money on internet bills when compared to traditional ISPs, and can save even more if they cut the cord and use streaming services.

In that vein, now that the system is up and running, Mayor Acee and Travis are looking to educate the public to fully harness its capabilities. They understand that a lot of people are comfortable with the entertainment options they have and may be intimidated by streaming services. So, the next step is thinking through how to do outreach and open people up to the idea that they could save even more money by subscribing to streaming services rather than traditional cable, and have more personalized entertainment choices. For Mayor Acee, the cost savings and choice are perks that he can offer the people of Sherburne, and even use as a way to attract new residents. He’s hopeful that rural areas like his can be places where people and businesses that are seeking a lower cost of living can relocate to, helping to boost the local economy and alleviate housing shortages in more populated urban centers, a win for both upstate and downstate.

As of November 2024, Governor Hochul and ConnectALL have announced over \$214 million to build more than 2,000 miles of broadband infrastructure as a result of the pilots’ successes. The new projects span every region of Upstate New York, and will bring high-speed internet to 87,000 homes and businesses. For more information on the MIP and these projects, you can visit [broadband.ny.gov](https://broadband.ny.gov).



**ConnectALL**



**NYS LEGISLATIVE COMMISSION ON  
RURAL RESOURCES**

## New York Center for Agricultural Medicine and Health (NYCAMH) Offerings Expanding Thanks to Funding Increase

*By Erika Scott, PhD, Deputy Director for the New York Center for Agricultural Medicine and Health*

A recent report published by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) in April 2024 highlighted the fact that rural Americans are at higher risk of early death over their urban counterparts. The research showed that for the one in five Americans living in rural areas, the preventable early deaths were caused by heart disease, cancer, unintentional injury, stroke, and chronic lower respiratory disease. While rural areas are home to the fertile lands that grow our Nation's supply of food, rural residents have less access to healthy foods, healthcare, and health insurance compared to those living in urban areas. Living in a rural area is associated with less recreational physical activity, higher rates of cardiovascular risk factors such as high blood pressure and obesity, and cigarette smoking. Despite these recent reports, there is also reason for optimism. The wellspring of human capital and abundant natural resources in rural areas has brought attention to sustaining and enhancing rural economies and communities.



Agriculture is a major driver of the rural economy, and with this powerful economic engine comes inherent health and safety risks for farmers and farmworkers. Within our State, the New York Center for Agricultural Medicine and Health (NYCAMH) has long been committed to ensuring the health and well-being of our agricultural workers. Established in Public Health Law in 1988, NYCAMH's mission is to enhance agricultural and rural health by preventing and treating occupational injury and illness. We are excited to share that for the first time in 15 years, NYCAMH received a funding increase in this year's State Budget, allowing us to better serve workers around the State. We are grateful to Governor Hochul, Commissioners Ball, McDonald, and Reardon, Majority Leader Stewart-Cousins, Speaker Heastie, Agricultural Committee Chairs Hinchey and Lupardo, Health Committee Chairs Rivera and Paulin, and Labor Committee Chairs Ramos and Bronson for their continued support of our program.

With a pulse on the latest research, NYCAMH is uniquely positioned to house all components of the public health model under one roof. This means that we are able to be responsive to emerging needs, understand if programs are effective, and easily share the best practices in health and safety. We work in collaboration with the industry to ensure solutions are practical and actionable. Our staff includes occupational health technicians, healthcare providers, safety specialists, a case manager/therapist, occupational health nurses, epidemiologists, social scientists, biostatisticians, research and program coordinators and assistants, and numerous support staff. Thanks to our talented staff, we are able to research agricultural injury and illness, provide education and prevention activities within the farm community, and provide clinical services for farm-related health and rural occupational health.

