



Start with Planning Policy Paper:
**Land Conservation and Agricultural Viability:
Fundamental Assets for Connecticut's Future**

February, 2018



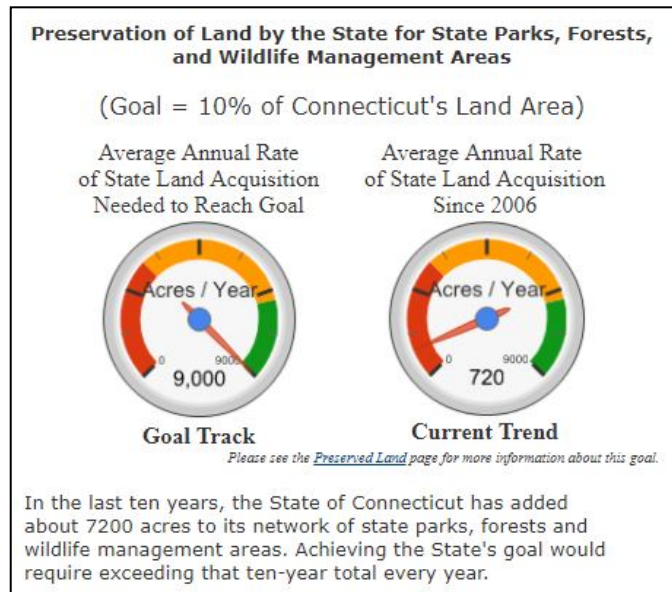
ABSTRACT

Connecticut's landscape, its character, and its sense of place are irrevocably tied to its preserved lands. State parks and beaches, town greens, dairy farms and orchards, and networks of trails and forests all define Connecticut's quality of life and place. In every corner of the state, conservation advocacy groups and land trust work to preserve Connecticut's heritage and natural resources.

Connecticut's natural beauty, its recreational assets, and its agricultural heritage help make the case for residents considering making Connecticut their home and in keeping existing residents in the communities they love. Agriculture contributes billions of dollars to the state's economy, and tourism from Connecticut's parks and forests make substantial impacts as well. It makes sense from both an environmental and an economic perspective to protect the state's natural resources and agricultural lands. While the state has outlined a big picture goal of conserving 21 percent of Connecticut's land area as preserved open space, individual efforts and state programs lack coordination and the necessary integration with other public policies, all of which would further accelerate conservation efforts toward reaching that goal.

PLANNING CONTEXT

The State of Connecticut has established targets for open space and farmland preservation in two separate policies, set in 1997 and 1978, respectively. The Green Plan, Connecticut’s official land conservation plan, states that “Land conserved by towns and cities, the state, land trusts and other nonprofit organizations and water utilities shall constitute 21 percent of Connecticut’s land area.” Of this, 10% is to be protected/owned by the state (see chart below from the Council on Environmental Quality’s “Environmental Quality in Connecticut” report, published April 19, 2017) and the remaining 11% would be all other entities (federal, local, nonprofit, utility, etc). Similarly, the state established a goal of preserving 130,000 acres of farmland several decades ago. Recent analysis from the Council on Environmental Quality (CEQ) indicates that neither goal will be reached by the target date of 2023 with current rates of preservation. In fact, no one knows exactly how much land has been preserved, because no state agency or organization has developed a consistent definition and assembled a database of preserved lands.



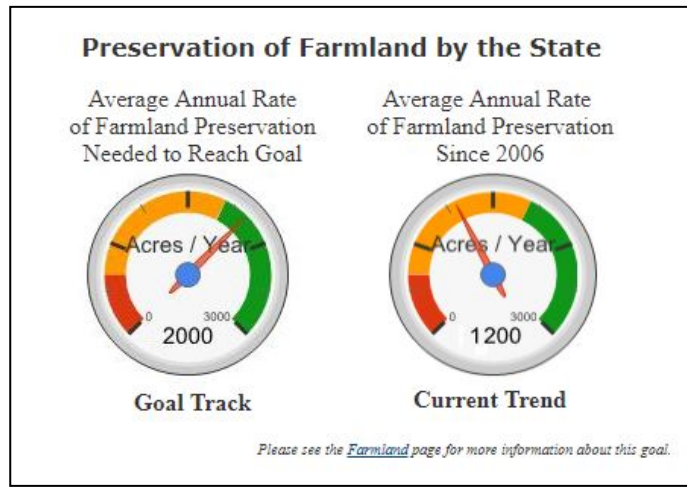
Land is currently preserved under numerous mechanisms. At the state level, the Department of Energy and Environmental Protection’s (DEEP) Open Space & Watershed Land Acquisition Fund and the Department of Agriculture’s (DoAg) Farmland Preservation Program are both supported by bond funds and revenue from the Community Investment Act, which uses fees

collected as part of land use filings to invest in preserving open space and historic resources and to support the development of affordable housing. Farmland protection funds are often leveraged by federal USDA easement funds and municipal investments. At a local level, land is protected through municipal budgets or sinking funds, bond funds, private donations, or as a required component of land development permits. Lands can be protected from development by outright sale to a government entity or non-profit organization or via legal restrictions attached to property deeds.

