

DRAFT

ERIE COUNTY, NEW YORK

Agricultural and Farmland Protection Plan Update



September 2025

Erie County, New York

Agricultural and Farmland Protection Plan Update

Acknowledgements

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Methodology

1.1 Planning Process

Erie County's previous Agricultural and Farmland Protection Plan was completed in 2012. In 2023, Erie County was awarded grant funding from the New York State Department of Agriculture and Markets (NYS AGM) to assist with the cost of preparing an updated Plan. The Erie County Department of Environment and Planning (DEP) issued a Request for Proposals in August 2023 and contracted with a consultant team led by LaBella Associates in January 2024.

The Erie County Agricultural and Farmland Protection Board (AFPB), which served as the project steering committee, met seven times during the process to identify issues and opportunities, guide the farmer and public engagement process, review draft documents, and provide feedback and guidance to the consulting team.

Erie County staff provided day-to-day guidance to the consultant team through bi-weekly check-in meetings.

1.2 Farmer and Stakeholder Engagement

Farmer and stakeholder engagement activities included:

- Interviews with representative farmers, agency representatives, and other stakeholders
- Focus group meetings held throughout the County which targeted farmers
- Farmer/landowner survey
- Public survey
- Project website
- Public informational meeting to present the draft Plan
- County Legislature public hearing

1.2.1 Farmer/Stakeholder Interviews

One-on-one interviews, in-person or via telephone or video conference, were conducted with representatives from eleven rural and urban farmers, one community garden, one school garden, six government agencies or institutions, five nonprofit organizations, and two agribusinesses. These interviews provided insight into challenges and opportunities for farms and related businesses in Erie County. A summary of the findings from these interviews is in Appendix A.

1. Methodology

Farmers

Robert Gianadda	Flat 12 Mushrooms
Lee Dobbins	Clear Water Farm
Mike Stefan	Stefan Hay Co.
Missy Singer DuMars	Crown Hill Farm
Laura Colligan	Dirt Rich Farms
Steve Blabac	Root Down Farm
Sarah Schneider	Sarah Schneider Farm
Daniel Henry	Henry Farms
Brett Kreher	Kreher Family Farms
Darlene Vacinek	Vacinek Farm
Greg Spoth	Greg's U-Pick
Allison DeHoney	Buffalo Go Green
Mayda Pozantides	Groundwork Market Garden
Madison Rios	Groundwork Market Garden
Katie Pfohl	Massachusetts Avenue Project
Kristin Heltman-Weiss	Providence Farm Collective

Urban Agriculture Farms and Gardens

Tim Chen	Grassroots Gardens WNY
Caesandra Seawell	Pelion School Garden

Nonprofit Organizations

Collin Bishop	FeedMore WNY
Kristen Tim	Food Future WNY
Laura Colligan	Good Farmers Guild of WNY
Beth Gosch	Western New York Foundation

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Government Agencies and Institutions

Andrew Federick	Erie County Industrial Development Agency
Sarah Gatti	Food Policy Council of Buffalo and Erie County
Becky O'Connor	Cornell Cooperative Extension, Harvest NY
Kim Roll	Kenmore-Tonawanda Union Free School District
Derek Nichols	University at Buffalo, Sustainability Team

Agriculture-related Businesses

Josh Bowen	FreshFix
Chris Laughton	Farm Credit East

1.2.2 Regional Farmer Focus Group Meetings

Two sets of focus group meetings were held throughout the County to share information about the Agricultural and Farmland Protection Plan update and to obtain input from farmers. In-person meetings were held in the Town of Clarence, the Town of North Collins, the Town of Holland, and the City of Buffalo, and one virtual meeting was held via Zoom.

At the first set of meetings, held in April 2024, attendees shared their thoughts and insights on the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats (SWOT) to agriculture in Erie County. Information gathered from these meetings was utilized to identify issues, needs, and opportunities to address in the updated Erie County Agricultural and Farmland Protection Plan and to identify potential initiatives for the consultant team to investigate further. A total of 78 members of the community participated in the first set of meetings. The North Collins meeting was the most well attended with over 30 community members present.

At the second set of meetings, held in September and October 2024, participants helped identify priority issues and suggested potential strategies.

Copies of the presentation materials and summaries of participant comments can be found in Appendix A.

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1.2.3 Farmer/Landowner Survey

To maximize farmer and farmland owner participation in the Erie County Agricultural and Farmland Protection Plan, a survey was distributed to farmers and farmland owners throughout Erie County. To increase participation, various methods of distribution were utilized, including providing paper surveys at each of the four in-person farmer focus group meetings held throughout the county, distributing handouts to take the survey online, linking the online survey on the County's website, and distributing the survey online through steering committee channels such as newsletters and email lists.

This survey campaign yielded a total of 166 responses. The results helped identify the most pressing issues and priorities for Erie County farmers and farmland owners and helped in identifying the actions recommended in the Plan. A summary of the survey results can be found in Appendix A.

1.2.4 Public Survey

DEP staff, with assistance from the AFPB and partners, distributed a survey intended for the general public to gauge interest in and support for local agriculture. A total of 67 people responded to the survey. Respondents largely consider Erie County to be an agricultural community (85%) and nearly all (97%) are concerned about farmland loss in the County. When asked which type of farmland loss concerns them most, 58% identified residential development on farmland, 11% selected solar energy on farmland, and 31% indicated lack of farm succession planning. The farmland protection measures supported by most respondents were "land use regulations that prioritize farmland and restrict non-farm development in certain areas" with 52%, and "programs that protect farmland forever" with 28%. Fewer respondents thought that "education on the importance of farming" (13%) and "taxation policies that discourage the location of large-scale solar on farmland" (6%) would be effective. Regarding the latter, this response may reflect a lack of knowledge about taxation policies, which should be taken into account when interpreting the results.

While 93% of respondents visit farm stands, farmers markets, or other agritourism events from May-October, just 57% of respondents were aware of Erie County's local food promotion initiative "Erie Grown."

A summary of the results of the public survey can be found in Appendix A.

1.2.5 Project Website

DEP maintained a [webpage](#) to inform the public about the Agricultural and Farmland Protection Plan Update, post meeting notices, and collect comments on draft documents.

1. Methodology

1.2.6 Public Informational Meeting

A Public Informational Meeting was held on June 11, 2025, at the Aurora Town Hall to present the draft Plan and encourage public comments.

1.2.7 Erie County Legislature Public Hearing

The Erie County Legislature held a public hearing on the draft Plan on ___ and incorporated comments prior to adopting the updated Plan.

1.2.8 Plan Contents

The Plan is organized into the following sections:

1. Methodology
2. Farmland Resources
3. Farm Viability
4. Integrated Agricultural Economy
5. Water Resources, Climate Resiliency, and Environmental Protection
6. Public Appreciation of Agriculture
7. Urban Agriculture

These sections of the Plan are interrelated with several components potentially aligning with more than one category.

1.2.9 Use of Maps for Planning

Each map and associated data on agricultural resources describes specific aspects of Erie County's agricultural land resources. No single map is designed to be used independently for agricultural planning; referring to a number of the maps will yield the best analysis and decisions. Erie County will incorporate the data from these maps into its online GIS for use by municipal boards.

1.3 **Accomplishments since 2012 Agricultural and Farmland Protection Plan**

The 2012 Erie County Agricultural and Farmland Protection Plan presented the following strategies as well as goals and recommendations in support of farmland and agriculture in Erie County:

Strategy I: Keep land in agricultural production by protecting farmland, helping a new generation to farm, and improving the viability of all farms in the County.

1. Methodology

Strategy II: Inform the public, local leaders, and elected officials about the benefits that agriculture provides and support policy and legislative changes that will improve farm viability.

The 2012 Plan recommended specific actions that Erie County and its partners should take to advance the Plan's strategies. Since adoption of the 2012 Plan, Erie County has made significant progress in addressing the strategies and recommendations of the Plan. Some of the key accomplishments were:

- Advanced the agribusiness park at the former Eden-Angola airport by completing a Generic Environmental Impact Statement (GEIS) and plans for construction of access road and utilities in 2025.
- Consistent and continuing funding for Cornell Cooperative Extension of Erie County (CCE Erie) and the Erie County Soil and Water Conservation District (SWCD).
- Continued promotion of local farm products and agritourism through the development of the Erie Grown program, including the Erie Grown Passport.
- Continued training for local government leaders and others about planning for agriculture and food systems.
- Established the Food Policy Council of Buffalo and Erie County in 2013.
- Consolidation of Agricultural Districts.
- Increased local food procurement by schools supported by CCE Erie.
- Eden Valley Growers was designated as regional food hub.
- Established the Office of Agriculture with agricultural planner staff position at the Erie County Department of Planning.

In addition to advancing many of the strategies presented in the 2012 Plan, the current Plan addresses several topics that were not included, either in full or in part, in the 2012 Plan, including an overview on urban agriculture, recognizing the establishment of commercial farming operations and increasing participation in community, school, and not-for-profit operations. The Plan also addresses challenges relating to a changing climate, as well as opportunities for adaptation and resiliency measures. A discussion on County initiatives to support the agricultural industry including development of an agribusiness park at the former Eden-Angola airport in the Town of Evans is also included in the Plan.

The Plan also addresses issues that have become more significant since the 2012 Plan, such as increased consolidation in production agriculture and agricultural processing and how this impacts small- and medium-sized farm operations.

1.4 List of Abbreviations

The following abbreviations are used throughout the document (see next page):

1. Methodology

AAS: Associate in Applied Science Degree
AFT: American Farmland Trust
AFPB: Erie County Agricultural and Farmland Protection Board
BEA: United States Bureau of Economic Analysis
BNE: Buffalo Niagara Enterprise
BOCES: Board of Cooperative Educational Services
BMP: Best Management Practices
CCE: Cornell Cooperative Extension
CSA: Community Supported Agriculture
DEP: Erie County Department of Environment and Planning
DSRIP: Delivery System Reform Incentive Payment Program
EC: Erie County
EC DPW: Erie County Department of Public Works
ECFB: Erie County Farm Bureau
ECIDA: Erie County Industrial Development Agency
FFA: Future Farmers of America
F2T: Erie County Agricultural Society Farm2Table Program
FNG: Farms for a New Generation Program
FPC: Buffalo and Erie County Food Policy Council
FPIG: New York State Farmland Protection Grant
FRPP: Federal Farm and Ranch Lands Protection Program
FSMA: Food Safety Modernization Act
GAP: Good Agricultural Practices
GEIS: Generic Environmental Impact Statement

GGWNY: Grassroots Gardens of Western New York
H-2A: Temporary Agricultural Workers
HDNAP: Hunger Prevention and Nutrition Assistance Program
HUC: Hydrologic Unit Code
IDA: Industrial Development Agency
ILDA: Industrial Land Development Corporation
MSG: Mineral Soil Group
MW: Megawatt
NASS: National Agricultural Statistics Service
NESAWG: Northeast Sustainable Agriculture Working Group
NLCD: National Land Cover Database
NOFA- NY: Northeast Organic Farming Association of New York
NYAITC: New York Agriculture in the Classroom
NYSERDA: New York State Energy Research and Development Authority
NYS AGM: New York State Department of Agriculture and Markets
NYSDEC: New York State Department of Environmental Conservation
PDR: Purchase of Development Rights
PACE: Purchase of Agricultural Conservation Easements
PUVS: Public Utility Variance Standard
ROC: Rural Outreach Center
RPTS: Erie County Department of Real Property Tax Services
SNAP: Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program

STEM: Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics
SUNY: State University of New York
SWCD: Soil and Water Conservation District
USDA: United States Department of Agriculture
USGS: United States Geological Survey
VAPG: Value-Added Producer Grant
VCN: Visit Buffalo Niagara
WNY: Western New York
WNYLC: Western New York Land Conservancy

2. Farmland Resources

2.1 Current Conditions and Trends

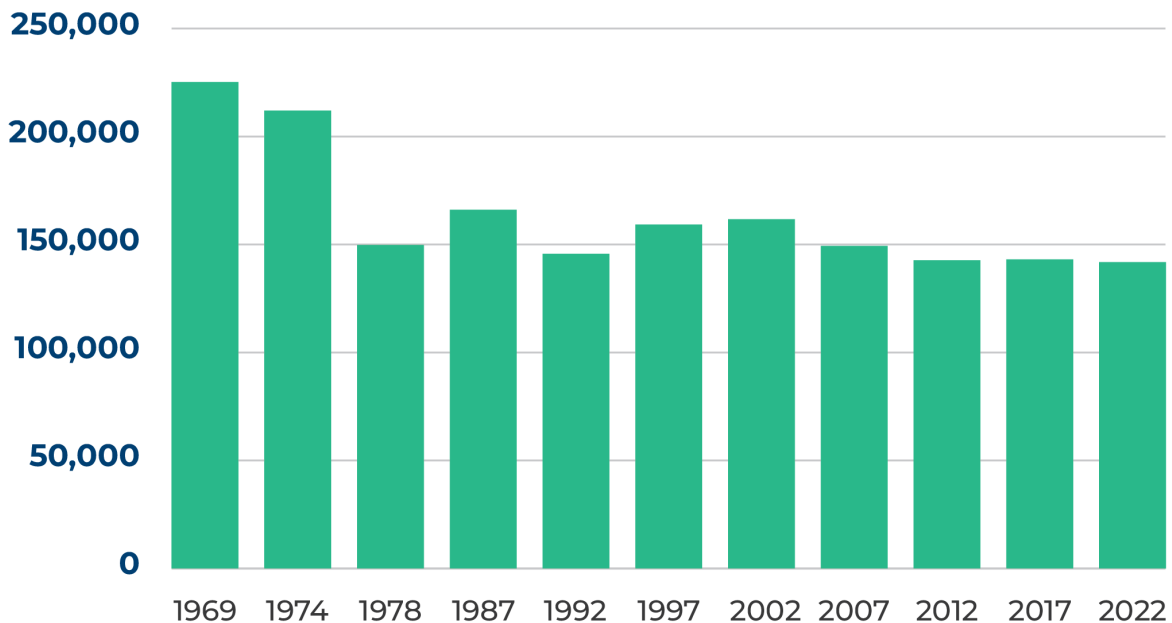
2.1.1 Farmland Resources

Acres in agricultural production

Erie County has lost substantial farmland since the early 1970s when the population of the County peaked. Sprawling development pushed out from the City of Buffalo – first into the inner ring suburbs, and in the past thirty years, into the second ring suburbs.

Per the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) Census of Agriculture, Erie County's total acreage in farms decreased between 2012 and 2022. Over the ten-year period, the total acres of land in farms in Erie County decreased by 1,252 acres (1%) as compared to a 9% decrease statewide.

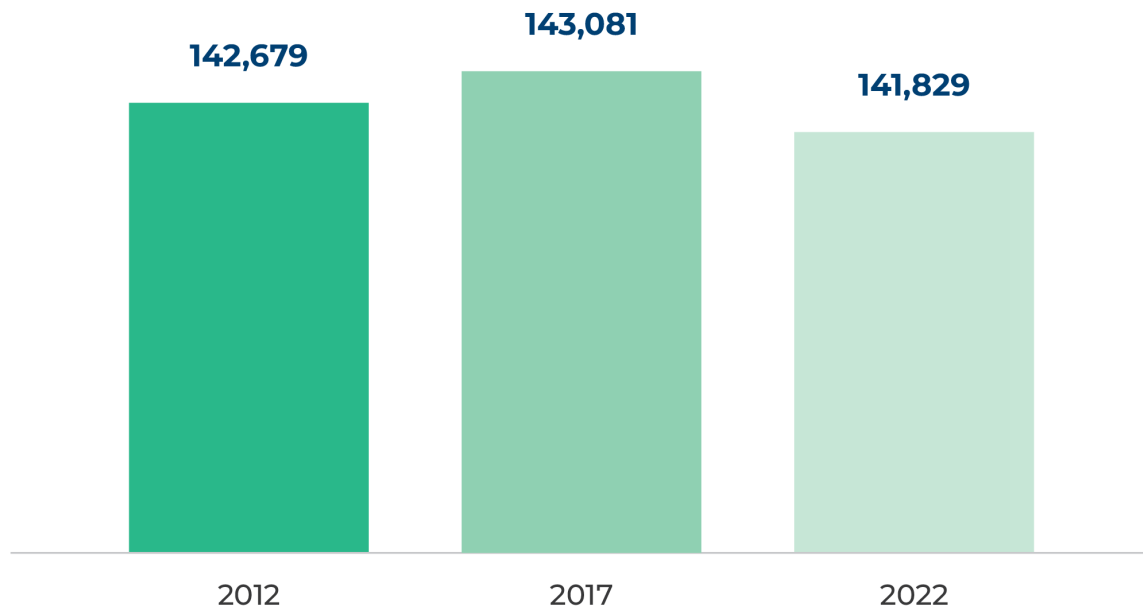
Chart 1. Land in Farms, Erie County, 1969–2022



Source: 2022 USDA Census of Agriculture

2. Farmland Resources

Chart 2. Land in Farms (acres): Erie County 2012–2022



Source: 2022 USDA Census of Agriculture

While the total number of acres in farms decreased by 1%, the USDA Census of Agriculture reports an 8.4% decrease in the amount of cropland on farms between 2017 and 2022, from 96,445 acres in 2017 to 88,353 acres in 2022, and a 16.8% reduction in pastureland, from 7,642 to 6,360 acres.

Table 1. Land in Farms by Type of Use, 2017 - 2022

			Change 2017 - 2022	
	2022	2017	#	%
Total cropland	88,353	96,445	-8,092	-8.4%
Woodland	36,745	28,441	8,304	29.2%
Pasture	6,360	7,642	-1,282	-16.8%
Land in homes, buildings, other uses	10,371	10,553	-182	-1.7%
Total Land in Farms	141,829	143,081	-1,252	-0.9%

Source: USDA Census of Agriculture 2022

2. Farmland Resources

Land Cover

Based on 2021 satellite data, approximately 168,336 acres in Erie County (approximately 25% of the County's land area) are cropland or pastureland, while another 235,310 acres (27%) are forested, and 183,110 acres (27%) are developed. (See Map 1: Aerial Base Map and Map 2: Land Cover).¹

NASS data estimates the number of acres devoted to specific crops, based on satellite imagery from 2023, as summarized in the following table. These figures are from the 2023 USDA National Agricultural Statistics Service (NASS) Cropland Data Layer.

Table 2. Crop-Specific Land Cover, 2023

Summarized Crop Types (2023)	Area (Acres)	Area (%)
Alfalfa	11,740	6.60%
Christmas Trees/ Horticulture	62	0.00%
Clover/Wildflowers	747	0.40%
Corn	27,413	15.30%
Dry Beans	1,924	1.10%
Fallow/Idle Cropland	802	0.40%
Grassland/Pasture ²	82,730	46.30%
Misc.	56	0.00%
Oats	982	0.50%
Other Hay/Non-Alfalfa	30,571	17.10%
Peas	662	0.40%
Potatoes	1,484	0.80%
Soybeans	11,941	6.70%
Sweet Corn	225	0.10%
Triticale	712	0.40%
Winter Wheat	2,648	1.50%
Grapes	3,455	1.90%
Other Grains/ Cereals	147	0.10%
Other Vegetables	147	0.10%
Other Fruits/Berries	208	0.10%
Total	178,658	100.00%

Source: USGS NLCD, USDA NASS

¹ Based on calculations from land cover data, provided through the USGS National Land Cover Database, 2023 and the 2023 USDA NASS Cropland Data Layer.

² Estimate of grassland/pasture acreage includes areas in parks, golf courses and other large lawns as well as pastureland used in agricultural operations.

2. Farmland Resources

Agricultural Parcels

Based on 2023 parcel property classifications assigned by local assessors for tax assessment purposes, 2,155 parcels comprising approximately 104,170 acres of land are in agricultural use. A detailed breakdown of acreage by property classification is provided below.

Table 3. Agricultural Parcels

Total Acreage			
	# Parcels	# Acres	% of Total
Agricultural Land (no improvements)	844	33,328.7	32.0%
Rural Residence with Agriculture	327	14,030.9	13.5%
Field Crops	353	21,665.5	20.8%
Dairy Farm	191	17,496.9	16.8%
Truck Crops/Vineyard/Berries	64	2,804.5	2.7%
Cattle/Other Livestock or Poultry	85	5,468.8	5.2%
Greenhouse/Nursery	69	1,219.6	1.2%
Horse Farm/Riding Stable	62	2,423.4	2.3%
Conservation Easement/Land Rights	5	340.6	0.3%
Abandoned Agriculture	155	5,391.5	5.2%
	2,155	104,170.4	100.0%

Map 5 identifies parcels that are actively farmed or include open land that may be suitable for agricultural production.

Agricultural Soils

USDA Agricultural Suitability Classes

Prime farmland: The best physical and chemical properties for producing food, feed, forage, fiber, and oilseed crops, with high productivity and sustainability when properly managed.

Prime farmland if drained: Soils that have the potential to be highly productive if they are artificially drained.

Farmland of statewide importance: These lands are important for agricultural production within a specific state but do not meet the criteria for prime farmland. They can still support the sustainable production of food, feed, forage, fiber, and oilseed crops.

2. Farmland Resources

Farmland Soil Categories

Two ways to classify the suitability of soil types for agricultural uses are the USDA classifications of prime farmland, prime farmland if drained, and farmland of statewide importance and Mineral Soil Group (MSG) classes. The USDA classifications are used in the Web Soil Survey and other federal applications. The MSG classifications are used in New York State environmental reviews and in determining agricultural use values for property tax exemptions.

Maps 3 and 4 show the agricultural soils suitability using USDA and Mineral Soil Group (MSG) classifications, respectively. Countywide, 47% of soils are either prime farmland or farmland of statewide importance, based on USDA classifications. However, many of these areas with high quality agricultural soils have been previously developed and are not available for agricultural use.

Table 4. Agricultural soil suitability - USDA

Prime farmland classification	Area (acres)	Area (%)
All areas are prime farmland	112,332	17%
Farmland of statewide importance	199,577	30%
Prime farmland if drained	185,553	28%
Not Prime Farmland	172,278	26%
Total	669,740	100%

Source: USDA

Forested Land

Based on the 2019 National Land Cover Database (NLCD) data (see Map 2), approximately 235,310 acres or 42.0% of the total land area (excluding water) in Erie County is forested land. Two-thirds of the forested land in Erie County is deciduous, nearly the remaining third is mixed forest, and a small portion is evergreen forest.

Table 5. Forested Land Cover

	Acres	% of Total Land Area	% of Total Forested Area
Forested land cover	235,310	35.13%	100%
Deciduous Forest	156,995	23.44%	66.7%
Evergreen Forest	15,132	2.26%	6.4%
Mixed Forest	63,184	9.43%	26.9%

Source: National Land Cover Database (NLCD)

Forested lands that are part of farm operations may be used for pasturing animals. Some farms harvest timber or lease land for hunting to supplement farm income.

2. Farmland Resources

Agricultural Parcels

Preserved Land

Approximately 3,500 acres of farmland in Erie County are preserved through permanent conservation easements or acquisition by a municipality. A conservation easement is a legal restriction on developing land for non-agricultural purposes. Programs to preserve land with conservation easements are called Purchase of Development Rights (PDR) or Purchase of Agricultural Conservation Easements (PACE) programs. These programs pay farmers for the value of the development rights on a parcel, which is the total market value minus the value of the property for agricultural use. Some municipalities have acquired land outright, placed a conservation easement on the property to prohibit non-agricultural development, then sold the property to a farmer. Farmland protected with conservation easements are privately owned and can be sold. The easement runs with the land to prohibit future development. Typically, a land trust monitors the property to ensure that the terms of the easement continue to be met.

In Erie County, funding for permanent farmland protection has been obtained through NYS Farmland Protection Implementation Grant (FPIG) program, Federal Farm and Ranch Lands Protection (FRPP) program, and municipal programs.

Map 6: Preserved Land identifies the locations of farm parcels protected through agricultural conservation easements.

The Western New York Land Conservancy (WNYLC) holds easements to approximately 2,901 acres of farmland located within the Towns of Amherst, Clarence, Eden, Elma, Marilla, and Wales. The Genesee Valley Conservancy holds easements to approximately 680 acres of land in the Towns of Elma, Wales, and Aurora. Some of the land protected by the Genesee Valley Conservancy is farmland and some has been preserved for natural habitats.

Resources/Partners

The **WNYLC** is an accredited regional, not-for-profit land trust that works with landowners, municipalities, and other organizations to conserve natural areas and working farms. Conservation of farmland is typically funded through the FPIG program or with Federal farmland protection grant funding. The WNYLC advises and assists landowners in obtaining grant funding and facilitates completion of the documentation and legal documents needed to establish an easement. The WNYLC works closely with municipalities to apply for funding on behalf of participating farmland owners.

Several **municipalities** in Erie County have developed townwide farmland protection programs. The Town of Clarence established its Greenprint Preservation Program in 2002. Residents approved a public referendum authorizing bond funds of \$12.5 million to acquire land and development rights to farmland and other open space. The Town retained the WNYLC to develop a

2. Farmland Resources

process and criteria for selecting the parcels to be preserved. By 2012, the Town had preserved 1,025 acres of farmland at a cost of \$6.8 million. Parcels purchased by the Town were resold to farmers at a reduced cost once the development rights to the properties were extinguished. Farms currently working these parcels include Root Down Farm, Providence Creek Farm, Willow Creek Farm, and Greg's U-Pick Farm.

In the early 2000s, the Town of Marilla established a Purchase of Agricultural Conservation Easements program to facilitate the acquisition of voluntary permanent conservation easements from farmland owners. Funding was obtained through the FPIG program and the FRPP. The WNYLC holds and monitors the conservation easements on 17 parcels and 743 acres of farmland.

The Town of Amherst established a Farmland Protection Program to acquire development rights to farmland located in the northern part of the Town. To date, the program has preserved 750 acres of land in 17 parcels for continued agricultural use. The Town's 2021 Agricultural and Farmland Protection Plan identified additional parcels as targeted for conservation easements. In 2022, the Town received an Erie County Municipal Planning Grant to prepare an Open Space Inventory and Prioritization Plan. This Plan updated and prioritized the Town's inventory of open space and involved identification of all undeveloped parcels in northern Amherst; screening to identify candidate parcels and award points based on criteria like presence of agricultural resources, parcel size, adjacent land uses, consistency with local planning documents, and presence of natural and scenic resources; and ranking based on points earned to prioritize those most appropriate for protection via conservation easement or acquisition.

The Town of Eden also established a program to enable the Town to acquire land for conservation easements. In 2012 the WNYLC acquired development rights to the 102-acre Surgenor farm in 2012 and in 2014, acquired development rights to 90 acres of the Meyer farm with funds provided through the Federal Farm and Ranch Land Protection Program, a private foundation, and the Town of Eden.

The Town of Elma has partnered with the WNYLC to permanently protect farmland through agricultural conservation easements on five farm parcels. The Town of Elma has established an easement program (Chapter 70 of the Town Code) which provides for the acquisition of land or easements by the Town as well as reductions in property taxes to reflect the lower market value of the protected land.

The **NYS FPIG Program** administered by NYS AGM provides funding for PDR to conserve farmland. While the most frequently funded activity through this program is the purchase of development rights on individual farms, FPIG may also award funding to enable other implementation activities, such as amendments to local laws affecting agriculture, option agreements (which lead to PDR), and covering the transaction costs of donated agricultural conservation easements.

2. Farmland Resources

Agricultural District Program

New York State Agriculture and Markets law authorizes counties to establish Agricultural Districts for the purpose of promoting agriculture. Erie County currently has four consolidated Agricultural Districts comprising approximately 265,661 acres (See Map 7: Agricultural Districts.)

Each Agricultural District must be reviewed every eight years, at which time parcels may be added or removed. Landowners may request to have their parcels added to an Agricultural District during the annual open enrollment period between September 1st and September 30th. However, parcels can be removed only as part of the 8-year review.

Table 6. Agricultural Districts

District Name	Last Reviewed	Next Review
Consolidated North Agricultural District No. 1	2023	2031
Consolidated Central Agricultural District No. 5	2021	2029
Consolidated Southwest Agricultural District No. 8	2023	2031
Consolidated Southeast Agricultural District No. 15	2017	Ongoing

The AFPB is responsible for reviewing and renewing Agricultural Districts every eight years and for reviewing requests for parcels to be added to an Agricultural District during the annual Open Enrollment Period. As specified in NYS Agricultural Districts Law, land included in an Agricultural District must be “highly suitable for agricultural production” and “feasible for farming if conditions remain the same.” In considering requests for inclusion in the Agricultural District, the AFPB considers soil types and suitability for agriculture, type of operation, whether the parcel is owner-operated or rented, gross sales, surrounding land use, eligibility for agricultural assessment, consistency with zoning, local and regional planning documents, and proximity to existing agricultural districts. The AFPB makes recommendations to the County Legislature, which then makes the final determination by resolution regarding whether parcels will be added to an Agricultural District. The resolution of the County Legislature is then sent to NYS AGM which certifies the modifications.

2. Farmland Resources

The Agricultural District program and NYS Agricultural District Law support the long-term economic viability of farming through the following benefits:

- Local governments may not enforce laws, ordinances, rules or regulations which would unreasonably restrict or regulate farm operations within an agricultural district unless it can be shown that public health or safety is threatened.
- To discourage private nuisance lawsuits, NYS AGM will issue opinions and interpretations regarding what is considered a “sound agricultural practice.”
- To limit the impact of projects that receive public funding or require an eminent domain, State agencies, local governments, and public benefit corporations which intend to acquire more than one acre of land from any active farm within an agricultural district or more than 10 acres in total from a district must file a notice of intent with the Commissioner of Agriculture and the County agricultural and farmland protection board.
- Assessments for special improvement districts are limited to dwellings and farm structures directly benefiting from the services.

Agricultural Assessment

NYS Agricultural Districts Law also provides for an agricultural assessment, which allows eligible farmland to be taxed based on its value for agricultural production, rather than at its fair market value. The land must be used in a farm operation that generates the required minimum gross income to be eligible. Parcels do not need to be in a certified Agricultural District to receive agricultural use exemption. Parcels rented or leased to an eligible farm operation are eligible for agricultural use assessment.

Landowners must apply annually to the local assessor to receive agricultural assessments. The application must include a [Soil Group Worksheet](#) that specifies the number of acres in each soil group. The [assessment value](#) will be based on value of land by soil group for agricultural production. Erie County Soil and Water District (SWCD) provides assistance to landowners with filling out the worksheet.

2. Farmland Resources

2.1.2 Analysis of Development Pressure

2.1.2.1 *Conversion of farmland to non-agricultural development*

Development Trends

As depicted in Map 8: Developed Land Cover Change, 2001-2021, areas of developed land cover have extended outward from Buffalo's inner ring suburbs into more rural areas over the past 20 years. This map shows changes in developed land cover between 2001 and 2021 based on an analysis of satellite imagery from the USGS National Land Cover Database (NLCD).

Residential Development

Residential development represents a majority of farmland that has been converted to non-farm use over the past 20 years. Of the 454 parcels that changed from agriculture to another use between 2013 and 2023, 93 parcels comprising 1,618 acres were developed with a new residential structure.

Solar Energy

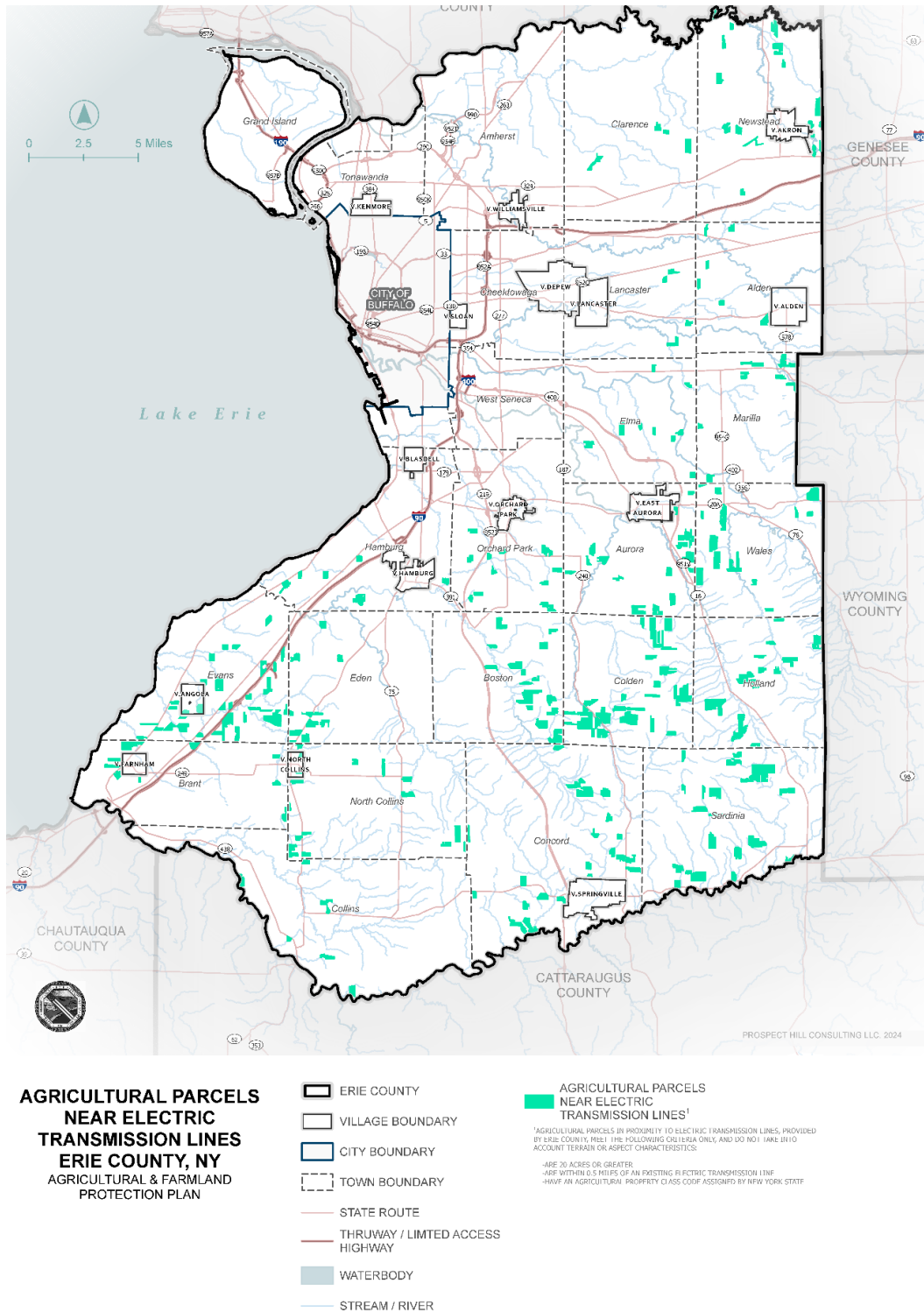
Some farmland has been developed for commercial solar energy projects. Of the approximately 49 solar projects referred to Erie County for review since 2019 (excluding the proposed large-scale project in the Towns of Sardinia and Concord), approximately 10 projects on approximately 765 acres are on land that was formerly agricultural. This is not a complete snapshot of solar development in the County as some projects do not meet referral criteria and are not forwarded to the County for review. The development pattern of solar differs from residential development in that it can be located in rural areas of the County that heretofore had not experienced much, if any, development pressure.

Additional farmland may be used for solar energy development in the future. Figure 1 depicts parcels that may be attractive solar developers because of their size and location (at least 20 acres in size and within one mile of electrical transmission lines). Many parcels identified in Figure 1 are currently in agricultural use. Efforts to strategically protect agricultural parcels vulnerable to solar energy development should be taken.

The map below depicts agricultural parcels that are near electric transmission lines. These parcels may be more likely to be considered for development of solar energy projects.

2. Farmland Resources

Figure 1. Agricultural parcels near electric transmission lines



ERIE COUNTY DEPARTMENT OF ENVIRONMENT AND PLANNING (DEP) OFFICE OF AGRICULTURE 2024; ESRI 2024; NYS OFFICE OF INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY SERVICES GEOSPATIAL DATA SERVICES 2024; USGS NATIONAL HYDROGRAPHY DATASET PLUS HIGH RESOLUTION 2020; WYNYC 2024; NCEC 2024

2. Farmland Resources

Regional Growth Policy Areas

The Regional Growth Policy Areas map depicts the location of Agricultural Parcels in relation to the Regional Growth Policy Areas identified in the Erie Niagara Regional Framework for Regional Growth. This 2006 study delineated Developed Areas, Developing Areas, and Rural Areas as well as overlays for Development Centers and Corridors. This map is intended to indicate development pressure and to inform decisions regarding long-term preservation in the context of regional development policies.