With a stable organizational budget, we are able to offer wide-ranging education, training, and outreach health and safety services for farms across New York State. In addition to long-standing programs such as the ROPS Rebate Program (tractor rollbars), we created four new positions, including dedicated staff to coordinate the John May Farm Safety Fund, farm respirator fit testing, personal protective equipment, and logging safety programs. In addition, we designed a Farm Navigator position whose job it is to connect farm owners, managers, and workers to the catalog of services that we offer, but also to share information on other organizations and services in the State. Lastly, a new research scientist is joining our team, with a special focus in exploring contemporary issues influencing farmers' health and well-being. Together, these new positions round out the expertise needed to serve the farm communities' health and safety needs. We also plan to expand our on-farm services to include health and wellness screenings. We, along with our partners around the State, will continue to provide much-needed support for this vital industry and its workers.



*NYCAMH Safety Training*



## Investments in Seedling Supply Will Enable Reforestation Across NY



*By Michelle Brown, Ph.D., NY Director of Natural Climate Solutions, The Nature Conservancy*

Here in New York, we've passed some of the most ambitious climate legislation in the country. To reach our climate goals, we must work with nature in strategic ways. Solutions found in nature, often called "natural climate solutions," can provide emissions reductions and carbon storage of up to 21% of current net annual emissions in the United States.

In New York State, reforestation is the natural climate solution that offers the most significant opportunity to sequester and store large amounts of carbon. Forests also protect clean water, reduce flooding, cool our urban landscapes, and provide wildlife habitats. Nature Conservancy research indicates that New York has more than 1.7 million acres of land suitable for reforestation. In an initial survey, over 60% of surveyed New York landowners expressed interest in their land transitioning to forest. But right now, we're planting less than 1,000 acres of trees annually.

To expand our forests, we need to improve how we collect, process, and distribute seeds. Effectively scaling reforestation efforts in New York requires every aspect of the process to expand, including seedling production, workforce development, planting activities, follow-up monitoring, and landowner participation. One major challenge in implementing large-scale reforestation is the limited commercial availability of native woody seeds and seedlings.

According to a recent study, it is estimated that total seedling production must increase more than two-fold over current production (Fargione et al., 2021) to meet nationwide reforestation goals. In New York, there is a limited local supply of commercial "bareroot seedlings" (no soil around the roots), and not enough coordination of current demand to generate the operational scaling required to meet New York State's goal of planting 25 million new trees by 2033.

Nurseries are essential. We depend on them to produce the tree and shrub seedlings needed to mitigate climate change, meet climate goals, maintain soil health, and supply native plants for restoration. The nurseries supplying commercial quantities of native woody seedlings for conservation have survived despite challenges, including labor shortages, shifting demand, and uncertain supply. Nurseries operate on thin profit margins, and nursery owners and operators often carry the economic risk of multi-year projects. Nurseries need committed partners willing to engage with them earlier in the project development cycle.

A seed needs a minimum of 18 months before it can be planted. The process includes collection, processing, storage, production, harvesting and sale. For some species, this takes many years. At each stage, there is the possibility the seed or seedling will not survive. Skilled labor is required to manage the seed collection process, and financial incentives are needed to make the collecting worthwhile. Seed collection tradespeople are becoming sparser throughout the Nation, and the transition to training the next generation of seed collectors has been slow. There are cohorts of individuals and organizations collaborating to train new workers in this field, but ramping up will require increases in coordination and investment in order to achieve State goals.

The seedling supply chain is complex and needs to scale up to meet New York's climate goals. A key way to help increase nursery capacity is through coordinating markets and financially supporting nurseries so they can increase their operational capacity. New York can provide financial support and incentives to the industry to increase seed collecting at the rate required for scaling up production. By investing in our nurseries today, we can better ensure that they can provide New York with the trees needed for planting tomorrow.

For more information, you can contact the author, Michelle Brown, NY Director of Natural Climate Solutions, The Nature Conservancy, at [michelle\\_brown@tnc.org](mailto:michelle_brown@tnc.org).



