



Specialty Crop Landscape Protection Strategies

*Duncan Hilchey, New Leaf Publishing and Consulting
duncan@newleafnet.com or 607.342.0259*

Many of the specialty agricultural landscapes included in our research are struggling with sprawl, agricultural industrialization, declines in the number of family farms, and farm-neighbor conflict. These problems are often compounded by the fact that the agricultural landscape crosses multiple political or administrative divisions. But there are strategies for protecting farmland in specialty crop landscapes, with examples below.

- Conduct an *exhaustive inventory and analysis of the critical landscapes of these regions*: the critical landscapes include environmentally fragile areas, particular “viewsheds,” large contiguous blocks of land owned by one or more growers; areas along transportation corridors that serve as gateway properties into the region; and any others deemed critical to conserving the integrity of the specialty crop region. A *targeted easement program* could provide protection to the most vulnerable farm properties.
- With political leadership from the region and local conservation groups, develop a *unified land-use policy*, perhaps as part of a county comprehensive plan, that includes group training for all municipal land-use officials and leads to more effective land-use management.
- To maintain the working landscape, establish a means of *assisting retiring growers* make the transition out of farming and *transferring the farm to a new young farmer*. Farm Transfer Programs and New Farm Programs are popping up throughout the U.S. The Farm Transfer Network (of New England) (www.farmtransfernewengland.net) has excellent resources on farm transfers. The USDA’s Alternative Farming Information System Network has excellent new farmer program information (http://afsic.nal.usda.gov/nal_display/index.php?info_center=2&tax_level=2&tax_subject=301&topic_id=1442).
- *Consider agricultural zoning*. “Agricultural zoning refers to designations made by local jurisdictions that are intended to protect farmland and farming activities from incompatible, nonfarm uses. Agricultural zoning can specify many factors, such as the uses allowed, minimum farm size, the number of nonfarm dwellings allowed, or the size of a buffer separating farm and nonfarm properties” (retrieved from Wikipedia 09.04.2009). Zoning that permits farmers to process and market their products is critical to the survival of the farm community and should be allowed. For example, special dispensation should be made for farmers who need parking, signage, additional facilities and other infrastructure.