2.1.3 Parcel Ratings

Map 9: Agricultural Parcels by Resource Rating depicts each parcel with active farmland or land that may be suitable for farming based on the extent and quality of the agricultural soils within each Agricultural Parcel.

The “universe” of agricultural parcels was created using the following process:

1. Overlay the cropland and pastureland cover (NASS Cropland Data Layer) onto a parcel base map.
 - Select all parcels with at least three acres of cropland or pastureland cover based on NASS Cropland/Pasture designation
2. Select all parcels that meet at least one of the following criteria:
 - Property Classification in 100s (Agriculture) or 241 (Residential with Ag)
 - Parcel receiving agricultural use exemption
3. Remove parcels known to be non-agricultural, including parks, industrial sites, utilities and other public facilities.

This process selected 7,628 parcels.

Parcels in urban areas that produce agricultural products are not included in the agricultural “universe” as the land cover and soil type data for urban agricultural lands are not comparable to those for rural farmland. Documentation of urban agricultural land and benefits of urban agriculture are provided in Section 7: Urban Agriculture.

Each agricultural parcel received a rating based on the extent and quality of active agricultural lands within each parcel. The rating is based on 1) the number of acres of cropland or pasture within each parcel and, 2) the percentage of active farmland with soils that are classified as Prime or Soils of Statewide Significance based on the USDA Soil Survey. Each parcel was assigned two scores as follows:

2. Farmland Resources

Table 7. Agricultural Parcel Rating

# acres active farmland	
>100	60
50-99	40
20-49	20
5-19	10
% of active farmland in parcel with Prime soils or Soils of Statewide Importance	
75% or more	40
50-74%	25
25-49%	10

The sum of the two scores is the parcel rating.

Clusters of Parcels with High Agricultural Soils Values

Map 10, Areas with Clusters of High Agricultural Resource Values depicts the proximity of agricultural parcels with high agricultural soils values. A mathematical tool in the ArcGIS mapping software analyzed proximity and generated a thematic map. Generalized boundaries were drawn around the “hot spots” depicted in the thematic map to delineate areas where parcels with high agricultural soils values are clustered.

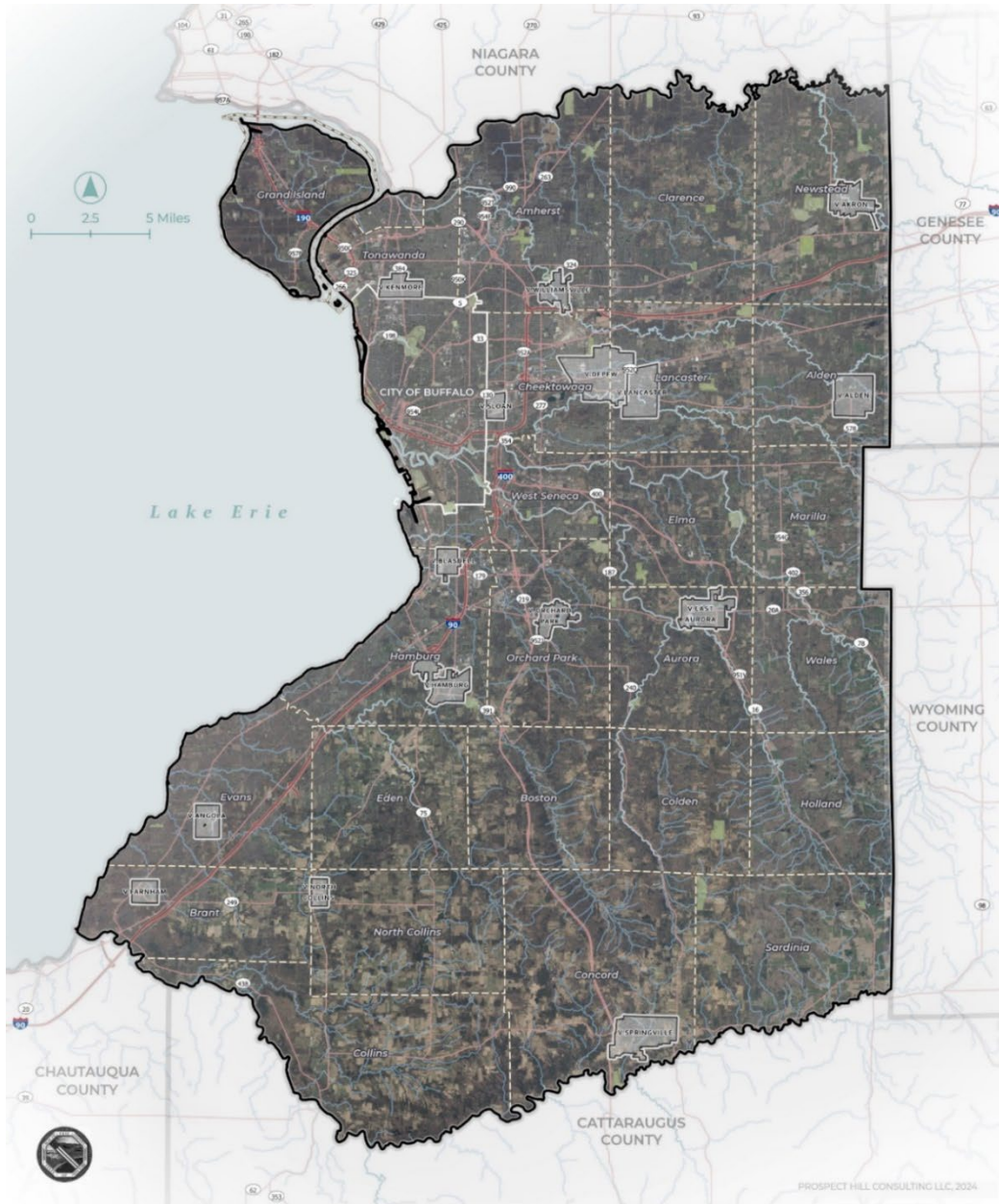
Lands in urban areas that are used for agricultural production are not shown on this map as benefits of agriculture in urban areas are measured in different ways than those of farmland in rural parts of Erie County.

Guidance for Use of Resource Maps

The maps on the following pages depict various resources relating to farmland and agriculture. Each map presents valuable information, but no single map is designed to be used independently for agricultural planning; referring to a number of the maps will yield the best analysis and decisions. County staff should ensure that all towns have copies of these maps with the associated methodology (in the Appendix) and text descriptions and should encourage their use by town planning boards and town boards. Trainings offered to town volunteers and staff should include opportunities to learn how to use these maps to plan for agriculture in local towns.

2. Farmland Resources

Map 1. Aerial Basemap



**AERIAL BASEMAP
ERIE COUNTY, NY
AGRICULTURAL & FARMLAND
PROTECTION PLAN**

- ERIE COUNTY
- VILLAGE BOUNDARY
- TOWN BOUNDARY
- PARK
- WATERBODY
- STREAM / RIVER
- STATE ROUTE
- THRUWAY / LIMITED ACCESS HIGHWAY

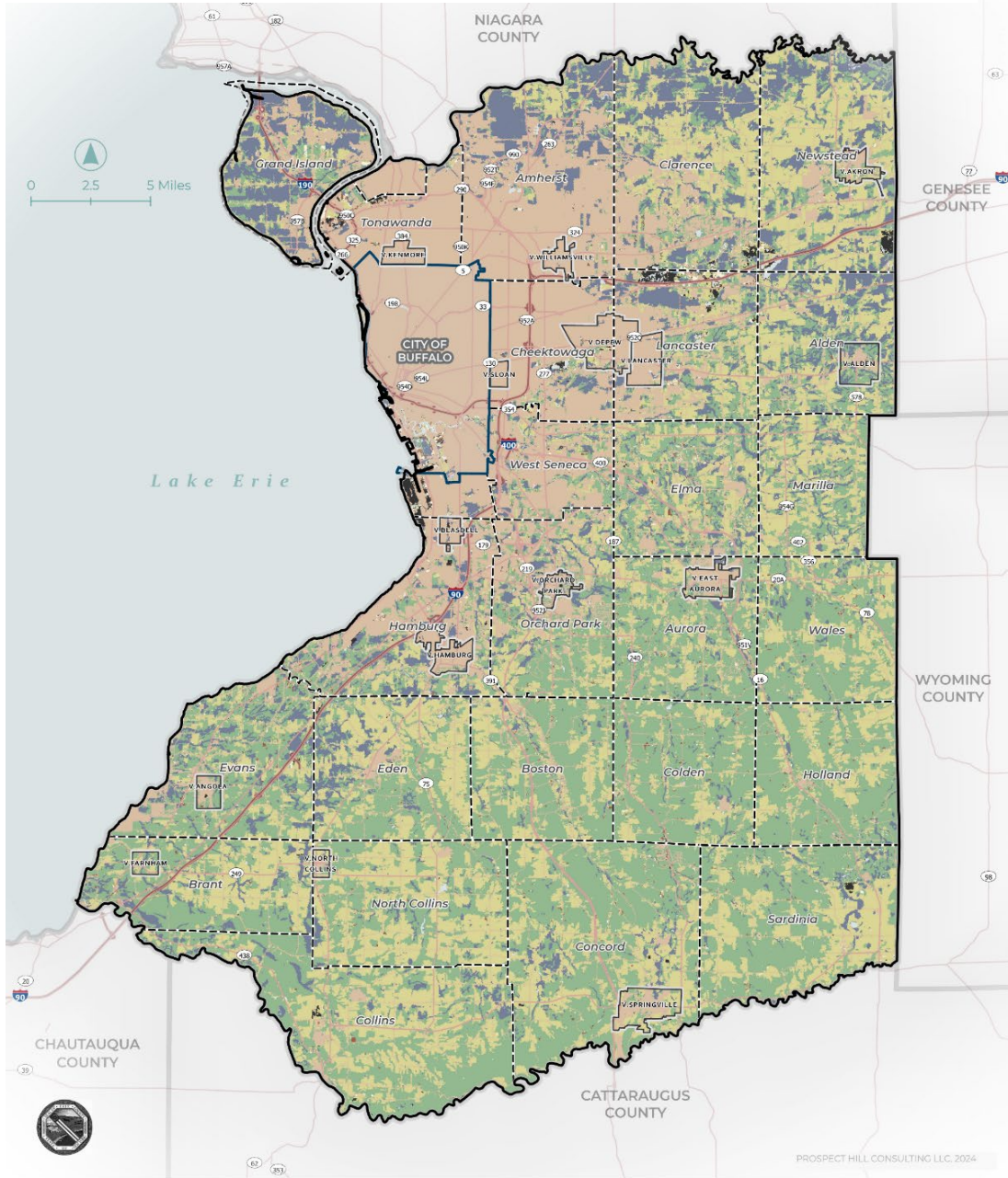
ERIE COUNTY QUICK FACTS:

	2022	2017
NUMBER OF FARMS:	918	940
LAND IN FARMS (ACRES):	141,829	143,081
AVERAGE SIZE OF FARMS (ACRES):	154	152
POPULATION:		
	2023 ESTIMATE: 946,147	↑ 3% INCREASE
	2022 ESTIMATE: 919,040	

NYS ITS GEOSPATIAL SERVICES, WESTCHESTER COUNTY GIS; ERIE COUNTY 2024; ESRI 2024; NYS OFFICE OF INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY SERVICES GEOSPATIAL DATA SERVICES 2024; USGS NATIONAL HYDROGRAPHY DATASET PLUS HIGH RESOLUTION 2020; U.S. CENSUS BUREAU ACS 5-YEAR ESTIMATES 2010-2022 AND 2019-2023; USDA NATIONAL AGRICULTURAL STATISTICS SERVICE, 2022 CENSUS OF AGRICULTURE

2. Farmland Resources

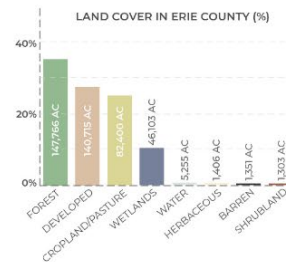
Map 2. Land Cover



LAND COVER ERIE COUNTY, NY AGRICULTURAL & FARMLAND PROTECTION PLAN

- ERIE COUNTY
- VILLAGE BOUNDARY
- CITY BOUNDARY
- TOWN BOUNDARY
- STATE ROUTE
- THRUWAY / LIMITED ACCESS HIGHWAY

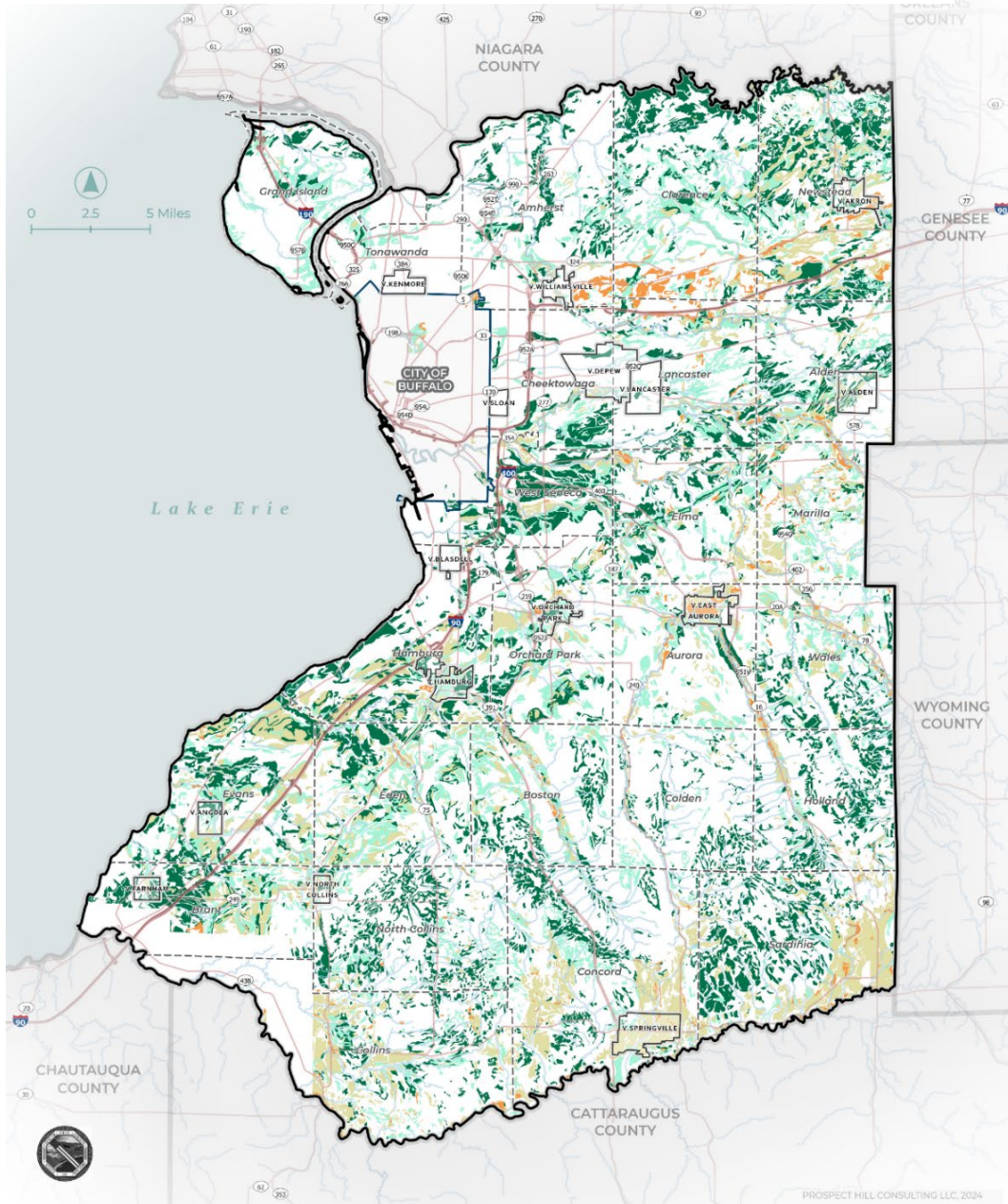
- BARREN
- CROPLAND/ PASTURE
- DEVELOPED
- FOREST
- HERBACEOUS
- SHRUBLAND
- WATER
- WETLANDS



ERIE COUNTY 2023; ESRI 2024; U.S. GEOLOGICAL SURVEY - NLCD 2021
LAND COVER (CONUS) 2023; NYS OFFICE OF INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY
SERVICES GEOSPATIAL DATA SERVICES 2024; USGS NATIONAL
HYDROGRAPHY DATASET PLUS HIGH RESOLUTION 2020.

2. Farmland Resources

Map 4. Agricultural Soil Suitability - Mineral Soil Groups



AGRICULTURAL SOIL SUITABILITY - MINERAL SOIL GROUPS ERIE COUNTY, NY AGRICULTURAL & FARMLAND PROTECTION PLAN

- ERIE COUNTY
- VILLAGE BOUNDARY
- CITY BOUNDARY
- TOWN BOUNDARY
- COUNTIES SHORELINE
- STATE ROUTE
- THRUWAY / LIMITED ACCESS HIGHWAY
- STREAM / RIVER
- WATERBODY

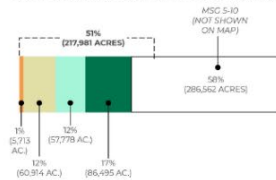
AGRICULTURAL SOIL CLASSIFICATION (USDA)

MSG

- 1
- 2
- 3
- 4

¹ MSG 1-4 CLASSIFICATIONS ARE DEFINED AND USED BY THE NYS DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE AND MARKETS TO CLASSIFY THE STATE'S AGRICULTURAL LANDS BASED UPON SOIL PRODUCTIVITY AND CAPABILITY. EACH COUNTY IN NEW YORK STATE HAS A LISTING OF ALL SOIL TYPES PRESENT IN THE COUNTY ASSOCIATED WITH A SPECIFIC MINERAL SOIL GROUP. MSG 1 THROUGH 10. (NYSERDA, 2015)

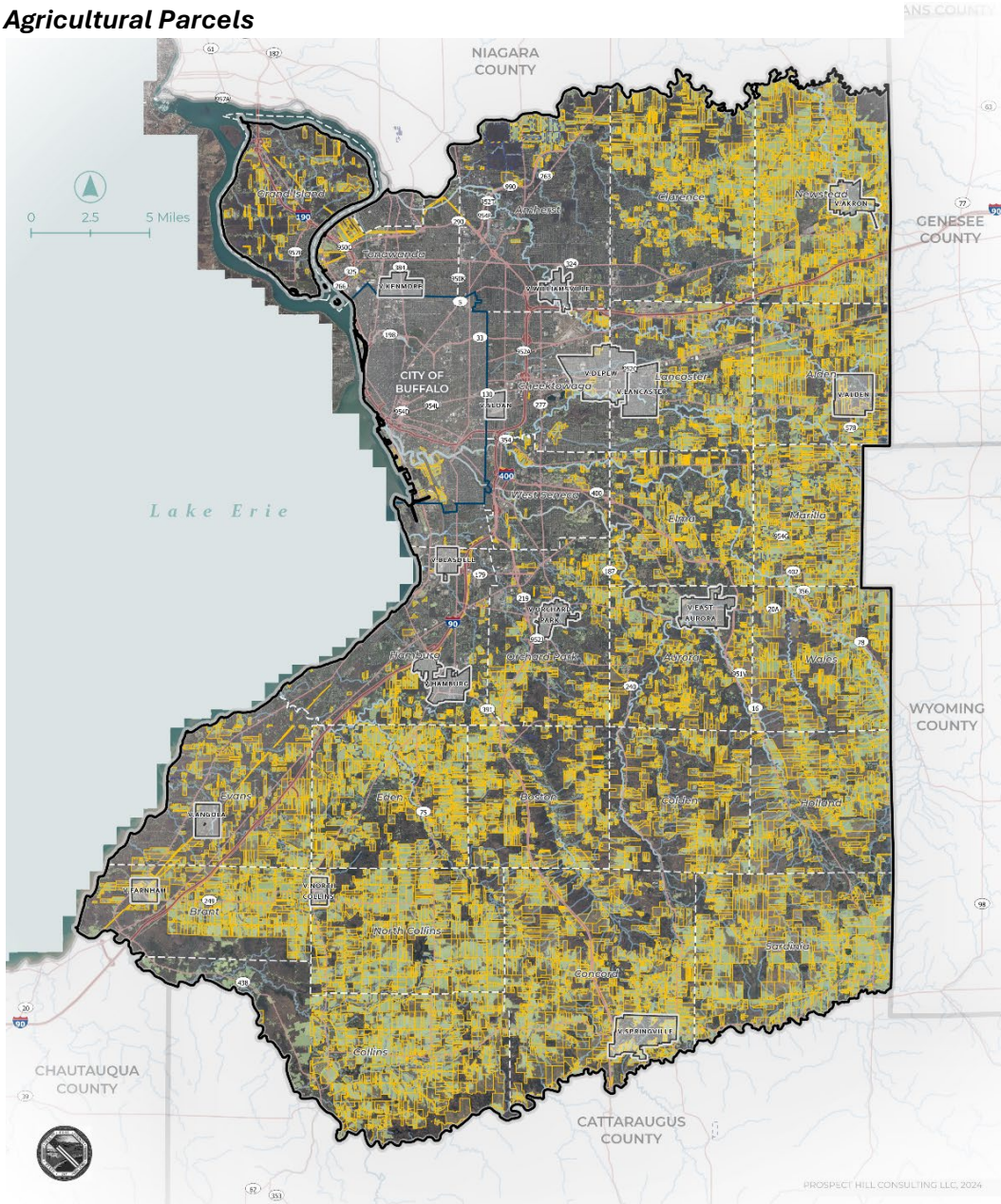
AG. SOIL SUITABILITY SUMMARY IN COUNTY



ERIE COUNTY 2023; ESRI 2024; NYS OFFICE OF INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY SERVICES GEOSPATIAL DATA SERVICES 2016; USGS NATIONAL HYDROGRAPHY DATASET PLUS HIGH RESOLUTION 2020; U.S. GREAT LAKES RESTORATION INITIATIVE (GLRI) 2010; U.S. DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE, NATURAL RESOURCES CONSERVATION SERVICE - SOIL SURVEY GEOGRAPHIC (SSURGO) DATABASE FOR ERIE COUNTY NY 2020; NYSERDA 2022 SOILS DATA FOR USE IN THE LARGE-SCALE RENEWABLES AND NY-SUN PROGRAMS 2023

2. Farmland Resources

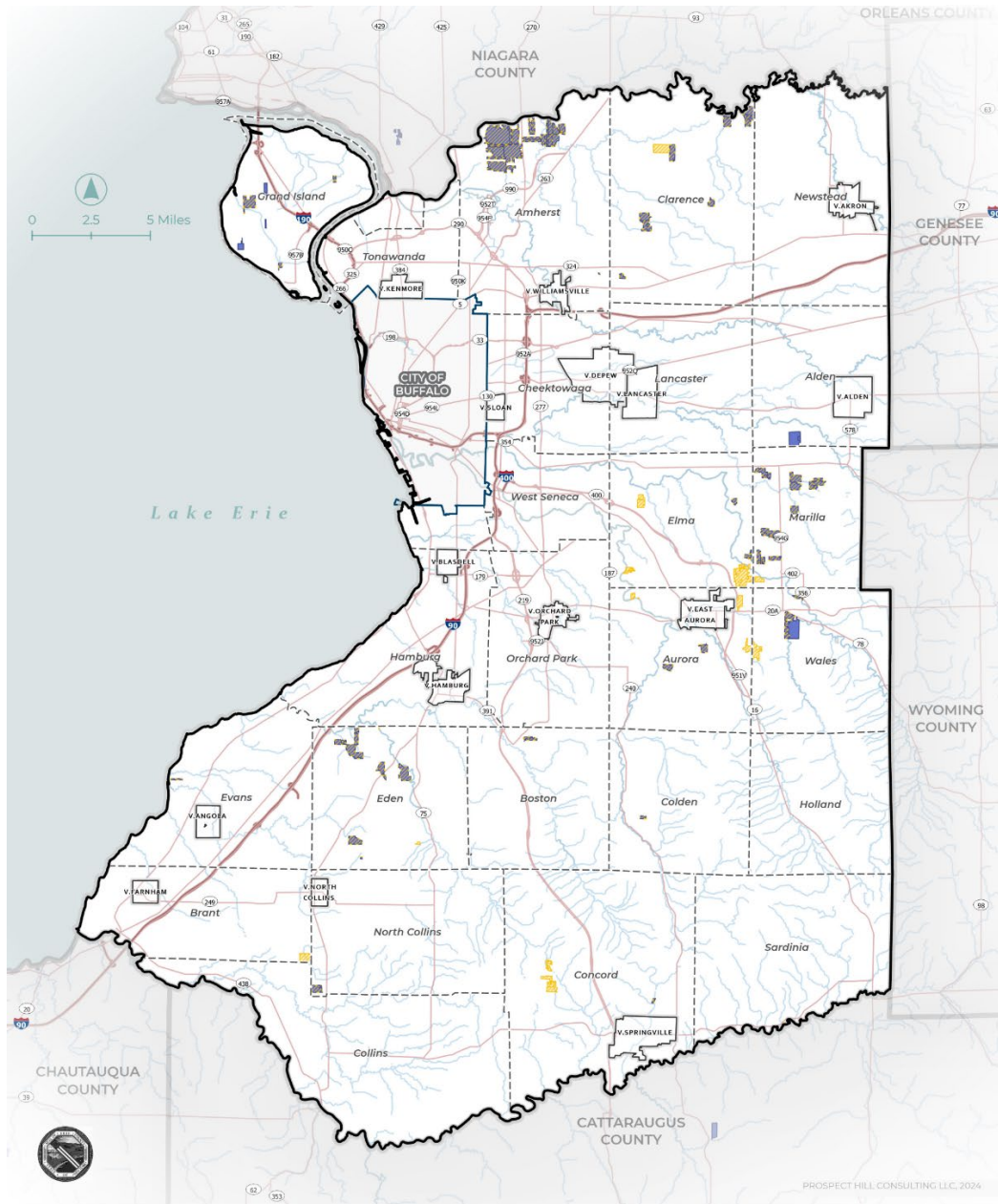
Map 5. Agricultural Parcels



INYS ITS GEOSPATIAL SERVICES, WESTCHESTER COUNTY GIS ERIE COUNTY DEPARTMENT OF ENVIRONMENT AND PLANNING (DEP) OFFICE OF AGRICULTURE, 2024; ESRI 2024; INYS OFFICE OF INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY SERVICES GEOSPATIAL DATA SERVICES 2024; USGS NATIONAL HYDROGRAPHY DATASET PLUS HIGH RESOLUTION 2020; WNYC 2024; NCEC 2024

2. Farmland Resources

Map 6. Preserved Farmland



PRESERVED FARMLAND
ERIE COUNTY, NY
 AGRICULTURAL & FARMLAND
 PROTECTION PLAN

- ERIE COUNTY
- VILLAGE BOUNDARY
- CITY BOUNDARY
- TOWN BOUNDARY
- STATE ROUTE
- THRUWAY / LIMITED ACCESS HIGHWAY
- WATERBODY
- STREAM / RIVER

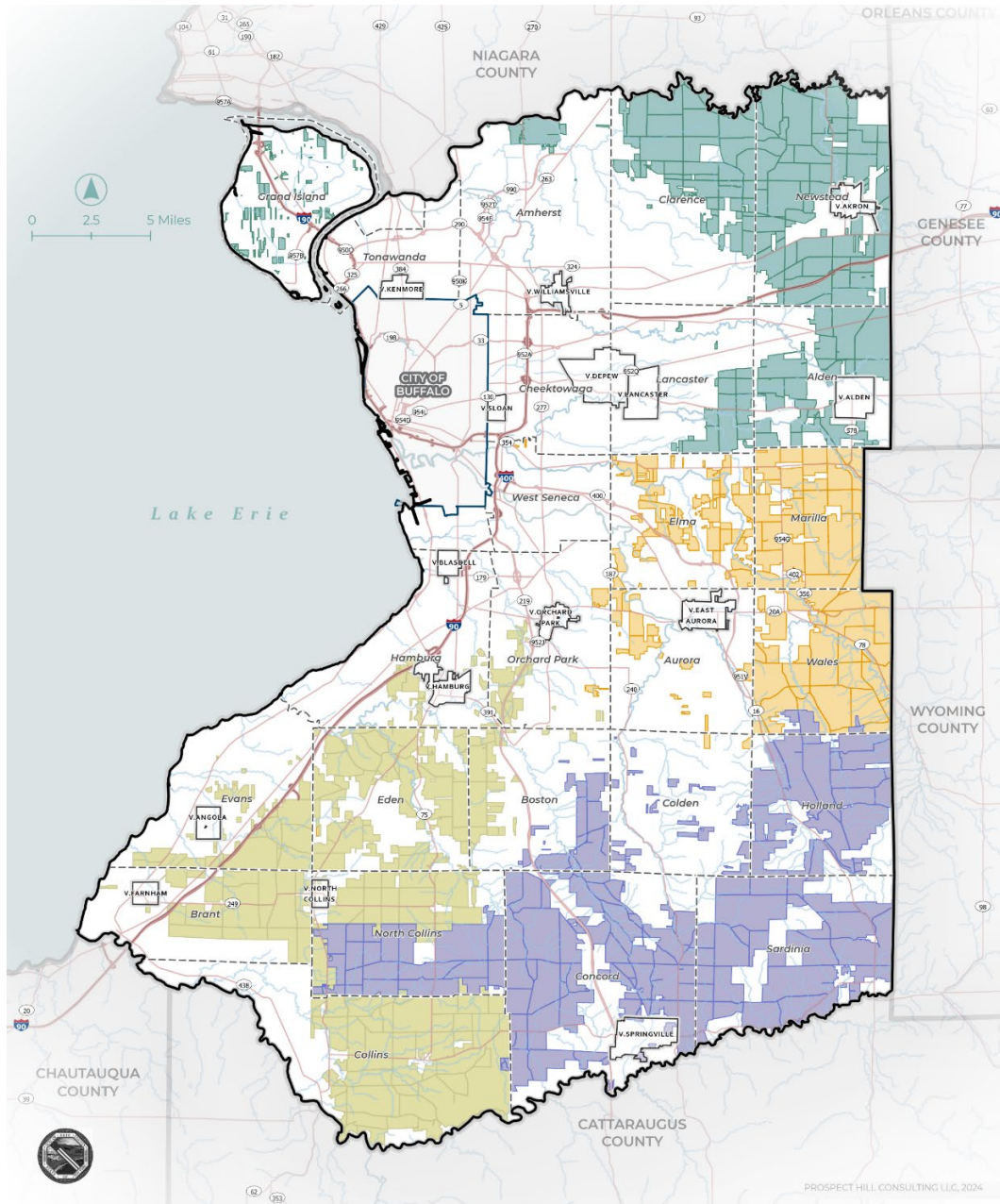
- PARCELS PROTECTED THROUGH WNY LAND CONSERVANCY
- NATIONAL CONSERVATION EASEMENT DATABASE (NCED) LAND

ERIE COUNTY DEPARTMENT OF ENVIRONMENT AND PLANNING (DEP) OFFICE OF AGRICULTURE 2024; ESRI 2024; NYS OFFICE OF INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY SERVICES GEOSPATIAL DATA SERVICES 2024; USGS NATIONAL HYDROGRAPHY DATASET PLUS HIGH RESOLUTION 2020; NYNLC 2024; NCED 2024

PROSPECT HILL CONSULTING LLC, 2024

2. Farmland Resources

Map 7. Agricultural Districts



AGRICULTURAL DISTRICTS ERIE COUNTY, NY AGRICULTURAL & FARMLAND PROTECTION PLAN

- ERIE COUNTY
- VILLAGE BOUNDARY
- CITY BOUNDARY
- TOWN BOUNDARY
- STATE ROUTE
- THRUWAY / LIMITED ACCESS HIGHWAY
- WATERBODY
- STREAM / RIVER

AGRICULTURAL DISTRICT

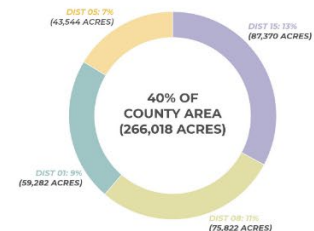
DISTRICT 01: (NORTH)
MUNICIPALITIES OF AKRON, ALDEN, AMHERST, CLARENCE, GRAND ISLAND, LANCASTER, AND NEWSTEAD

DISTRICT 05: (CENTRAL)
MUNICIPALITY OF MARILLA, WALES, ELMA AND AURORA

DISTRICT 08: (SOUTH-WEST)
MUNICIPALITIES OF EDEN, HAMBURG, BOSTON, COLLINS, AND ORCHARD PARK

DISTRICT 15: (SOUTH-EAST)
MUNICIPALITIES OF HOLLAND, CONCORD, BOSTON, COLDEN, SARDINIA AND NORTH COLLINS

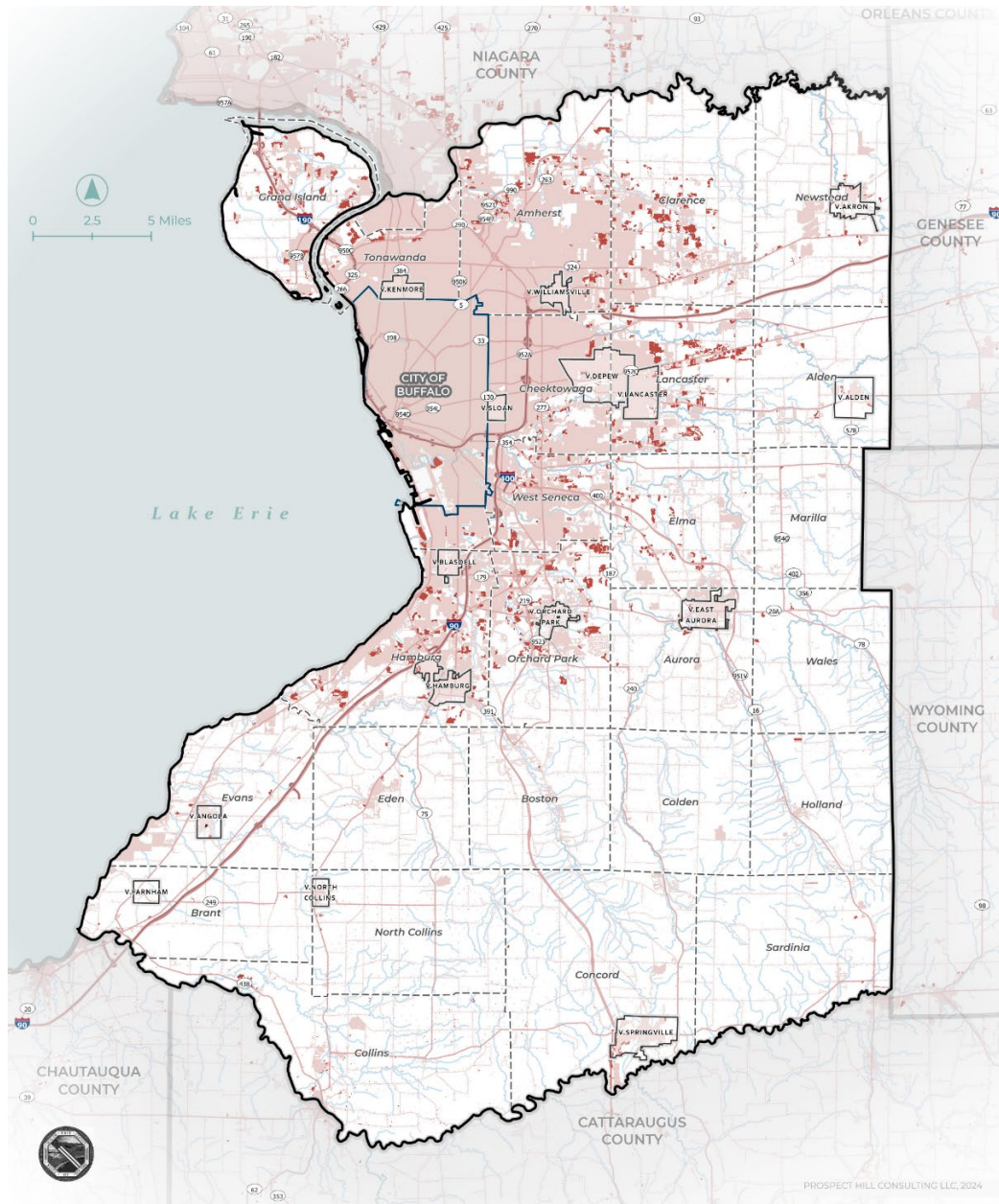
AGRICULTURAL DISTRICT SUMMARY IN COUNTY (%)



ERIE COUNTY DEPARTMENT OF ENVIRONMENT AND PLANNING (DEP) OFFICE OF AGRICULTURE 2024; ESRI 2024; NYS OFFICE OF INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY SERVICES GEOGRAPHIC DATA SERVICES 2024; USGS NATIONAL HYDROGRAPHY DATASET PLUS HIGH RESOLUTION 2020.

