

NEWS RELEASE

County of Warren, New Jersey



Warren County Permanently Preserves its 300th Farm

(July 22, 2020) – The Warren County Board of Chosen Freeholders is pleased to announce the permanent preservation of its 300th farm.

A third-generation family farm that primarily grows corn, soybean, wheat, and hay, the 388+ acre Hart Farm in Franklin Township was preserved on June 25 and adjoins several other preserved farms to create an impressive farm belt consisting of more than 743 contiguous acres of permanently protected land.

The farm is predominantly tillable, boasting about 270 acres of prime soils and soils of statewide importance.

“The preservation of our 300th farm happens to coincide with the release of a recent report by the American Farmland Trust, revealing that 11 million acres of agricultural land nationwide were paved over, fragmented, or converted to other uses between 2001 and 2016,” noted Corey Tierney, Director of Preservation for Warren County.



Hart Farm, Franklin Township, New Jersey

According to that report, *Farms Under Threat: The State of The States*, “The United States is home to 10 percent of the planet’s arable soils – the most of any country on Earth. Yet even here, in what appears to be a vast agricultural landscape, only 18 percent of the continental U.S. is nationally significant land [i.e., the most productive versatile and resilient land for sustainable food and crop production]. As we face growing demand for high quality food and environmental protection along with increasingly complex challenges from epidemics, extreme weather, and market disruptions, it is especially important to protect the land best suited to intensive food and crop production...” However, despite these threats, the American Farmland Trust ranked New Jersey as Number 1 for utilizing a number of tools to help protect its farmland and farmers. Chief among them is the state’s successful farmland preservation program.

Michele Byers, Executive Director of the New Jersey Conservation Foundation – an organization that worked with the Hart family and the County for many years in an effort to see this land preserved – congratulated Warren County on its milestone.

“By preserving farms like this one, the Garden State continues to lead the nation and keep its nickname alive,” Byers remarked. “But as the nation’s most densely populated state, New Jersey’s farmland is also especially vulnerable to development pressures. We are thrilled to help preserve this beautiful productive farm along the Pohatcong Creek and congratulate Warren County on its 300th farm preserved.”

To date, New Jersey’s Farmland Preservation Program has resulted in the permanent protection of some 2,600 farms, accounting for more than 237,000 acres – or roughly one-third of all farmland in the state. It also has made a bigger financial investment in farmland protection than any other state in the country. But, while New Jersey earned the top rank for protecting its farmland, it also ranked third among states with the most threatened agricultural land (only behind Texas and North Carolina respectively), evidencing the continued need for a strong Farmland Preservation Program.

With a reduction in both the number of active farmland and the number of individual farms over the past half century, Warren County has seen its share of agricultural lands threatened. This loss in farmland occurred primarily through conversion of agricultural land to other uses, which still continues today. More recently, according to the County’s 2019 *Grow Warren* Report, “between 2002 and 2012, approximately 5,750 acres of farmland went out of production.” Even though the rate of loss has been much lower in Warren County than in other parts of the state, it still remains a significant cause for concern.

“This farm, and those around it, have some of the best soils in the state. But they also sit on the edge of some very developed areas in Greenwich and Franklin,” said Freeholder Director Richard D. Gardner. “We really only have so much prime farmland left in Warren County, so it’s important we protect these fertile lands while we still can. And we have been very aggressive, for many years, about doing just that - but we must keep at it,” Gardner added.

“During my 18 years as a freeholder, we have more than quadrupled the number of farms preserved in Warren County, going from about 70 farms in 2003 to now our 300th farm,” Gardner said.

Located in a non-conforming portion of the Highlands Planning Area, the property could have been converted into residential development as many of the surrounding farms have been. The nearly 400-acre Hart Farm is located in Franklin Township’s Rural Conservation Zone, which has a five acre minimum lot size.

According to Census figures, over the past 50 years Franklin Township’s population has grown from approximately 1,973 people in 1970 to about 3,055 people today. Meanwhile, over that same period, neighboring Greenwich Township saw its population grow from approximately 1,482 people to about 5,523 people today. Though development pressure has slowed in recent decades due to economic conditions, multiple professional appraisers hired by the County found that residential development continues to occur in Franklin Township and surrounding areas at a slow but steady pace.

“With this farm, Warren County’s farmland preservation program now totals just over 26,398 acres. Although this sounds like a lot, and it is, to put that in perspective Warren County is about 230,000 acres in size,” said Tierney, “so we’ve only preserved about 11 percent of the county’s total land mass as farmland, or about 36 percent of the 72,000 acres of productive farmland that remains.”

