

Agriculture

Agriculture has laid the historical and cultural foundation for the region, and, as such, it should be encouraged and celebrated. There is still a large farming presence in the area, and that is a strength of the region. To build upon this presence, more emphasis should be placed on promoting agri-tourism, encouraging diversity and inclusion within agriculture, and on the use of locally-made products in food service establishments, stores, and other related facilities, in turn making agriculture more economically sustainable. In particular, organic farming should be encouraged in order to protect the natural resources that give the region its character.

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The recommendations that follow represent ways to incorporate this sector into the broader plan for economic vitality. In this way, the recommendations can help farmers prosper and highlight the region's cultural heritage.

Inventory Assets

As with outdoor recreation assets, understanding what agricultural assets are located within the region is critical for strong promotional efforts. Each town should take stock of its assets by engaging farmers and farming-related groups and organizations, municipal agricultural commissions, the Connecticut Farm Bureau, the Connecticut Farm Service Agency, and the Connecticut Department of Agriculture. The implementer should then work together to map out the assets that are open to the public, highlighting organizations like the Connecticut Equestrian Center, Stearns Dairy, and UConn's agricultural facilities. Farm tours are another attraction and potential opportunity for agri-tourism, so any farms that offer them should be noted. The implementer should also consider creating a map overlaying outdoor recreation and agricultural assets for visitors and residents who may be interested in both.

As discussed within the Outdoor Recreation section, this map should be posted on the region's website and smart phone app. It should also be printed and distributed among key businesses, highlighting complementary businesses like food service, lodging, and retail.

As the implementer engages farmers, it should also connect them to the Connecticut Department of Agriculture's "Connecticut Grown" program, which highlights locally-produced goods and related events. This will allow additional exposure for the region's agriculture industry and boost visitor counts.

Develop Agricultural Infrastructure

There are many resources and opportunities to encourage agricultural growth that the implementer can become involved with and promote. Engagement with representatives from the agriculture industry to inform these recommendations revealed that there are significant cost, information, and other resource barriers to

creating new farms and retaining and expanding existing farms, and the implementer can take a role in addressing these.

The four towns should work together to create a regional agriculture committee or sub-committee of the regional steering committee/nonprofit (see Managing Plan Implementation section) to ensure that progress is being made in connecting farmers and other agriculturally-oriented individuals to critical resources. Members of existing municipal agriculture committees and engaged farmers are a good source for membership.

A top priority for this committee should be encouraging provision of sufficient infrastructure to enable the success of the farming community. One specific opportunity to provide this infrastructure is equipment sharing between farmers. As large equipment can be extremely expensive, creating opportunities for cost sharing and collective financing could be extremely impactful for farmers in reducing overhead costs. The group should work to gauge interest within the agricultural community and guide the farmers in creating co-ownership agreements, schedules and other requirements for use, etc. One example that emerged during the process of creating the plan is the idea of a slaughterhouse. This slaughterhouse could be at one fixed location, open for use by the region’s livestock keepers, or mobile, allowing it to be transported to different locations as needed. Because this piece of equipment does not currently exist in the area, an entire sub-industry in meat production is limited. This should be a priority for the regional committee.



2Lemek Greenhouse, Tolland (source: <https://patch.com/connecticut/tolland/lemek-farm-greenhouse-donated-mums-300th-celebration-0>)

Another focus of the committee should be supporting individuals, and particularly a diverse group of young adults looking to enter the industry, in creating new farms or repurposing fallow land in the region. One major obstacle to new farm creation is the lack of available and affordable land suitable for agriculture, which often acts as a barrier to greater diversity within the agricultural sector as well. The committee should closely track the area’s farmland, ensuring that any parcels that come available are marketed to individuals interested in farming. Additionally, by working with local Planning & Zoning Commissions to limit land use to agriculture and other complementary uses in areas specifically desirable for farming, this may create other opportunities for these individuals. Affordability is also a significant factor in the challenges of farm creation, so ensuring that prospective buyers are aware of all the financing programs available to them is essential (see discussion above on the Connecticut Farm Service Agency). FarmLink is a resource the committee should encourage current and prospective farmers to utilize. It is a Connecticut-specific website that aims to connect land “needs” with those selling or leasing land and could be helpful to the committee in achieving this goal.