*Greenbelt Native Plant Center on Staten Island is run by the New York City Department of Parks and Recreation, New York.*

*Photo Credit: Kevin Arnold*

### References

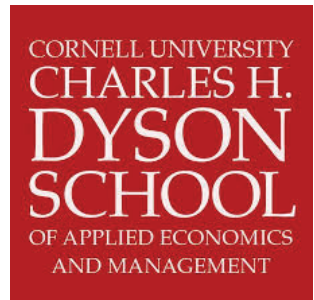
Joseph Fargione et al. Challenges to the Reforestation Pipeline in the United States, *Frontiers in Forests and Global Change* (2021). DOI: 10.3389/ffgc.2021.629198

# The True Cost of Food in Public Food Procurement

*By Todd Schmit, Kristina Sokourenko, Franco Bilotto, Xiaoyan Liu, Mario Herrero, and Chris Barrett*

*(of the Charles H. Dyson School of Applied Economics and Management, Cornell University)*

In recent years, New York State has implemented numerous legislative and budget incentives to promote the purchasing of New York agricultural goods. One example is the 30% NY Initiative, which increases State reimbursement for the purchase of NYS food products for school lunch programs. Public agencies in New York State spend over \$1.3 billion each year purchasing food,<sup>1</sup> so there has been enthusiasm for expanding local markets through the purchasing power of State agencies. As a State, we clearly recognize the valuable role that public procurement can play in promoting local food systems, whether that be in a farm-to-school setting or procurement through other State agencies or institutions. However, it's important to look beyond just the price tag when considering how much our food is costing us in these transactions.



Most public food bids award contracts to the lowest cost qualified bidder (a Request for Bid process) that ignore important positive and negative externalities that can disadvantage New York State producers and processors and hide the true, longer-term cost of food to taxpayers. Accounting for such externalities levels the playing field between in-state and out-of-state producers. Request for Proposal processes already exist under State law, which allows public agencies to award bids considering "best value" based on factors that include, but are not limited to price (e.g., geographic preference). However, the process is arguably based on a set of ad-hoc scoring criteria.

With the Cornell True Cost of Food Calculator, we use a transparent and scientifically based framework to establish the monetary value of key externalities, and develop an implementable tool for agencies to adjust submitted bid prices to "true cost" equivalents. In doing so, we are mindful that the process does not impose unreasonable data demands on prospective bidders or State agencies. A lean process is important so as not to discourage bidders and thereby inadvertently reduce competition and drive up costs.

For example, some states permit private companies to employ incarcerated persons who are paid well below the minimum wage. New York does not permit prison contract labor in agriculture or food industries. As such, access to prison labor represents an implicit subsidy provided to out-of-state producers. Those labor cost savings can then be passed on by vendors in their bids. Adding the value of the corresponding subsidy to such firms' bids levels the playing field for in-state producers.

Another factor, environmental costs associated with climate change, can be estimated based on the location of production, production practice, and transportation mode. In other words, the costs relate to the production of food products and their transportation to market or destination. Adding the environmental costs associated with a food product bid likewise levels the playing field across bidders and incentivizes adoption of improved climate-friendly practices. It can also reduce future State expenditures on environmental remediation and climate change adaptation or mitigation.

Our tool estimates the value of these two key externalities (the use of prison labor and environmental costs), in addition to a third: economic multiplier effects. Each externality can be used individually or collectively. You can find a webinar showcasing the tool in action at <https://cornell.box.com/v/CornellTCOFProcurement>. The link also provides access to a technical appendix explaining the framework, and a user guide for agencies and vendors on how to use the bid adjustment tool are also available. We are extremely interested in working with agencies and vendors in this process and providing customizable tools for agency adoption. If that pertains to you, please contact us to participate in the testing phase. After putting the tool through scientific peer review and conducting beta testing with local agencies and prospective vendors to ensure and improve implementability, we expect to make the tool publicly available. Others interested in learning more about true cost approaches to public food procurement processes should feel free to reach out as well.

For agencies, organizations, or individuals interested in the True Cost of Food Calculator, contact the program manager, Cynthia Jean Mathys, at [cjm296@cornell.edu](mailto:cjm296@cornell.edu).

<sup>1</sup>Remarks as prepared: Governor Hochul delivers 2023 State of the State. (n.d.).

