“The policy of the State shall be to conserve and protect its natural resources and scenic beauty and encourage the development and improvement of its agricultural lands for the production of food and other agricultural products.”

- Article XIV, Section 4, New York State Constitution
Good morning. I am pleased to be here to present testimony on behalf of American Farmland Trust (AFT). AFT is the nation’s leading conservation organization dedicated to protecting farmland, promoting sound farming practices and keeping farmers on the land. Since its founding in 1980 by farmers and citizens concerned about the rapid loss of farmland to development, AFT has helped protect five million acres of farmland and led the way for the adoption of conservation practices on millions more. Established in 1990, AFT’s New York State Office works to save the land that sustains us across New York. Thank you for holding this hearing and for the New York State Assembly and Senate’s strong support of our state’s agricultural industry and for state programs that help farmers protect and steward their land.

**FARMLAND FOR GROWING FOOD AND THE ECONOMY**

Productive farmland – fertile soil – is the foundation for growing food and a robust farm economy in New York State. New York is a national leader in the production of numerous fruits, vegetables, and dairy products. The State has the second highest direct-to-consumer sales of food in the nation and New Yorkers spent $362 million purchasing local agricultural products directly from farmers.\(^1\)

New York’s farms create business opportunities for other industries including farm support services such as electricians, feed and seed distributors, carpenters, equipment dealers, trucking companies, mechanics, bankers, veterinarians and many others. In addition, farms serve as the cornerstone of the state’s $39 billion farm and food economy and are closely tied to New York’s food processing sector that processes milk, fruits, vegetables and grains into cheese, yogurt, baked goods, wine, beer, spirits and other food products, creating a total of over 160,000 jobs for residents across New York.

In addition to providing increased economic opportunity for New York farmers, improved access to fresh, healthy, locally-grown fruits, vegetables and other foods can also help address the urgent diet-related problems of obesity, diabetes and cardiovascular disease affecting millions of New Yorkers. In addition to the threat posed to public health, the public cost of diseases related to a poor diet is substantial. For example New York’s health care costs for treating obesity are approaching a staggering $12 billion annually.

Thanks to many innovative state programs, more New Yorkers than ever before can take advantage of healthy food produced locally. Some of the programs drawing on the bounty of New York’s local foods to help improve public health include:

- Buy NY
- Fresh Connect Farmers’ Market
- Senior Farmers’ Market Nutrition Program
- Farmers’ Market Nutrition Program
- Women, Infants and Children (WIC) Vegetables and Fruits Check Program
- Farm to School Program
- Hunger Prevention and Nutrition Assistance Program
- Creating Healthy Schools and Communities
Yet, access to locally grown fruits, vegetables, dairy and other farm products is under threat. More than 90 percent of the fruits and vegetables and 80 percent of the dairy products produced in New York State are grown in counties facing development pressure. Tragically, nearly 500,000 acres of farmland has been paved over in New York due to poorly planned development since the 1980s, the equivalent of nearly 5,000 farms. This land could have been capable of producing as much as 500 million meals annually.

**EMERGING THREATS: AGING FARMERS AND A CHANGING CLIMATE**
According to the 2012 Census of Agriculture, 30 percent of the farmers in New York are age 65 or older. These farmers are farming 2 million acres of land. Importantly, 92 percent of farmers are not working with an operator under the age of 45 alongside them poised to take over the farm operation. Such demographics indicate that millions of acres of farmland currently in agricultural production in New York needs to transition to a new generation of farmers in the next decade, or risk being lost to development.

New and next generation farmers entering agriculture in the coming years will have the added challenge of farming in a changing climate. In fact, the effects of climate change are already being felt by farmers in New York, and across the nation, in the form of flooding, drought, heat stress on crops and livestock, and invasion of new and harmful pests from warmer climates.

At the same time, there is growing evidence that keeping farmland in well-managed agricultural production can help reduce greenhouse gas emissions. New research from AFT’s California office has found that keeping land in farming can help ensure lower rates of greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions, as developed land contributes 58 times more GHG emissions per acre than agricultural land. Informed by this research, in December 2015, the California Air Resources Board approved the allocation of $40 million in GHG auction proceeds to be used for the permanent protection of farmland in California.