Advocate and Educate

The agriculture committee can be helpful to farmers by advocating locally and at the state level for critical resources. For example, the committee should support policies that encourage the growth of the agriculture industry, such as:

- Ensuring that zoning regulations do not impose barriers to farming;
- Facilitate creation and expansion of farm breweries⁵ and wineries; and
- Financial incentives for farmland.

Members of the committee should frequently engage with local regulatory bodies like Boards of Selectmen/Town Councils and Planning and Zoning Commissions and speak on the record at meetings to ensure that the perspectives of the agricultural community are heard. Additionally, the same type of advocacy work should be undertaken with state legislative representatives for policies that may impact the region's farmers.

The committee should also connect farmers to informational resources and technical assistance that will help them grow. One particularly important resource is the Connecticut Farm Service Agency, which is headquartered in Tolland and is an excellent partner for the agricultural community. The FSA provides conservation loans to farmers to preserve their land, natural disaster assistance, and has a vast library of informational materials on topics like relevant legislation and other federal programs that farmers may not know about. The committee should work closely with the FSA to ensure that the regional agricultural community has knowledge of and access to all the federal and state programs available to it. The FSA could also work with farmers considering taking on new technologies to reduce costs and increase efficiency, such as opportunities for turning manure and food waste into energy. These types of technologies may be intimidating, and the FSA can take a role in better explaining these types of opportunities to farmers.

Engage Community

Fostering a sense of support for and pride in the agricultural community is important in promoting both agri-tourism and product sales and, resultingly, stabilizing the economic position of farms in the region. The creation of the regional agriculture committee should go a long way to show farmers the commitment of the four communities to their success. However, there are additional ways to involve the broader community in the success of this industry.

“For the most part, the community is very supportive of my business, but it could also support the industry better by buying more local products.” – Mansfield business owner

⁵ Note that a farm brewery differs from a standard microbrewery in that it sells beer brewed using products grown on a farm run by the brewery owners. The brewery is often located on the farm on which these products are grown.

To build community pride, the implementer should work with the agriculture committee to educate the community about the area's agricultural history and the importance of farming locally and globally. Speakers could be local farmers or representatives from the Connecticut Farm Bureau or even economists that discuss the economic importance of the agriculture industry. This education is particularly important for people not involved in agriculture because, as community members place more value on agriculture, they are more likely to support local farms and the policies that impact them. The committee should also consider engaging farmers that have historic farming equipment and display that equipment in public places. This, again, creates community interest and involvement in agriculture and its history within the region.

The towns might also consider creating community gardens to further support interest in agriculture. These would likely be most easily executed at the local level, though they support the larger regional effort around promoting agriculture. The communities could bring in local farmers to assist residents in the planting process, further integrating them into the fabric of the community. Coventry and Mansfield have already created successful community gardens and may be able to provide guidance to the other towns around this effort.

Partner Strategically

There are numerous potential partners within the region that can help create new opportunities for the agricultural community. Restaurants are one good example of that, as farm-to-table concepts are popular with many consumers. The implementer should engage local restaurants, as well as those outside the four towns, to coordinate farm-to-table nights which are special events taking place periodically throughout the year that incorporate mostly locally-produced goods such as fruits, vegetables, cheeses, meats, wines, and beers. This creates a special draw for customers, who would purchase tickets in advance, while benefitting both the restaurants and the farmers. The implementer should connect farmers to these restaurants so they can co-create a menu based on what is seasonally available. The implementer can also help to promote these events and offer the restaurants an additional incentive to work with farmers by highlighting them on its website, social media channels, and relevant print marketing materials. The local and regional chambers of commerce can also support the implementer in this effort. Mansfield has been holding community dinners with locally-grown foods for the past two years, and this structure could be emulated and expanded within other towns and with restaurants interested in participating.

