

Farmland Preservation Program: RBA Analysis (Program Report Card Summary)

QUALITY OF LIFE RESULT

"Connecticut has viable farms that support Connecticut-grown agriculture and benefit the health, economic and social/cultural interests of the state's citizens."

Main Contribution: Provides Connecticut with a sustainable land base for food and fiber production through the purchase of farms' development rights. By doing so, the program is able to protect agricultural lands with prime and important soils from non-agricultural use for the benefit of current and future generations.

Primary Partners: Farmers; state and federal agencies; municipalities; land trusts; community-based, non-profit agencies; advisory and advocacy groups; associations for farmland preservation; and the real estate industry.

HOW MUCH DID WE DO?

- Program purchases the development rights (PDR) to farms preserving prime and important farmland in perpetuity
- 38,546 acres preserved on 296 farms since 1978; annual average of 1,100 acres
- 30% of program's informal goal of 130,000 acres met
- Five staff administer the program; funding for FY was just over \$15 million from state, federal, local, and other sources

HOW WELL ARE WE DOING IT?

<i>Key Measures</i>	<i>Progress</i>	<i>Most Current Data</i>
Acquisition Timeliness	↔	• Trend in overall average time to complete the PDR process since 2009 was mixed; ranging from 719 days (FY 11) to 1,046 days (FY10).
Farmland Quality (to serve program purpose)	+	• Program exceeded its target of attaining development rights to farms with at least 65% prime/important soils for acquisitions two of the past three years.
Land Stewardship	-	• No proactive effort exists to determine if preserved farms are in compliance with the PDR requirements specified in deeds.
Program Operations/Data Collection and Mgt.	↔	• Program maintains an electronic database of its acquisitions, as well as hardcopy records, used for program management purposes; database does not capture data for all phases of the PDR process; pertinent information on current land owners not up to date.

IS ANYONE BETTER OFF?		
Public Interest Served	+	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> State law declares farmland preservation is in the public interest; the Farmland Preservation Program continues to preserve farmland in perpetuity.
Acquisition Value	+	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Since 2007, there has been an upward trend in the difference between farms' appraised values and the prices paid by the state for PDRs, indicating a better purchase price value for taxpayers.
Improved Economic, Health, Social/ Cultural	+?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Research suggests people desire farmland preservation programs; evidence has been found that farmland preservation programs can benefit the economy; farmland preservation: offers the state increased access to locally-grown, nutritious food; is extricably linked to a cleaner environment; and protects the state's rural heritage and scenic beauty.
STORY BEHIND PROGRAM PERFORMANCE		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The Farmland Preservation Program's progress in preserving farmland to secure a land base for food and fiber production has been mixed since the program's inception in 1980. The program has slowed overall farmland loss to development, although only 30% of its overall goal of preserving 130,000 acres has been achieved over the past three decades. It is difficult to determine the full context of whether the rate of farmland preservation is adequate. There will undoubtedly be some point in time when not enough farmland containing prime and important soils will be available for the state to preserve and meet its (informal) farmland preservation goal. As such, proper planning must occur to ensure a strategic effort is made to identify the most appropriate farms that meet program standards from which to acquire development rights. The Farmland Preservation Program has a firm knowledge of such lands, although no written strategic plan exists to achieve the state's farmland preservation goal. Committee staff believes such a plan would provide the program, along with the Farmland Preservation Advisory Board, with a comprehensive approach to fully identify ways to achieve the farmland preservation goal. A criticism of the Farmland Preservation Program has been the time it takes to complete the process to acquire a farm's development rights. Committee staff's analysis of acquisition data shows a mixed trend for the timeliness of the full PDR acquisition process since 2009. At the same time, several of the individual phases of the process showed improved timeliness trends. Two recent legislative actions impacted the farmland preservation process: an influx of funding from the state's Community Investment Act (CIA) beginning in 2006; and lump-sum bonding as of 2008. Although it is difficult to quantify the extent these two actions improved the overall efficiency of the PDR process, the program benefitted from the CIA funding with the addition of three program staff positions, and lump-sum bonding has allowed more timely administrative functions to occur (e.g., hiring appraisers and surveyors). The underlying premise of the Farmland Preservation Program is to protect the prime and important soil resources of farms for future food/fiber production. The higher the percentage of prime and important soils included in each acquisition, the greater the overall impact of the program. FPP acquisitions made since 2010 have included an average of 68 percent prime and important soils, which exceeds the program's target of 65 percent. Analysis also shows 95 percent of preserved land is actively farmed (i.e., not fallow), which meets the program's informal goal of 95 percent. 		

- A critical component of the overall PDR process is stewardship of the properties following PDR acquisitions to ensure responsible resource management and oversight. **There is no specific statutory or regulatory requirement obligating the Farmland Preservation Program to conduct any type of stewardship compliance effort for preserved lands. Moreover, the Farmland Preservation Program does not have a formal, proactive stewardship effort in place, nor has the Farmland Preservation Advisory Board fully focused on a sustained effort in this area to date.**
- Efficient and effective program management relies on complete and accurate data. FPP maintains an electronic database for its acquisitions, yet **there needs to be greater attention paid to ensuring the overall thoroughness of the program data tracked.** This includes maintaining current land owner information and a complete recording of all pertinent dates corresponding to the individual phases of the process. Such data would allow for more precise accounting and monitoring of program performance.
- A key measure of the public benefit derived from the Farmland Preservation Program, is whether the purchase prices for PDR acquisitions are of relative value to the state. Although this measure also could be an indication of "how well" the program is performing, operating efficient public programs is of high priority to many in the general public, and the overall public benefit of such programs is viewed in large part by their value (i.e., are they cost effective). Committee staff examined the Farmland Preservation Program's acquisition value in two ways: 1) how successful the program has been with negotiating purchase prices for PDR acquisitions in comparison with the highest appraised values (market value); and 2) the trend in cost per acre paid. **Beginning in 2007, there has been an upward trend in the spread between the prices paid for PDRs and the highest appraisal amounts. In other words, the state is saving taxpayers more money. The program realized its greatest savings for PDR acquisitions made in calendar years 2006 and 2012.**

ACTIONS TO TURN THE CURVE PRI STAFF PROPOSED RECOMMENDATIONS (SUMMARY)

Committee staff's examination of the Farmland Preservation Program resulted in proposed recommendations. The intent of the recommendations is to:

- **Ensure the program goal is still attainable through periodic review.**
- **Develop a strategic plan to guide the acquisition process and achievement of a program goal(s).**
- **Establish a formal stewardship effort to guarantee the state's investment remains viable and adheres to the program's mission.**
- **Increase overall efficiency and effectiveness of program operations and administration.**