**CRITICAL STATE PROGRAM CELEBRATES 20TH ANNIVERSARY OF HELPING FARMERS PROTECT LAND**
New York’s Farmland Protection Program was established by Governor Mario Cuomo and the New York State Legislature in 1992 to support local efforts to strengthen the future for the state’s agricultural industry. Since then the Farmland Protection Program has utilized money from the 1996 Clean Water/Clean Air Bond Act and the Environmental Protection Fund (EPF) for two primary purposes: 1) grants to municipalities and counties for the development of agricultural and farmland protection plans and 2) grants to municipalities, counties and land trusts to purchase permanent agricultural conservation easements on farms.

To date, the state’s Farmland Protection Program has awarded planning grants totaling $4,780,252 to 65 counties (including 12 county plan updates) and 77 towns to assist in the development of local agriculture and farmland protection plans, outlining strategies for strengthening the economic viability of agriculture and retaining agricultural lands through farm friendly land use planning.

2016 marks the 20th anniversary of state funding for permanent farmland protection through the Farmland Protection Implementation Grant (FPIG) program. This anniversary is commemorated in a
newly released report from AFT entitled **Cultivate New York: An Agenda to Protect Farmland for Growing Food and the Economy** *(executive summary attached.)*

To date, the FPIG has provided $140,206,211 in funds to protect 232 farms encompassing 59,165 acres.iii Through permanent farmland protection projects, the Department of Agriculture and Markets distributes grant funds to town and county governments, soil and water conservation districts, and private land trusts to pay farmers to convey permanent agricultural conservation easements on farmland. Such projects enable farmers to tap into one of their largest sources of equity, their land, and use these funds to reinvest in their business and community.

In SFY 2015-2016, $35 million was appropriated to protect farmland, including $20 million in settlement funds specifically for projects in the Hudson Valley, as part of a new initiative called the Hudson Valley Agricultural Enhancement Program and $15 million available for projects statewide from Environmental Protection Fund (EPF.) This combined level of funding is the highest in the state’s history and puts New York into the top 5 states in the nation for funding farmland protection. This is an important milestone and puts New York among other leading states like Pennsylvania, New Jersey and Maryland who have annually made significant investments in protecting farmland for decades.

A request for proposals for the Hudson Valley Agricultural Enhancement Program was released in October of 2015. A request for proposals for the statewide funding from the EPF is expected to be released before the end of the current fiscal year.

Earlier this month, American Farmland Trust released **Cultivate New York**, a report highlighting the impacts of New York’s FPIG program over the last 20 years, identifies new threats to the state’s farmland and makes recommendations for action to protect the fertile soil needed to grow food and the economy in New York.

**EXECUTIVE BUDGET PROPOSAL INCLUDES HISTORIC INCREASE TO FOR EPF**

Governor Andrew Cuomo’s SFY 2016-17 Executive Budget Proposal includes a historic increase to the EPF—a record annual funding level of $300 million. The proposal includes $20 million for New York’s Farmland Protection Program, an increase of $5 million from EPF funds provided in SFY 2015-2016.

AFT strongly supports Governor Cuomo’s historic proposal to increase the EPF to $300 million in SFY 2016-2017. A $300 million EPF will allow the State to better meet current demand and implement critical programs to conserve open space and farmland, protect and improve water quality, build community resilience to a changing climate and achieve other important state environmental goals. Capital investments made through the EPF support thousands of jobs in our state across a broad spectrum of industries, from tourism, recreation, agriculture and forest products to drinking water protection for millions of New Yorkers, and generate approximately $40 billion in revenue every year. A 2012 analysis by The Trust for Public Land found that for every $1 of EPF funds invested in land and water protection, $7 in economic benefits are generated for New York State.
MAINTAIN NEW YORK’S POSTION AS A NATIONAL LEADER IN FUNDING FARMLAND CONSERVATION
AFT supports Governor Cuomo’s proposal to increase funding for the State’s Farmland Protection Program as part of an expanded EPF. The $20 million proposed in the EPF for the Farmland Protection Program represents a $5 million increase over funding provided through the EPF in SFY 2015-2016 and demonstrates the State’s commitment to continue to grow funding resources for farmland conservation. We encourage the State Legislature to work with Governor Cuomo to continue to expand funding for the State’s Farmland Protection Program, with a goal of investing $300 million to protect 1,000 farms over the next decade.