Another potential partner for the region's agricultural community is the area's school systems. The committee should engage the superintendents to determine if there might be an opportunity for educational programming around farming to be included in lesson plans or as after-school activities. Farmers could hold workshops for students – perhaps once in the fall and once in the spring – on the work they do and how they contribute to the region. Parks and Recreation departments may also consider holding cooking classes with locally-created products. The implementer may further consider working with the schools and Parks and Recreation Departments to support youth gardening, creating after school programs that offer the opportunity for children to garden plots on school grounds. Again, this engages the community around the topic of farming and potentially creates a generation of youth interested in continuing this practice into the future. The committee

may also consider engaging school systems and Parks and Recreation Departments outside the four town region in communities with different demographic makeups in order to reach a more diverse audience.



3Coventry Farmer's Market (source: <https://www.coventryct.org/422/Coventry-Farmers-Market-at-Hale-Homestead>)

The Coventry Farmer's Market is another key partner in promoting agriculture in the region. It is the largest farmer's market in New England and attracts 3,000-5,000 attendees to the region over a three-hour span during 22 weeks of the year. It also acts as an incubator for small food startups that get access to thousands of customers each week without taking on much financial risk. This is an event that draws visitors from around the state, offering an excellent opportunity to market additional agri-tourism and other tourism opportunities in the region. The implementer should apply to have a booth at the market, with volunteers discussing the many agricultural, recreational, cultural, historical, and entertainment assets in the area. The booth should have promotional take-

away materials as well as marketing items like a tablecloth and pull-up banner (see Visibility and Marketing section). This event is an excellent way to reach visitors already somewhat knowledgeable about the area and who are interested in many of the types of activities the implementer is trying to promote.

Beyond the Coventry Farmer's Market, there are several others that operate in and around the region, and the agriculture committee should ensure that all farmers can sell their products at any and all if they choose. The committee should coordinate informational sessions on getting involved in the various markets and invite the region's farming community. These sessions should occur in the months leading up to the markets' openings so that farmers have ample time to prepare. There are also retail stores in the region that could sell locally-produced goods, and the process for getting involved with these should be incorporated into these presentations. Through ongoing engagement with local retailers, the implementer can guide farmers to the right partners.

Another approach to consider in growing agricultural partnerships is coordinating Community Supported Agriculture weekly/bi-weekly pick-ups (CSAs) to maximize impact. The region currently has many CSA programs, but because there are so many options, some smaller farmers do not experience a significant financial impact. The agriculture committee could work with smaller farmers to coordinate joint CSAs between them, allowing consumers to experience a higher volume and variety of locally-grown products while creating a more predictable stream of sales for the farmers. The committee should look to connect producers of different types of goods for a unique variety. Products might include produce, dairy, meat, soaps, candles, jams, and more. A more diverse offering from a pooled CSA would likely make this offering more attractive for customers. Lyman Orchards in Middlefield offers add-ons to its CSA program for an extra charge based on specific types of locally-produced goods customers want to see (i.e. bakery add-on, cheese add-on, eggs add-on).

The committee should also consider regularly engaging with the Connecticut Department of Agriculture to maintain awareness about initiatives that may impact the region’s agricultural community. Working with this agency to better promote the certified “Connecticut Grown” businesses is one specific opportunity to consider.

Desired Outcomes and Program Evaluation

Success in building up the region’s agriculture and agri-tourism industries might look like increased sales for farmers, an increasing number of farms in the region, and a broader awareness by the region’s residents – these outcomes should be explored in evaluating the program. Like the outdoor recreation program evaluation, the agriculture efforts should also be monitored through visitor surveys (see Appendix E). The survey can be the same for both industries, simply asking respondents about their demographics, attractions visited, spending habits, and overall satisfaction with their experience. It should be posted on the website, smart phone app, and social media and on printed postcards distributed at key local businesses like farms, restaurants, and lodging and events like the Coventry Farmer’s Market. The survey results should tell the implementer whether patronization of agriculture-related businesses has increased since the plan’s implementation and determine which components are the most well-received by residents and visitors, guiding the implementer in making any changes to the plan over time to ensure its maximum impact.