2. Farmland Resources

Map 8. Development Land Cover Change, 2001-2021



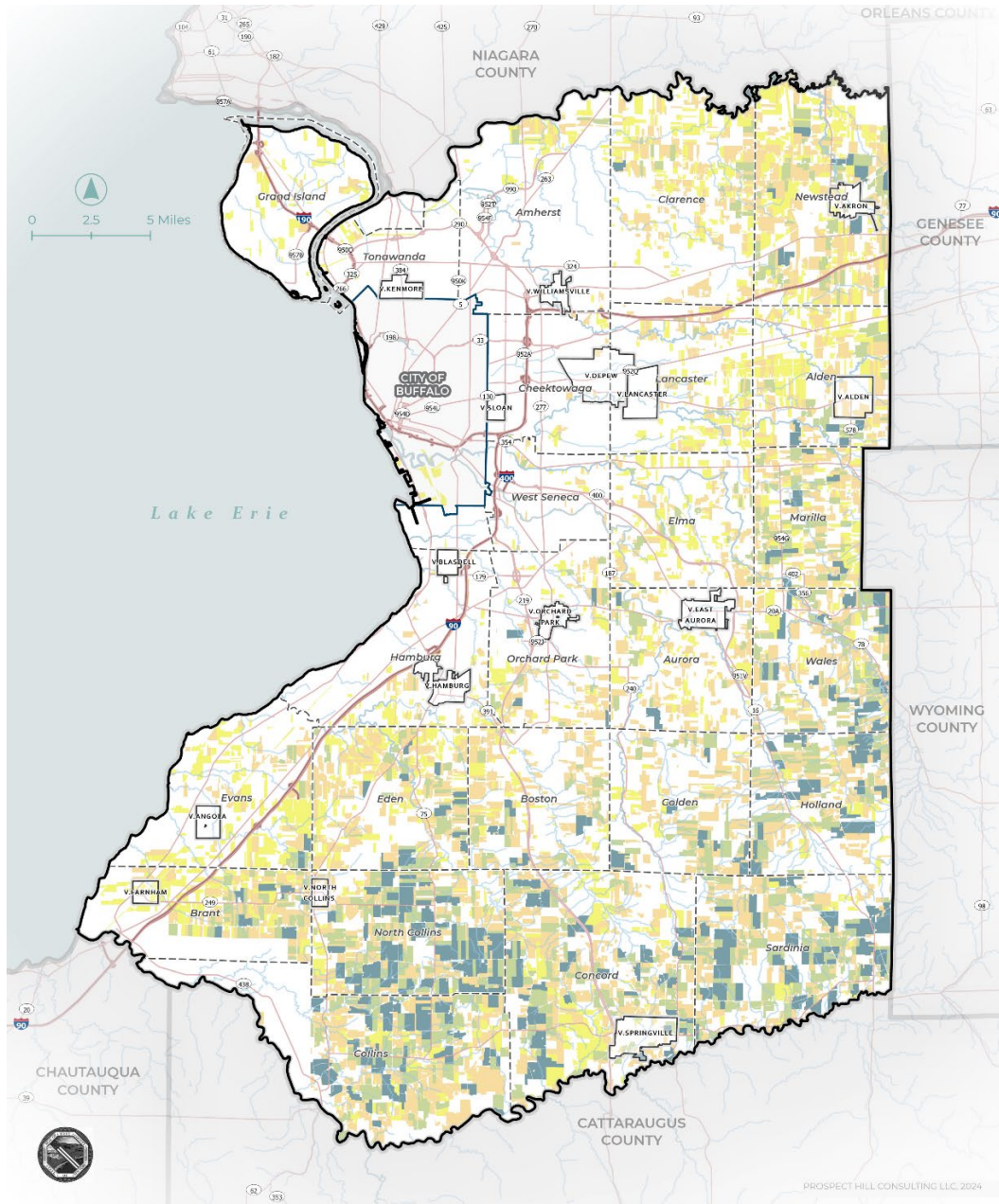
**DEVELOPMENT LAND
COVER CHANGE
2001-2021
ERIE COUNTY, NY
AGRICULTURAL & FARMLAND
PROTECTION PLAN**

- ERIE COUNTY
- VILLAGE BOUNDARY
- CITY BOUNDARY
- TOWN BOUNDARY
- COUNTIES_SHORELINE
- STATE ROUTE
- THRUWAY / LIMITED ACCESS HIGHWAY
- 2001 DEVELOPED LAND COVER
- 2021 DEVELOPED LAND COVER INCREASE

ERIE COUNTY DEPARTMENT OF ENVIRONMENT AND PLANNING (DEP) OFFICE OF AGRICULTURE 2024; ESRI 2024; INYS OFFICE OF INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY SERVICES GIS/SPATIAL DATA SERVICES 2024; USGS NATIONAL HYDROGRAPHY DATASET PLUS HIGH RESOLUTION 2020; WNYLC 2024; NCEC 2024

2. Farmland Resources

Map 9. Agricultural Parcels by Resource Rating



AGRICULTURAL PARCELS BY AGRICULTURAL RESOURCE RATING ERIE COUNTY, NY AGRICULTURAL & FARMLAND PROTECTION PLAN

- ERIE COUNTY
- VILLAGE BOUNDARY
- TOWN BOUNDARY
- CITY BOUNDARY
- STATE ROUTE
- THRUWAY / LIMITED ACCESS HIGHWAY

- AGRICULTURAL PARCEL
RESOURCE RATING¹
- 1 - 25
 - 26 - 50
 - 51 - 75
 - 76 - 100

¹ AGRICULTURAL SOILS RATING SCORE
EACH PARCEL'S SCORE (0-100) REFLECTS THE EXTENT
AND QUALITY OF ACTIVE FARMLAND, BASED ON A
TWO-PART SYSTEM:

ACTIVE FARMLAND ACREAGE (MAX 60 POINTS)
POINTS ARE ASSIGNED BASED ON THE NUMBER OF
ACRES IN ACTIVE CROPLAND OR PASTURE USE:
≥100 ACRES: 60 PTS
50-99 ACRES: 40 PTS
20-49 ACRES: 20 PTS
5-19 ACRES: 10 PTS

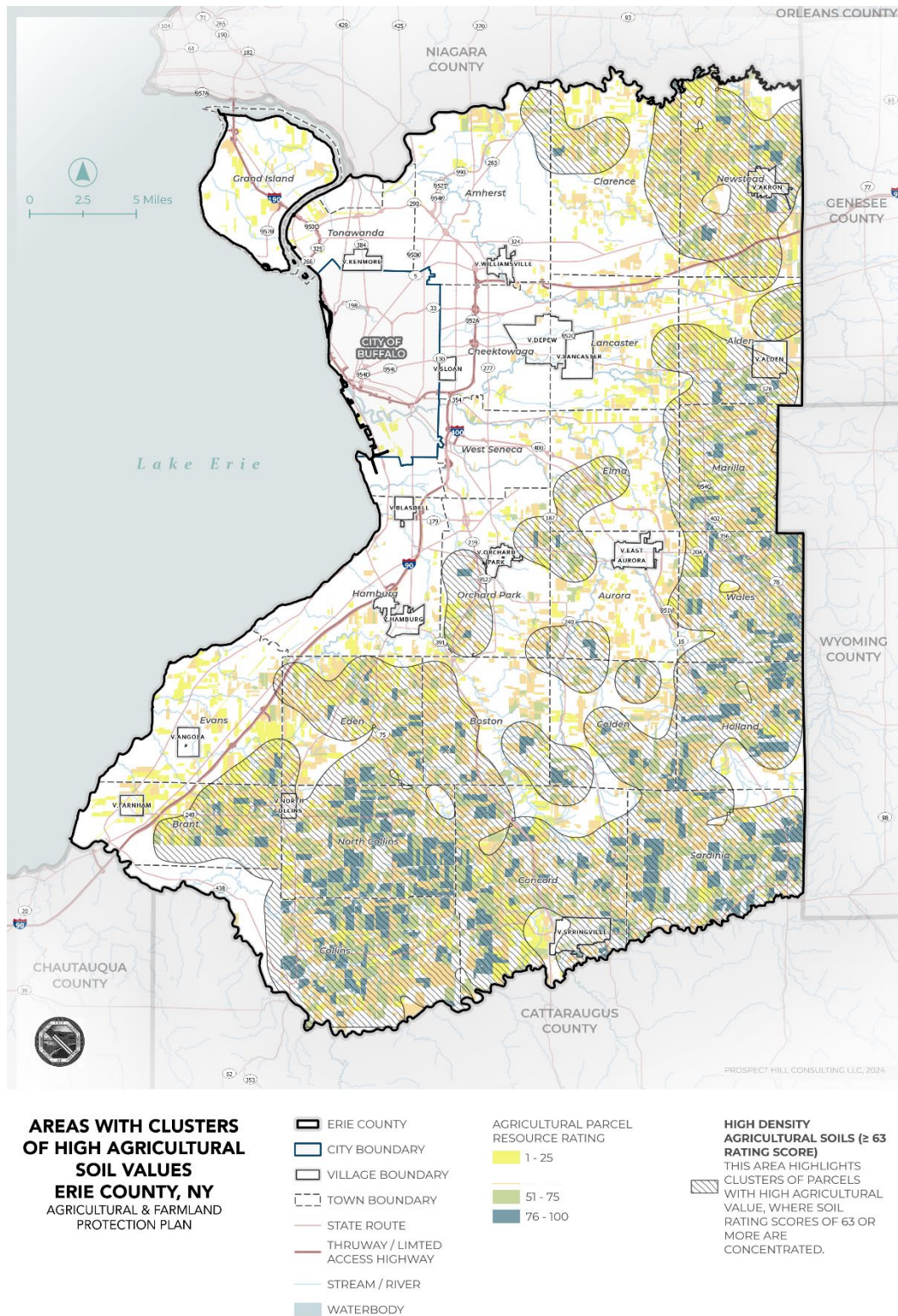
SOIL QUALITY OF ACTIVE FARMLAND (MAX 40 POINTS)
POINTS ARE BASED ON THE PERCENT OF ACTIVE
FARMLAND COMPOSED OF PRIME FARMLAND OR
FARMLAND OF STATEWIDE IMPORTANCE:
≥75%: 40 PTS
50-74%: 25 PTS
25-49%: 10 PTS

THE FINAL RATING HELPS PRIORITIZE PARCELS THAT
COMBINE LARGE AREAS OF ACTIVE USE WITH HIGH-
QUALITY SOILS.

ERIE COUNTY DEPARTMENT OF ENVIRONMENT AND PLANNING (DEP) OFFICE
OF AGRICULTURE, 2024; ESRI, 2024; NYS OFFICE OF INFORMATION
TECHNOLOGY SERVICES GEOSPATIAL DATA SERVICES 2024; USGS NATIONAL
HYDROGRAPHY DATASET PLUS (HIGH RESOLUTION 2020; WHYLC 2024; NCEI
2024; UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE (USDA) NATIONAL
AGRICULTURAL STATISTICS SERVICE (NASS) NEW YORK CROPLAND DATA
LAYER 2001 AND 2023.

2. Farmland Resources

Map 10. Areas With Clusters of High Agricultural Resource Values



ERIE COUNTY DEPARTMENT OF ENVIRONMENT AND PLANNING (DEP) OFFICE OF AGRICULTURE 2024; ESRI 2024; NYS OFFICE OF INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY SERVICES GEOSPATIAL DATA SERVICES 2024; 1984 NATIONAL HYDROGRAPHY DATASET PLUS HIGH RESOLUTION 2020; NYNLC 2024; NCE 2024; UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE (USDA) NATIONAL AGRICULTURAL STATISTICS SERVICE (NASS) NEW YORK CROPLAND DATA LAYER 2001 AND 2023;

PROSPECT HILL CONSULTING LLC, 2024

2. Farmland Resources

2.2 Opportunities and Challenges

The primary issues relating to agricultural land preservation are land conversion pressures from residential and solar development, high cost and limited availability of land for new farmers and farms seeking to expand, and the vulnerability of rented land. Related issues are addressed in subsequent sections of this Plan, including challenges in transitioning farms to the next generation, impacts of extreme weather, and the need to enhance public appreciation and support for agriculture.

2.2.1 Non-agricultural development on farmland may reduce land available for agricultural production

Residential development

Both residential subdivisions in suburban towns and large lot residences in rural towns have the potential to take farmland out of production. While local governments may enact zoning restrictions that limit or prohibit residential development, zoning restrictions alone are unlikely to prevent residential development, as all zoning districts in Erie County where agriculture occurs also allow residential and often other types of development as well. Few jurisdictions nationwide have enacted zoning that limits land uses exclusively to agriculture.

Protection of farmland through permanent conservation easements prevents non-agricultural development of farmland. The WNYLC works with farms and municipalities permanently protect farmland with funding through the FPIG program.

Keeping farms economically viable is critical to keeping land in agricultural use. Measures that help farms operate successfully as a business will help farmers keep land in farming rather than sell land for residential or other development. (See Chapter 3, Farm Viability.)

Solar Energy Development

Solar energy development has the potential to convert large areas of farmland to non-agricultural uses. Most solar projects must be approved by the municipality.

Robust local solar laws are the most effective tools for municipalities to address the location of solar facilities. Towns have direct jurisdiction to regulate solar projects smaller than 25 MW. Local solar laws may include limitations on constructing these facilities on active farmland with high quality agricultural soils and can include provisions to avoid or mitigate impacts of solar projects on farmland. Local laws may also require solar developers to incorporate agricultural uses in conjunction with the solar panels, such as sheep grazing, pollinators, or specialty crops.

2. Farmland Resources

Municipalities should be aware that use variances to allow a project within a zoning district where it is prohibited is subject to the “public utility variance standard” (PUVS) rather than the more restrictive use variance criteria established in NYS Town, Village and City Law. The PUVS derives from a provision in the NYS Constitution that prohibits local laws that are inconsistent with the provisions of the State Constitution or any general law. In the past this has applied to power plants which are regulated by NYS Public Service Law and serve a public purpose. Recent court cases have determined that the PUV standard should be applied to solar energy projects to ensure consistency with New York’s Climate Leadership and Community Protection Act.

The PUV standard requires the applicant to demonstrate the broad public necessity for the project and that there are compelling reasons why the proposed site is more feasible than alternative sites. Consideration of local impacts must be balanced against the wider benefit of additional renewable energy that helps meet the State’s long-term goals.

For projects of 25 MW or larger, the NYS Office of Renewable Energy Siting (ORES) has the authority to approve projects and may overrule provisions in local laws. However, ORES will consider provisions in local laws and may require solar developers to comply with regulations that limit placement of solar facilities on high-quality agricultural land, provided those regulations are deemed “reasonable.”

Projects located within a NYS Agricultural District and/or using NYSERDA funding for construction are subject to NYS AGM review and adherence to the Department’s Guidelines for Solar Projects – [Construction Mitigation for Agricultural Lands](#) (see Appendix B). As part of the municipal review, the municipality should contact AGM for a copy of their final determination regarding adverse impacts on farm enterprises and should ensure the construction standards are met by the developer.

Municipalities that have not opted out of property tax exemptions for eligible solar facilities may require developers to pay an annual fee as a “payment in lieu of taxes” (PILOT). Municipalities may impose requirements on solar developers, such as avoiding or mitigating impacts on agricultural lands, as a condition of receiving the PILOT. This tool may become increasingly important in light of the PUVS rulings.

2.2.2 High cost of land and limited availability make it difficult for farmers to acquire land for farming

Acquiring land for farming is a major challenge for new farmers as well as farms seeking to expand. Challenges include high cost, competition from larger farms, and lack of available land of suitable size.

Farmland that is advertised for sale is often in parcels larger than small farms need. Large farms are more likely to have the resources that allow them to purchase farmland that goes up for sale.

2. Farmland Resources

Conservation easements on farmland remove development pressure and make resources more affordable for purchase by new farmers and farms seeking to expand. Some farms in Erie County have acquired land with permanent conservation easements as the sale price is much lower than land that can be developed. For example, the Town of Clarence purchased farmland, placed permanent conservation easements on the land, and then sold it back to farmers as part of their Greenprint Program.

Resources/Models

The American Farmland Trust's (AFT) "Buy-Protect-Sell" program (BPS+) helps keep farmland in agricultural use while promoting conservation, farm viability, and environmental health. Through this program, AFT purchases agricultural land that is under threat from development, places a permanent conservation easement on the property, then sells the property to next generation farmers for an affordable price while encouraging regenerative farm practices on the land.

2.2.3 Continued availability of rented land is essential for farm viability.

Many farmers rely on leased or rented land to support their farm operation. Long-term leases help farmers plan ahead and encourage investments in soil health and other productivity improvements.

While many farmland owners who rent land want to support agriculture, tenant farmers are more frequently affected by the loss of rented land. In addition, rented land is particularly susceptible to conversion. When owners of land that had been rented to farmers transfer it to a younger generation, the heirs may want to sell quickly or at the highest possible price, without consideration for keeping it in agricultural use. Farmers interested in purchasing the land may not be able to act quickly enough to make an offer before the land is sold.

Farmland owners who rent or lease land to farmers may be eligible for lower property taxes through agricultural assessments. While most farmers work with landowners to obtain this exemption, some landowners may not be aware of this potential tax savings.

As mentioned previously, the AFT has advanced an innovative "Buy-Protect-Sell-plus" approach to farmland conservation by purchasing land that is under threat for development, placing a permanent easement on the land, then selling the land to a farmer at an affordable price while encouraging regenerative farm practices on the land.

2. Farmland Resources

2.3 Goals, Policies and Recommended Actions

Goal: Keep high quality farmland in agricultural production.

Recommended Actions

1. Support municipalities, land trusts and farmland owners in efforts to place more land under private easements or preserve farms through Purchase of Development Rights.

- a. Provide information to municipalities and farmland owners about protection programs and encourage them to confer with WNYLC.

Lead: WNYLC, DEP

Partners: Municipalities, NYS AGM

2. Encourage farmland owners to include their land in Agricultural Districts.

- a. Provide information to municipalities and farmland owners about the NYS Agricultural District program, including opportunities to add parcels during the annual open enrollment period.

Lead: DEP, CCE Erie, SWCD, farmers

Partners: WNYLC, Municipalities, Assessors, Erie County Department of Real Property Tax Services (RPTS)

3. Encourage participation in Agricultural Assessments to those who are eligible, including those who have been traditionally excluded from the program but who may qualify.

- a. Provide ongoing education to local assessors about agricultural assessments.

Lead: SWCD

Partners: RPTS

- b. Provide information to farmland owners about the agricultural assessments and the process for applying.

Lead: SWCD, DEP, Local Assessors

Partners: RPTS

4. Advocate for responsible siting of large-scale solar facilities that avoids development on farmland.

- a. Work with the New York State Legislature and agencies to develop and implement policies to minimize the impact of solar development on agricultural lands.

Lead: DEP

Partners: Erie County Farm Bureau, AFPB, FPC, Municipalities

2. Farmland Resources

5. Adopt County policies and support municipalities with the development of laws or regulations that would limit the impacts of solar energy development on agriculture.

- a. Connect municipalities with model laws and other resources to assist in preparing and adopting provisions in local solar and other local laws and land use regulations that would limit the impact of solar and other energy projects on agricultural resources.

Lead: DEP

Partners: NYSERDA (model local law), NYS AGM (standards for construction and decommissioning), Municipalities

- b. Establish a County PILOT policy that incentivizes solar development on brownfields and other sites that do not use active farmland. For example, offer higher host community benefit fees for developments that avoid farmland or require creation of a mitigation fund to help preserve farmland.

Lead: DEP, ECIDA

Partners: WNYLC

6. Advocate for mitigation when solar energy development occurs on high-quality farmland.

- a. Provide information and guidance to local governments during review of solar energy development projects to help ensure that mitigation is incorporated into the project to minimize impacts on agricultural lands.

Lead: DEP

Partners: Municipalities, NYSERDA (model local law), NYS AGM (standards for construction and decommissioning)

7. Assist municipalities in preparing Agricultural and Farmland Protection Plans, Comprehensive Plans, and zoning updates that support farmland preservation and agriculture.

- a. Continue to allocate funds for the municipal grant program administered to support the preparation of local Agricultural and Farmland Protection Plans, Comprehensive Plans, and zoning updates that support farmland preservation and agriculture.

Lead: DEP

Partners: Municipalities

3. Farm Viability

3.1 Current Conditions and Trends

3.1.1 Types of Farms

According to the USDA Census of Agriculture, there were 918 farms³ in Erie County in 2022. The market value of products sold by Erie County farms was approximately \$192 million in 2022. Based on the market value of products sold, Erie County ranked 16th in the State, up from 17th in the State in the 2017 Census of Agriculture.

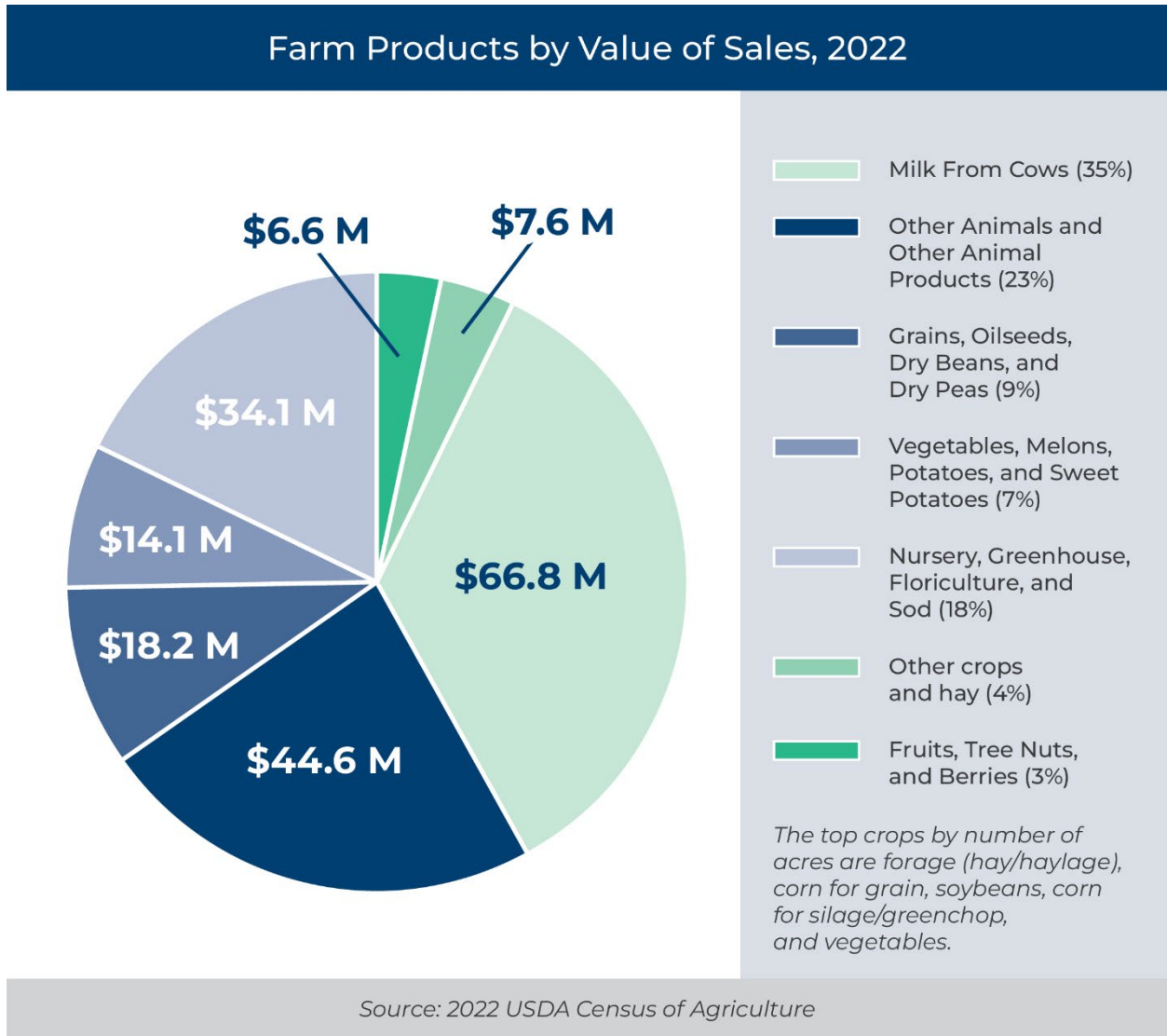
Erie County ranked third in nursery, greenhouse, floriculture, and sod; fourth in poultry and eggs; ninth in horses, ponies, mules, burros, and donkeys; and twelfth in both vegetables, melons, potatoes, sweet potatoes, and hogs and pigs. The County's largest agricultural sector was dairy and was ranked 21st in the state in 2022, down from 20th in 2017.

Farm Products and Value of Sales

The major farm products sold by Erie County farms in 2022, based on value of sales reported by the Census of Agriculture, were "milk from cows" with \$66.803 million, "nursery, greenhouse, floriculture and sod" with \$34.107 million, "grains, oilseeds, dry beans, dry peas" (primarily corn and soybeans) with \$18.221 million, and "vegetables, melons, potatoes, sweet potatoes" with \$14.078 million.

³ To count as a farm by the U.S. Census of Agriculture, the enterprise must have sales of \$1,000/year or more.

3. Farm Viability



3. Farm Viability

Table 8. Farm Products and Value of Sales

Item	# Farms	Value of Sales (\$1,000)
Crops, including nursery and greenhouse crops	577	\$ 80,609
Grains, oilseeds, dry beans, and dry peas	163	\$ 18,221
Corn	146	\$ 11,511
Wheat	39	\$ 506
Soybeans	68	\$ 5,340
Sorghum	3	\$ 3
Barley	6	\$ 24
Other grains, oilseeds, dry beans, and dry peas	45	\$ 837
Vegetables, melons, potatoes, and sweet potatoes	133	\$ 14,078
Fruits, tree nuts, and berries	70	\$ 6,572
Fruits and tree nuts	59	\$ 5,346
Berries	34	\$ 1,226
Nursery, greenhouse, floriculture, and sod	101	\$ 34,107
Cultivated Christmas Trees and short rotation woody crops	28	\$ 512
Other crops and hay	329	\$ 7,119
Maple syrup	42	\$ 403
Livestock, poultry, and their products	368	\$ 111,409
Poultry and eggs	117	D
Cattle and calves	165	D
Milk from cows	43	\$ 66,803
Hogs and pigs	52	\$ 246
Sheep, goats, wool, mohair, and milk	56	\$ 191
Horses, ponies, mules, burros, and donkey	27	\$ 2,598
Aquaculture	1	D
Other animals and other animal products	62	\$ 495
Total	1,719	\$ 192,018

Source: USDA Census of Agriculture, 2022

Note: D indicates data points that were not published due to small sample size.

3. Farm Viability

The top crops by number of acres are forage (hay/haylage), corn for grain, soybeans, corn for silage/greenchop, and vegetables. Acreage devoted to these crops occupied 64,130 acres, representing 73% of total cropland in Erie County.

Table 9. Acreage of Crop Types

Crop Type	Acres
Forage (hay/haylage), all	29,719
Corn for grain	13,477
Soybeans for beans	9,062
Corn for silage/greenchop	8,976
Vegetables harvested, all	2,896

Source: USDA Census of Agriculture, 2022

3. Farm Viability

Chart 3. Crops by Acres, 2023

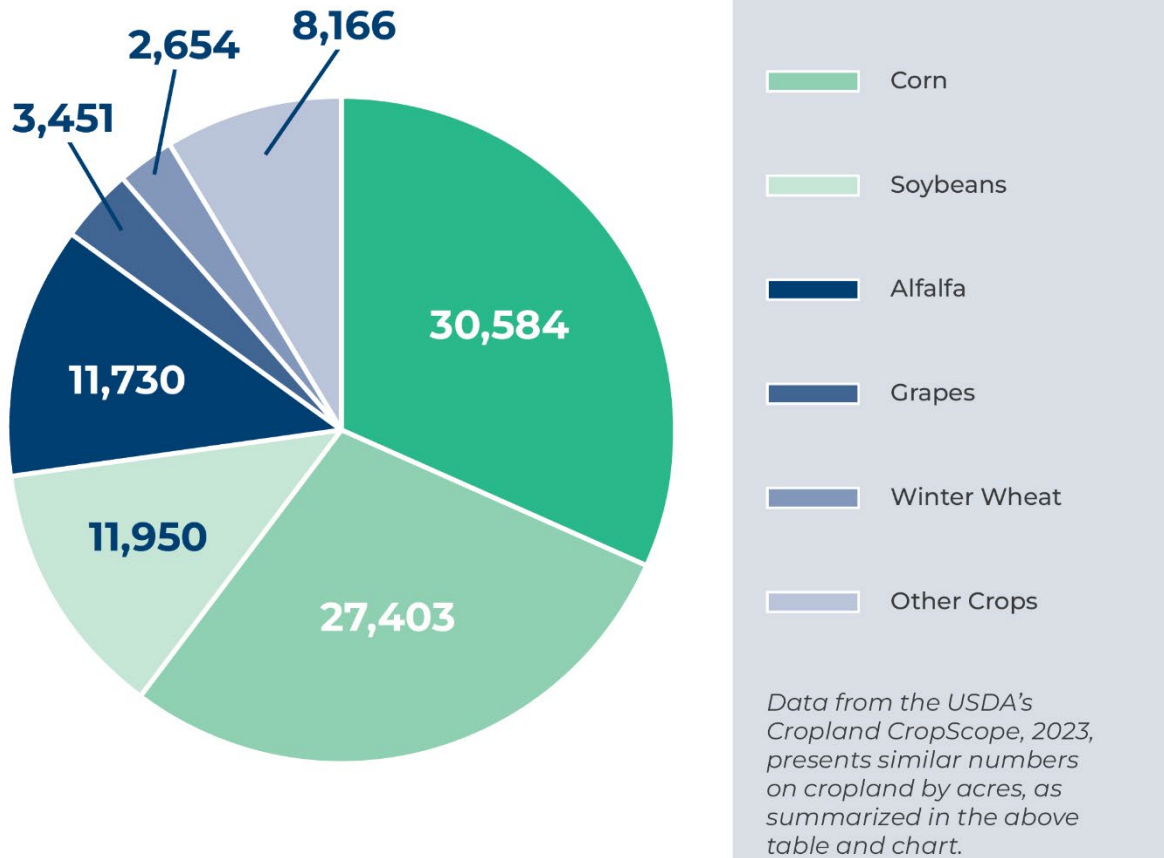


Table 10. Crops by Acres, 2023

Crop	Acres	% of total
Other Hay/Non-Alfalfa	30,584	32%
Corn	27,403	28%
Soybeans	11,950	12%
Alfalfa	11,730	12%
Grapes	3,451	4%
Winter Wheat	2,654	3%
Other Crops	8,166	9%
Total	95,938	100%

3. Farm Viability

Size of farm

More than half of Erie County's 918 farms, as reported by the USDA Census of Agriculture, were smaller than 50 acres and 18.5% were smaller than 10 acres. Farms smaller than 50 acres occupied a total of 8,551 acres, accounting for 6% of all of land in farms in Erie County.

Acres of farmland in production is also concentrated among larger operators. A total of 27 farms had 1,000 or more acres, with seven farms operating 2,000 or more acres. These large farms represented 3% of all farms in Erie County but utilized 39% of all the land in farms.

Table 11. Farm Size

Farm Size (acres)	# of Farms	% of Total	# Acres	% of Total
1 to 9	170	18.5%	736	0.5%
10 to 49	294	32.0%	7,815	5.5%
50 to 99	178	19.4%	12,099	8.5%
100 to 179	119	13.0%	15,227	10.7%
180 to 259	32	3.5%	6,868	4.8%
260 to 499	66	7.2%	23,800	16.8%
500 to 999	32	3.5%	20,573	14.5%
1,000 to 1,999	20	2.2%	26,069	18.4%
2,000+	7	0.8%	28,642	20.2%
	918	100.0%	141,829	100.0%

SOURCE: USDA Census of Agriculture, 2022

3. Farm Viability

Land Ownership

In 2022, approximately 68% of all the land in farms, a total of 96,144 acres, was owned by the farm operator, according to USDA Census of Agriculture. The remaining 44,474 acres of land in farms was rented.

Seventy percent of farm operators owned all the land that they work. This 70% operated 645 farms, owned 53,880 acres, and harvested 13,703 acres of farmland in 2022.

The 28 operators that are tenant farmers worked a total of 774 acres of harvested cropland. A total of 44,474 acres of land in farms were rented by farmers who worked both rented land and land they owned.

The 245 farm operators who both owned and rented land for farming worked 80% of the harvested cropland and 61% of the land in farms.

Table 12. Land in Farms

	Land in Farms			Harvested Cropland	
	# Farms	# Acres Owned	# Acres Rented	# Farms	# Acres
Full Owners	645	53,880		446	13,703
Part Owners	245	42,264	44,474	212	58,516
Tenants	28		1,211	14	774
	918	96,144	45,685	672	72,993

Source: USDA Census of Agriculture, 2022

3. Farm Viability

Operator Characteristics

Of the approximately 1,666 farm operators reported by the 2022 USDA Census of Agriculture, 11% were younger than 35 and over 60% were 55 or older – meaning that most farmers in Erie County are very close to or are over retirement age. Approximately 625 (37.5%) of farm operators were female and 1,041 (62.5%) were male. A total of 202 farms used hired managers. These figures are based on the USDA definition of a farm, which includes operations that generate sales of \$1,000 or more annually.

Table 13. Age of Farm Operator

Age of Farm Operator	#	% of Total
Under 25	56	3.4%
25 - 34	128	7.7%
35 - 44	213	12.8%
45 - 54	258	15.5%
55 - 64	426	25.6%
65 - 74	385	23.1%
75+	200	12.0%
	1,666	100.0%

Source: USDA Census of Agriculture, 2022

Half of all farm operators reported a primary occupation other than farming. While approximately 712 farm operators did not work any days off the farm, 597 (36%) worked 200 or more days off the farm in the year prior to the 2022 Census of Agriculture. These figures are based on the USDA definition of a farm, which includes operations that generate sales of \$1,000 or more annually.