Now is an ideal time to both support open space conservation and the agricultural economy as there are now over 6,000 farms in Connecticut; this 22% increase between 2007-2015 was the highest in New England during that period according to the Connecticut Department of Agriculture.

POLICY DISCUSSION

With significant effort and fundamental ‘basics’ in place, CCAPA sees a pathway through coordination and integration efforts which can accelerate our pace of conservation.



Our primary recommendation to advance conservation in Connecticut is for the state (Executive Branch) take the strong lead in the coordination of preservation efforts. Currently, preservation is undertaken by hundreds of entities: numerous state agencies, including Departments of Agriculture, Energy &

Environmental Protection, Corrections, and OPM; numerous federal agencies including USDA and the EPA; national groups such as the Audubon Society, the Nature Conservancy or the Trust for Public Lands; over 120 independent Land Trusts; and the Conservation Commissions, Parks & Recreation Commissions, and Planning & Zoning Commissions of our 169 municipalities. Depending on how one defines “open space,” we could also include in this list water utilities, fish & game clubs, country clubs, and cemetery associations.

Having so many organizations working actively to preserve and protect Connecticut’s land is truly extraordinary, and underscores the dedication of the people of Connecticut to maintaining our environment and high quality of life. The combined successes of these efforts tell a truly important story about our values, and this should be celebrated at the highest levels. The fact that this effort is so decentralized, however, can lead to significant gaps in coordination, cross-organization information sharing, and impeded the coordinated, larger-scale planning that has a significant impact on habitat and landscape preservation. In southeastern Connecticut, the Connecticut Land Conservation Council is assisting local land trusts to assemble data that will enable the development of a large-scale conservation plan that promotes contiguous and connected forested areas that



allow species to migrate, interbreed, and shift their ranges in response to changes in the environment.

While the legislature passed a law in 2014 that directed DEEP to create a public registry of conservation lands (CGS §23-8(e)), this project has shown little progress. This appears to be a problem of capacity and priority. It is incumbent on the state to establish a standard definition of conservation land, codify a set of mapping standards, and undertake the town-by-town data gathering to establish a baseline. This will not only be able provide the best answer to the question “How much of Connecticut has actually been preserved?,” but will facilitate all manner of proactive planning efforts, allowing for cross-municipal and cross-agency coordination for identification and prioritization of future preservation projects.

Many of the Councils of Government have already developed unified parcel-based mapping for their constituent communities. Similarly, UConn (via CLEAR and CTEco entities within the University Extension System) have developed very good state-wide base data. The state is not so large that a relatively inexpensive (\$3.0 – 5.0 million), short-term effort would not be able to establish such a baseline. Following that, the task of maintaining the database could be shared between UConn (via CTEco or CLEAR) and the Councils of Government. The state’s ability and willingness to take a strong lead in conservation efforts will also encourage partnerships across other organizations and result in the leveraging of funding, accelerating the rate of land preservation.

A secondary, but equally important recommendation is to maintain (and increase where possible) current land protection programs. The programs funded through the Community Investment Act, including municipal open space acquisition, purchase of development rights on private farmland, and promotion of farmland viability are critical to ongoing conservation efforts and help leverage significant municipal and private-sector cost-share. The new Passport to Parks program also establishes a dedicated funding stream to maintain state parks and forests. Additionally, the Bond Commission has shown regular willingness to invest the state’s bond funds in permanent protection of its lands.

Similarly, the purchase of development rights on private farmland is a mechanism to help ‘gap finance’ and the “CT-grown” economy and at the same time support the overall effort to conserve open space and the rural heritage of many communities.

All of these programs and investments should be protected and continued from proposed rescissions, budget cuts, or fund re-allocations. This ongoing programmatic support should also seek to allocate sufficient resources to the stewardship of existing and proposed land holdings. Maintenance of our parks, forests, and agricultural easements are undoubtedly as important as the original acquisition and should be a critical feature of our programs, not an afterthought.



ABOUT CCAPA AND THE “START WITH PLANNING” INITIATIVE

CCAPA members are deeply passionate about Connecticut and we play a key role in the development, transportation environmental protection of our common home. At this critical moment in the state’s history, CCAPA launched the Start with Planning initiative because we understand the dimensions of Connecticut’s challenges and we embrace a way forward built on core values, a pace of work and the “Team Connecticut” approach. With special attention to the interrelatedness of decisions, social equity and the long-range consequences of our current actions, CCAPA members are well-positioned to facilitate these important local and statewide conversations. For more information on this topic, email us at info@ccapa.org

REFERENCES

- [Connecticut Green Plan](#)
- [Council on Environmental Quality](#)
- [CT-DEEP Open Space Registry](#)
- [Community Investment Act](#)
- [Passport to Parks Program](#)
- [UConn Extension Study on “Economic Impact of Connecticut Agricultural Industry”](#)
- [Harvard Study on Decline of Investment in Open Space](#)
- [CT Land Conservation Council](#)
- [CT Eco Map Server](#)
- [“Planning for Agriculture” Guide for Connecticut Municipalities](#)