

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The purpose of the Morris County Comprehensive Farmland Preservation Plan is to guide Morris County's efforts in preserving its remaining agricultural lands. The plan recognizes that agriculture is a major component of Morris County's economy and that farmland is an irreplaceable natural resource. The plan identifies long-term goals and provides the framework necessary to implement Morris County's farmland preservation program over the next decade.

This comprehensive plan gives substantial reasoning why agricultural preservation is crucial to Morris County. Overall, the plan demonstrates Morris County's successful preservation progress and details what steps need to be taken in the next few years to assure future agricultural preservation.

This document is organized in the following manner: Chapter I discuss Morris County's agricultural land base. Chapter II provides information about the agriculture industry in Morris County. Chapter III discusses land use planning in Morris County. Chapter IV describes the farmland preservation program in Morris County with details about techniques employed and details of funding and lands preserved to date. Chapter V outlines Morris County's farmland preservation goals and how these goals can be obtained. Chapter VI discusses ways to enhance the economic viability of agriculture in the county. Chapter VII discusses natural resources and conservation methods to protect these precious resources. Chapter VIII discusses methods for promoting agriculture and supporting the agricultural industry in Morris County.

The plan includes county preservation goals incorporating one, five and ten year acreage targets for permanent farmland preservation. Morris County's farmland preservation goals are based on various criteria such as statutory requirements, Morris County Agriculture Development Board policies, municipal support of agriculture as a business and funding.

Agriculture provides numerous direct benefits including food production, employment opportunities, and net cash returns. It also provides many indirect benefits that contribute to the high quality of life enjoyed by Morris County residents. These benefits include recreational, educational and agritourism opportunities, historic heritage, scenic views, groundwater recharge areas and wildlife habitat areas.

Morris County comprises 307,440 acres of land. In 1992, farmland covered 23,915 acres of the county. According to the United States Census of Agriculture, by 1997 the amount of farmland coverage had decreased to 22,351 acres or about 7.3% of the county. The ranking of farmland in Morris County by municipality starts with Washington Township ranked 1<sup>st</sup> with 11,165 acres of farmland, Chester Township ranked 2<sup>nd</sup> with 3,880 acres and Mt. Olive Township ranked 3<sup>rd</sup> with 2,991 acres.

Agriculture is an important part of Morris County's economy and a major contributor to the state's and country's farming industry. Despite ranking 13<sup>th</sup> in the state for land in farmland, the US Census of Agriculture indicates that in 2002, Morris County ranked 8<sup>th</sup> in the state in the market value of agricultural products sold with \$41,879,000 in sales. From a purely economic standpoint Morris County is a powerhouse in the market, with a 20 year trend of dramatically

increasing sales. Since 1987, when the County had sales of \$13.016 million, we have experienced *219% growth* overall in Total Agricultural Products sold. When comparing counties across the state, Morris County increased its state ranking from 5<sup>th</sup> in 1997 to 4<sup>th</sup> in 2002 in the value of nursery, greenhouse, floriculture, and sod sales. Morris County is also ranked 6<sup>th</sup> in the state in the value of horse and pony sales.

The Morris County Farmland Preservation program began with the permanent preservation of the Cupo Farm, a 14-acre parcel in Washington Township, on December 28, 1987. Since 1987, an additional 99 farms have been permanently preserved. As of December 2007, these 100 preserved farms, total 6,495 acres, with another 11 farms working towards permanent preservation.

The County funding for the program is a 25% allocation from the Morris County Open Space and Farmland Preservation Trust Fund. This dedicated tax is paid by all property owners in the county at a rate of \$0.040 per \$100 of equalized county valuation for 2008. The rate is set each year by the Morris County Board of Chosen Freeholders, up to a maximum of \$0.05 per \$100. At the current rate, the Trust Fund generates approximately \$44 million per annum. In 2007, \$11 million was allocated for farmland preservation.

Based on the recent average per acre easement costs in Morris County, the average Morris County share for easement purchase, a limit of \$5 million of SADC funds per year and the current annual funding allocation of \$11 million (assuming no change in future funding), the Morris CADB can annually purchase development easements on approximately 542 acres. As a result, the Morris County Comprehensive Farmland Preservation Plan establishes county preservation goals, incorporating the following one, five, and ten year acreage targets for permanent farmland preservation:

One Year Goal:	542 acres
Five Year Goal:	2,710 acres
Ten Year Goal:	5,420 acres

The one year goal has been established for year 2008.

All preserved farms are monitored by County inspection to ensure that each farm is in compliance with the terms of the Deed of Easement. Towns with permanently preserved farms include: Boonton Township, Chester Borough, Chester Township, Harding Township, Lincoln Park Borough, Long Hill Township, Mendham Borough, Mendham Township, Montville Township, Mt. Olive Township, Randolph Township, and Washington Township.

Landowners interested in preserving their farmland can take advantage of four programs: 1.) County Easement Purchase Program- An interested landowner voluntarily agrees to sell to the County Agriculture Development Board the development rights to his or her property, and a permanent deed restriction is then placed on the land (*the majority of farms that have been preserved in Morris County, have been preserved through this program.*); 2.) Fee Simple Program- Interested landowners sell their land in fee simple, relinquishing all rights to the land;

3.) Direct Easement Program- Landowners sell the development rights of their farmland directly to the State Agriculture Development Committee; and 4.) Eight-Year Program- Landowners voluntarily restrict development on their land for a period of eight years; however, they receive no direct compensation but are eligible to receive grants for up to 50% of the cost of conservation projects.

Other programs for farmland preservation include the following: Grants for Nonprofit Organizations provides grants for nonprofit organizations for funding up to 50% of the fee simple or development easement values on farms to ensure their permanent preservation; The Right-to-Farm Program is intended to promote the continuation of agriculture in the State of New Jersey while recognizing the potential conflicts among all lawful activities in the State. The Right to Farm Act was amended in 1998. The Legislature's intent for amending the Act was to afford the farmer additional protection against municipal regulation and private nuisance suits. The State Agriculture Development Committee (SADC) administers the Right-to-Farm Program, although the Morris County Agriculture Development Board administers the State's Right-to-Farm program on the local (county) level.

Protection for the future viability of agriculture as an industry in Morris County is maintained by a number of components: the right-to-farm assistance for farmers; municipal right-to-farm ordinances; municipal ordinance review; agritourism; and other educational and support methods.

The Morris County Comprehensive Farmland Preservation Plan is consistent with and supports the goals and policies of The New Jersey State Development and Redevelopment Plan, which was adopted on March 1, 2001. Morris County has long recognized the importance of preserving farms and the farming industry in the county. Since the first permanent preservation of a farm in 1987 and the start of the Morris County Open Space and Farmland Preservation Trust in 1993, the County has dedicated staff and funding toward the retention of agriculture and has coordinated efforts with the SADC and the municipalities. In order to help protect the agricultural industry, the Morris CADB has developed a strong Right-To-Farm assistance program.