3. Farm Viability

Table 14. Primary Occupation of Farmers

Primary Occupation	#	%
Farming	841	50.5%
Other	825	49.5%
	1,666	100%

Source: USDA Census of Agriculture, 2022

Days Worked Off Farm	#	%
None	712	42.7%
1-49	116	7.0%
50 - 99	72	4.3%
100 - 199	169	10.1%
200 or more	597	35.8%
	1,666	100.0%

Source: USDA Census of Agriculture, 2022

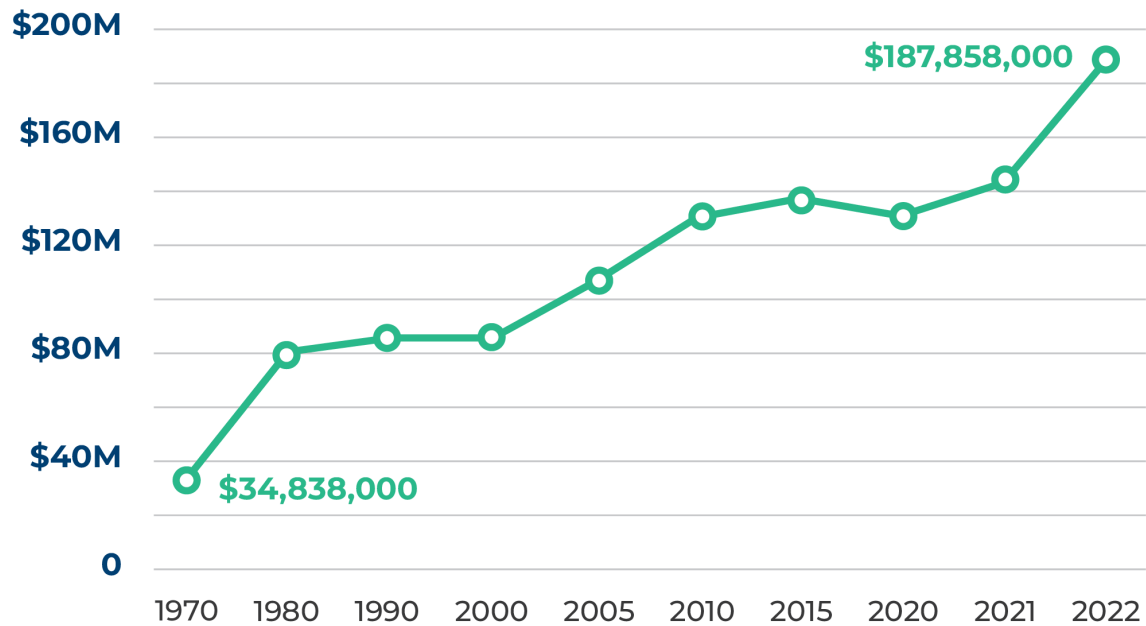
3.1.2 Farm Income and Expenses

The agricultural economy has seen a relatively steady expansion in Erie County over the last fifty years. Based on data collected from the U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis (BEA), sales of farm products increased from \$33 million in 1969 to \$187 million in 2022. Reported sales for 2022 were \$44 million greater than 2021's prior year performance, \$46 million greater than the 10-year average, and \$65 million greater than the 10-year low in 2016. Since that 2016 low, Erie County has increased its agricultural sales each year and at an accelerated pace. In just three fiscal years – 2019-20, 2020-21, and 2021-22 – sales increased by 1%, 9%, and 31% respectively. The BEA data are adjusted for inflation.

The BEA groups farm sales into two main categories– livestock and products (which includes milk and dairy products) and crops. Both categories reached 10-year highs in 2022 and both experienced substantial fluctuations over the 10-year period. In the past ten years, livestock has comprised a slightly higher percentage of the County's overall farm sales, accounting for 60% in 2014, 51% in 2020 and 2021, and 57% in 2022.

3. Farm Viability

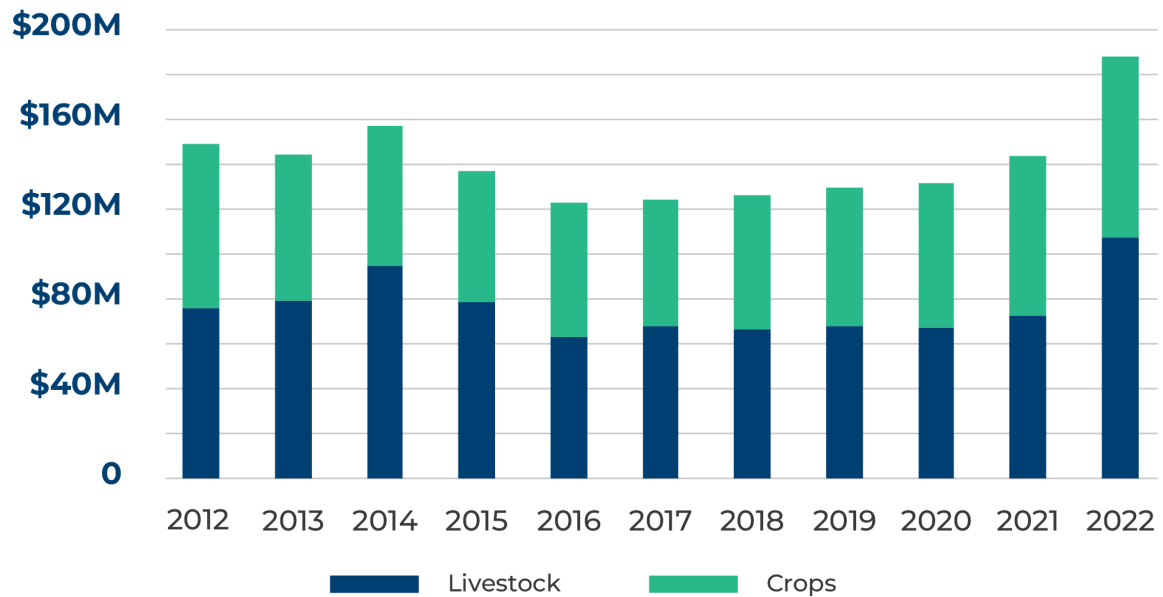
Chart 4. Cash Receipts from Marketings



Source: U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis

3. Farm Viability

Chart 5. Cash Receipts from Farm Marketings, Livestock and Crops, 2012–2022

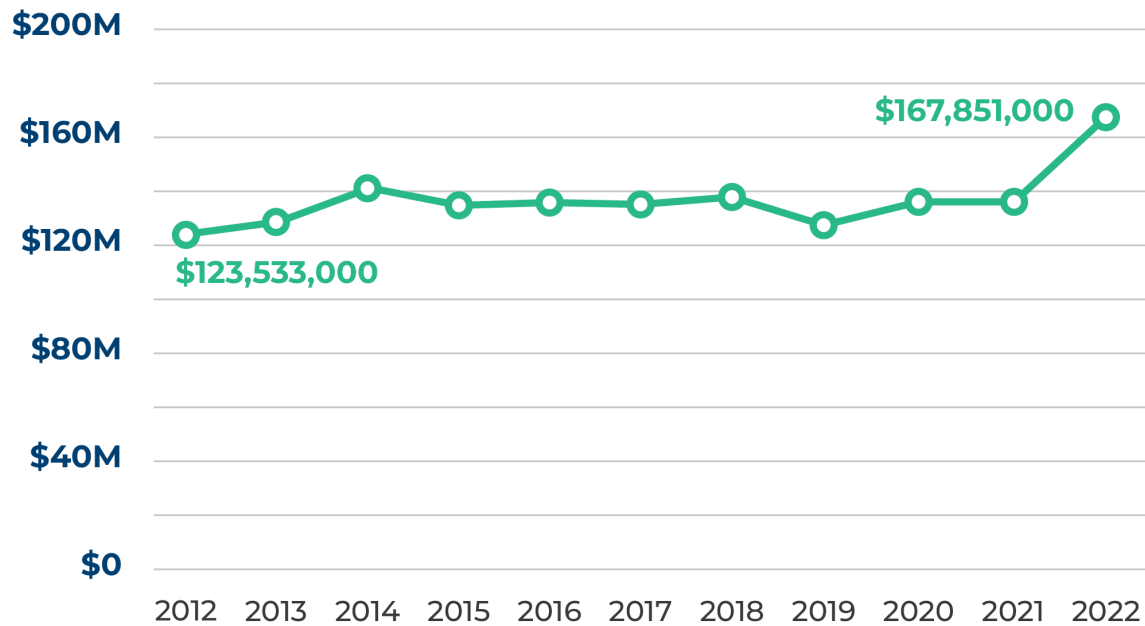


Source: U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis

Farm expenses have similarly fluctuated while trending higher over the last decade. From 2012 to 2022, total farm expenses increased 36% from \$123 million to \$167 million. The rate at which expenses have been increasing has been in concert with the sales increases enjoyed by farmers. From 2021 to 2022, farm expenses increased by \$32 million, from \$135 million to \$167 million.

3. Farm Viability

Chart 6. Farm Production Expenses, 2012–2022

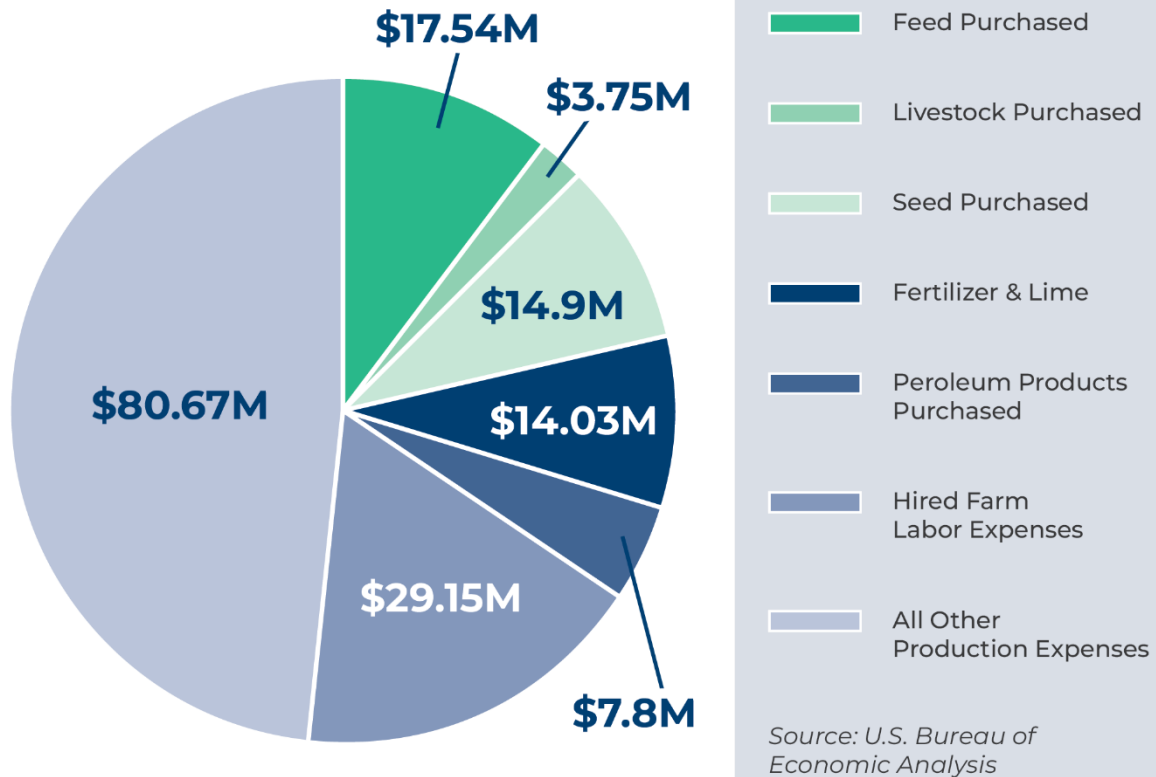


Source: U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis

Production expenses categories include feed, livestock, seed, fertilizer, fuel, labor, and all other production expenses. In 2022, “all other production expenses” represented almost half (48%) of Erie County farm expenses. All other production expenses are expenditures not elsewhere classified incurred by all farms in the production of agricultural commodities during a given calendar year. It consists of repair and operation of machinery; depreciation, interest, rent, and taxes; and other miscellaneous expenses.

3. Farm Viability

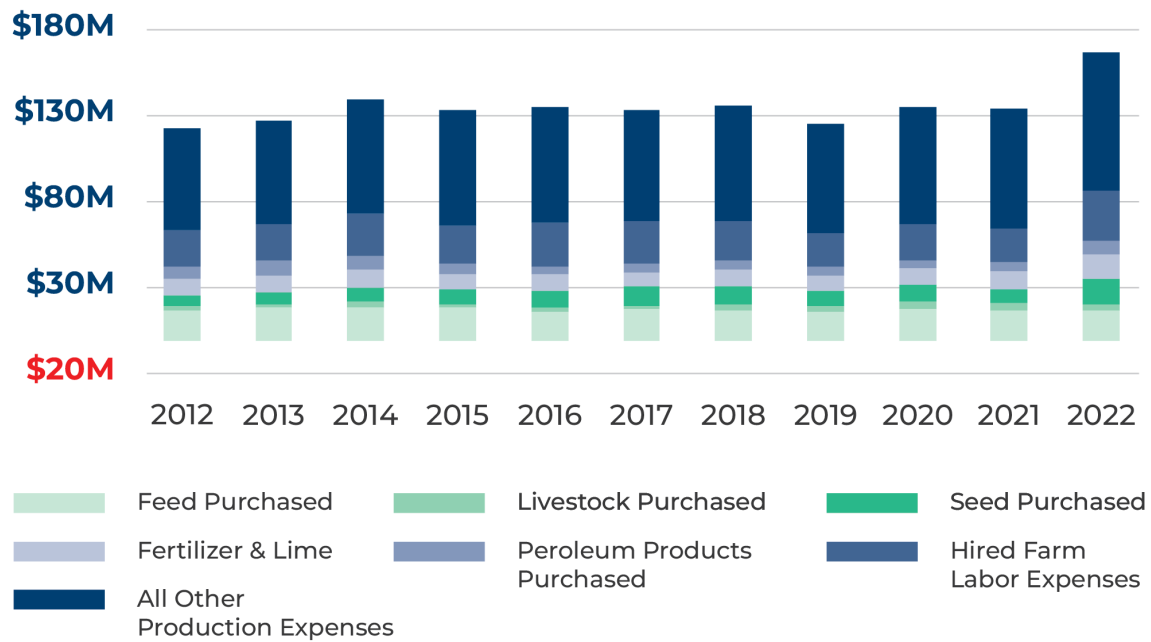
Chart 7. Farm Production Expenses by Category, 2022



Between 2012 and 2022, overall production expenses in Erie County increased \$44 million (a 36% increase). “All other production expenses” has been the largest expense category over the 10 years, increasing \$21 million (36%). “Feed purchased” is the only expense category that decreased over the 10-year period.

3. Farm Viability

Chart 8. Farm Production Expenses by Category, 2022

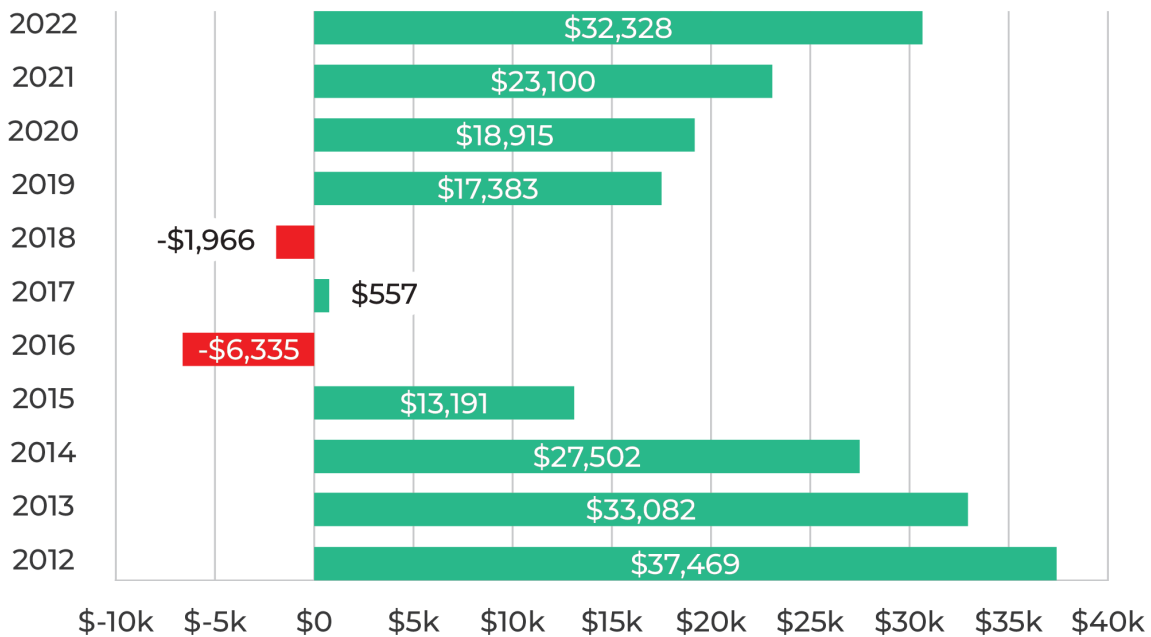


Source: U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis

Total Erie County farm cash receipts have outpaced production expenses in eight out of the past ten years and have increased in the past four years.

3. Farm Viability

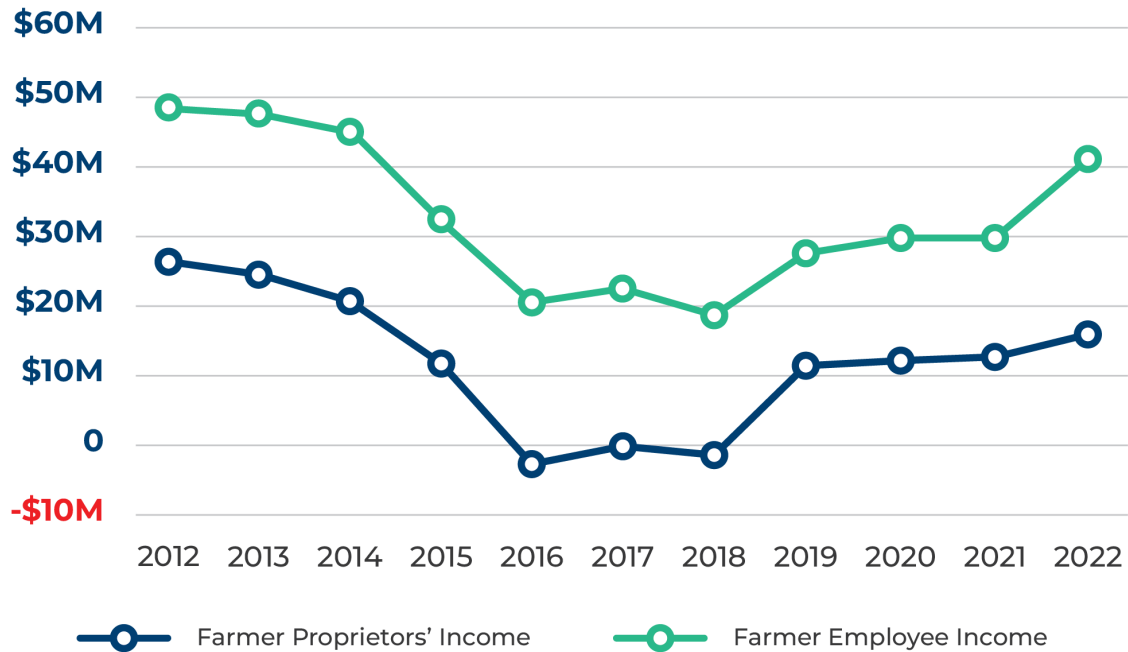
Chart 9. Net Income, 2012–2022



Source: U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis

Farm earnings, defined as the sum of wage and salary disbursements, supplements to wages and salaries, and proprietors' income, have been remarkably volatile over the 10-year period from 2012–2022. Total farm earnings peaked in 2012 at \$48 million, decreased to a low of \$18 million in 2018, and then steadily increased from 2018 to 2022. From 2021 to 2022 alone, earnings jumped from \$11 million to \$40 million. In 2022, high earnings from dairy production had a disproportionate effect on total farm income.

3. Farm Viability

Chart 10. Farm Earnings, Proprietor & Employee, 2012–2022

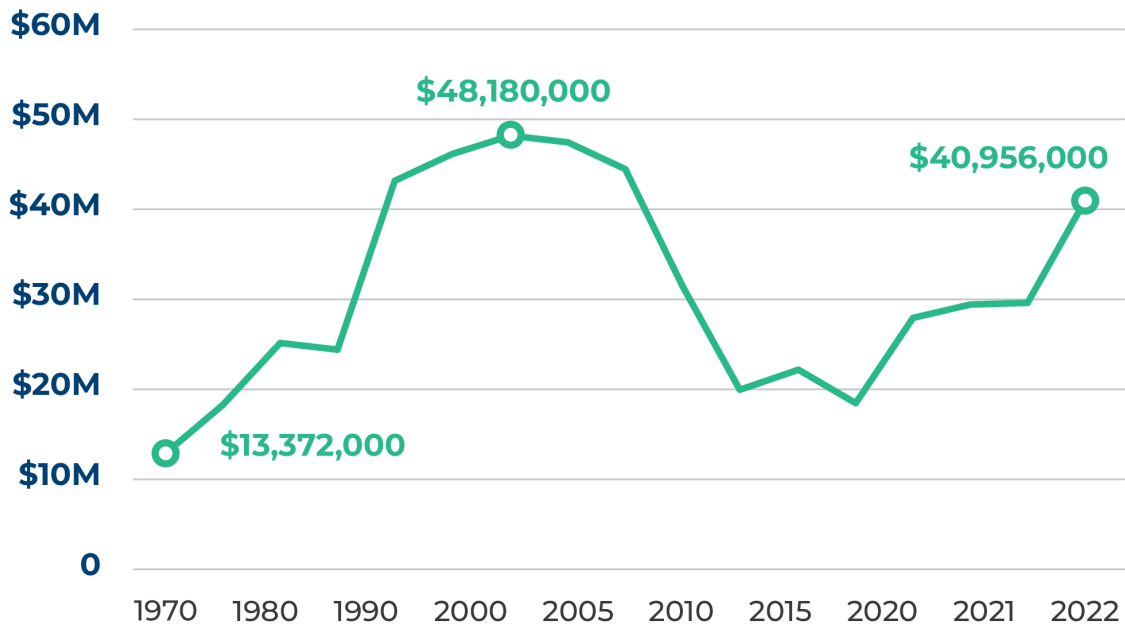
Source: U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis

Proprietor income is an especially volatile component of overall farm earnings. Erie County farm proprietors' earnings ranged from a \$2.2 million loss in 2016 to \$26 million in earnings in 2012 – a \$28 million difference. The 10-year period is characterized by declines from 2012 to 2016 followed by a general period of recovery to 2022. Overall, earnings were \$10 million lower in 2022 than the 2012 high.

Employee earnings were also volatile, but within a much narrower range, fluctuating by \$8.5 million from the 2022 high of \$24 million to the 2016 low of \$16 million. This dynamic makes sense in the context of the farm business. Farm operations, such as the number of animals kept, the acreage in production, and the labor required to manage those operations change more slowly than market prices. Farmers are incentivized to keep good employees and maintain a workforce that matches the scope of their operations. They achieve this by keeping employee compensation as stable as possible. Proprietor earnings therefore become the flexible variable within the farm earning equation, thus leading to steep declines in bad times and sharp increases in good times.

3. Farm Viability

Chart 11. Farm Earnings, 1970–2022



Source: U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis

3.1.3 Farm Labor

According to the 2022 Census of Agriculture, there were 237 farms in Erie County with hired labor. Together, these farms employed 1,799 workers with a total payroll of over \$37 million. The USDA defines hired labor as any paid farm workers, including paid family members. Twenty-two farms report hiring migrant workers, totaling approximately 173 migrant workers in the County. There are 365 farms who report having unpaid workers, totaling 939 unpaid workers. The majority of unpaid workers are likely family members, spouses, or business partners of the farm owner, although the USDA defines unpaid worker in a general sense as any worker not on the payroll. In Erie County, there are more farms with unpaid labor than there are farms with hired labor, and only a small number with migrant labor.

The USDA also counts custom work/custom hauling, a term which includes the hiring of labor and machinery specifically for “planting, spraying, harvesting, preparation of products for marketing, grinding and mixing feed, corn picking, grain drying, and silo filling.” In 2022, 148 farms hired custom work contractors. Importantly, the USDA excludes contract labor from the count of hired labor. Contract labor might include “contractors, crew leaders, cooperatives, or any other

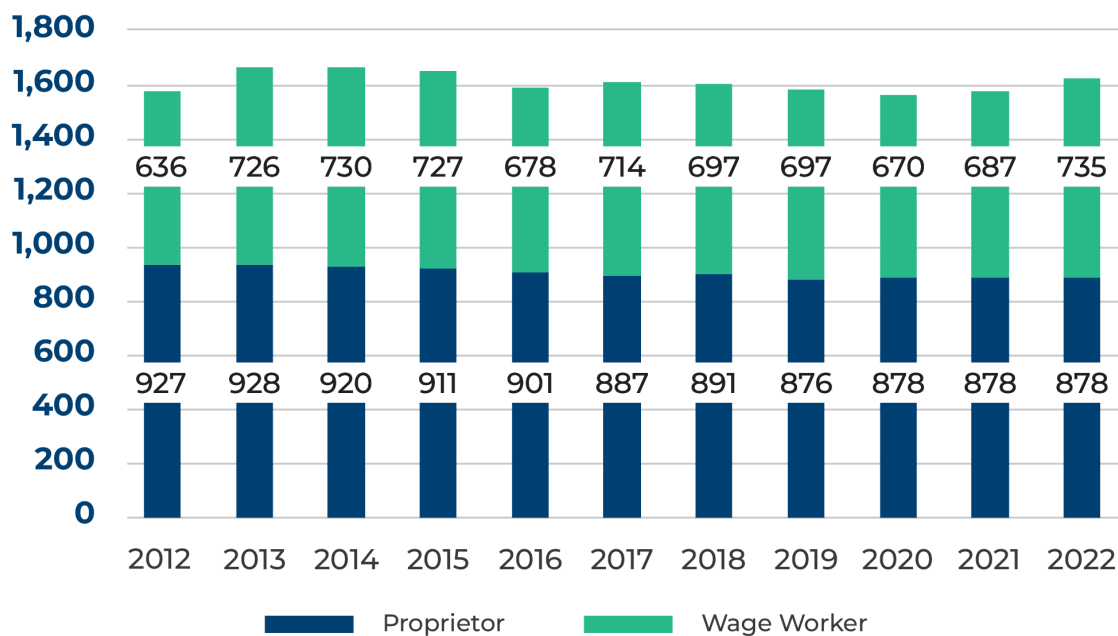
3. Farm Viability

organization hired to furnish a crew of laborers to do a job that may involve one or more agricultural operations.” In 2022, 45 farms in Erie County hired contract labor.

BEA Employment Data

According to 2022 data from the BEA, 1,613 or 0.27% of the 587,498 jobs in Erie County were farm jobs. For comparison, the top three industries by number of employees in Erie County in 2022 were Health Care and Social Assistance (12%), Government and Government Enterprises (12%), and Transportation and Warehousing (10%). Since 2001, farm jobs decreased 26% in Erie County as compared to a 12% decrease over the same period statewide. However, over the past ten years, farm jobs stabilized in Erie County, declining only 1% compared to 3% statewide. In 2001, proprietor employment was 61% of total farm employment, but that gap steadily decreased, and by 2022 the distribution was 54% proprietor employment to 46% wage worker employment.

Chart 12. Farm Proprietor and Farm Employee Jobs, 2012 - 2022



Source: U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis

3. Farm Viability

3.1.4 Markets

Markets for agricultural products from Erie County farms include processors, distributors, wholesalers, retailers, and direct-to-consumer sales. This section outlines the markets for products from Erie County farms. Section 4: Integrated Agricultural Economy documents the larger economic impact of food processing and food system businesses.

3.1.4.1 *Processing*

Processing generally refers to actions such as packaging, washing, cutting/preparing, and sorting food, as well as value-adding processes, such as converting raw milk into yogurt, baking apples into pies, or packaging lettuce heads into salad mixes, for example. Meat processing refers to the entire process of livestock butchering, from transporting live animals to packaging saleable meats.

While some Erie County farm products are processed locally, most are marketed through national or global networks and sent to regional processing plants elsewhere. Dairy farms in Erie County send milk to processing plants in Buffalo and in neighboring counties. Fruit and vegetables that are not intended to be consumed fresh are sent to regional processors for canning, freezing, or manufacturing of other food products. Grains and beans are typically sold through brokers for processing. Farms that raise livestock for meat generally rely on a small number of local meat processing facilities in the region and larger facilities located in Pennsylvania. Farms that raise animals for fiber generally use fiber processors from outside the region.

There are a multitude of food processors in the County, but through interviews, focus groups, and stakeholder meetings, it was learned that Erie County farmers feel that very few are accessible markets to small and/or urban farmers.

For more details regarding the food processing market in Erie County, refer to Section 4.1.1 (Processing) in Section 4: Integrated Agricultural Economy.

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3.1.4.2 *Distributors/Aggregators and Wholesale*

There are several large-scale wholesale food distributors with presences in Erie County, which have clientele such as restaurants, institutions, and retail outlets. U.S. Foods has a location in Cheektowaga and Sysco has a location in Depew, both of which are two of the largest food distribution companies in the country.

Through stakeholder interviews and public meetings, farmers in Erie County have indicated that many have switched to direct-to-consumer sales because of a lack of access to aggregation and distribution companies and/or difficulties in being able to scale up to the amount of food production that would be required to consistently sell to an aggregator/distributor.

For more detail regarding distribution, aggregation, and wholesale markets, refer to Sections 4.1.2: Aggregation/Distribution/Packing/Packaging and 4.13: Wholesale and Retail Markets.

3.1.4.3 *Retail Markets*

Erie County is home to several large retailers, including Wegmans, Tops Friendly Markets, Aldi, and Trader Joe's. Wegmans and Tops are both headquartered in Western New York and have commitments to local farms, often purchasing directly from producers. These retail outlets provide substantial markets for local farms and contribute greatly to Erie County's agricultural industry.

Food cooperatives, including the Lexington Co-op Markets in Buffalo and the East Aurora Co-op Market in East Aurora, offer consumers an alternative to retail stores for retail sale of agricultural products and prioritize partnerships with local farmers and food producers.

For more information regarding retail markets and the farm-to-table business model, refer to Section 4.1.3.2: Retail.

3.1.4.4 *Farm to Institution Sales*

Farm-to-institution activities involve selling farm products to institutions such as schools, hospitals, universities, correctional facilities, and senior living centers to provide fresh, locally produced food. These activities often include direct purchasing agreements, local food procurement policies, and educational initiatives to promote healthy eating and sustainable practices.

Because of the large populations that institutions are responsible for feeding, these markets represent a stable and high-volume opportunity for farms. This is especially true for small- and medium-sized farms, who sometimes need a "leg up" in terms of supply chains and opportunity for economies of scale.

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For more in-depth information regarding farm-to-institution sales, refer to Section 4.1.4: Institutional Sales.

3.1.4.5 Direct-to-Consumer Sales and Agritourism

Direct-to-consumer sales refer to sales made between a producer and consumer without a middleman. Typically, the farmer themselves or their staff or family members make the sale directly and therefore can develop a working relationship with the customer. Direct-to-consumer sales are conducted in a variety of ways, including at farmers markets, through CSAs, and on-farm stores.

According to the 2022 Census of Agriculture, 153 farms in Erie County sold products valued at \$2,615,000 directly to consumers. The number of farms and value of products sold directly to consumers may have declined over the past decade but remains a significant source of revenue for many farms.

Food Marketing Practices

Table 15. Food sold directly to consumers, 2012 - 2022

Food Sold Directly to Consumers	2022	2017	2012
# farms	153	200	211
Value of products sold (\$1,000)	\$2,615	\$3,468	\$3,468

Source: USDA Census of Agriculture, 2022

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Farmers Markets/Farm Stands

Visit Buffalo Niagara (VBN) promotes the region's markets through their webpage and other tourism promotion activities. The contribution of these businesses to the regional economy is more significant than the value of agricultural products alone. Farmers markets in Erie County are outlined in the table below.

Table 16. Farmers Markets

Market Name	Location	Schedule
Alden Farmers Market	Alden	Seasonal
Clarence Hollow Farmers Market	Clarence	Seasonal
Clinton Bailey Farmers Market	Buffalo	Year-round
Delavan-Grider Farmers Market	Buffalo	Seasonal
Downtown Country Market	Buffalo	Seasonal
East Aurora Farmers Market	East Aurora	Seasonal
Eden Farmers Market	Eden	Seasonal
Elmwood Village Farmers Market	Buffalo	Seasonal
Gentner's Commission Market	Springville	Year-round
Hamburg Farmers Market	Hamburg	Seasonal
Holland Farmers Market	Holland	Seasonal
Kenmore Farmers Market	Kenmore	Seasonal
Market at Bassett Park	Amherst	Seasonal
Mrs. Nash's Garden Basket	Buffalo	Seasonal
Providence Farm Collective	Buffalo	Seasonal
South Buffalo Farmers Market	Buffalo	Seasonal
West Seneca Farmers Market	West Seneca	Seasonal
West Shore Farmers Market	Akron	Seasonal
Williamsville Farmers Market	Williamsville	Seasonal

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CSAs

Community Supported Agriculture, also known as CSAs or farm shares, are regular deliveries (or pick-ups) of locally grown farm products on a subscription or membership basis, typically from one farm or a group of farmers. Consumers typically pay in advance and can pick the contents (subject to seasonality), share size, and delivery or pickup day for their products. CSAs have become a popular option since the 1980s as consumers have recognized the importance of agriculture in their communities and sought to directly support farms. By paying in advance, CSA subscribers assist farms by contributing to the financial stability of the farm and sharing in any potential gains and risks to the farm's productivity. Like other forms of direct marketing, CSA farmers receive better prices for their crops, gain some financial stability, and have minimal, or at least lower, marketing/advertising costs. Additional costs or challenges related to a CSA include time spent managing subscriptions and communicating with subscribers, organizing and being present at pickup and delivery times, packing CSA boxes, and growing a wide variety of crops each season, among others.

On-Farm Stores

Some farms sell directly to consumers through roadside stands or on-farm markets. These are a straightforward way of accessing customers and tend to minimize number logistical hurdles for farmers, at least in terms of transporting products and managing a customer base, since the places of production and selling are in the same location. Significant challenges associated with on-farm stores include the cost and materials of building or maintaining the store, keeping the store open/staffed in a way that balances costs and profits, attracting customers who live in other areas, and in some locales, zoning or building codes that prohibit or greatly hinder the potential for on-farm sales.

3.1.5 On-Farm Value Added Enterprises

Farms throughout Erie County incorporate value-added enterprises into their farm operations to expand their revenue and capture a larger share of the value of the product. These include beverages, branded and ready-to-eat foods, direct-to-consumer sales, and agritourism operations.

The Census of Agriculture surveys for information related to these activities. In the first two categories, the Census counts all sales that the farm is directly involved in, but the sale does not need to occur on the farm premises. Sales at off-premises farmers markets and on-premises farm stands are both counted in Table 2 of the Census of Agriculture Food Market Practices data. Similarly, for processed and value-added food, the processing and conversion of the food to a value-added product does not need to occur on the farm or be performed by the farmer, the farmer must have *control* over the production, processing, or marketing of the value-added product for it to be counted. If a farm is involved in creating white label products (produced by one company that

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other companies rebrand to make it appear as if they had made it), the value-added component would be included in their value-added product sales. However, the branding and marketing of the final product would not be attributed to the farm but to the purchasing company. The farm's involvement is counted in terms of its production and processing activities, not the final sale under a different brand. The table below charts data within the three practices of food marketing that the Census of Agriculture tracks.

Table 17. Food Marketing Practices, 2022

Value of Food Sold Directly to Consumers	
Farms	153
Sales (Inflation Adjusted)	\$2,190,254
Value of Food Sold Directly to Retail Markets, Institutions, and Food Hubs for Local or Regionally Branded Products	
Farms	45
Sales (Inflation Adjusted)	\$3,279,936
Value of Processed or Value-Added Agricultural Products Sold	
Farms	153
Sales (Inflation Adjusted)	\$4,213,831

Source: USDA Census of Agriculture, 2022

Raw agricultural products become “value added” when they have been modified or enhanced to have a higher market value and/or a longer shelf life. Value-added agricultural products are typically characterized by one or more of the following:

- a change in the physical state or form of the product
- the production of a product in a manner that enhances its value, as demonstrated through a business plan
- the physical segregation of a commodity or product in a manner that results in the enhancement of the value of that commodity.

A value-added agricultural business may be defined as any activity an agricultural producer performs outside of traditional commodity production to receive a higher return per unit of commodity sold.