Warren County's goal, according to its *Comprehensive Farmland Preservation Plan*, is to preserve an additional 8,000 acres over the next 10 years. This would bring the total preserved farmland to about 34,000 acres, or just under half of the 72,000 acres of productive farmland that remains here today. Nevertheless, out of 18 counties in New Jersey that preserve farmland, Warren County ranks third in number of farms preserved and fourth in farmland acreage preserved. Moreover, when looking at the Highlands Region, Warren County ranks number one in both number of farms preserved and total farmland acreage preserved.

"Agriculture is a critical component of the Highlands Region character and economy," said Lisa Plevin, Highlands Council Executive Director. "Protection of working farms like the Hart property advances the goals of both the Highlands Act and the Regional Master Plan. Warren County has been a great preservation partner and we are very pleased to be a part of this milestone achievement."

The New Jersey Highlands Region is a 1,343-square-mile area extending from the Delaware River northeast to the New York border. Stretching from Phillipsburg in the southwest to Mahwah in the northeast, the region lies within portions of seven counties (Hunterdon, Somerset, Sussex, Warren, Morris, Passaic, and Bergen) and includes 88 municipalities. While the primary purpose of the Highlands Act is to protect the region's natural resources and drinking water supply, according to the Highlands Regional Master Plan, the Act also "recognizes that agriculture is an important element of the economy, history, and essential character of the region which should be protected and enhanced."

In furtherance of this goal, the New Jersey Highlands Council provided grant funding to the County of Warren that ultimately enabled the preservation of the Hart farm. In the end, the county will have contributed a little over 50 percent towards the total purchase price of \$1,377,000 for the development rights to the Hart farm with the balance being covered by state funds.

Last year, the County closed on 11 farms totaling 546 acres at a cost of about \$2.5 million. Its share of that cost, paid out of the County's Open Space Trust Fund, was about \$1 million. So for every \$1.00 spent on farmland preservation, the county was able to secure \$1.50 in matching funds from the state.

"Not only are we protecting productive soils for future generations, but our farmers are hardworking people who often reinvest the proceeds from preservation back into their operations. Whether that's to buy equipment, supplies, or even more land, this helps to keep our farms growing and ensures that we'll always have access to locally grown produce and farm products," said Freeholder James R. Kern III.

As the county's *Grow Warren* report found, when the 9 million residents of New York City and the 4 million residents of Philadelphia are considered, there are more than 20 million people who live within a two-hour drive of Warren County. Many of these areas are home to some of the nation's highest income households, so Warren County is uniquely positioned in close proximity to one of the world's largest and most lucrative marketplaces. This "presents an incredible opportunity," the report reasoned, "when it comes to agriculture, nearby urban areas simply cannot support themselves [so] understanding and capitalizing on the advantages inherent to Warren County is the key to the county's economic future."

In fact, the economic impact of Warren County's diverse agricultural practices is quite significant. Farm production totaled \$91.2 million in combined crop and livestock sales in 2012. Statewide, Warren County ranks at or near the top of the state's counties in a number of farm products. For example, the county ranks first in the value of livestock, Christmas trees, and poultry/eggs sold. It ranks second in corn production. And nursery, greenhouse, and sod operations account for the largest portion of agricultural income in the county.

"Our farmers not only grow everything from corn, grain, fruits, and vegetables to Christmas Trees and nursery stock, but they also raise livestock, poultry, and so much more. They make wine, cheese, ice cream, pies, and a wide variety of products for consumers. So we have seen both an increasing demand for their products over the years, as well as a growing interest in visiting these farms and experiencing all that our county has to offer," said Freeholder Jason J. Sarnoski.

"What's more, in light of recent events, we have also seen just how important it is for our communities to maintain a local food supply, so farmland preservation continues to be a smart investment," Sarnoski added.

Currently processing 38 applications for farmland preservation covering over 3,360 acres, Warren County continues to invest in its agricultural economy and community. "New Jersey was ranked number one by the American Farmland Trust because our residents see the value in preserving farms," Tierney explained.

"I'm excited to celebrate our 300th preserved farm, but this wouldn't have been possible without the approval of our local residents, assistance from nonprofit groups, municipalities, state officials, and the continued support of our County Freeholders. I extend my thanks to all of them. Last but not least, I would especially like to thank the Hart family for choosing to preserve their farm," Tierney added.

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