COMPLETE FARMLAND PROTECTION PROJECTS IN LESS THAN TWO YEARS
AFT encourages the State Legislature to continue to work with the Department of Agriculture and Markets to consistently complete state-funded farmland protection projects in less than two years. The Department of Agriculture and Markets has recently streamlined its application and review process with the goal of completing farmland protection projects within this two year timeframe. These revisions included fewer required forms, a decreased scope and depth of review through the use of standardized contracts and clauses, and a multi-payment process that tied payments to the successful completion of project milestones.

In 2015, two farms in Saratoga County were protected with state funds in only six months – the shortest time period in the State’s history. This is dramatic progress for a program that during its history has taken an average of four years to complete projects and more than 90 percent of projects requiring more than four years to be completed.

We encourage the State Legislature to work with the Cuomo Administration to continue to set administrative standards and allocate resources at the Department of Agriculture and Markets to ensure that new farmland conservation projects are completed in less than two years. This change in expectations and improved program efficiency is critical for meeting farmers’ needs and achieving the program’s goals. This can be achieved by:

- Allowing greater flexibility to local farmland conservation partners in the design and implementation of state-funded projects
- Improving capacity at the Department of Agriculture and Markets to consistently complete projects in less than two years
- Providing financial support for building land trust capacity through New York’s Conservation Partnership Program to work with communities and farm families to protect farmland and keep farmers on the land.

ENABLE THE TRANSITION OF FARMLAND TO NEW AND NEXT GENERATION FARMERS
The significant generational transition occurring in New York’s farm community requires strong action by the State. More must be done to help farm families transition their farms to the next generation as well as to assist beginning farmers in accessing farmland at an affordable price and succeeding in the business of agriculture.
**Grow Farmland Conservation Funding:** The State must build on its recent efforts to aid both young and retiring farmers by continuing to increase funding for the State’s Farmland Protection Program and ensuring that the program runs efficiently, completing projects in less than two years. Purchasing development rights and placing an agricultural conservation easement on farmland makes land affordable for farmers, easing the transition of land from one farming generation to the next.

**Invest in Building Partnerships:** The State of New York needs to support new partnerships to aid beginning farmers in securing access to land and facilitating the transfer of farms to the next generation of farmers in New York. Resources from the State of New York along with AFT, additional land trusts, Cornell Cooperative Extension and other partners have aided farm families facing these challenges. AFT has extensive expertise in helping farmers secure land and recently coordinated the launch of the Hudson Valley Farmlink Network, a partnership of 14 organizations dedicated to ensuring the availability of farmland in the Hudson Valley for today and tomorrow. NY FarmNet facilitates successful farm business transfers. Likewise, Cornell’s Small Farms Program offers resources for both beginning farmers and professionals that work with them. Greater investments are needed in building the human capital, or a professional network, necessary to help the next generation of farmers access land in New York and support senior farmers as they transfer their farms to a new generation.

**GROWING ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITY FOR FARMERS THROUGH STATE PROCUREMENT PRACTICES**
One way to save farmland is to create more economic opportunity for farmers. When farmers make a profit they are not under pressure to sell their land to real estate developers. Institutions administered by the State such as colleges, hospitals, schools, senior centers, emergency food providers and others annually feed millions of New Yorkers. If state-run institutions that serve meals bought more food grown in New York that would add up to a lot of revenue for the State’s farmers. The State has responded to this opportunity with new state initiatives such as Buy NY, and funding for the State’s Farm to School program. We encourage the State Legislature to continue to support efforts to establish procurement incentives for schools and other state institutions to purchase healthy food produced in New York.

**CULTIVATE NEW YORK BY PROTECTING FARMLAND TO GROW FOOD AND THE ECONOMY**
This year marks the 20th anniversary of the State of New York’s investment of funds to permanently protect working farms with agricultural conservation easements. In January of 2016 AFT released a new report, *Cultivate New York: An Agenda to Protect Farmland to Grow Food and the Economy*, celebrating the accomplishments of the last 20 years and providing a roadmap to protect the state’s irreplaceable farmland to ensure a growing farm and food economy and the availability of healthy, local food for generations to come. For more information about Cultivate New York and to download the complete report go to www.farmland.org/cultivateNY.

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3 figures provided by NYSDAM December 11, 2014

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