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By creating new products from raw commodities, through packaging innovations, or by taking on distribution and storage, the farmer increases the value of the product sold and the farm business captures the increased value that would otherwise be paid to downstream businesses.

Distinctive branding and certifications can also increase the value of an agricultural product that can be captured by the farmer. For example, consumers may be willing to pay more for pasture-fed animal products, certified organic, or local foods.

USDA Definition of a Value-Added Agricultural Product:

Any agricultural commodity or product that:

- Has undergone a change in the physical state or form of the product, such as milling wheat into flour or making strawberries into jam.
- Is produced in a manner that enhances the value of the agricultural commodity or product, such as organically produced products.
- Is physically segregated in a manner that results in the enhancement of the value of that commodity or product, such as an identity preserved product.
- Is a source of farm- or ranch-based renewable energy, including E-85 fuel; or
- Is aggregated and marketed as a locally produced agricultural food product and, as a result of the change in physical state or the manner in which the agricultural commodity or product is produced and segregated, the customer base for the commodity or product is expanded and a greater portion of revenue derived from the marketing, processing, or physical segregation is made available to the producer of the commodity or product.

3.1.5.1 On-farm processing, packing, or packaging

Processing typically refers to the preparing and breaking down/cutting of products into consumable and saleable parts. This may include washing, removing inedible stems and leaves before packaging, or cutting into smaller pieces, such as cubing squash into bite-sized pieces for the ready-to-cook market. The word processing also refers to the different treatments applied to milk to create different dairy products, such as yogurt, butter, cheese, cream, etc. Additionally, it refers to the breaking down of animal carcasses into saleable cuts of meat.

Packing is defined by the United States Food and Drug Administration as “placing food into a container other than packaging” for activities such as “sorting, culling, grading, and weighing or conveying.”

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Packaging, on the other hand, is defined as “placing food into a container that directly contacts the food and that the consumer receives.” For example, a farmer might package blueberries into plastic pint containers, then pack the pints into a case.

3.1.5.2 *Agritourism*

An agritourism business is one where local agriculture and tourism meet to produce an educational, fun, and unique experience. On-farm agritourism activities are as varied as wine/beer/cider tours and tastings, u-pick fields, Halloween pumpkin patches, Christmas tree farms, roadside produce stands, farm field trips, and more. Farmers markets, farm-to-table dinner events, tours of food manufacturing facilities, and agricultural festivals and fairs are also considered agritourism.

U-Pick

U-pick is a unique form of farm operation in which large fields of products are grown and maintained (strawberries, apples, blueberries, flowers, pumpkins, etc.) for the end consumer to pick themselves. U-pick farms spend employee time and resources ensuring consistent supply of the product throughout the season, as well as maintenance. U-pick farms can also easily be considered agritourism, as consumers may consider them a special seasonal experience that they take part in with friends or family. U-pick farms lack several key costs, such as harvesting/packing/packaging labor, retailing costs, packaging costs, and others. However, costs that they may face include customer service personnel and equipment, additional maintenance and production labor before and during the production season, and advertising/marketing materials, among others.

3.1.6 Investment/Financing/Grants

Farms in Erie County have access to a variety of capital sources, including traditional lending organizations like the Farm Credit System, USDA Farm Service Agency, and commercial banks with agricultural lending divisions. Additionally, they can benefit from grants and funding programs such as Municipal Planning Grants through Erie County DEP and Urban Agriculture Grants through NYS AGM. These resources collectively support the growth, sustainability, and economic viability of local farms and food producers.

3. Farm Viability

Profile: Providence Farm Collective

Providence Farm Collective is a 37-acre “incubator” farm in the Town of Orchard Park that provides small plots to individual farmers and community farms. The farm started in 2017 as a pilot project to allow members of the Somali-Bantu community, mostly resettled refugees living in the City of Buffalo who were farmers in their previous home countries, access to high quality farmland where they could grow vegetables and other crops needed to prepare their traditional foods. As of 2024, members of eight diverse communities work land at the collective as community farms and 19 farmers operate small plots as incubator farms.

In 2023, PFC finalized purchase of the land with support from WNYLC. The land is protected from development through a permanent conservation easement.

Farmers interested may apply to PFC to receive access to an incubator plot of up to a quarter acre for the season. PFC provides the initial tilling of the farm plots, provides access to drip irrigation from an on-site pond, and offers education and training workshops through the season.

PFC cooperative members sell produce at the International Farmers Market Saturdays at 130 Grant Street in Buffalo. PFC also offers Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) subscriptions.

To date, more than 200 individuals have accessed farmland at PFC. Nearly 15,000 pounds of fresh, culturally relevant produce to food pantry partners. PFC farmers have generated nearly \$150,000 in sales of farm products.

Regenerative farming practices include use of compost on-site for use as a soil enhancement. With the support of a Climate Resilient Farming Grant from the NYS Department of Agriculture, PFC uses high tunnels to extend the growing system, drip-line irrigation to conserve water, organic pest management, as well as cover crops, intercropping and crop rotation to improve soil health and replenish nutrients.

PFC is supported financially by grants from governments and private foundations, as well as individual donations.



3. Farm Viability

PFC addresses many of the challenges faced by small farms in Erie County:

- The incubator provides **access to high quality farmland** for individual farmers and community groups as well as **education and training in farming and business practices**.
- 37 acres are protected from development through a **permanent conservation easement**.
- As a not-for-profit collective, PFC doesn't fit the definition of "farm operation" in NYS Agricultural Districts Law (AGM Sec. 301) and is **not eligible for the protections** afforded farm operations through the Agricultural District Program.
- Environmentally beneficial practices include on-site composting, water-efficient irrigation and cropping practices to maintain soil health.
- Farmers market in Buffalo and CSA give local residents access to fresh produce.

3.2 Opportunities and Challenges

Supporting the viability of farm businesses is essential to maintaining agriculture in Erie County. Strategies relating to the economic viability of farms in Erie County which pose both opportunities and challenges include:

- Value-added enterprises on farms
- Farmers selling directly to consumers and institutions
- Costs and benefits associated with agritourism enterprises
- Farm succession planning
- New and beginning farmers accessing land and capital
- Revisions to local zoning and changes in code enforcement
- Labor and workforce development
- Crop diversification and reaching new or niche markets

3.2.1 Programs that promote local food and other agricultural products help increase sales from Erie County farms.

Local food promotion programs such as Erie Grown, Taste NY, Eat Local WNY, and Find Fresh Erie help local farms increase sales to local consumers and institutions while enhancing public appreciation of agriculture. Additional information about local food promotion can be found in Section 6.1.2.

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3.2.2 On-farm value-added enterprises such as processing, packing, u-pick, retail, and direct-to-consumer sales can add value to farm products, allow farmers to keep more of the end product's value, and increase farm revenue.

On-farm processing, packing, or packaging

Being able to process, pack, or package goods on-farm has the potential to add substantial value to raw products. In principle, doing these processes on-farm removes one or more middlemen or bottlenecks in the food production timeline. Each middleman or bottleneck poses a loss of revenue that typically cannot be overcome until and unless scales of economy are in place. Each of these poses a series of tradeoffs for the farmer; for example, having animals processed off-farm demands travel time, creates scheduling difficulties, and incurs costs. Processing animals on-farm removes those barriers, but it also requires specialized training on the part of the farmer (or hiring of additional staff), an additional time and scheduling demand, expensive equipment costs, and potentially a lack of access to markets if the facility does not become USDA certified. On-farm processing can make on-farm retail opportunities, such as a farm store or “honor freezer,” easier to accomplish.

Resources/Partners

CCE Erie can help farmers connect to technical assistance (i.e. Cornell AgriTech) to implement processing on their farms. Cornell Cooperative Extension specialists can provide targeted business development consultations with farmers looking to reach new markets.

The USDA also offers the Value-Added Producer Grant (VAPG) program, which was created under the 2018 Farm Bill. Funds can be used to add value-added processes to farm business, to generate new products, create and expand marketing opportunities, and increase producer income. Funds can be received for both planning purposes and working capital. The VAPG is administered by the Office of Rural Development of the USDA. Erie County producers are served by the Batavia Service Center local office of this agency, located in nearby Genesee County.

Organic and Other Certifications

Certifications such as organic or Good Agricultural Practices (GAP) – a voluntary audit to verify that fruits and vegetables are produced, packed, handled, and stored in ways that minimize the risks of microbial food safety hazards – help farmers to distinguish their products and be able to sell at a higher price or to meet requirements of certain markets. For example, Tops, Wegmans, and most larger markets require GAP certification as a requisite for their purchase of certain products.

3. Farm Viability

Resources/Partners

The NYS Grown and Certified Label is a state program that assures consumers that their food was produced using a high standard by requiring producers to adopt food safety standards, i.e., GAP, and enroll in an environmental management program. This voluntary program is one way to increase consumer and aggregator confidence in farm products. New York State offers a GAP certification program, as well as reimbursement for up to \$2,000 for the cost of the GAP audit.

3.2.3 Direct-to-consumer sales offer opportunities for farmers in Erie County to benefit from nearby populations and interest in local food.

Farms that sell products directly to consumers benefit from selling at retail prices. Direct-to-consumer sales options include farmers markets, roadside stands or on-farm shops, CSAs, and online sales. Each of these modes has benefits and costs and farmers must balance their choice of market with time constraints, customer bases, geographical location, and business plans, among other things.

In focus groups and interviews conducted with City of Buffalo farmers, it was found that the prevalence of “honor stands” (roadside stands) is seen as a strength of the urban agricultural ecosystem in Buffalo.

Resources/Partners

Farmers markets and individual farms can be promoted through the Erie Grown brand and Eat Local WNY, two local food promotion programs. Refer to Section 6.1.2 for more information on local food promotion.

Outside of individual farm enterprises, New York State administers a Farmers Market Resiliency Grant Program, which provides funding to farmers markets across the state for “projects such as modernizing the delivery of products; repairing, replacing, or enhancing market infrastructure; and developing or scaling up marketing and outreach efforts.” Farmers markets are operated by different entities across the state, including not-for-profits, municipalities, business improvement districts, chambers of commerce, tribal organizations, and others, depending on the market’s context and history. Awards for the grant range from \$10,000 to \$50,000.

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3.2.4 Sales to wholesalers, large retail outlets or institutions may help farms increase their revenue and access key markets.

Existing aggregation and distribution enterprises such as Eden Valley Growers and Produce Peddlers help farms that do not have sufficient product to sell directly to institutions or retailers to access these markets.

Wholesale and retail food purchasing represent two distinct yet interconnected markets within a county or region, each with unique dynamics and implications for farms. Wholesale food purchasing involves buying large quantities of food, often destined for resale or use in institutional settings like schools, hospitals, or correctional facilities. It requires compliance with stringent food safety standards, such as GAP (Good Agricultural Practices) certification or FSMA (Food Safety Modernization Act) regulations, and typically involves long-term contracts with distributors or institutional buyers. Wholesale transactions demand high volumes, standardized products, and advanced logistics, allowing for lower per-unit pricing but requiring significant infrastructure on the part of the farm.

In contrast, retail food purchasing caters to individual consumers, often through direct sales at farmers markets, farm stands, or local grocery stores. Food safety requirements are less formalized than in wholesale markets, though still regulated, and the transaction process is more straightforward, with smaller volumes and higher per-unit prices. Retail markets offer greater flexibility for farms, particularly smaller operations, and enable producers to build community relationships and brand loyalty.

These markets overlap and interact in various ways. Farms may participate in both, using wholesale sales to secure steady income while leveraging retail sales to diversify their customer base. Excess inventory from wholesale channels often finds its way into retail markets, while a robust retail presence can serve as a marketing tool for wholesale opportunities. Regional food systems, such as food hubs, can further integrate these markets by aggregating products from smaller farms for wholesale while supporting direct-to-consumer retail sales. Additionally, initiatives like farm-to-school programs often combine wholesale procurement with retail-style local sourcing, creating opportunities for farms to reach multiple market channels. Together, wholesale and retail purchasing dynamics contribute to a resilient and interconnected local food system.

See also Section 4.1.3: Wholesale and Retail Markets.

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3.2.5 Targeted investments in capacity building can help farms engaged in wholesaling and off-farm retail sales increase both volume and profit margins. Small and mid-sized farms can benefit from technical assistance, training, and operational support to successfully enter these markets.

Farms that have already engaged in wholesale and off-farm retail sales—often mid-sized to large operations—have typically overcome early challenges related to pricing, outreach, packing, food safety, and regulatory compliance. For these farms, high-impact investments in facility upgrades (e.g., cold storage, packhouses), equipment (e.g., production and packing machinery, fleet vehicles), and IT systems can significantly enhance productivity and profitability. Erie County can support these efforts by connecting farms with funding sources or fostering partnerships within the supply chain to address barriers and drive economic growth.

For smaller farms new to wholesale and off-farm retail markets, navigating pricing, contracts, regulatory requirements, and administrative systems can feel overwhelming. To bridge this gap, Erie County can partner with organizations like CCE to provide training, resources, and guidance. These efforts can demystify wholesale processes and identify key investments needed for small and mid-sized farms to successfully enter and compete in these markets.

3.2.6 Agritourism enterprises can increase farm revenue.

Agritourism (tours, u-pick, events, lodging, etc.) can add to farm revenue and has the added benefit of increasing public appreciation of agriculture. Challenges include the need to create and implement an additional business plan for the agritourism operation. Local government regulations are also an issue (farm-to-table events, requirements for special use permits, etc.)

By providing enjoyable and memorable services and experiences for visitors, agritourism increases public appreciation of agriculture and contributes positively to the region's agricultural identity. Farmers who sell products directly to consumers often take the opportunity to educate consumers about agricultural products and processes.

Agritourism activities on farms can increase farmers' income by creating additional revenue streams to supplement income from sales of farm products. Alternatively, farms can and do orient themselves entirely around agritourism, i.e., only offering Christmas trees during the winter season without a spring or summer enterprise. In cases where farmers are not supported by off-farm jobs, though, year-round opportunities may be more desirable. For instance, a small farm may produce pumpkins and apples for the fall, taking advantage of the Halloween season, but may grow other fruits, vegetables, and flowers for the spring and summer to ensure year-round cash flow.

Agritourism can provide farmers with an opportunity to tap into new markets, such as families with young children, couples on vacation or looking for a fun night out, consumers looking to support local agriculture more directly, and field trips taken by schools or other groups, etc. However, it can also come with significant costs and hurdles. Adding an agritourism component to a farm requires a new or additional business plan. Depending on the scale of the enterprise, it may require new

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infrastructure, employees, and insurance. It may also involve breaking into a new market with established competitors (for instance, building a farm-related wedding venue and now competing with other wedding venues in the area). On the other hand, creating an agritourism enterprise within an area already known to be a destination could be beneficial and reduce marketing costs (such as opening a winery on an already established regional wine trail). Agritourism enterprises certainly require market research and likely require significant start-up capital.

3.2.7 Farm succession planning can help farms transition to a new generation.

Succession planning is an important issue for farmers for ensuring the long-term economic viability of agriculture. Succession planning (sometimes also called transition planning) is the planning ahead for the passing down of farm businesses from one generation to the next. According to the 2022 USDA Census of Agriculture, the average age of a producer in Erie County is 56.6 years, and the average number of years of experience is 24.4. In Erie County, there are approximately 184 producers aged 34 or younger, yet there are over 1,400 producers aged 35 and older⁴. Many older producers have no plan for the succession of the farm business for a variety of reasons. There has been a trend within the last few decades of younger generations, such as the farmer's children or grandchildren, frequently being disinterested in inheriting the farm. Furthermore, farm managers or partners from outside the family are often difficult to find, train, and prepare for farm ownership. Lack of a succession plan may result in the land being sold and converted to non-agricultural usage, which could go against the wishes of the original owner and diminish the area's agricultural industry.

Succession planning involves both the process of finding a successor and preparing for transferring ownership of the farm to the successor. Transferring ownership is often a years-long process that involves developing relationships, hands-on training and experience, taking on responsibilities, and having discussions with professionals such as accountants, appraisers, financial advisors, and lawyers, all of which have costs involved. There are several potential legal mechanisms for transferring land and asset ownership, and a succession plan will outline which one(s) will be used and how, as well as how taxes will be handled.

⁴ The USDA defines a producer as "a person who is involved in making decisions for the farm operation. Decisions may include decisions about such things as planting, harvesting, livestock management, and marketing. The producer may be the owner, a member of the owner's household, a hired manager, a tenant, a renter, or a sharecropper. If a person rents land to others or has land worked on shares by others, he/she is considered the producer only of the land which is retained for his/her own operation."

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Resources/Partners

The primary organization working in succession planning and connecting landholders to land seekers is the American Farmland Trust through their Farms for a New Generation (FNG) program. FNG provides resources to farmers and ranchers on the topics of land access and succession planning as well as overseeing a network of programs across the country which connect land seekers to land holders. The program in New York is called Farmland for a New Generation New York and is operated in partnership with the NYS Department of Agriculture and Markets. FNG New York has a Farmland Owner Hub which is a searchable online database of landowners who want to make their land available to farmers.

CCE Erie is one of the organizations tasked with hosting a Great Lakes Regional Navigator, a position which facilitates connections between farmers, landowners, and land seekers in the Western New York region. LifeSource Systems also received grants from AFT through this program to support transition planning and assistance to new farmers.

NY FarmNet is another program which provides succession planning/business transfer advice, assistance, and resources, in addition to many other services that farmers utilize. These include retirement and estate planning, financial analysis, and business planning. FarmNet also conducts consultations for concerns such as family communication, stress and emotional issues, relationship concerns, and many other mental health issues for farmers and their families. NY FarmNet is operated by Cornell University.

3.2.8 Support for new, beginning, and small farms

There are many populations interested in getting into farming that do not necessarily come from a farming background or have a farm to inherit/purchase. “New” farmers, such as immigrant and refugee populations, seek agricultural land to grow culturally appropriate produce for themselves and to sell as an income stream. Additionally, there are many young and beginning farmers who are interested in starting or taking over farms but face major difficulties in securing land, obtaining capital, and hiring labor.

Existing and potential farmers in Erie County report that obtaining small plots of land (usually less than 10 acres) is seemingly impossible, especially for new and beginning farmers with less capital on hand. Larger plots of land are generally untenable for these groups from both a cost and management perspective.

Rural and urban farmers alike identified lack of support for new, beginning, and small farmers as an opportunity for Erie County to strengthen its agricultural industry. Farmers noted a lack of grant programs and technical training for small farms and a lack of local laws and policies which support and encourage small farms as obstacles for these groups to get into farming.

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Resources

There are several farm incubator and community garden enterprises in Erie County which provide small land plots to new farmers to help kickstart their farm businesses, including PFC and Grassroots Gardens WNY.

Providence Farm Collective owns 37 acres of prime farmland in the Town of Orchard Park and operates a 3-year Incubator Farm Program, which provides immigrant and refugee farmers the opportunity to start their own farm and develop a business on a quarter acre of land. In addition, farmers receive access to agricultural and business training and assistance, marketing opportunities, and necessary agricultural tools and inputs.

Grassroots Gardens WNY is an umbrella organization for community gardens in Buffalo and Niagara Falls that provides technical assistance and resources and secures funding to the independent organizations which operate the gardens. GGWNY also provides youth gardening education programs, gardening accessibility to those with disabilities, therapeutic gardening programs, and Freedom Gardens, which is designed to foster food sovereignty in Buffalo households affected by COVID-19 and food apartheid.

CCE Erie regularly promotes trainings (Cornell Small Farms and others) for small and beginning farmers.

CCE Niagara previously offered a **Beginning Farmer Training Program**, a four-month course taught in the field and in the classroom, based out of CCE Niagara's facility in Lockport. Trainings offered by CCE Niagara were open to Erie County farmers. The program focused on market gardening, which is the intense production of high-value crops for sale. The program instructed on topics including crop production, small-scale farm management, and entrepreneurial skills development. Individuals who completed the program were awarded a Certificate in Market Gardening. This program is currently (2025) on hold due to lack of sufficient funding and staff.

CCE Erie and the **Greater Buffalo Urban Growers Group (GBUG)** also provide networks and resources to urban farmers, many of whom fall under the new/beginning/small farmer umbrella.

Currently, many of the grants, loans, and other resources available to new/beginning/small farmers are provided by the USDA. Grants and loans are available for purchasing farms, operating costs, natural disasters and emergencies, and more. The USDA also offers microloans (less than \$50,000), which are specifically designed to assist small, beginning, niche, and non-traditional farmers, including direct-to-consumer enterprises, which are very common in Erie County. By statute, the USDA also has targeted funding for minority and women farmers applying for loans through the Department.

In August 2024, the USDA announced updates to their farm loan programs intended to increase opportunities for farmers and ranchers. These changes include the option of deferring installments at a reduced interest rate, flexibility in repayment terms, and reducing loan security requirements

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(collateral). The terms are designed to ease the burdens on new and financially distressed farmers and ranchers.

3.2.9 Local zoning and code enforcement can be revised to accommodate agriculture-related secondary businesses on farms and nearby parcels.

Farms seeking to add processing, retail sales, or other agriculture-related businesses to their operation may find obstacles in local zoning regulations. Farm stores, creameries, soapmaking, animal boarding, lumber and milling, meat processing, etc. are all types of secondary business that are related to agriculture and may be core elements of a farmer's business plan that could be beneficial to the local tax base but are not allowed based on zoning regulations as written. Additionally, certain types of businesses may have additional impacts on neighbors and the community such as traffic and noise.

Municipalities need to balance the benefits to farm businesses with the impacts on the surrounding community.

3.2.10 Hired farm labor may allow farms to scale up, but may be prohibitively expensive, especially for smaller farms.

In focus groups, interviews, and surveys, Erie County farmers expressed that labor is a challenge for them. Being able to afford hired labor, obtaining legal migrant labor, and dealing with increased state and federal regulations, including wage increases, has made it more difficult for farms to remain profitable.

Workers hired through the federal H2A visa program are entitled to a minimum wage, which increased to \$17.80 per hour on January 1, 2024. They are also entitled to free housing with a kitchen and cooking facilities (or meals, if cooking facilities are not provided). H2A employers are also required to provide transportation for workers to and from their lodging, grocery stores, and other necessary locations. The H2A visa process is also expensive for employers, sometimes resulting in administrative costs totaling \$2,000 per worker. Uncertainty regarding funding and staffing of federal programs and departments may have an impact on the availability and timely administration of the H2A visa process.

Farming is, by nature, unrestricted to standard working hours. It persists regardless of weather conditions and may not provide competitive benefits such as vacation time. Many small farmers often depend on the unpaid or low-paid labor of their family members, which can be unreliable over the long term since not all family members are interested in working on the farm indefinitely, or in inheriting farms from their elders.

When family is not an option for farm management, owners may look to hire qualified farm managers. Increasingly, farm managers from outside the family are being given ownership of the farm when the original owner passes away, retires, or otherwise transfers ownership, which is a

3. Farm Viability

viable option for planning for farm succession. Smaller farms may not have the capital to hire a dedicated farm manager from outside the family. In interviews and focus groups, it was found that many Erie County farmers do not have succession plans in place for their farms and do not have hired managers or employees. Finding managers or successors may be in their long-term plan, but they have not taken steps towards it yet.

The lack of locally based non-family agricultural workers was identified by farmers as one of the main threats to their continued success. For all intents and purposes, there are essentially no resources in Erie County for finding and hiring suitable farm labor. There are some workforce development efforts taking place in Erie County for farm labor, but this pool of workers is not currently easily accessible. Refer to Section 4.1.6: Workforce Development for more information.

3.2.11 Crop Diversification

As new markets emerge and farmers adapt to changes in climate, regulation, or land availability, diversification of crops can lead to new opportunities. Certain niche products may be profitable when sold directly to consumers. Urban growers are exploring opportunities with vertical farming and hydroponics and aeroponics. Cannabis is a new legal market in New York State that may present opportunities to local farmers. Hemp is also a growing market that was unlocked with the legalization of cannabis production. However, difficulties have arisen in navigating the legality of hemp (as it does contain the same chemical substance as cannabis), as well as in the accessibility of processing facilities and markets for hemp.

3.2.12 Farm Stress Management

Farmers and their families constantly manage stress when dealing with challenges from finances, weather, employees, family or personal situations, and more. NY FarmNET has compiled [resources](#) to help farmers and family members identify the warning signs of stress and how to help.

3. Farm Viability

3.3 Goals, Policies and Recommended Actions

Goal: *Maintain and enhance the economic viability of Erie County farms.*

Policies and Recommended Actions

1. Continue to promote local farm products and agritourism operations on farms.
 - a. Maintain support for the Erie Grown and Erie Grown Passport programs.

Lead: DEP, CCE Erie
Partners: NYS AGM
 - b. Continue to promote local agricultural products and on-farm attractions through the Erie Grown Passport, Taste NY, and I Love New York tourism promotions and increased marketing support via VBN and other programs.

Lead: DEP, VBN
Partners: CCE Erie
2. Encourage and assist farmers to incorporate direct-to-consumer sales and other value-added enterprises into their farm operations.
 - a. Provide information to farm operators on grant funding and sources of technical assistance to help them add processing packing or obtain certifications.

Lead: CCE Erie via Taste NY
Partners: NYS AGM, Farm Credit East, USDA
 - b. Consider adding CSAs to list of providers for Erie County government wellness benefits for employees.

Lead: Erie County
Partners: N/A
3. Support local governments in maintaining and revising farm-friendly land use regulations.
 - a. Continue to provide funding for municipalities to update zoning regulations through the Erie County Municipal Planning Grant Program

Lead: DEP
Partners: Municipalities
 - b. Work with municipalities to revise local zoning laws to:
 - Eliminate provisions in zoning and other land use regulations that unreasonably restrict standard farm practices (see local zoning evaluations in Appendix C);

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- Accommodate roadside stands, on-farm markets, agritourism, and other value-added enterprises on farms. Ensure that permitting procedures and review criteria are not unreasonably restrictive;
- Accommodate secondary businesses on farms, such as retail stores, agricultural byproduct processing, agritourism, etc., subject to appropriate safeguards.

Lead: DEP

Partners: Municipalities

- c. Work with local code enforcement officers to interpret building code regulations to avoid unreasonable restrictions on farm operations.

Lead: DEP

Partners: Municipalities, NYS AGM, CCE Erie

4. Encourage and support farm transition and succession planning.

- a. Encourage continued support for FarmNET, FNG, Regional Navigators and other programs that help farmers with succession/transition planning.

Lead: CCE Erie

Partners: AFT (Regional Navigator position at CCE Erie), FarmNET (Cornell University), WNYLC

5. Support programs to help farmers manage stress.

- a. Provide information to farmers and their families about resources to help identify and manage stress.

Lead: FarmNET

Partners: CCE Erie, NYS Office of Mental Health

6. Reduce barriers for new and beginning farmers.

- a. Provide information about existing programs and funding, including AFT's Farmland for a New Generation Regional Navigator program.

Lead: CCE Erie

Partners: AFT, WNYLC

3. Farm Viability

7. Advocate for State and Federal policies to improve access to qualified and affordable farm labor.

- a. Work with Farm Bureau to advocate for programs that help farms obtain suitable workers and for changes in State and Federal farm labor regulations that would benefit farms in Erie County.

Lead: New York Farm Bureau (NYFB)

Partners: FPC, NYFB, State and Federal legislators

8. Prepare Erie County youth for careers in agriculture and food systems.

- a. Encourage and support programs such FFA, BOCES, and 4-H for youth to increase awareness and develop skills that would be useful in farm jobs.

Lead: CCE Erie, BOCES, School Districts

Partners: FPC, NYS AGM

- b. Encourage Erie Community College and other institutions to include opportunities for agricultural careers, including internships, or connect current curriculum to areas relevant to farm management, including partnerships with other schools with specialties, such as the meat processing certificate from SUNY Cobleskill.

Lead: DEP

Partner: ECC, Erie County Farm Bureau, CCE Erie

9. Encourage internships or apprenticeships on farms and agriculture related businesses.

- a. Facilitate connections between farmers and agricultural education institutions to network and provide information for those interested in establishing internships or apprenticeships on farms and agricultural related businesses.

Lead: DEP

Partners: USDA (grants), CCE Erie, NYS AGM

10. Encourage farms to consider diversifying crops in response to changing markets and climate.

- a. Provide information to farmers about sources of funding and technical assistance to introduce new products.

Lead: CCE Erie

Partners: NYS AGM

3. Farm Viability

11. Support workforce development, apprenticeships, training, youth education

- a. Continue to support organizations conducting workforce development and education in the agriculture sector and related fields, focusing on the need for locally based agriculture workers and future farmers in the county.

Lead: BOCES

Partners: Workforce Investment Board, Colleges and universities, school districts, CCE Erie

12. Connect small and mid-sized farms interested in institutional and wholesale markets to training and technical assistance to support their successful entry into these markets.

- a. Provide information to farms about training programs, resources, and partners that could help them market to institutions.

Lead: DEP, CCE Erie

Partners: NYS AGM (funding)

- b. Facilitate connections and training opportunities with training providers such as CCE Harvest NY.

Lead: CCE Erie

Partners: NYS AGM (funding)

13. Support efforts to inform farm operations about sources of funding for capital investments, marketing and other needs and encourage farms to prepare in advance for opportunities.

- a. Provide information about potential grant opportunities and encourage farms to prepare project concepts in advance for potential grant opportunities so that farms are competitive when relevant funding opportunities arise.

Lead: Farm Credit East/lenders

Partners: DEP, CCE Erie

- b. To the greatest extent possible, adapt existing economic development funding resources to support farm investment needs, e.g. microenterprise funds, USDA Rural Development Revolving Loan Funds, etc.

Lead: ECIDA

Partners: USDA Rural Development, DEP

4. Integrated Agricultural Economy

4.1 Current Conditions and Trends – Agriculture-Related Industries

Agriculture-related industries include businesses that provide goods or services to farmers that contribute to the production of farm products (inputs), as well as processing, aggregation, distribution, packing, packaging, wholesale and retail operations that add value to the farm product.

As shown in the following graphic, agriculture-related industries are significant components of the overall food system. This Agricultural and Farmland Protection Plan focuses on the farming and agriculture-related business components of the food system as they relate to Erie County farms and businesses. Other plans and studies have addressed the regional food system in more detail.

Figure 2. Food system diagram



Source: Vermont Farm to Place

4. Integrated Agricultural Economy

4.1.1 Processing

Processing generally refers to actions such as packaging, washing, cutting/preparing, and sorting food, as well as value-adding processes, such as converting raw milk into yogurt, baking apples into pies, or packaging lettuce heads into salad mixes, for example. Meat processing refers to the entire process of livestock butchering, from transporting live animals to packaging saleable meats.

Erie County possesses a broad and diverse array of processors and processing capabilities. **Food manufacturing in Erie County generated \$3.2 billion in sales** (3% of the County total) in 2022 and **employed approximately 6,557 people**, according to data compiled through an IMPLAN economic analysis. Operations range from large, multi-national companies to small and medium-sized local businesses engaged in value-added food processing.

Table 18. Erie County Food Manufacturing Output, 2022

Industry Sector	Total Output	% of Total
Fluid milk manufacturing	\$937,317,282	29%
Flour milling	\$369,874,778	12%
Frozen specialties manufacturing	\$265,583,829	8%
Dog and cat food manufacturing	\$244,902,579	8%
Other food manufacturing sectors	\$1,398,599,566	43%
Total	\$3,216,278,034	100%

Source: IMPLAN

The largest processing industries in Erie County are dairy, primarily fluid milk; flour milling; frozen specialties manufacturing, and dog and cat food manufacturing. With the closure of a Tyson Foods plant in Buffalo in 2014, there are no longer any large-scale meat processors in Erie County. Today, meat processing in the County is on a small scale compared to other food processing sectors, though the total output in 2022 was worth over \$150 million.

The County's processing capabilities are largely driven either by its relationship to local and regional agricultural production or the presence of processing specialists. The dairy industry exemplifies the connection between production and processing. In 2022, dairy cattle and milk production was the County's largest agricultural production sector at \$74 million in economic output (36% of all production output) according to data from IMPLAN. This production is supported by substantial processing capabilities to bring liquid milk to market. In 2022, fluid milk manufacturing comprised 29% of all Erie County food processing output, more than double the next largest standalone sector.

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Notable processors in the fluid milk manufacturing sector include Lactalis American Group (City of Buffalo) and Upstate Niagara Cooperative (City of Buffalo). Located in northeastern Erie County in the Village of Akron is the Perry's Ice Cream plant, which distributes ice cream products to all major retailers in Erie County (and the East Coast) and sources nearly all its milk from local farms.

The County's strength in flour milling is an example of a processing capacity driven more by the presence of a high output processing specialist than its relationship to local production. General Mills operates a major production facility in the City of Buffalo, which heavily contributes to the County's \$937 million in flour milling output, which is far in excess of its \$1.7 million in grain farming output.

The same is true for frozen specialties and manufacturing and dog and cat food manufacturing. Rich Products located in the City of Buffalo has expanded its portfolio of specialty food to include a wide array of food products, such as bakery items, desserts, pizzas, appetizers, and toppings. Operating in more than 100 countries, the company has grown from a small family-owned business into a significant player in the global food market and a major contributor to the County's processing output. Nutrablend, located in the Town of Lancaster, is a division of the Land O' Lakes company and is an outsized contributor to the County's dog and cat food manufacturing output. Its facility in Lancaster plays a crucial role in producing and supplying premixes, vitamins, and minerals essential for livestock and poultry nutrition. Additionally, the Milk-Bone plant in the City of Buffalo produces all of the Milk-Bone dog treats that are sold in the United States.

Erie County's diverse processing capabilities also support smaller but vital industry sectors within its integrated agricultural economy. Meat processing, for example, generated over \$153 million in 2022, driven by operations like Alliance Farm Butchery, Erba Verde Farms, and the Lackawanna Halal Market. Value-added food producers, including Steuben Foods, Treehouse Foods, Pellicano Foods, and Del Monte Foods, support multiple sectors and regional agricultural production. Additionally, Fruit Fresh Up specializes in minimally processed fruits and vegetables, serving retail chains, local distributors, and farm-to-school programs, further connecting farmers to cafeterias.

Some notable companies located in Erie County include:

- **Lactalis American Group, Buffalo.** Part of the global dairy giant Lactalis Group, Lactalis American Group operates a facility in Buffalo which is a key hub for the production and distribution of a wide range of dairy products, including popular brands like Président, Galbani, and Sorrento. Lactalis' Buffalo plant is integral to the company's U.S. operations and specializes in the production of Italian-style cheeses such as mozzarella, ricotta, and provolone. The facility was originally part of the Sorrento Cheese Company before being acquired by Lactalis. Today, the Buffalo plant is one of the largest cheese manufacturers in the area.

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- **Upstate Niagara Cooperative, Buffalo and West Seneca.** Upstate Niagara Cooperative is a farmer-owned cooperative headquartered in Buffalo. Raw milk from member dairy farms across Western New York is processed and packaged for distribution under well-known brands such as Upstate Farms, Bison, and Intense Milk. Facilities in Erie County include a fluid milk and ice cream plant in Buffalo and a facility in West Seneca that manufactures cultured milk products.
- **Steuben Foods, Elma.** Steuben Foods is a leading aseptic (shelf-stable) food and beverage manufacturer, known for its advanced processing and packaging capabilities. The Elma facility is a state-of-the-art production site where a wide range of shelf-stable products, including dairy, plant-based beverages, soups, and sauces, are manufactured. As a pioneer in aseptic processing, Steuben Foods ensures that its products maintain freshness and quality without the need for preservatives or refrigeration.
- **Treehouse Foods, Tonawanda.** Treehouse Foods specializes in private-label food and is known for its focus on supplying retail grocery chains with high-quality, cost-effective alternatives to national brands and beverage products. Its manufacturing facility in the City of Tonawanda is a key part of its extensive network of production sites across the country. The Tonawanda plant produces primarily snacks, condiments, and dry packaged foods and the facility is equipped with advanced manufacturing technologies that ensure the consistency and quality of the products made there.
- **Pellicano Specialty Foods, Buffalo.** Pellicano Specialty Foods, based in Buffalo, is a family-owned company that has been producing high-quality specialty sauces, marinades, and dressings for over three decades. The company's Buffalo facility is where it crafts a variety of products, often inspired by traditional Italian recipes, for both retail and food service industries.
- **Fruit Fresh Up, Depew.** Established in 1959, Fruit Fresh Up is a leading processor and distributor of fresh-cut fruit and vegetables. The company specializes in producing ready-to-eat, pre-cut fruit and vegetable products for both retail and food service markets. Known for its commitment to quality and food safety, Fruit Fresh Up employs advanced processing techniques to ensure the freshness and nutritional value of its products. The Depew facility is equipped with state-of-the-art technology, enabling efficient production and distribution across the region. By focusing on convenience and innovation, Fruit Fresh Up plays a crucial role in providing healthy, fresh produce options to consumers while supporting the local economy through job creation and community involvement.