Examples and Resources

Below is a list of resources to be used for implementation of components of the Agriculture/Agri-tourism section of the plan:

Agri-tourism map

- The State of Maine has created an agri-tourism map showcasing each asset and its sub-sector within the agriculture industry. It provides data on each location with links to its website (where possible) and contact information. See it here:
<https://www.getrealmaine.com/index.cfm/fuseaction/home.showpage/pageID/151/index.htm>.

Connecticut Grown Program

- The Connecticut Grown program promotes goods produced in the state. This is an extra layer of advertisement possible for the region’s farmers, and they should be encouraged to register. See it here:
<https://portal.ct.gov/DOAG/Marketing/Marketing/Connecticut-Grown-Program>.

Agricultural equipment sharing program

- The Sustainable Agriculture Research & Education division of the USDA offers a number of resources related to the topic of agricultural equipment sharing. This includes co-ownership agreement

frameworks, LLC operating agreement frameworks, and a detailed guide for how to implement this practice. See it here: https://projects.sare.org/sare_project/fne16-844/.

Digital Tools

- Connecticut FarmLink is a website that matches farmers looking for land with those selling land. This can be particularly useful for prospective farmers looking to break into the industry and in need of affordable land. See it here: <https://www.ctfarmlink.org/>.
- The Fresh Please smartphone app, developed by a Connecticut resident, allows farmers to upload information on the produce they have available so that consumers can find the local products they are seeking. More information on it here: <https://www.courant.com/community/hampton/hc-wm-fresh-please-2020-08-06-20200727-oywd42ixpzhblnmrfej5exg6xu-story.html>.

Connecticut Farm Service Agency

- The Connecticut FSA provides innumerable resources to the state's agriculture community. The regional agriculture committee should work very closely with the FSA to ensure that all the needs of the agriculture industry are being met. See it here: <https://www.fsa.usda.gov/state-offices/Connecticut/index>.

Community gardens

- Coventry's community garden has been very successful and well-received by the community. These plots encourage broad community engagement with agriculture. Find information on this program on page 16 of this brochure: <https://www.coventryct.org/DocumentCenter/View/3883/2020-Summer>.
- Mansfield's community garden, like Coventry's, has been popular amongst residents. See it here: <http://www.tasteofmansfieldct.org/grow-your-own.html>
- The American Community Gardening Association provides many resources to guide communities in organizing these gardens. See it here: <https://www.communitygarden.org/>.
- GROW Windham is a nonprofit organization that explores the areas of youth development, community food projects, and community gardens. The organization manages a community garden that offers an opportunity for Windham's youth to experience agriculture and provide food for the community. See it here: <http://www.growwindham.org/>.

Lyman Orchards CSA Program

- Lyman Orchards offers add-ons for specific types of foods (in addition to the standard produce offerings) such as bakery products, cheese, eggs, and milk. The implementer should consider encouraging similar variations as it works with the Agriculture Committee to coordinate joint CSA opportunities. See it here: <https://lymanorchards.com/csa/>.

Northeast Organic Farming Association of Connecticut

- CT NOFA works across Connecticut and the Northeast on issues related to agriculture, conservation, and land care by educating about and advocating for the agricultural community. See it here: <https://ctnofa.org/>.

E.O. Smith High School Agriscience Program

- E.O. Smith High School in Mansfield offers an agriscience program that promotes youth engagement in agriculture and exposes them to a variety of topics in the field with mentorship from faculty around pursuing a career in agriculture. See it here: <https://www.eosmith.org/programs/agriscience>.

Willimantic Food Co-op

- The Willimantic Food Co-op is a retail facility where members receive discounts on foods for paying an annual membership fee or working at the store. The facility is also open to a public for an above shelf price rate. The co-op sells many locally-created products. See it here: <https://www.willimanticfood.coop/>.

Taste of Mansfield

- The Taste of Mansfield holds events with locally-created food products to showcase the community's many local producers. See it here: <http://www.tasteofmansfieldct.org/>.

AGvocate Program

- The AGvocate Program is administered by the Connecticut Resource Conservation and Development Area that provides a forum for municipal officials, agricultural producers, and other stakeholders to strengthen the farm-friendliness of Connecticut towns through actions like administering grant funding and creating local agricultural commissions. See it here: <https://agvocatect.org/>.