Governor Kathy Hochul. <https://www.governor.ny.gov/news/remarks-prepared-governor-hochul-delivers-2023-state-state>



## GRANTS

### John May Farm Safety Fund (JMFSF)

The John May Farm Safety Fund provides up to \$5,000 in matching financial assistance to small and mid-sized farm operations in New York State for repairs and upgrades that make for a safer workplace. Past projects include updating electrical wiring, adding slip-resistant surfaces, upgrading animal handling equipment, and fixing silo ladders. A free, non-regulatory, and confidential safety walkthrough of the farm will be conducted by a NYCAMH safety specialist for all eligible applications as part of the approval process. Once notified of the approval and estimated award amount, the farmer starts the project with the understanding that the actual award payment is made upon completion of the project. Awards will not exceed 50% of the estimated total cost of the project, with a maximum award amount of \$5,000. Applications are accepted year-round. Contact 800-343-7527 or [jmfsf@bassett.org](mailto:jmfsf@bassett.org). Visit [www.nycamh.org/johnmayfund](http://www.nycamh.org/johnmayfund) to learn more.

### The National ROPS Rebate Program

Farm tractors are the leading cause of farm fatalities, with almost 100 farmers dying annually in tractor overturn events. Rollover Protective Structures (ROPS) are highly effective in protecting tractor operators, but most tractors manufactured before 1985 were not equipped with these lifesaving devices, and around half of the United States farm tractor fleets do not have ROPS. The National ROPS Rebate Program is a lifesaving program which provides rebates to help reduce the cost to retrofit older tractors that do not have ROPS. In fact, the Program covers 70% of the cost, with a maximum out-of-pocket cost of \$500 to the farmer. The New York ROPS Rebate Program has also recently made canopies and headliners eligible for rebates to provide shade and protect farmers and farm workers from skin cancer, and to protect from rain, heat, and snow. ROPS are ninety-nine (99%) percent effective in preventing death or serious injury from tractor overturns. Applications are accepted year-round. To learn more, you can call 877-767-7748, email [info@ropstr4u.org](mailto:info@ropstr4u.org), or visit <https://www.ropstr4u.org>.

### Rural Energy for America Program (REAP)

If you are a business or farm with high energy bills, drafty buildings, or old heating and cooling systems, the Rural Energy for America Program (REAP) may be able to help. This program provides grant funding to small businesses and farms for energy efficiency improvements and renewable energy systems. Grant funding reimburses up to 50% of the costs of the project. The Adirondack North Country Association (ANCA) is providing free grant writing services to eligible businesses and farms. For more information, please contact Jon Ignatowski at [jignatowski@adirondack.org](mailto:jignatowski@adirondack.org) or 518-891-6200 x124. You can learn more through our website at <https://www.adirondack.org/reapadk/>.



## Upcoming Events

### Wild Lights at the Wild Center

**Date: Fridays and Saturdays from November 29, 2024 through February 22, 2025**

Location: The Wild Center, 45 Museum Drive  
Tupper Lake, NY 12986

Description: The Wild Center is transformed into an immersive, family-friendly winter wonderland that includes thousands of lights, as well as sound installations.

Website:

<https://www.wildcenter.org/visit/wildlights/>

### New York State Agricultural Society Annual Meeting & Forum

**Date: January 9, 2025**

Location: Syracuse OnCenter

Description: The annual meeting of New Yorkers in the agricultural community will include an address from Commissioner Richard Ball (NYS Department of Agriculture and Markets) and a panel on using technology in farming practices, among other speakers and sessions.

Website: <https://www.nysagsociety.org/>

### The Lake George Winter Carnival

**Date: Every weekend from February 1 to March 2, 2025**

Location: Lake George, NY

Description: This event celebrates its 63rd year in 2025. It incorporates a wide variety of activities, such as racing, contests, the Polar Plunge, fireworks, and more!

Website: <https://lakegeorgewintercarnival.com/>



# **Rural Futures | Winter 2025**

## **NEWS OF INTEREST ABOUT RURAL NEW YORK STATE**



*If you have any suggestions  
for upcoming editions,  
please email the Commission at  
[ruralres@nysenate.gov](mailto:ruralres@nysenate.gov).*