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- **NutraBlend Foods, Lancaster.** NutraBlend, part of Land O'Lakes, specializes in the manufacturing and distribution of premixes, vitamins, and minerals essential for livestock and poultry nutrition. Their Lancaster facility is known for its advanced blending and production capabilities, ensuring that high-quality nutritional products are delivered to farms and agricultural operations across the country.
- **Milk-Bone, Buffalo.** Milk-Bone, owned by J.M. Smucker Co., is a leading producer of dog treats. The Buffalo plant, located on Urban Street, opened in 1957 as the company's second location. The plant currently employs about 280 people. In March 2025, a multi-million-dollar project was announced to build an expansion to the plant that would add a new processing line and additional freezer capacity. All the Milk-Bone dog treats sold in the United States are produced at the Buffalo plant.
- **Del Monte Foods, Buffalo.** Del Monte Foods' Buffalo facility specializes in the production and packaging of canned fruits, vegetables, and other food products. This plant, part of Del Monte's extensive network, has been a staple in the community for decades, providing employment and contributing to the local economy.
- **General Mills, Buffalo.** General Mills' Buffalo facility has been operating since 1904. This facility produces some of the company's most iconic products, including Cheerios and other cereals. Situated along the Buffalo River, the plant is notable for its large grain silos and milling operations.
- **Rich Products, Buffalo.** A prominent global food company known for its innovative contributions to the food industry, Rich Products was established in 1945 by Robert E. Rich, Sr. The company gained recognition for creating the world's first non-dairy whipped topping, which was a groundbreaking development at the time. Over the decades, Rich Products has expanded its portfolio to include a wide array of food products, such as bakery items, desserts, pizzas, appetizers, and toppings. Operating in more than 100 countries, the company has grown from a small family-owned business into a significant player in the global food market.
- **Coca-Cola Beverages Northeast, Tonawanda.** Coca-Cola operates a significant distribution and bottling facility in the Town of Tonawanda which serves as a key hub for the Company's operations in the Western New York region. The facility is involved in the bottling, packaging, and distribution of a wide range of Coca-Cola products, including sodas, juices, and other beverages. This site plays a crucial role in ensuring the timely and efficient delivery of Coca-Cola products to retailers, restaurants, and other customers throughout the region.
- **Goya Foods Great Lakes, Angola.** Goya Foods Great Lakes facility in Angola produces canned goods for the Goya label, the largest Hispanic-owned food company in the United States.
- **Breweries.** Local breweries located in Erie County include Big Ditch, Community Beer Works, Flying Bison, Resurgence, Hamburg Brewing, and many others. Additionally, while Labatt beer is brewed in Canada and Rochester, NY, Labatt USA is headquartered in Buffalo. Some local breweries give their spent grain to farmers as livestock feed.

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Distilleries. Craft distilleries in Erie County include Lakeward Spirits, Lockhouse Distillery, Tommyrotter Distillery, Buffalo Distilling Company, and many more.

These companies are part of a vibrant ecosystem in Erie County that includes advanced manufacturing processes, substantial investment in new technologies, and a commitment to economic growth and job creation in the region.

Table 19. Total Output by Food Manufacturing Sectors, 2022

Industry Sector	Total Output	% of Total
Fluid milk manufacturing	\$937,317,282	29%
Flour milling	\$369,874,778	12%
Frozen specialties manufacturing	\$265,583,829	8%
Dog and cat food manufacturing	\$244,902,579	8%
Ice cream and frozen dessert manufacturing	\$195,281,678	6%
Bread and bakery products, except frozen, manufacturing	\$167,839,102	5%
Confectionery manufacturing from purchased chocolate	\$150,316,672	5%
Other animal food manufacturing	\$145,529,889	5%
Meat processed from carcasses	\$126,482,453	4%
Breweries	\$113,252,038	4%
Frozen cakes and other pastries manufacturing	\$83,957,091	3%
Cookie and cracker manufacturing	\$79,969,900	2%
All other food manufacturing	\$70,911,340	2%
Flavoring syrup and concentrate manufacturing	\$48,751,811	2%
Distilleries	\$32,311,997	1%
Roasted nuts and peanut butter manufacturing	\$28,752,860	1%
Coffee and tea manufacturing	\$28,183,446	1%
Nonchocolate confectionery manufacturing	\$22,172,289	1%
Canned fruits and vegetables manufacturing	\$21,183,861	1%
Wineries	\$20,435,065	1%
Other snack food manufacturing	\$18,382,052	1%
Animal, except poultry, slaughtering	\$15,297,827	0%

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Industry Sector	Total Output	% of Total
Rendering and meat byproduct processing	\$11,471,500	0.36%
Dry pasta, mixes, and dough manufacturing	\$9,433,917	0.29%
Chocolate and confectionery manufacturing from cacao beans	\$6,097,660	0.19%
Poultry processing	\$2,585,119	0.08%
Total	\$3,216,278,034	100%

Source: IMPLAN. 2022 data for Erie County industry sectors

4.1.1.1 Partners/Resources

In February 2024, a feasibility study for a new meat processing plant in neighboring Niagara County, NY was developed. The report found that the most desirable model for a new meat processing facility amongst local farmers and processors would be a USDA-certified cooperative (producer-owned facility) that processed both red meat and poultry. In 2025, Niagara County was in the process of extending infrastructure to the site, located in the Town of Cambria.

The NYS AGM has provided funding in recent years through the following grant programs:

- The Farm and Food Growth Fund provided \$34 million in capital funding over two years as part of the State's FY24-25 and FY25-26 budgets in grants to farmers through the NYS Dairy Modernization Grant program for on-farm fluid milk storage and processing infrastructure.
- The Farmers Market Resiliency Grant Program offered grants of \$25,000 to \$50,000 to support farmers markets operated by municipalities or not-for-profit organizations.
- The Farm to School Grant Program offered grants of \$50,000 to \$100,000 to schools and not-for-profit institutions for projects that increase the amount and variety of New York State farm products used in school meal programs.

4.1.2 Aggregation/Distribution/Packing/Packaging

Aggregators and distributors develop relationships and enter contracts with markets, restaurants, and institutions to provide food in large quantities. These organizations also sign contracts with farmers to supply food in large quantities to fulfill procurement contracts. The time, labor, and resources spent on tasks including but not limited to purchasing, marketing, processing and packaging, transportation, storage, and delivery are thus largely the responsibility of the aggregator/distributor rather than the farmer. The exact degree to which produce is processed and packaged by the farmer or the aggregator would be a part of the contract. For instance, a farmer might wash and cut the produce, but the aggregator might pack it into the specific packaging the

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aggregator uses. Because aggregation and distribution are contract-based, this gives the farmer a certain peace of mind that there is a purchaser for what they produce.

Erie County has a food hub, Eden Valley Growers, which purchases and distributes food to buyers throughout the region and East Coast. Eden Valley Growers was selected as the Erie County food hub in 2014 and continues to operate in that capacity. As a food hub, it is a non-profit aggregator and distributor and a farmer's cooperative, receiving funding for operating costs through a grant from the USDA. It provides qualified growers in the WNY New York region with immediate access to wholesale markets. Farmers are considered members of the food hub rather than simply suppliers. Most of the food stays within the WNY region, but the food hub has a customer base across the East Coast. Eden Valley Growers supplies certified organic produce, fruit, root crops, specialty niche crops, ethnic crops, and other items.

Produce Peddlers and FreshFix are both online platforms based in Buffalo which pick up produce, meat, eggs, dairy, and other goods from WNY farmers and sell it via their websites. Purchasers can place orders, and both platforms will make deliveries directly to the doorstep of the purchaser. Produce Peddlers can accommodate custom orders and is marketed towards commercial purchasers like restaurants and bakeries, while FreshFix has less flexibility (customers receive produce boxes) and is oriented more towards residential customers. Both platforms are essentially aggregation and distribution companies that use an online platform rather than contracts.

Erie County has also invested in its overall supply chain capabilities through the visioning and development work at the Erie County Agribusiness Park in the Town of Evans. This Park has the potential to meet needs that cut across several Farm Viability and Integrated Agricultural Economy elements and its future role and functions will appear throughout this plan.

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Profile: Erie County Agribusiness Park

The Erie County Agribusiness Park is a 240-acre property in the Town of Evans, with 190 acres available for development, strategically acquired in 2021 to support the region's integrated agricultural economy. Managed by the ECIDA and its subsidiary, the Industrial Land Development Corporation (ILDC), and funded by Erie County, the Park aims to address critical gaps in the local agricultural infrastructure while fostering economic development. The Park aligns with the Regional Economic Development Council's focus on agriculture and is guided by a recently completed master plan. Initial efforts include designing and engineering an access road, upgrading utilities such as water, electric, and natural gas lines, and preparing the site for future development.

The Park is positioned to support cold storage, value-added processing, product aggregation, and direct sales opportunities for local farmers. It has also attracted interest from greenhouse developers, hydroponic and vertical farming ventures, and agricultural research organizations. Marketing efforts, informed by GIS-driven land use analyses, are underway, and collaboration with agencies like Invest Buffalo Niagara and Empire State Development will help generate leads for potential tenants.

By integrating these facilities and services, the Agribusiness Park will create more opportunities for Erie County farmers, enhance regional food systems, and attract value-added agricultural businesses, further diversifying and strengthening the local economy. Design of the access road to the Park will be completed in 2025, and construction of the road will commence in 2025.

4.1.3 Wholesale and Retail Markets

4.1.3.1 Wholesale

Erie County, New York, is served by several notable wholesale food distributors that cater to a diverse clientele, including restaurants, institutions, and retail outlets. Some of the key operators in the region include:

- **Tarantino Foods LLC, Buffalo:** A privately owned wholesale food distributor serving independent restaurants, regional and national chain accounts, schools, universities, health care facilities, casinos, and other institutions in WNY.
- **J Mills Distribution Co., Orchard Park:** Known as 'The Deli People,' they supply a wide variety of quality products, including deli items, salads, frozen foods, and pizza ingredients, to businesses of all sizes across WNY.
- **Ford Brothers Wholesale Meats Inc., West Valley, Cattaraugus Co.:** One of WNY's largest wholesale distributors of beef, pork, and poultry products, offering their trademark

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'Paddy's' line, which includes corned beef, peameal bacon, shaved sirloin, sliced ribeye, and hamburger patties.

- **Sysco, Depew:** A global leader in food service distribution, providing exceptional produce, custom cuts of meat, high-quality seafood, and imported foods offering global flavors.
- **Curtze Food Service, Erie, PA:** A broadline food service distributor offering a unique center-of-the-plate program, including portion-controlled fresh meat, serving a 9-state geographical area including WNY and Central New York.
- **US Foods, Cheektowaga:** US Foods is one of the largest food service distributors in the United States, with a significant presence in Erie County. The company provides a broad range of products, including fresh produce, custom-cut meats, seafood, bakery items, and prepared foods. US Foods also offers innovative solutions and technology to help food service operators streamline operations and enhance profitability. Their Cheektowaga location services a variety of establishments, including restaurants, healthcare facilities, and educational institutions.

These distributors play a crucial role in the local food supply chain, ensuring that a wide range of food products is available to meet the needs of Erie County's diverse food service establishments.

4.1.3.2 Retail

Direct-to-consumer and other farm directed retail activities are detailed in the Farm Viability section of this plan. However, off-farm retail markets are an active part of the overall food economy in Erie County. Prominent grocery store retailers in the Erie County Market include Wegmans, Tops, and Trader Joe's, among others. Each of these companies have distinct approaches to sourcing and their emphasis on local products. Wegmans stands out for its strong commitment to local farms, often purchasing directly from producers in New York State for fresh produce, dairy, and other items. The company actively promotes its local sourcing through in-store signage and collaborations with farms to meet high food safety and quality standards. Tops, while more reliant on brokers and distributors, also incorporates local products through initiatives like its "local pride" campaigns, especially for seasonal items such as apples and sweet corn.

Erie County is also served by cooperative markets that place a greater emphasis on local food procurement. The Lexington Co-op, with locations on Elmwood and Hertel Avenues in Buffalo, and the East Aurora Cooperative Market are community owned grocery stores that focus on fresh, local, and organic products.

Several restaurants in the County follow the "farm to table" business model and specifically build their menus and branding around locally produced foods. Examples of these restaurants include The Grange Community Kitchen (Hamburg), The Dapper Goose (Buffalo), and The Little Club (Buffalo).

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4.1.3.3 Livestock and Produce Auctions

Produce and livestock auctions serve as a way for farmers to offload surplus goods and livestock without spending the time and energy on direct-to-consumer sales. Farmers can drop off their goods and livestock at the auction grounds and the auction house will handle selling and processing payment for the goods, taking a commission as payment for the service. Individuals and wholesalers alike purchase from auctions. Auctions often have the benefit of being able to sell very large quantities of produce at once and in some cases can connect ethnic groups with culturally desirable livestock and produce.

The primary auctions in Erie County are the Gentner Commission Market in Springville and Foss Livestock in Alden.

4.1.4 *Institutional Sales*

Farm-to-institution activities involve connecting local farms with institutions such as schools, hospitals, universities, correctional facilities, and senior living centers to provide fresh, locally produced food. These activities often include direct purchasing agreements, local food procurement policies, and educational initiatives to promote healthy eating and sustainable practices.

These activities play a vital role in diversifying a region's agricultural economy. By establishing consistent demand from institutions, they provide farmers with stable, high-volume markets beyond traditional retail or wholesale channels. This stability is particularly beneficial for small and mid-sized farms, which gain access to new opportunities to participate in larger supply chains.

K-12 schools are a primary driver of institutional sales and supply chain development. Schools located in communities where farms operate often desire to develop direct connections to local producers. K-12 purchases are also supported through the **NY 30% Initiative**, a New York State Farm-to-School program that incentivizes schools to purchase at least 30% of their food from New York producers and processors. Schools that meet this threshold receive an increased state reimbursement—rising from \$0.06 to \$0.25 per meal—for their school lunch programs.

Of the 28 school districts in Erie County, only four, Buffalo, Frontier, Hamburg, and Lancaster, reached the 30% threshold in the 2022-23 school year.

Although Erie County schools lagged behind other school districts in New York State in reaching the threshold that year, it's important to recognize several factors. Achieving the 30% threshold can vary year to year due to shifting procurement dynamics. Even purchases below the threshold contribute significantly to supporting local and regional New York State producers. Additionally, some districts buy local and regional products but do not track or report these purchases to NYS AGM due to limited administrative capacity.

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Additionally, the adoption of the Community Eligibility Provision in New York State has significantly enhanced the financial flexibility of many K-12 schools by providing universal free meals and steady federal reimbursement streams. This reliable funding allows schools to allocate more of their budgets toward higher-quality food purchases, including locally sourced products, without compromising financial sustainability. As a result, K-12 schools are becoming increasingly viable markets for local farmers.

County	Number of 30% Schools
Broome	12
Steuben	11
Essex	5
Erie	4

4.1.4.1 Colleges and Universities

Colleges and universities are important markets for local and regional food producers. The extent to which these institutions prioritize local food sourcing varies based on their culture, values, and financial priorities. Student and faculty interest in healthy food, knowledge of food origins, connections to local communities, and carbon emission reduction goals motivate these institutions to engage with the local food supply chain.

However, these motivations are often weaker or more complex than those of K-12 schools. While some college students are from the local community, many come from across the state, country, or world, lacking specific ties to local growers. Additionally, college food services are not subsidized by public funds like K-12 schools, making profitability a more significant factor, especially when considering budget and enrollment pressures.

Colleges and universities typically have two main contracts for food service operations: a food service operator and a broadline food distributor. These institutions have varying degrees of leverage to negotiate goals beyond price and cost, such as carbon reduction and local sourcing. Goals may be to include lower-impact foods on school meal menus and tracking the carbon footprint of food to demonstrate progress, as well as geographic and local preference bids.

For State University of New York (SUNY) schools, Executive Order 32, signed by Governor Kathy Hochul in August 2023, could lead to increased purchasing of New York State and local food. This order mandates New York State agencies to source 30% of their food from New York farmers and producers within five years, boosting local agriculture and food system resilience. While the specifics of compliance tracking and enforcement are still unclear, the Order provides state institutions with more leverage in negotiations with food service contractors to source more local food.

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4.1.4.2 Hospitals and Health Care Organizations

Hospitals and healthcare organizations have increasingly become significant sources of institutional purchasing. Similar to colleges and universities, their level of engagement can vary widely and must align with their overall business model's profitability. Hospitals typically contract with food service providers, often the same ones used by colleges and universities, which presents similar challenges in negotiating local procurement requirements.

At the primary care and health insurance levels, many operators are experimenting with "Food as Medicine" or food prescription models. Participants receive vouchers ("Produce Bucks") that they can use at participating retailers and farm markets to purchase fresh fruits and vegetables. Independent Health offers a nutrition benefit program where consumers can earn money-back rewards on fresh fruits and vegetables. The Buffalo Niagara Medical Campus is piloting a "40 Days to Wellness" program for chronically ill and stressed healthcare workers and neighborhood residents. Qualified participants receive medically tailored meals, hands-on nutrition education, mindfulness training, and dietitian guidance.

BGG received grant funding in 2023 from NYHealth to expand its fruit and vegetable prescription program. Working with the Community Health Center of Buffalo, BGG will connect veterans with a dietitian and social worker to improve food security through nutrition counseling, fresh food deliveries, and enrollment in SNAP and other programs.

Currently, many of these programs are funded through grants, philanthropy, or marketing budgets. However, there are state and national efforts to integrate "Food as Medicine" more directly into the continuum of care. New York State's Delivery System Reform Incentive Payment Program (DSRIP) created connections and provided funding for several partnerships aimed at improving health outcomes and reducing healthcare costs by providing healthy food to qualifying patients. New York is working towards rolling out a DSRIP 2.0 program, which would build on the successes of the first round and likely include additional funds for "Food as Medicine" programs. Many healthcare organizations, especially primary care providers, are also experimenting with Section 1115 Demonstration Waivers, which allows states to implement experimental, pilot, or demonstration projects that promote the objectives of the Medicaid program, including nutrition and food-based interventions. Authorized under Section 1115 of the Social Security Act, these waivers may include eligibility expansions, alternative benefit designs, or innovative payment models.

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4.1.4.3 Emergency Feeding Programs

Emergency feeding agencies, including food banks and food pantries, play a critical role in the farm-to-institution landscape in New York State by creating consistent demand for locally grown and produced foods while addressing food insecurity. These agencies serve as vital intermediaries, distributing fresh and shelf-stable foods to low-income and underserved populations. By sourcing products from local and New York State farmers, they help sustain agricultural producers while ensuring that nutritious food reaches those in need.

Several key programs support these efforts by providing funding specifically for the procurement of local and NYS products:

1. NY Food for NY Families Program

This USDA-funded initiative provides grants to emergency feeding organizations to purchase and distribute New York State agricultural products. It emphasizes building long-term relationships between farmers and food banks, fostering a sustainable farm-to-institution model. The program supports local economies while improving food access for vulnerable populations.

2. Nourish NY

Nourish NY is a state-funded program that emerged during the COVID-19 pandemic to connect New York farmers with emergency feeding organizations. It reimburses food banks and pantries for purchasing surplus agricultural products directly from NYS farmers, reducing food waste and supporting the agricultural sector while supplying fresh, local food to families in need.

3. Hunger Prevention and Nutrition Assistance Program (HPNAP)

Administered by the NYS Department of Health, HPNAP provides funding to emergency feeding organizations to purchase nutritious food, including local and NYS products. It also supports operational costs like storage and transportation, enabling agencies to handle perishable and fresh foods effectively.

Through these programs, emergency feeding agencies not only address immediate food security needs but also contribute to the broader farm-to-institution ecosystem by integrating local agriculture into their supply chains, creating a win-win scenario for both producers and consumers in New York State.

Erie County is served by FeedMore WNY, a regional food bank covering Erie, Niagara, Chautauqua, and Cattaraugus counties. It collaborates with a robust network of more than 450 partner agencies to distribute food to those in need, with approximately 200 partner agencies located in Erie, Niagara, Chautauqua, and Cattaraugus counties. In 2022, FeedMore WNY provided over 12 million meals to the community, serving an average of 135,000 individuals each month. Its programs include food pantries, soup kitchens, mobile food distributions, and home-delivered meal services for seniors, ensuring comprehensive support for vulnerable populations across its service area.

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Construction began in October 2024 on a new regional headquarters for FeedMore WNY in the Town of Hamburg, partially funded by Erie County (\$3 million).

Profile: FeedMore Western NY

FeedMore Western New York, a merged entity of Meals on Wheels and the former food bank, is dedicated to enhancing food security and nutrition in Erie County through innovative programming that seeks to incorporate locally produced food where possible. FeedMore operates Farm Market trucks that sell fresh produce at cost, sourced from their container farms, community gardens, and local farms or wholesalers. This approach ensures a steady supply of fresh, locally grown produce.

One of the unique aspects of FeedMore's operations is their ability to produce their own food, which not only reduces costs but also provides valuable job training opportunities. Their job training programs began with warehousing and logistics and have recently expanded to include culinary training, preparing participants for careers as line cooks or in food manufacturing. This initiative is supported by partnerships with local growers like Eden Valley and Fruit Fresh Up, enhancing their capacity to integrate local produce into their programs.

Funding from initiatives such as NY Food for NY Families, Nourish NY, and HPNAP has been crucial in enabling FeedMore to purchase local food, including fresh produce from New York State. Their low-cost farm markets in underserved neighborhoods address food access issues, offering fresh, healthy options to communities in need.

FeedMore is also in the process of expanding their facilities, moving from a rented 30,000 square feet warehouse to a new, larger facility. This expansion will not only replace the current rental space but also provide additional capacity for growth. The new facility will include clean pack rooms for meat and other smaller portions, enhancing their ability to serve the community. While they have not yet fully explored the potential for broader commercial purposes, such as supporting K-12 or other institutional food purchases, they remain open to new approaches and collaborations.

Overall, FeedMore Western New York's farm-to-school programming and local procurement efforts are a testament to their innovative and community-focused approach to food security and nutrition. Their partnerships, funding strategies, and commitment to local sourcing highlight their role as a primary organization for food assistance in Erie County, ready to respond to both everyday needs and emergencies.

4.1.4.4 Other New York State Institutions

State managed and funded institutions are an important institutional market to consider as an outlet for Erie County farm and food products, especially those that are governed and operated by Erie County. The Erie County Holding Center and Correctional Facility alone conservatively serves

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over one million meals per year. Establishing targets, not just for New York State food, but for Erie County food through a geographic preference bid or other such measure could substantially increase procurement of food produced in Erie County. Additionally, while it contracts its Meals on Wheels and senior Restaurant Dining Program, the County can set procurement targets for its operating partners and participating restaurants.

It should be noted that while Executive Order 32 will provide additional incentives for procurement, without additional policies in place, distributors and food service providers need only source New York State food, not necessarily Erie County produce. Additionally, unless or until clear incentives or penalties for failing to meet Executive Order 32 are put in place, adherence to Executive Order 32 will largely be voluntary.

The Good Food Bill (NYS S.6955/A.7264) would have built on the Good Food Purchasing Program by providing a comprehensive set of tools, technical support, and resources to support public institutions shifting to a values-based procurement model, perhaps at the same time as they are implementing Executive Order 32. These values include standards related to Local Economies, Animal Welfare, Environmental Sustainability, Nutrition, and Valued Workforce. The bill was vetoed in December 2024 by Governor Kathy Hochul. While supported by many agricultural organizations and farmers in New York State, it was notably opposed by the New York Farm Bureau, the state's largest farmer advocacy organization.

4.1.5 Investment/Financing

A variety of lenders and investment firms serve farms in Erie County, including traditional lending organizations like the Farm Credit System, USDA Farm Service Agency, and commercial banks with agricultural lending divisions.

Farm Credit East's lending in Erie County emphasizes production agriculture while also supporting primary processing industries like dairy pasteurization and food hubs within its congressionally regulated scope. Their portfolio reflects a commitment to beginning, young, and veteran farmers, supported through programs like Farm Start, which offers financial assistance, mentorship, and education. Over its 15-year history, Farm Start has made 400 investments region-wide, providing tailored loans and business planning guidance while referring clients to additional resource, such as a mentoring program for small businesses, ranchers, and farmers. Small farms with gross annual revenues under \$350,000 make up 40% of Farm Credit East's portfolio, while beginning farmers (those with fewer than 10 years of experience) represent 20%. However, Erie County's farming landscape is characterized by larger, legacy operations, with limited activity from young farmers due to the high capital demands and extended payback periods associated with perennial crops like vineyards. As a result, young and beginning farmers often gravitate toward diversified vegetables or pasture-raised animal products, which offer faster returns.

In addition to statewide and national funding through NYS AGM and USDA, WNY also benefits from the philanthropic and organizational efforts of private foundations. The WNY Foundation, which

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has been involved in supporting several philanthropic fields locally, is shifting its focus to exclusively support food access and food systems, aiming to enhance its impact on the agricultural industry and related initiatives. This strategic narrowing of priorities allows for more resources to be directed toward these efforts, with \$1–\$2 million disbursed annually. The Foundation prioritizes collaboration, conducting listening sessions and public learning initiatives like “Food for Thought” to engage stakeholders and inform its approach. Through its commitment to fostering partnerships and addressing local challenges, the Foundation seeks to strengthen regional food systems and improve food access.

Food Future WNY (FFWNY) worked with local farmers and food producers to help them implement goals and actions identified in the 2021 WNY Regional Food System Initiative report. The study identified 144 recommendations that the FFWNY working group organized into seven priority projects: Healthy Food Priority Areas, Regional Food System Leadership Cohort Program, Butcher Training Program, Expand Beginning Farmer Training Program, Farmer Workshop Series, and Discretionary Pool of Funds. FFWNY helped farms connect with programs and partners for support.

4.1.6 Workforce Development

4.1.6.1 Community Colleges

Agricultural education at the college level, including workforce development in partnership with community colleges, was identified as an opportunity for Erie County, as farmers see that there is a lack of a pipeline of trained agricultural workers to work on or run farms. While many colleges and universities offer 4-year degrees in agriculture and related sciences, community colleges are more accessible and affordable for most individuals. There are a variety of agriculturally related community college degree and credential programs in WNY, including:

- SUNY Erie Community College
 - Biotechnological Science Associate’s in Applied Science (AAS) with Cannabis concentration
 - Microcredential in Cannabis Science
 - Brewing Science and Service certificate
- SUNY Niagara
 - Horticulture AAS
 - Horticulture certificate
 - Microcredentials in Cannabis Cultivation, Cannabis Manufacturing and Processing, and Cannabis Business
- SUNY Genesee Community College
 - Veterinary Technology AAS

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Other colleges which offer degrees in agriculture but are not located in Erie County or its adjacent counties, include SUNY Alfred State, SUNY Morrisville, SUNY Cobleskill, SUNY Finger Lakes Community College, and Cornell University. Each of these institutions is within a 3-hour drive from Buffalo.

4.1.6.2 Internships, Apprenticeships, and Non-Formal Training

Neither Erie County nor New York State offer a formal farm apprenticeship program. Cornell University has developed a Dairy Specialist Apprenticeship program, which is a three-year experience of both on-the-job training and technical instruction in dairy farm management positions. Employers qualify for NYS funding to offset training costs of employees. Employees also receive an official credential from New York State without taking on student debt.

Other existing resources in Erie County include Cornell Small Farms, PFC, GGWNY, CCE Erie and CCE Niagara, GBUG, and more.

4.1.6.3 BOCES

Erie 1 BOCES offers extensive adult and K-12 educational programs that help students build skills needed in farm occupations. BOCES is a cooperative of 19 school districts in Erie County, any student of which can access BOCES programs. Programs operated by BOCES are supported heavily by businesses and industry in WNY, by providing job opportunities to students as well as offering (non-farm) apprenticeship programs. Over 4,000 students are educated by Erie 1 BOCES every year. Furthermore, BOCES operates multiple career and technical centers in Erie County with more than 25 programs for high school students.

High school programs related to agriculture or may lend themselves to agricultural careers include animal science, auto technician training, building trades, diesel technology, plant science, welding, and wildlife/conservation, among others. Youth may be interested in, or exposed to via these programs, an element of farming that is not necessarily production agriculture, such as repairing and building tractors and small engines (diesel mechanics), large animal veterinary care (animal science), and fabricating farm implements (welding), among others.

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4.1.6.4 FFA

FFA, formerly known as Future Farmers of America, is a national organization that oversees formal agricultural education within middle and high schools across the country. Each state has its own FFA organization that is managed typically by one of the state's land-grant universities. In New York, FFA is overseen by the New York Agricultural Education Outreach project. New York Agricultural Outreach Education works in partnership with the Cornell University College of Agriculture and Life Sciences and the New York State Education Department. FFA is open to students in the 6th to 12th grades at schools or career/technical centers with FFA chapters and is comprised of classroom instruction, conferences and conventions, and Supervised Agricultural Experiences such as internships, research or community service projects, entrepreneurship projects, etc. taken up by students and overseen by educators. Agricultural topics taught in FFA classes include animal systems, agribusiness, mechanical systems, environmental systems, plant systems, natural resources, food processing, and agricultural education, leadership, and communication.

In 2023, there were 11,525 New York FFA members. The 2024 New York FFA State Convention was held in May in downtown Buffalo. There are six FFA chapters in Erie County:

- McKinley Vocational High School (Buffalo Public School 305)
- Harkness Career and Technical Center (Erie-1 BOCES; Cheektowaga)
- W.D. Ormsby Center (Erie 2-Chautauqua-Cattaraugus BOCES; East Aurora)
- Eden Jr./Sr. High School
- Carrier Center (Erie 2-Chautauqua-Cattaraugus BOCES; Angola)
- Springville Griffith Institute High School

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4.1.6.5 4-H

4-H is an extracurricular youth development program for youth ages 5-18 that is administered by the USDA at the federal level and by land-grant universities' Cooperative Extension systems at the state level. 4-H in New York is managed and partially funded by Cornell University's Cooperative Extension System, which develops curricula, provides training, hosts youth conferences for a wide variety of topics, and more. The program depends heavily on parent and volunteer involvement. 4-H is typically administered in an organized fashion with programming taking place at Cooperative Extension offices and in 4-H clubs run by volunteer leaders.

CCE Erie County, with offices in East Aurora and Buffalo, has over 400 registered 4-H members and over 200 registered volunteers. Programming in Erie County 4-H includes agricultural programs such as horticulture and urban agriculture; livestock husbandry and animal science; life skills such as sewing, cooking, and baking; creative arts, like painting, drawing, and sculpting; STEM fields, such as electrical, woodworking, and 3D printing, and much more. Many Erie County 4-H members exhibit their livestock and projects at the Erie County Fair in Hamburg each year, where youth and their parents have an opportunity to communicate with the public about agriculture. 4-H is also dedicated to community service and has many community partners and a large volunteer base that finds and conducts community service projects with youth. While 4-H started as an organization for rural youth over a century ago, today 4-H includes and encourages youth and families of all backgrounds to participate. Educators and volunteers can tailor programming to youths' interests and cultural contexts.

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4.2 Opportunities and Challenges

4.2.1 Supporting local sourcing by processing facilities in Erie County could benefit local farms.

While many food manufacturing businesses source nationally and globally, improving local sourcing would benefit farmers. Dairy processing, in particular, relies on milk production near the processing plants. Consolidation and policies among cooperatives have negatively impacted some local farmers. Many of these issues are largely related to the national consolidation of dairy companies and the effects of the global economy; these are outside the control of Erie County.

4.2.2 Supporting and developing meat processing in Erie County could increase processing capacity for farmers and reduce bottlenecks.

Additional meat processing capacity was expressed as a desire by Erie County farmers. Livestock processing is very limited in Erie County. There are only two meat processing facilities in Erie County, though there are several more (less than 10) in the immediately surrounding counties. This results in long trips for farmers to livestock processing facilities in terms of both mileage and time, often posing a significant hurdle for small producers. Processors are also frequently unable to accept new clients and have appointment books full over a year in advance. Many processors cannot schedule appointments less than a month in advance, leading to an increased demand for processing capacity, even though processors report their amount of work has increased or stayed the same over the last five years. This poses a challenge to farmers who must balance many external factors to have animals ready by a certain date. For context, when it comes to most livestock, scheduling a processing date a year in advance would be before the animal is even born.

Ultimately, the inflexibility of the current livestock processing landscape in Erie County poses a significant challenge to small farms and may even be a hindrance to people looking to start a farm. Additionally, much like farmers themselves, meat processors report struggling to find and afford interested and qualified workers, even though the demand for their work is increasing.

4.2.3 Aggregation and distribution companies rely on large quantities of food that cannot be produced by small farms; conversely, small farms cannot scale up without access to large purchasers.

Erie County has a food hub (Eden Valley Growers) which purchases and distributes food to buyers throughout the region and east coast. However, through focus groups and interviews, it became clear that there is still a demand for additional aggregation opportunities in Erie County farmers. Small and urban farmers would like to be able to sell produce to an aggregator and not have to rely

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on direct-to-consumer sales but might not produce enough per season for it to be economically viable for an aggregator to consistently purchase from them.

Farmers have expressed that they would increase the sizes of their farms and make other changes to increase productivity if they knew that there was reliable demand and good prices for their produce, such as an aggregator. Increasing the aggregation and distribution capacity in Erie County and the WNY region might contribute to closing that gap. Additionally, there are other benefits to empowering small scale and urban farms to increase in size and capacity, including but not limited to economic growth and development of farms, more land used and conserved for agriculture, more jobs in agriculture, and more locally grown food being consumed.

Potential Partners/Resources

Funded by Erie County, the ECIDA is currently redeveloping the former Eden-Angola Airport into the Erie County Agribusiness Park. The Agribusiness Park will be a 240-acre agribusiness commerce park and is currently in the final stages of design. It is being developed as an industrial park; sites will be individually sold to prospective companies in the agricultural sector. The site is ideally located less than 10 miles from Eden Valley Growers, 20 miles from Buffalo, and 120 miles from Toronto. The Agribusiness Park will provide additional capacity for packing and aggregation/distribution for Erie County farmers and help strengthen their economic development.

The new FeedMore WNY facility in Hamburg presents several opportunities to strengthen and integrate the agricultural economy in Erie County. By nearly doubling its warehouse space, the facility will enhance the distribution network for local food producers, allowing for greater efficiency and reach in delivering fresh, locally sourced food to the community. This expansion supports local farmers by providing a reliable market for their produce, thereby encouraging sustainable agricultural practices.

Additionally, the facility will include more growing spaces, which can be used to cultivate fresh produce on-site, further integrating local agriculture into the food supply chain.

4.2.4 Operational investments for large farms engaged in wholesaling can increase profit margins. For small and mid-sized farms, technical assistance and training, plus operational investments, can support their growth in wholesale markets.

Investing in capacity-building initiatives for farms engaged in wholesaling and off-farm retail sales presents a critical opportunity to strengthen Erie County's agricultural economy. Small and mid-sized farms often face challenges in scaling operations to meet wholesale and off-farm retail demands, including infrastructure limitations, market knowledge gaps, and operational inefficiencies. Strategic investments in technical assistance, training, and infrastructure

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enhancements can empower these farms to expand their reach, improve efficiency, and increase profitability. By equipping farmers with the tools and resources needed to succeed in wholesale and off-farm retail markets, Erie County can bolster its local food system, increase market resilience, and create economic opportunities in rural and suburban communities.

Capacity-building initiatives, such as shared-use processing facilities, cold storage, transportation solutions, and access to marketing expertise, can reduce barriers for farms transitioning into these larger markets. Coupled with technical training in business planning, compliance with wholesale standards, and market trend analysis, these investments can help local farms capture more significant market shares and foster regional economic growth. By supporting these efforts, Erie County can solidify its position as a leader in regional food production and distribution while ensuring long-term viability for its agricultural sector.

Potential Partners/Resources

- USDA Agricultural Marketing Service grants
- NYS Grown and Certified program funding
- Northeast Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education (SARE) grants
- Empire State Development programs for agriculture
- Technical support from organizations like Foodlink and NOFA-NY
- Local chambers of commerce and business networks

4.2.5 The County can leverage its internal institutional food procurement to create markets for Erie County products.

County managed meal services can be leveraged to create an additional institutional market and provide small and medium-sized Erie County farms a “friendly” point of entry into institutional sales. Its procurement policies and systems can be designed to be as flexible and forgiving as possible so that farms that are new to institutional and wholesale-style sales can gain experience without the risks and uncertainty associated with many institutional and wholesale markets. These policies and procedures can set precedents for other institutions in the County.

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4.2.6 The County can leverage its relationships and its clout to facilitate regional conversations and connections, recognizing that food systems ultimately extend beyond County lines.

Erie County is uniquely positioned to leverage its relationships, expertise, and regional influence to foster collaboration and innovation across food systems that transcend county boundaries. Recognizing that food systems are inherently regional, the County can act as a convener, connecting growers, processors, distributors, and buyers from surrounding areas, including neighboring counties and states like Pennsylvania, to create a more cohesive and efficient food supply chain.

One key role Erie County can play is facilitating regional conversations between stakeholders to align supply and demand. This includes engaging growers in Pennsylvania and elsewhere to aggregate sufficient volume to meet the needs of institutional buyers such as schools, hospitals, and large employers. By addressing seasonality through coordinated production planning and shared infrastructure investments, the County can help ensure that regional growers maintain steady workflows, extend their operating seasons, and make better use of staff and equipment year-round.

Erie County can also leverage its partnerships with organizations like CCE Erie, food hubs, and economic development agencies to promote resource-sharing initiatives. These could include shared-use facilities like cold storage, processing equipment, or transportation services, which lower barriers for smaller producers to compete in larger markets.

Furthermore, the County's clout can attract state and federal funding for multi-county food system initiatives and serve as a central organizer for joint grant applications. By using its economic development framework to create a regional food systems network, Erie County can position itself as a leader in fostering resilience, equity, and sustainability within the broader food economy.

4.2.7 The County can direct resources and activities to expand farm and food business workforce development programming and to align such programming with partners.

Erie County plays a direct role in workforce development support and programming through Workforce Buffalo and the Workforce Development Board. Within these programs, the County can evaluate programming that currently supports farming, supply chain activities, and food business workforce needs and adjust existing programs or develop new programming to address needs.

The County can also convene patterns in the County and region engaged in workforce development, especially programming related to farming and food businesses, to inventory programming, align efforts, share best practices, and share resources. Since workforce development activities take place at local, County, and regional levels and are carried out by

4. Integrated Agricultural Economy

governmental, non-profit, and for-profit organizations, much of this work can take place in silos which results in opportunities for collaboration or streamlining to be missed.

Other than incubator farms, there is not a widely accepted farm internship or apprenticeship model that has gained traction in the United States. There are several farms and non-profit organizations across New York State which have developed their own apprenticeship or internship programs, but they operate independently from any institution or municipality. The replicability of these programs is low and the barriers to entry are high, since their availability is so limited.

4.3 Goals, Strategies and Recommended Actions

Goal: Support agricultural economic development countywide.

Policies and Recommended Actions:

1. Continue to promote agritourism, CSAs, and farm retail shops in Erie County.
 - a. Continue to administer and expand the Erie Grown and Taste NY marketing efforts through Visit Buffalo Niagara (VBN), and other programs that publicize and promote sales of local farm products.

Lead: DEP
Partners: CCE Erie, VBN
2. Continue to develop the Erie County Agribusiness Park in partnership with the ECIDA. When the Agribusiness Park is operational, support its mission.
 - a. Support near-term, Phase I site development with funding and technical assistance.

Lead: DEP, ECIDA
Partners: Town of Evans
 - b. Further clarify and define the highest probability and highest impact activities the Agribusiness Park can support in the near-term given the anticipated state of infrastructure and site development. Once identified, develop requests for proposals and market to businesses.

Lead: ECIDA, DEP
Partners: CCE Erie, Invest Buffalo Niagara, Empire State Development

4. Integrated Agricultural Economy

3. Support additional aggregation, distribution, and processing, including cooperative ventures.
 - a. Facilitate an inventory of existing capacities and operators across the supply chain to identify gaps, potential partnerships, opportunities for expansion, that support overall aggregation and distribution for producers, processors, and purchasers.

Lead: DEP
Partners: CCE Erie, FFWNY, ECIDA, FeedMore WNY, Eden Valley Growers, University of Buffalo, regional Counties and stakeholders.
 - b. Support initiatives with GIS mapping, grant identification, and other project support where relevant County skills and capabilities support project advancement.

Lead: DEP
Partners: Erie County
 - c. When appropriate, provide letters of support for new aggregators and/or distributors seeking grant funds.

Lead: AFPB, FPC
Partners: DEP
4. Leverage County food procurement to feature Erie County products to the greatest extent possible.
 - a. Develop a geographic preference bid and procurement process friendly to small and medium-sized farms for County managed food services associated with Erie County Holding Center and Correctional Facility and Meals on Wheels.

Lead: Erie County
Partners: Erie County Purchasing, CCE Erie, NYS AGM
 - b. Identify supply chain supports (pick-up and delivery, storage, etc.) the County can engage to facilitate order fulfillment and decrease the costs of entry for small and mid-sized farms.

Lead: Erie County
Partners: ECIDA, FeedMore WNY, Produce Peddlers, FreshFix
5. Support marketing initiatives for local farm products.
 - a. Further develop and expand Erie Grown label by increasing prominence at farmers markets, local events, etc.

Lead: DEP
Partners: CCE Erie, Erie County Farm Bureau, SWCD, Taste NY

4. Integrated Agricultural Economy

6. Support policies which increase purchases of local farm products by schools and institutions

- a. Provide information to school districts and County institutions regarding opportunities and incentives for increasing local food purchases.

Develop and distribute educational materials to school districts, County departments, and other institutions outlining opportunities, incentives, and benefits for purchasing local food. Include information about programs such as Farm to School, USDA's Local Food for Schools Cooperative Agreement Program, and New York's 30% Initiative.

Lead: CCE Erie, FPC

Partners: NYS AGM, DEP

- b. Host Workshops and Training Sessions

Organize workshops or webinars for procurement officers, school nutrition staff, and the Erie County Bureau of Purchasing to explain how to source local products, navigate procurement guidelines, and connect with local farmers.

Lead: DEP

Partners: NYS AGM, CCE Erie

- c. Facilitate Connections Between Farmers and Institutions

Leverage Erie Grown to improve connections between local farmers and institutions. This could include enhancing the online directory or organizing a matchmaking event and could focus on identifying farmers who meet institutional needs, such as scale, delivery capabilities, or certifications.

Lead: DEP

Partners: CCE Erie, FPC

- d. Lead by Example

Implement a local food procurement policy for County-run institutions, such as correctional facilities, hospitals, or senior meal programs, to demonstrate feasibility and set a precedent for other institutions.

Lead: Erie County

Partners: DEP

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e. Advocate for Policy Change

Advocate for streamlined procurement processes or additional funding at the state level to support schools and institutions in purchasing local food. This can be done through resolutions or direct advocacy by County leadership.

Lead: FPC

Partners: Erie County Farm Bureau, CCE Erie, DEP, Erie County

f. Offer Technical Assistance

Provide technical assistance to both farmers and institutions on topics like production scaling, food safety compliance, and menu planning with local products. Partner with organizations like CCE Erie or NOFA-NY.

Lead: CCE Erie

Partners: DEP, NOFA-NY

7. Leverage workforce development programs and partners to maximize farm and food business workforce quality.

- a. Leverage FeedMore WNY's new facility as a farm and food service workforce development incubator: The new facility will also offer classroom and training spaces for workforce development programs, such as the Readyng Individuals for Success and Employment (RISE) program, which can help train individuals in agricultural and food-related careers

Lead: FeedMore WNY, WNY Workforce Center

Partners: Erie County, BOCES, CCE Erie, K-12 schools and Colleges

- b. Develop internships or apprenticeships programs for jobs that support farm and food business operations including but not limited to processing, agricultural technologies, truck drivers, etc.

Lead: BOCES, ECC, WNY Workforce Center

Partners: CCE Erie, K-12 schools and Colleges

5. Water Resources, Environmental Protection, and Climate Resiliency

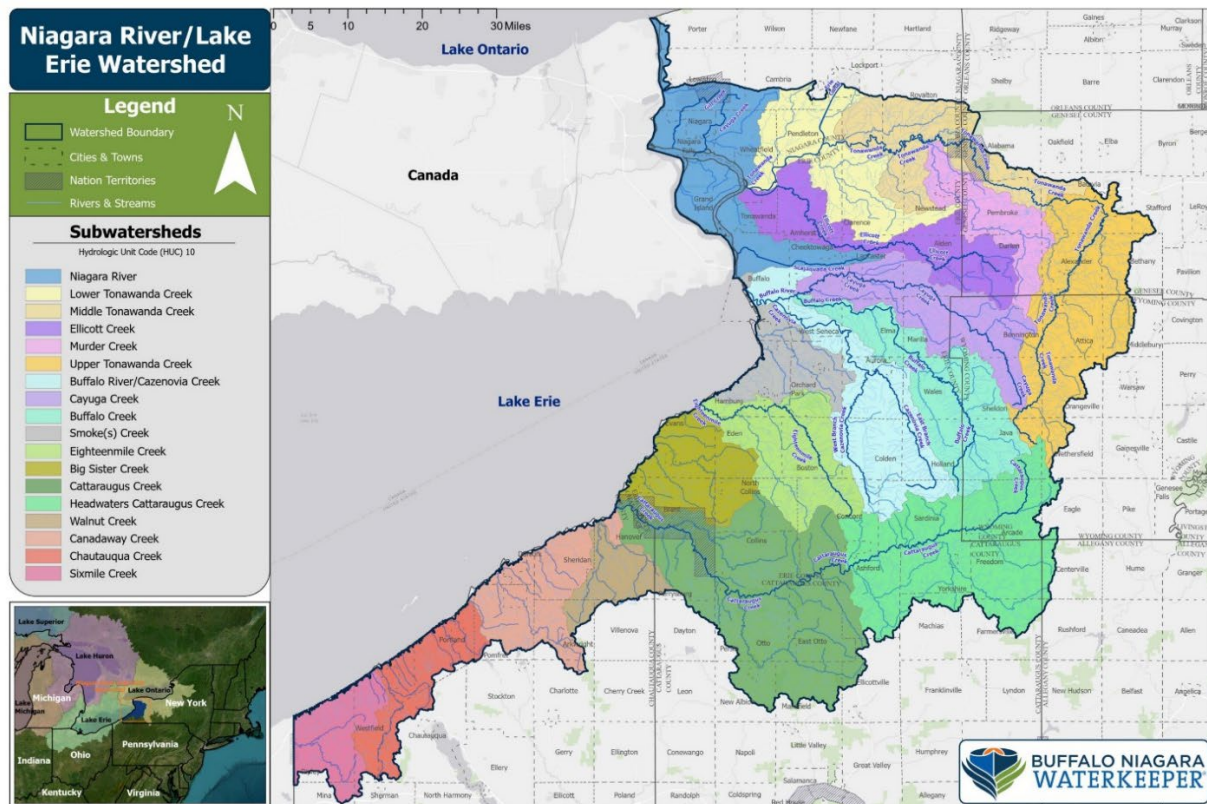
5.1 Current Conditions and Trends

5.1.1 Water Resources

Watersheds

A watershed is an area of land from which all water drains into a particular stream, river, lake, or another water body. Watersheds are classified by the waterbody into which stormwater flows. Looking at Erie County as a whole, all of the streams flow into the Niagara River or Lake Erie, as shown in the diagram below.

The United States Geological Service (USGS) identifies watersheds based on Hydrologic Units. Hydrologic Unit Codes (HUC) form a standardized system to classify watersheds and subwatersheds. In Erie County, there are 13 primary HUC-10 sub-watersheds within the larger Niagara River/ Lake Erie watershed. All the water that falls on the land within Erie County flows into these five watersheds, ultimately carrying the water into the region’s primary watershed, Niagara River/Lake Erie.



5. Water Resources, Environmental Protection, and Climate Resiliency

Most of Erie County is within the Buffalo River/Eighteenmile Creek watershed, which drains into Lake Erie. The Buffalo River watershed includes land in the sub-watersheds of Cazenovia Creek, Buffalo Creek, Smoke Creek, Rush Creek, Cayuga Creek, Two Mile Creek, Big Sister Creek, and Little Sister Creek.

The northern part of Erie County is part of the Niagara River watershed which also flows into Lake Erie. Subwatersheds include land along Ellicott Creek, Ransom Creek, Got Creek, Tonawanda Creek, and Murder Creek. The southern part of Erie County drains into Cattaraugus Creek, which also into Lake Erie. Sub-watersheds include Spooner Creek, Spring Brook, and Clear Creek.

HUC10 Watersheds within Erie County

HUC10	Name	Area Acres (of entire watershed) (Acres)	Area within County (Acres)
412010303	Buffalo River	101,365	101,327
412010305	Eighteenmile Creek	76,864	76,853
412010202	Cattaraugus Creek	197,520	70,557
412010306	Big Sister Creek-Frontal Lake Erie	61,198	61,188
427010104	Ellicott Creek	76,834	57,016
412010302	Buffalo Creek	93,170	55,179
427010108	Niagara River	174,146	47,786
412010301	Cayuga Creek	81,368	47,086
412010304	Smoke Creek-Frontal Lake Erie	43,190	43,147
427010105	Lower Tonawanda Creek	78,798	43,147
412010201	Headwaters Cattaraugus Creek	160,625	30,626
427010103	Middle Tonawanda Creek	79,100	21,913
427010102	Murder Creek	46,672	11,415
426000001	Pelee Island	122,399	2,154
426000002	Lake Erie	6,359,988	347

5.1.2 Stormwater Management

Many farms in Erie County have installed drainage tiles and other improvements to manage stormwater and maintain soil productivity.

Stormwater management on farmland often relies on stormwater drainage systems along roadways and other existing drainage infrastructure, including streams, ditches and other structures, to effectively carry stormwater away from farm fields.

5. Water Resources, Environmental Protection, and Climate Resiliency

5.1.3 Habitats and Wildlife

Natural Habitats and Protected Areas

Approximately 147,766 acres (35%) of land cover in Erie County is classified as forested. These forested areas help to provide a diversity of habitats for wildlife; supply timber and other raw materials; help support clean water sources; and provide opportunities for recreational activities. Additionally, forested areas provide ecosystem services such as nutrient cycling, pollinator support, seed dispersal, soil formation, pest and disease control, and climate regulation that support crop production.

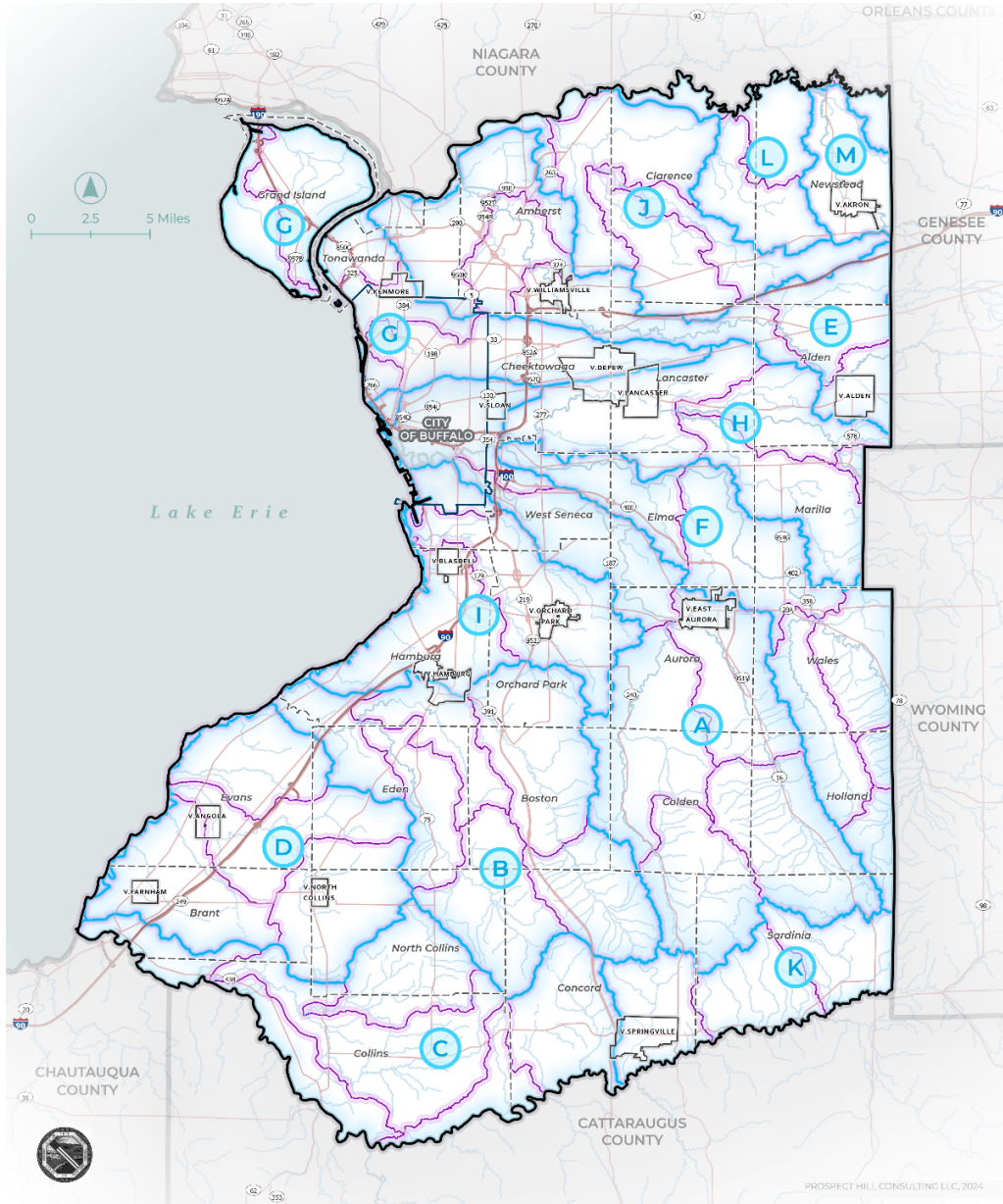
Farmers can also utilize the benefits of wooded lots directly on their farms by either retaining trees on their farmland after clearing a forest or by employing agroforestry techniques.

Invasive and Pest Species

Invasive and pest species represent a significant threat to farms in Erie County. Pest species such as the white-tailed deer and invasive species like the spotted lantern fly and the spotted winged drosophila can significantly damage vegetable, fruit, and ornamental crops. Other invasive species recently observed in Erie County include the Hemlock Woolly Adelgid, Emerald Ash Borer, Japanese Stiltgrass, Spongy Moth, Japanese Knotweed, Giant Hogweed, Lesser Celandine, Asian Honeysuckle, and Garlic Mustard. (For more information, see [Imapinvasives](#).)

5. Water Resources, Environmental Protection, and Climate Resiliency

Map 11. Streams, Watersheds and Subwatersheds



**STREAMS, WATERSHEDS
& SUB-WATERSHEDS
ERIE COUNTY, NY
AGRICULTURAL & FARMLAND
PROTECTION PLAN**

- ERIE COUNTY
- VILLAGE BOUNDARY
- CITY BOUNDARY
- TOWN BOUNDARY
- STATE ROUTE
- THRUWAY / LIMITED ACCESS HIGHWAY
- WATERBODY
- STREAM / RIVER
- SUB- WATERSHED BOUNDARY (HUC 12)
- WATERSHED BOUNDARY (HUC 10)

LABEL	NAME	AREA (ACRES)
A	BUFFALO RIVER	101,377
B	EIGHTEENMILE CREEK	76,853
C	CATTARAUGUS CREEK	70,557
D	BIG SISTER CREEK-FRONTAL LAKE ERIE	61,188
E	ELLICOTT CREEK	57,016
F	BUFFALO CREEK	55,179
G	NIAGARA RIVER	47,786
H	CAYUGA CREEK	47,086
I	SMOKE CREEK-FRONTAL LAKE ERIE	43,147
J	LOWER TONAWANDA CREEK	43,147
K	HEADWATERS CATTARAUGUS CREEK	30,626
L	MIDDLE TONAWANDA CREEK	21,913
M	MURDER CREEK	11,415

ERIE COUNTY DEPARTMENT OF ENVIRONMENT AND PLANNING (DEP) OFFICE OF AGRICULTURE 2024; FSR 2024; NYS OFFICE OF INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY SERVICES GEOGRAPHICAL DATA SERVICES 2024; USGS NATIONAL HYDROGRAPHY DATASET PLUS HIGH RESOLUTION 2020.

5. Water Resources, Environmental Protection, and Climate Resiliency

5.1.4 Climate Impacts

According to the [Regional Greenhouse Gas Overview](#) for Erie-Niagara Region prepared by One Region Forward, agriculture contributes 2% of the total greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions in the region. Of this 2%, the primary source (39%) is from animals digesting their food (enteric fermentation), the release of methane caused by decomposition of manure (36%), soil management associated with crop production releases (25%), and the breakdown of nitrogen-based fertilizers (2%).

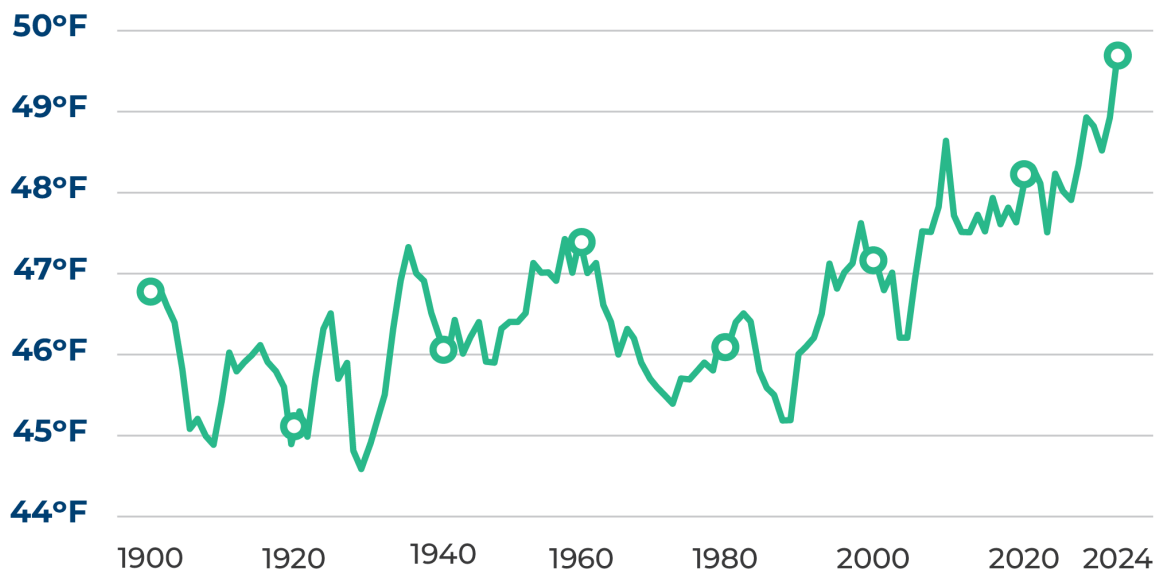
Many farmers utilize best management practices to minimize emissions from manure storage and soil management. Advances in animal feed composition, including [research conducted by scientists at Cornell University](#), show promise in reducing emissions from enteric fermentation.

5.1.5 Climate Resiliency

In 2014, NYSERDA updated the *ClimAID, Responding to Climate Change in New York State, Technical Report* with new projections on the impact of climate change in New York State, including Erie County. Concerning the agricultural sector, the report noted that farmers would be on the front lines of coping with climate change; however, there will also likely be new opportunities from climate change, such as longer growing seasons and new crop options.

Air Temperature

The average yearly temperature for Erie County in 2024 was 48.3° F, with an average summer high of 80° F and an average winter low of 17° F. According to the ClimAID report, the average annual air temperature in Erie County is projected to increase by 4.3-7.3° F by the year 2050 and by as much as 13.8° F by 2100. NYSERDA's report anticipates that each season will experience similar amounts of warming. Across New York State, the growing season is projected to lengthen by about a month, with summers becoming more intense and winters becoming milder. While these changes may lead to new opportunities in longer growing seasons and new crop types, these drastic changes will also strain current agricultural industries. For instance, hotter summers may lead to heat stress on farm animals leading to a loss of production, the extension of breeding seasons for insect pests, and an increase in droughts which will damage the quality and yield of many crops. Additionally, winter agricultural industries such as maple syrup production will be diminished.

Figure 2. Erie County, NY Average Temperatures

Source: National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration,
National Centers for Environmental Information

Precipitation

On average, Erie County receives 41 inches of rainfall annually and 92 inches of snow per year. According to the 2014 ClimAID Report, the average precipitation rate in Erie County is predicted to increase by 2-12% by 2050 and by as much as 24% by 2100. The most serious impact of increased precipitation on Erie County's agriculture could come from erosion and the loss of productive topsoil. Increased erosion from precipitation could lead to the loss of productive farmland and the increase of pollutants such as phosphorous entering the counties' waterbodies. Furthermore, agricultural communities in Erie County that reside along stream and lake valleys may face increased risks of flooding during extreme precipitation events, damaging crop yields, and destroying important farming tools/infrastructure.

5. Water Resources, Environmental Protection, and Climate Resiliency

Severe Weather Events

As climate characteristics such as air temperature and precipitation are anticipated to increase, the rate of extreme weather events is also anticipated to increase. According to the 2022 Erie County Multi-Hazard Mitigation Plan, Erie County has experienced several hazard events over recent years, including droughts, excessive heat, floods, and severe storms. Between 2014 and 2019, flooding and severe winter storms caused more than \$16 million in crop losses to Erie County farms. Future increases in severe weather events and daily temperatures will have serious repercussions for the agricultural success of farms in Erie County as well as the health of its residents.

5.1.6 Organic waste

Farms routinely compost organic matter on site, including animal manure, bedding, crop residue, and some processing waste. Use of BMPs ensures that the organic matter decomposes safely and becomes a helpful additive to the soil.

Farms may have a role in advancing New York State initiatives to reduce organic waste through using by-products from food or beverage manufacturing as animal feed, composting organic waste, or donating excess produce to emergency food providers. Recent New York State requirements and private initiatives among institutions and businesses to reduce organic waste may lead to opportunities for Erie County farms. For example, by-products from brewing or distilling such as spent grain, brewery mash, fruit or vegetable peels, and liquid whey may be fed to animals. Federal regulations limit the use of feeds derived from animal products and require safe food handling practices.

5.1.7 Programs and Partners

5.1.7.1 Erie County November Storm Fund and July Tornado Damage Relief Fund

Recognizing the impact of increasing frequency of severe weather on agricultural operations, Erie County allocated funds to help farms recover from damage caused by the November 2022 storm and the July 2024 tornado. Erie County and the SWCD initially allocated up to \$2 million to farms and agribusinesses that sustained damage from the November 2022 storm and authorized funds in 2024 to be used to help farms recover from the impacts of the July 2024 tornado caused by remnants of Hurricane Beryl. The funds must be used for repairs that were not covered by an insurance settlement or a U.S. Small Business Administration loan and are conditioned on the land remaining in agricultural use for a period of five years.

5. Water Resources, Environmental Protection, and Climate Resiliency

5.1.7.2 Agricultural Best Management Practices

The Erie County SWCD administers the Agricultural Environmental Management program, which works with farmers to maintain farming as a profitable and environmentally sound enterprise. Cost shares are available through state-funded grants. Participation is voluntary and begins with completing the Tier I Survey. Once the initial phase is completed, Tier II involves an in-depth survey and site visit. Implementing and evaluating BMPs occur during Tiers III and IV.

Examples of BMPs include:

- Stormwater diversion from barnyards
- Livestock water source development
- Fuel storage and spill containment
- Pesticide storage and mixing areas
- Silage leachate management
- Milkhouse waste management
- Buffer strips and vegetative filter strips
- Manure management systems.

SWCD also administers grant funds to support implementation of Climate Smart Farming practices – many of which have benefits to water quality and soil health as well.

Participating farmers maintain control over the improvements and benefit from the expert assistance of SWCD staff.

5.1.7.3 Stormwater Management

The Cornell Local Roads program offers technical assistance and training to municipal highway department staff, including training in proper design and maintenance of roadside drainage ditches.

Erie County SWCD staff may assist with the evaluation of drainage issues on farms.

5.1.7.4 Wetlands

Significant revisions to New York State wetlands took effect in January 2025. The changes replace published maps with criteria for identifying “Wetlands of Unusual Importance.”

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5.1.7.5 NYS Department of Environmental Conservation Climate Smart Communities Program

Municipalities can earn “points” toward certification through the NYS Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC) Climate Smart Communities program by enacting “[Policies for Local Food Systems](#).” These include support for local farmers markets or farm stands, community gardens, and agricultural production in rural or urban areas.

5.1.7.6 NYS Open Space Conservation Plan

The [2016 New York State Open Space Plan](#) established goals and policies for the conservation of natural resources and open spaces in New York State. The Plan acknowledges that farms provide benefits from scenic working landscapes, rural heritage, and quality of life and reduce cost of services for municipalities. It notes that farms often include woodlands, wetlands, and streams which support wildlife habitat.

The Plan recommends the following actions to support the goal of “Ensuring Clean Water, Air and Land for a Healthy and Vibrant Economy”:

Promote local food production and development of a conservation ethic by providing and maintaining opportunities and resources to facilitate the initiation and continuation of urban farming and community gardening.

- Continue to fund grant programs that support community gardens and urban farms, especially focused on low-income communities.
- Encourage the dedication of vacant private and publicly owned land in low-income communities for community gardening and urban farming, including the use of “underused” park land for productive community gardening and educational farming purposes.
- Promote brownfield remediation in low-income communities with dedicated reuse for open space with raised-bed planters for community gardens and urban farming opportunities.
- Collaborate with state and municipal agencies to provide adequate technical assistance to assess the toxicity of potential community garden and farm sites.
- Assist in extending land trust opportunities to community gardens with limited or no municipal protections and at risk of losing sites to development or sale of public or private land.
- Encourage the inclusion of community gardeners in municipal open space planning, as gardeners are natural partners for “greening the cityscape.”

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- Allocate resources to existing urban farm sites and community gardens to expand environmental stewardship efforts. As small, nimble organizations, community gardeners are often able to take the lead on best practices such as rainwater harvesting and decentralized city composting programs.

The Plan recommends the following actions to support working farms to advance the goal, “Protecting, Using and Conserving Our State’s Natural Resources and Cultural Heritage:”

- Support the work of municipalities in developing or updating local Agricultural and Farmland Protections Plans through the Farmland Protection Planning Grants program administered by DAM.
- Provide financial and technical support to project sponsors of locally led programs that protect farmland from conversion to non-agricultural uses and support a robust agricultural economy.
- Continue to support state, local government and non-profit acquisition of conservation easements on priority viable agricultural lands identified by the Regional Open Space Advisory Committees.
- Continue to refine the Farmland Protection Implementation Grants program administered by DAM to ensure timely completion of awarded projects and that local sponsors are afforded a menu of fundable project options.
- Support tax incentives and regulatory relief for agriculture-based industries.
- Support the concept of foodsheds as Scenic Hudson has in the Hudson Valley and the Region 3 Regional Advisory Committee discusses in its report.
- Provide access for smaller farming operations to technical and financial support for the development of management plans and implementation of best management practices equal to that of larger Consolidated Animal Feeding Operations.

5.1.7.7 Erie County Community Climate Action Plan

Erie County’s [Community Climate Action Plan](#) (CCAP) includes a goal to “Promote agriculture and food system solutions that advance farmland and environmental protection; strengthen ecosystem health; improve equitable access to healthy, local food; mitigate the impacts of climate change; and increase climate resiliency.” Recommended strategies include:

- Promote and protect agriculture
- Protect and restore ecosystems
- Access to healthy food
- Mitigate the impacts of climate change

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5.2 Opportunities and Challenges

5.2.1 *Properly maintained off-farm stormwater infrastructure helps prevent flooding of farm fields.*

Farms in Erie County rely on off-farm stormwater drainage systems to effectively carry stormwater away from farm fields. When flows in roadside ditches and other drainage structures exceed the ability of the drainage system to carry water away, stormwater may collect on adjoining farm fields. Although flooding abates over time, it can cause damage to crops and potentially introduce pathogens to the soil.

Where farm fields drain into **roadside drainage ditches**, farmers rely on the State, County, or municipality with jurisdiction over the road to maintain the drainage ditches to ensure flow of stormwater and avoid backup of water onto farm fields. When silt accumulates within roadside ditches, their capacity to carry stormwater is reduced, resulting in more frequent backup of stormwater onto adjoining farm fields. Cleaning out the accumulated silt from roadside ditches restores the capacity.

Many ditches require culverts to carry the stormwater under roads or driveways. Culverts deteriorate over time, fill with silt and sometimes heave and rise, impeding drainage upstream. Due to the high cost of repairing or replacing culverts, the culverts continue to deteriorate. While farms rely on well-maintained roadside ditches to help manage stormwater, municipalities are not legally obligated to size roadside drainage structures to accommodate flows from adjacent properties. Municipal highway departments responsible for maintaining roadside ditches may be concerned about excessive flows from farm fields requiring more frequent maintenance. Municipalities may also be concerned about sediments, nutrients, or chemicals in farm field runoff being carried into waterbodies. Due to the high cost and complexity of maintaining ditches and culverts, New York State, Erie County, and local municipalities responsible for these facilities along roadways may defer action, resulting in drainage issues getting worse. As climate change leads to more frequent and intense storms, the damage from poor drainage infrastructure becomes more severe.

Drainage infrastructure on farms may direct stormwater runoff to ditches that convey it to existing waterbodies. Drainage infrastructure located on other properties downstream from the farm needs to be properly maintained to avoid backup of stormwater and flooding of farm fields. Cooperation with downstream property owners is needed to ensure that this maintenance occurs.

Farmers may obtain **drainage easements** from neighbors to allow them to enter the neighbor's property to inspect, maintain, repair, install, or replace tile lines or other drainage structures. Drainage easements may be held by a Town Highway Department, SWCD, or other entities to allow access to private property to clear watercourses or maintain drainage structures.

Some municipalities have established **drainage districts** to fund the construction and maintenance of drainage infrastructure. As authorized by NYS Law, property owners within the

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district who benefit from the improvements are assessed annually to pay for the capital and operating costs.

Some farmland drains directly into a stream or other natural watercourse. When trees or other debris impede the natural flows, water may overflow the banks and flood adjoining farm fields. As NYS Environmental Conservation Law requires a permit to use heavy equipment within a stream bed, landowners are limited in how they can remove debris from streams. **Debris removal from a natural stream** is allowed without a permit only by using cables or ropes to pull the debris from the stream.

5.2.2 Agricultural best practices help to conserve soil and protect water quality

Agricultural practices have the potential to affect surface water through runoff of nutrients or chemicals into surface water.

Farms apply BMPs to avoid and minimize impacts.

SWCD offers technical and financial assistance to support whole farm planning and implementation of BMPs.

5.2.3 Climate resilient farming practices help farms reduce greenhouse gas emissions and adapt to the impacts of climate change

Farms have a role in both limiting impacts of climate change and adapting to the effects of climate change.

NYS AGM administers grant funding for climate resilient farming practices through the Climate Resilient Farming program, which is administered by the SWCD. This program has helped farms in Erie County implement various climate resilient farming practices including planting cover crops to sequester carbon and improving capacity of soils to retain moisture, manure covers and flares to reduce emissions of methane, stormwater management and irrigation improvements to allow for more targeted delivery of fertilizer and fungicide, and micro-irrigation systems to reduce the potential for nitrate to leach into groundwater.

As climate change increases the frequency and intensity of storms, farms may be impacted from severe damage caused by flooding, or other events.

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5.2.4 Water Supply Challenges

NYS regulations on withdrawals of well water have affected some farms. NYS regulations (6 NYCRR Part 601) require either registration or a permit, as well as annual reporting, for the withdrawal of more than three million gallons of water during any 30-day period.

Some farms have difficulty connecting to public water. For example, in April 2025 the Town of Orchard Park approved an out-of-district water agreement for the PFC to hook up to water supplied by the Erie County Water Authority following mediation. Some urban growers cannot obtain water hookups if no residence or business structure is located on the farm lot.

5.2.5 Revisions to NYS wetland regulations will impact farm operations

Revised NYS wetlands regulations, which took effect in January 2025, replace published maps of wetlands with criteria for identifying wetlands subject to regulations. The regulations continue to restrict land use practices on wetlands 12.4 acres or larger (and will be reduced to 7.4 acres in 2028), and smaller wetlands may be designated as “Wetlands of Unusual Importance”. Landowners may request an assessment from NYSDEC (“Jurisdictional Determination”) to determine whether a parcel meets the criteria for a regulated wetland. While agricultural drainage is not a regulated activity, construction of buildings and application of pesticides may require a NYSDEC permit if wetlands are located on the farm. As a result, many farmers face uncertainty regarding whether regulated wetlands are present on their farms, delays in obtaining a determination from DEC, and other challenges to carrying out farm practices.

5.2.6 Wildlife

Increasing deer populations can cause damage to crops, reducing harvest and revenue. In areas where hunting cannot effectively reduce the population, the NYSDEC administers a Deer Damage Permit that specifies certain methods of deer removal or discouragement of feeding on crops.

5.2.7 Risk of fire and harm to animals from sky lanterns and mylar balloons

Sky lanterns, also known as “Chinese lanterns” or “sky candles”, have become popular in recent years and are often launched en masse to commemorate special events (i.e., weddings, holidays, birthdays).

Once dispatched, the devices become an unattended fire, with no certainty that the device will be fully extinguished at the time of landing and no control over where it will land (i.e., house, animal enclosure, car, field). In addition to the risk of fire, these devices have landed in agricultural areas,

5. Water Resources, Environmental Protection, and Climate Resiliency

where livestock have consumed sky lantern components, often leading to death or internal complications.

In August 2025, the Erie County Legislature approved a law banning the sale and use of sky lanterns.

Mylar balloons also pose hazards to farm animals as well as wildlife. As no laws currently prohibit releasing balloons, reducing these hazards require public education to discourage this activity.

5.3 Goals, Policies and Recommended Actions

Goal: Protect water and environmental quality and ensure climate resilience.

Policies and Recommended Actions:

1. Support drainage policies and practices that benefit farm operations.
 - a. Encourage municipalities to periodically inspect and clean roadside ditches.

Lead: Erie County Department of Public Works
Partners: DEP, Municipalities, Cornell Local Roads Program (technical assistance)
 - b. Encourage municipalities to undertake drainage studies and create drainage districts as needed to coordinate the construction and maintenance of drainage facilities.

Lead: SWCD
Partners: Municipalities, SWCD, NYSDEC (technical assistance, grants), DEP
 - c. Provide information and technical assistance to farmers to obtain drainage easements from neighboring properties to ensure the ability to maintain drainageways downstream from farm fields.

Lead: SWCD
Partners: Municipalities, NYSDEC (technical assistance, grants)

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2. Support programs that provide funding and technical assistance to farms to install best management practices for water quality, environmental protection, and climate resiliency.
 - a. Advocate for continued funding for NYS grants, including Agricultural Environmental Management, Climate Resilient Farming, and USDA NRCS and Farm Bill programs, that provide technical assistance and cost sharing for farms to install best management practices.

Lead: SWCD
Partners: NYS AGM, USDA (technical assistance, grants)
 - b. Establish a permanent fund to assist farms and agribusinesses impacted by damage from severe storms.

Lead: Erie County Legislature
Partners: SWCD
3. Reduce negative impacts of recent changes to NYS wetlands regulations on farms.
 - a. Advocate for reasonable protections and administration of NYS wetlands regulations that do not place excessive burdens on farm practices.

Lead: NYFB, Erie County Legislature
Partners: SWCD
4. Eliminate the risk of fire and harm to animals from unregulated sky lanterns and mylar balloons.
 - a. Enforce the recent ban on untethered use of sky lanterns in Erie County.

Lead: Erie County Legislature
Partners: AFPB
 - b. Educate the public to discourage the release of mylar balloons to reduce risk of harm to farm animals and damage to equipment.

Lead: Erie County Legislature
Partners: AFPB

6. Public Appreciation of Agriculture

6.1 Current Conditions and Trends

As a majority of Erie County residents live in urban or suburban areas, few have the opportunity to see or visit farms. Many people have little knowledge of where their food comes from. Few elected leaders and other decision makers are farmers or are from farming families. The lack of understanding of agriculture may lead to restrictive local regulation of farming practices.

Current programs to increase public understanding and appreciation of agriculture include:

- Youth education
- Promotion of local farm products and agritourism
- Information and training for local decision makers

6.1.1. Youth Education

Youth education both encourages youth to consider careers in agriculture and helps to promote public education and appreciation of agriculture.

School gardens such as the Pelion Outdoor Classroom at City Honors School in Buffalo give youth an opportunity to learn first-hand about growing vegetables and other products.

Youth education programs currently active in Erie County include New York Ag in the Classroom, 4-H, and FFA. Refer to Section 4.1.6 (Workforce Development) for information related to 4-H and FFA.

6.1.1.1. *Ag in the Classroom*

New York Agriculture in the Classroom (NYAITS) is a partnership of Cornell University, NYS AGM, the NYS Education Department, CCE, and the New York Farm Bureau. The program's mission is to increase agricultural literacy in students and teachers from pre-K to high school, as well as CCE educators, farmers and producers, volunteers, parents, and community partners. NYAITS provides training and grants for educators to bring agriculture into their classrooms through a curriculum matrix, lesson plans, eLearning, apps, book distributions, and more. NYAITS also conducts trainings for specialized lessons such as Dairy in the Classroom and Agriculture Literacy Week. In 2023, Agriculture in the Classroom reached 17,000 teachers and 470,000 students across the state.

CCE Erie 4-H staff are cross-trained in NYAITS curricula and conduct NYAITS programs in Erie County schools.

6. Public Appreciation of Agriculture

6.1.1.2. *Erie County Agricultural Society*

The Erie County Agricultural Society, a private, not-for-profit organization, manages the annual Erie County Fair. The Erie County Fairgrounds, located in Hamburg, has horse racing, gaming, and convention facilities. In addition to the Fair, the Society hosts livestock/horse, farm shows, and other conventions throughout the rest of the year. In addition, it organizes educational field trips for students in grades K through 5 to introduce them to agriculture and learn how food comes from the farm to their table.



6.1.2. Local Foods Promotion

By identifying locally grown food and managing an identifiable brand and marketing strategy via Erie Grown and Eat Local WNY, Erie County makes it easier for consumers to more easily make intentional purchasing decisions and support local producers.

The Erie Grown brand is managed by the DEP Office of Agriculture. The brand is partnered with and sponsored by other recognizable organizations (CCE Erie, SWCD, Taste NY, Erie County Farm Bureau) in Erie County. Erie Grown includes the Erie Grown Passport program, an interactive initiative which offers prizes for completion. The purpose of the passport is to better connect consumers to farmers, farmers markets, and local foods. Users can fill out their passport by visiting a farm, farm-related business, or agricultural festival. The locations and dates of these opportunities are provided on a map on the Erie Grown website.

The Erie Grown website also serves as a hub for local food information, including links to resources for agricultural businesses, a search function for finding local growers, and a fresh produce finder function, including a map of all farmers markets in the area and where SNAP benefits can be used on fresh, local produce.



Erie Grown is a partner with Eat Local WNY, an initiative supported by FreshFix and the University at Buffalo School of Public Health and Health Professions that is funded by the USDA.

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Eat Local WNY is a pledge-based initiative where individuals can take a pledge to support local farms and producers, then provide information about how much local food they purchase each week for three months. The initiative will then inform the individual where they stand on reaching their goal and provide resources on where they can find local food. The Eat Local WNY website also provides resources to visitors without requiring them to sign the pledge, including a list of produce in season by month, local farms with u-picks, CSAs, and agritourism, and restaurants and retailers that prioritize local food sources.

Taste NY at the WNY Welcome Center in Grand Island is operated by CCE Erie as part of the broader New York State initiative aimed at promoting local food, beverages, and agricultural products. The program supports New York's farmers, artisans, and food producers by connecting them to both local and broader markets.

Taste NY stores typically source products directly from New York State farmers, food producers, craft brewers, and artisans. The store features a curated selection of products that reflect the diversity and quality of New York's agricultural output. Products include fresh produce, dairy products, meats, snacks, beverages (including ciders and craft beers at select locations), and specialty items such as honey, maple syrup, and artisanal baked goods.

Taste NY and CCE Erie's missions are closely aligned. The Taste NY initiative educates shoppers about the direct impact their purchases have on the local economy, farmers, and the environment. CCE serves as an educational partner, assisting producers with business development, marketing strategies, and sustainable farming practices. By operating through CCE Erie, Taste NY not only supports the local agricultural community but also helps raise awareness about the importance of local food systems, sustainable farming, and the value of buying locally produced goods. This collaboration allows consumers to enjoy high-quality, fresh, and sustainable products while supporting the economic growth and sustainability of New York State's agricultural sector.

Erie County's "Find Fresh Erie" program, funded by a grant from the USDA, will help connect residents with fresh food at grocery stores, mobile markets and farmers markets. The Erie County Office of Health Equity, the FPC, and DEP will work with community partners to create a database of locations that sell fresh produce. A "Text FRESH" campaign and distribution of discount coupons will encourage residents of low-food access communities to utilize those outlets.

The FPC "New York Food for New York Families" project, funded through a \$1 million grant from NYS AGM, will distribute local produce, eggs, and milk to families who reside in areas with low food access. The program will also prepare and distribute educational materials such as recipe suggestions, cooking demonstrations, and descriptions of local food sources.

6. Public Appreciation of Agriculture

6.1.3 “Right-to-Farm” laws and policies

NYS Agricultural District Law ([AGM Article 25-AA, §308](#)) includes “right to farm” protections for farm operations located within Agricultural Districts. The law authorizes the Commissioner of NYS AGM, in consultation with the State Advisory Council on Agriculture, to “issue opinions upon request from any person as to whether particular agricultural practices are sound.” The section also states that an agricultural practice deemed to be sound “shall not constitute a public nuisance.”

[Section 305-A](#) states that municipal comprehensive plans and zoning regulations “shall not unreasonably restrict or regulate farm operations within agricultural districts in contravention of the purposes of this article unless it can be shown that the public health or safety is threatened.” Upon request from a municipality or an affected farm operator, AGM will issue an opinion as to whether the local regulation is unreasonably restrictive to farm operations that meets certain thresholds.

The [Erie County Right to Farm Law](#) took effect January 1, 2000. This law recognizes the importance of agriculture in Erie County, declares that reasonable agricultural practices shall not violate public policy of Erie County, and requires a disclosure notice in contracts for sale of residential property stating that farm operations may cause odors, noise, dust or other impacts and that farms have the right to undertake such practices.

Twenty-three of Erie County’s 25 Towns have adopted local “right to farm” laws. Several state the Town’s policy in support of agriculture and declare that sound agricultural practices shall not be considered public nuisances. Several include required notifications to buyers of real estate. Some establish a committee and specify a process to resolve disputes between farms and non-farming neighbors. Some (Towns of Clarence and Eden) direct Town officers and boards to consider the impact of development applications on farm operations. The local right to farm laws are primarily a statement of policy and do not regulate land use.

6.2. Opportunities and Challenges

6.2.1. Increasing public understanding of where food comes from, and the contributions of local agriculture to the regional food system, help local farms market products to the public.

As documented in Section 3, Farm Viability, farms in Erie County that market products directly to consumers and those that operate agritourism enterprises benefit from proximity to population centers. Existing programs to educate youth and promote local foods help build the market for local farm products.

6. Public Appreciation of Agriculture

6.2.2 Increased understanding of farm practices among local government officials can help reduce neighbor complaints about farm practices and support farm-friendly local government regulation.

Local government actions can affect farms through assessments, zoning regulations, highway maintenance, and other actions. Local officials may not be aware of applicable provisions of NYS Agricultural District Laws or how their actions impact farms. Decision makers may not understand the extent to which farms contribute to the regional economy, maintain open space, and provide other benefits to the community.

As discussed in Section 3: Farm Viability, local zoning, and other regulations often unreasonably restrict some farm operations. The review of local zoning regulations, Appendix C, offers specific guidance for farm-friendly zoning practices by municipality. Towns, including planning board members and other officials, are encouraged to review these suggestions. Furthermore, such local officials would benefit from periodic education and training regarding NYS Agricultural District protections and best practices.

Local assessors are responsible for administering the agricultural assessments provided for in NYS Agricultural District Laws. Local assessors may differ in how they interpret or apply requirements to obtain agricultural assessments.

Municipal highway officials responsible for managing drainage along public roads may not be aware of how changes in drainage would impact adjoining farm fields.

6.3. Goals, Policies and Recommended Actions

Goal: Increase public appreciation of farming and support for agriculture and related businesses among local decision-makers.

Policies and Recommended Actions:

1. Continue to provide information and training to local officials and decision makers regarding farm practices and benefits of agriculture.
 - a. Continue training sessions and farm tours for local officials.

Lead: DEP

Partners: CCE Erie, Municipalities

6. Public Appreciation of Agriculture

2. Promote local agriculture and agritourism.

- a. Promote farmers markets through the Erie Grown label, farmers market online map, and Passport program.

Lead: DEP, FPC, CCE Erie, VBN

Partners: Municipalities

- b. Have a presence at Erie County Fair and other agriculture-related events such as festivals and conferences.

Lead: DEP, FPC

Partners: Erie County Agricultural Society

3. Encourage youth education through Agriculture in the Classroom curriculum, 4-H, and FFA.

- a. Continue operation of NYS Ag in the Classroom and CCE youth education programs and demonstrate successes and impacts yearly.

Lead: CCE Erie, FPC

Partners: Erie County Agricultural Society, Erie County Legislature

- b. Support school districts engaged in or interested in FFA programs with information and technical assistance.

Lead: CCE Erie, DEP, FPC

Partners: Erie County Farm Bureau

4. Maintain support for the Office of Agriculture, CCE Erie, and the Erie County SWCD

- a. Advocate for continued funding for the Erie County Office of Agriculture, CCE Erie, and the Erie County SWCD in the yearly County budget.

Lead: DEP

Partners: Erie County Legislature, Erie County Farm Bureau

7. Urban Agriculture

7.1 Current Conditions and Trends

7.1.1 What is Urban Agriculture?

Urban Agriculture can represent a broad range of activities, including backyard gardening, community gardens, and commercial agricultural operations. Given the wide variety of activities that constitute urban agriculture, there is no statutory definition. However, many agencies and organizations have attempted to develop their own definition, including the USDA, NYS Office of Urban Agriculture, FPC, and the City of Buffalo's Green Code. This Plan distinguishes commercial urban agriculture operations from school and community gardens and not-for-profit growers whose primary mission is to address social, environmental, or educational goals rather than generate profit.

Commercial Urban Agriculture is the cultivation, processing, and distribution of agricultural products within urban areas, primarily for profit. It involves various practices such as vertical farming, greenhouses, and urban farms utilizing limited urban space efficiently while focusing on economic viability.

Other urban agriculture activities include:

- **Nonprofit Urban Agriculture:** The cultivation, processing, and distribution of agricultural products within urban areas by organizations whose primary mission is to address social, environmental, or educational goals rather than generate profit. These initiatives often focus on community development, food security, sustainability, and education, using urban spaces to benefit local populations.
- **Food Producing Community Gardens,** which often serve to strengthen community bonds, promote food security, and enhance access to healthy food in neighborhoods.
- **School Gardens,** which serve as hands-on learning environments that promote knowledge of agriculture, nutrition, and environmental stewardship while providing fresh produce for the school community.
- **Commercial Urban Agriculture Support Services:** Businesses and resources that provide essential inputs and infrastructure to urban farms. These services include everything from equipment and inputs, to financial, marketing, and distribution support - all tailored to ensure the profitability and efficiency of urban agricultural operations.

Since the adoption of Erie County's previous Agricultural and Farmland Protection Plan in 2013, the urban agricultural environment in Erie County and across the country has received more attention from State and Federal governments to improve food access in underserved areas, provide workforce development opportunities for youth, and increase understanding and appreciation of where food comes from.

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7.1.2 Inventory of Existing Urban Agricultural Practices/Growers

The inventory of urban agricultural practices and growers was conducted through an online review supplemented by stakeholder interviews and focus group meetings with urban growers. Map 11 depicts the urban agricultural practices and growers identified as part of this inventory.

Local Profile: Flat 12 Mushrooms

Flat 12 Mushrooms has been a cornerstone of Buffalo's urban agriculture scene since its incorporation in 2014. Operating out of a 5,000-square-foot indoor vertical farm at 37 Chandler Street since 2019, the company has successfully utilized the food incubator space to cultivate approximately 1,000 pounds of mushrooms per week. In addition to fresh mushrooms, Flat 12 offers an array of mushroom-based products, including coffee, broth, pâté, and lion's mane mushroom powder, valued for its potential medicinal properties. While their current space has served as an accelerant for growth, Flat 12 is now at capacity and has been seeking a larger facility to scale up production to 5,000–7,000 pounds weekly, meeting the area's increasing demand for locally grown mushrooms and expanding their market presence.

The company's retail model is split between restaurant sales, which account for 60% of their business, and retail/direct-to-consumer, making up the remaining 40%. One way Flat 12 engages directly with the community is through their CSA program, offering local customers convenient weekly mushroom pickups. However, a significant retail challenge that remains is the lack of a year-round winter market in Buffalo, limiting their ability to sell directly to customers during colder months.

Overall, Flat 12 Mushrooms exemplifies the promise of commercial urban agriculture in Erie County, demonstrating how innovative practices and adaptive reuse of existing infrastructure can yield economic viability. Their success highlights a clear path forward for other urban agriculture ventures in the area, proving that with strategic planning and market awareness, urban farms can thrive and significantly contribute to local food systems.

7.1.2.1 Commercial Urban Agriculture

Commercial urban agriculture in Erie County includes businesses that cultivate, process, and distribute agricultural products for profit. Overall, there are an estimated eight commercial urban agricultural operations in Erie County, covering approximately 7.5 acres of land. Five of these operations are in the City of Buffalo, while others can be found in the City of Tonawanda and the Towns of Amherst and Cheektowaga. These operations include one indoor mushroom grower (Flat

7. Urban Agriculture

12 Mushrooms), two indoor microgreen growers (Rooted Locally and Tiny House Farms Microgreens), and five market gardens (5 Loaves Farm, Groundwork Market Garden, Westside Tilth Farm, and Wilson Street Urban Farm).

Commercial Urban Agriculture Support Services

Commercial urban agricultural support services in Erie County are businesses and organizations that provide inputs, services, and infrastructure that support urban farming operations. These operations include BFLO Worm Works and Farmer Pirates Compost, which both provide compost and composting services to growers in Erie County.

Local Profile: Massachusetts Avenue Project

Since 1992, the Massachusetts Avenue Project (MAP) has been a driving force for food justice, youth empowerment, and community development on Buffalo's West Side. What began as a grassroots block club initiative aimed at revitalizing vacant land and creating opportunities for young people has grown into a multifaceted nationally recognized nonprofit dedicated to building a more diverse, accessible, and equitable local food system. At the heart of MAP's operations is their urban farm and community education center, which serves as a hub for agricultural production, youth programming, and community engagement. The organization also operates a commercial kitchen, used for youth-focused culinary training and rented by small businesses to support local food entrepreneurs.

Youth empowerment is central to MAP's mission, demonstrated by their employment of over 650 teenagers since 2003, with an impressive 95% high school graduation rate among program participants. MAP's Growing Green Mobile Market ensures that fresh produce from their farm and other local growers reaches underserved neighborhoods throughout Buffalo. Additionally, their properties serve as a CSA (Community Supported Agriculture) pickup location, connecting rural growers with urban residents and bridging gaps in local food distribution networks. Despite their successes, MAP faces challenges in acquiring additional vacant land for expansion, as the City prioritizes land retention for large-scale development projects.

MAP's work highlights key lessons for Erie County and the City of Buffalo in advancing urban agriculture. Prioritizing access to vacant land for community-driven agricultural projects, supporting youth-focused programming, and investing in infrastructure like commercial kitchens and mobile markets can significantly strengthen the local food system. MAP's success demonstrates that urban agriculture, when paired with education and economic opportunity, has the power to address food insecurity, empower communities, and foster sustainable local economies.

7. Urban Agriculture

Nonprofit Urban Agriculture

Nonprofit urban agricultural organizations cultivate, process, and distribute agricultural products within urban areas with the primary mission to address social, environmental, or educational goals rather than generate profit. Overall, there are three such organizations in Erie County, covering approximately 2.1 acres of land. These organizations include Brewster Street Farm, Massachusetts Avenue Project, and Buffalo Go Green/Urbans Fruits and Veggies.

Food Producing Community and School Gardens

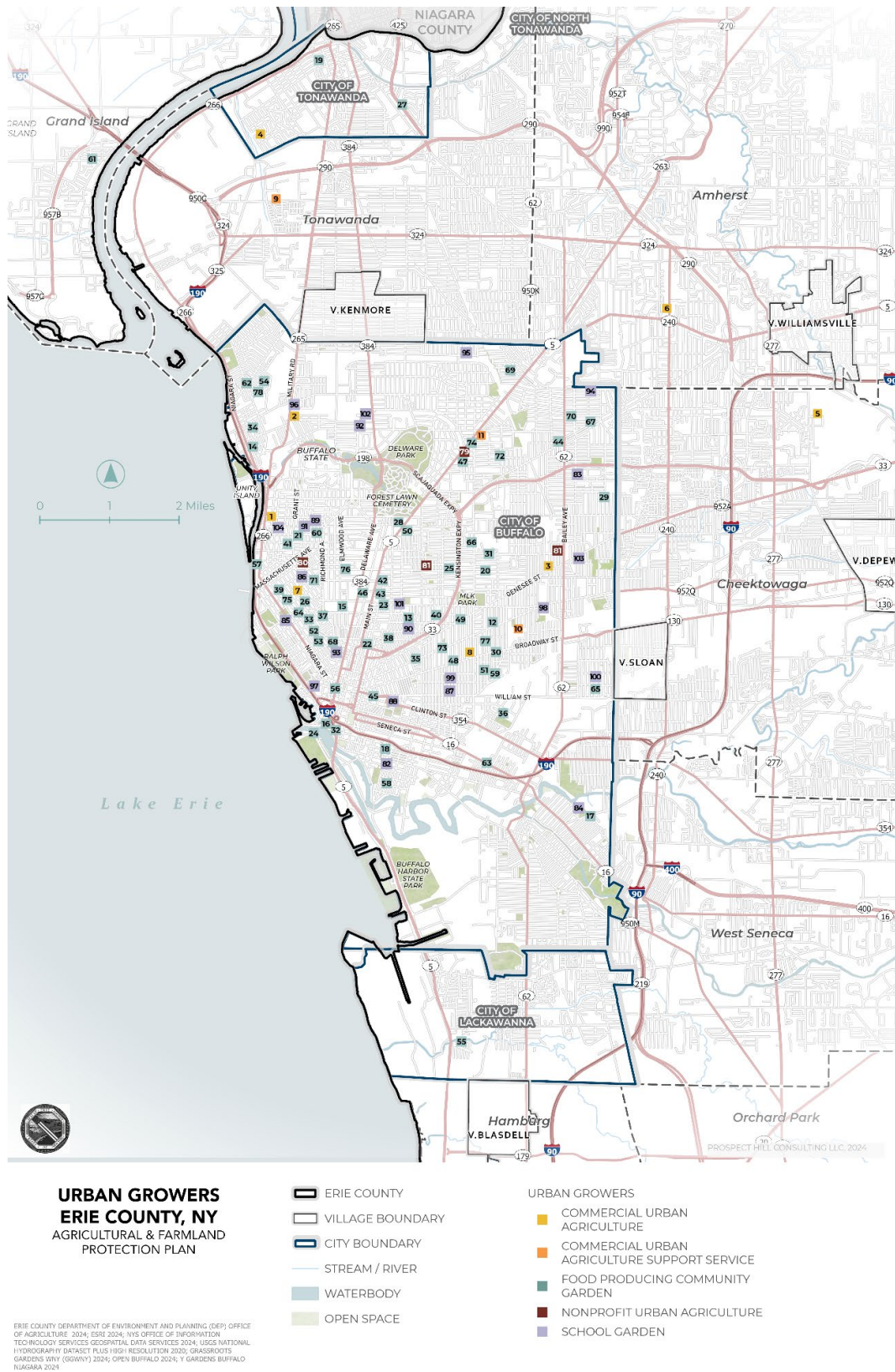
Food producing community gardens are shared spaces where community members collaboratively grow agricultural products, with the primary goal of providing fresh, locally grown food for personal or communal consumption. These community gardens can be found in various locations, including vacant lots in residential neighborhoods, incorporated into the landscaping of apartment complexes, or at community centers and places of worship, among other places. Overall, there are an estimated 67 food-producing community gardens in Erie County, covering approximately 7.2 acres of land. Most of these community gardens were developed in partnership with GGWNY, a nonprofit organization dedicated to growing healthy food and strengthening neighborhoods through the development of community gardens. As seen in Map 12, 90% of these are educational spaces within or adjacent to school grounds where students actively participate in agricultural production. These spaces simultaneously introduce students to understand various topics such as sustainability, ecology, and food systems while also introducing them to a potential career path in agriculture. Overall, there are an estimated 22 school gardens in Erie County, all of which are in the City of Buffalo. Like the food producing community gardens throughout the County, the majority of these school gardens were developed in partnership with GGWNY.

“Backyard” Gardens

Backyard or home gardens allow residents to grow food and other agricultural products for their own use. These types of gardens help to increase public appreciation of farming as well as improving their own self-sufficiency.

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7.1.3 Organizations Active in Erie County Urban Agriculture

Several organizations in and outside of the City of Buffalo support urban agriculture in Erie County. Below is a list and a short summary of the work each of these organizations do to support urban agriculture in Erie County.

GBUG: The GBUG are a growing network of local agricultural professionals and growers who are devoted to improving communication and developing best practices for growing food in urban settings throughout Erie County.

Gardens Buffalo Niagara: A nonprofit organization with the mission of creating a more vibrant and beautiful community through the development of gardens. With a focus on private and community gardens, Gardens Buffalo Niagara also supports urban farming with their Urban Farm Day which is held every August. By partnering with urban farms in the area, Urban Farm Day offers residents the opportunity to tour urban farms, hear stories from local growers, and broaden their knowledge on the local food systems in Erie County.

Buffalo Go Green (BGG)/Urban Fruits and Veggies: A nonprofit working to fight food apartheid and its effects on the East Side community in Buffalo.

- BGG provides East Side neighborhoods with fresh and healthy food choices from their urban farm and provides food to local schools, businesses, and restaurants.
- Helps other urban agricultural growers construct, set up, and manage their businesses.
- Provides training and educational programming on urban agriculture for children, teens, and adults.
- In partnership with the New York Power Authority and the Buffalo Center for Health Equity, BGG recently developed a new indoor food production system which will grow herbs and vegetables year-round and will help advance best practices with hydroponics.

GGWNY: A dedicated group of gardeners and activists who share their knowledge and resources to grow community gardens in WNY. With over 100 community gardens constructed under their guidance, GGWNY also provides workshops and distribution services for gardening equipment and inputs to maintain these gardens and so others can start on their own.

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Journey's End Refugee Services: A community organization working to welcome refugees to the WNY area.

- Journey's End Refugee Services Green Shoots program is an urban farming program that provides adult refugees skills in adaptive farming and marketing with the goal of helping refugees find permanent work in the agricultural sector.
- Journey's End operates the Brewster Street Farm and CSA. Refugees with the agency work on the farm and operate the CSA which provides a steady income and fresh produce for their family.

FPC: Orchestrated by Erie County, the FPC, which is comprised of 15-21 members, advocates for equitable and sustainable food systems for the people of Buffalo and Erie County.

CCE Erie: The Erie County branch of CCE provides research-based information and educational programming to ensure the vitality of local agriculture and to promote the health and well-being of the community and natural environment.

Buffalo Food Equity Network: A place-based network for people of color who are seeking to build a movement for WNY's new food economy.

The Food Systems Planning and Health Communities Lab: The "UB Food Lab," led by Dr. Samina Raja, is housed in the University at Buffalo's School of Architecture and Planning and conducts research examining how local government policies impact equitable, healthy, and sustainable communities. Through collaboration with community organizations and local governments, the Lab provides technical assistance and policy tools, exemplified by their report "Growing Toward Equity," which highlights strategies to promote and sustain equitable urban agriculture on Buffalo's East Side.

The **Tool Library** is a volunteer-powered nonprofit tool-lending library located at 2626 Main Street in Buffalo, NY. The Tool Library partners with GGWNY to support the community garden and sponsors events to help residents maintain their homes and gardens.

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Growing Toward Equity: Equitable Urban Agriculture in Buffalo's East Side Neighborhoods

The *Growing Toward Equity* report, developed by the UB Food Lab, examines urban agriculture on Buffalo's East Side, aiming to promote sustainable and equitable food systems in historically underserved neighborhoods. With approximately 100,000 residents — 36% of Buffalo's population and home to 70% of the city's Black residents — the East Side faces significant economic and food access challenges. Nearly 44% of households earn less than \$40,000 annually, and only four supermarkets serve the area's 14 neighborhoods, contributing to an estimated food insecurity rate of 42%, according to the report. Despite these challenges, the report identified 45 urban agricultural operations throughout the East Side, 86% of which are community or school gardens, demonstrating both a foundation for growth and an opportunity to address systemic inequities.

The report outlined 21 actionable recommendations to strengthen urban agriculture, including initiatives that Erie County could spearhead. Key recommendations Erie County could help undertake include:

- (1) Ensure that urban agriculture initiatives receive access to existing local government resources and services:** Through its Office of Health Equity (OHE), the County of Erie could provide technical/staff assistance to urban growers to navigate and apply to the plethora of state funding and grant opportunities, prioritizing applications from neighborhoods on the East Side.
- (2) Improve awareness and practices around soil safety and safe urban food production:** The OHE, with support from the Erie County Department of Health (and other city, state, and federal agencies), could support information and practices that ensure safe growing practices in East Side neighborhoods. Expanding on the GBUG's ongoing work regarding soil safety, OHE could support increasing access to safe soil awareness, soil testing, and soil safety education.
- (3) Promote Workforce development in urban agriculture and food systems:** Existing County adult education and workforce development programs could expand sponsored opportunities for training and job placement with local growing operations and ancillary businesses.
- (4) Host urban agriculture and community food workshops:** To facilitate interest and awareness in urban agriculture, the County could help expand offerings of workshops on urban agriculture and related activities such as food preservation and cooking. Funding for workshops could be made available.

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7.1.4 Policies, Programs, and Regulations

7.1.4.1 NYS Agriculture and Markets Law

New York State, through the **Agriculture and Markets Law**, has given counties the right to create agricultural districts, which require agricultural and farmland protection boards for oversight. By establishing a farm within an agricultural district, farm operators receive additional protection from unreasonable restrictions and discouragement of private nuisance lawsuits against them. For more information on agricultural districts, refer to Section 2.1.1: Farmland Resources. As the Agricultural District Program was designed to support farm operations in rural areas, it is not suitable for farms in urban areas. Agricultural assessments established through Agriculture and Markets Law allow land used for eligible farm operations to be taxed based on the land's value for agricultural production rather than for its "highest and best use." Currently, no parcels in the City of Buffalo are receiving this tax exemption.

Federal Programs

At the federal level, the USDA provides financial and technical assistance to urban and small-scale producers with growing, processing, and selling their agricultural products. The USDA provides grant funding to initiate or expand urban agricultural efforts through the **Urban Agriculture and Innovative Production Grant**. Funding awarded through this program can be utilized for either planning or implementation activities; planning activities include assessing community needs, researching best practices, or conducting business planning and feasibility studies related to urban agriculture. Eligible implementation activities through this grant program includes expanding operations, providing workforce training, implementing best practices, or supporting educational programs. In Erie County, Net Positive Inc. was awarded \$261,320 in 2022 through this program to partner with the aquaponic company Gro-operative and Buffalo high schools to address wealth and health disparities by providing urban agricultural programming.

Other federal agencies and departments that can assist urban agriculture operations through financial and technical assistance include: (1) the **Farm Service Agency** which can offer microloans tailored to small-scale farms, (2) the **Natural Resources Conservation Service** which can offer financial assistance with implementing urban agriculture best practices, (3) the **Food Nutrition Service** which can provide funding to urban growers for farm to school programs, and (4) the **Agricultural Research Service** which provide funding to research innovative production techniques such as vertical farming. **USDA's Urban Agriculture Programs at a Glance** provides a well-rounded review of all the various types of federal programs available to assist with urban agriculture operations.

In addition to providing financial and technical assistance, the USDA also supports urban agriculture through their **Federal Advisory Committee for Urban Agriculture and Innovative Production (UAIPAC)**. Created through the 2018 Farm Bill, this 12-member committee advises the Secretary of Agriculture on the development of policies and outreach relating to urban, indoor, and emerging agricultural production practices.

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At the State level, the **Office of Community Gardens** was created by New York State to support residents who are dedicated to building greener and healthier cities. The program helps interested individuals and organizations with forming community gardens by leveraging resources across state agencies to assist with identifying vacant public land for the development of community gardens, and by coordinating between those interested parties and the state agencies.

Established through an update to the NYS Agriculture and Markets Law in 2021, the **Community Gardens Task Force** is a group of stakeholders tasked with studying, evaluating, and developing recommendations to the State which would support the development of community gardens. The taskforce meets biannually and is required to submit a report to the Governor and Legislature every five years. There are currently two members of the taskforce that are from the Erie County area: Tim Chen (GGWNY) and Allison DeHoney (BGG).

Now in its second year of funding, New York State Department of Agriculture and Markets (NYSAGM) administers the **Urban Farms and Community Gardens Grant Program** which provides funding for the expansion or development of community gardens, school gardens, and urban farms. With \$1,000,000 in available funding, AGM offers minimum grant amounts of \$20,000 with a 10% match for projects that are focused on improving food security in urban areas through food production, food safety, and food distribution.

In 2025, the FPC will be developing criteria by which to rank County-owned land for possible reuse as community gardens.

7.1.4.2 Erie County Regulations

The **AFPB** consists of 11 members involved in agriculture within the County who meet at least four times a year to review proposed Agricultural District modifications, review Notices of Intent related to development within Agricultural Districts, and to a limited extent discuss agricultural issues. The composition of the AFPB is set forth in Agriculture and Markets Law. Erie County's Agricultural Districts are split into four distinct districts, North #1, Central #5, Southeast #15, and Southwest #8. One member of the AFPB was recently appointed to represent the interests and views of urban agricultural producers in the County.

Erie County does not have the jurisdiction to adopt zoning regulations itself or impose such regulations on towns, villages, or cities. Similarly, the administration of public water and sewer (outside of Erie County Sewer Districts) is outside of County jurisdiction.

7.1.4.3. City of Buffalo Regulations

The City of Buffalo supports urban agriculture through its **Unified Development Ordinance (UDO) also known as the Buffalo Green Code**. The Buffalo Green Code specifically permits “community gardens” and “market gardens.” Community gardens are permitted within 20 of the City's 22

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zoning districts (all districts except the D-IH (Heavy Industrial) and C-R (Rail Corridor) districts). “Market gardens” are defined as, “a site where food, ornamental crops, or trees are grown for sale to the general public.”

The Green Code allows market gardens as a permitted principal use within 15 of its 22 zoning districts and with a special use permit in the N-4-30 and N-4-50 Single Family zoning districts if they are located east of Jefferson Avenue, south of Best Street/Walden Avenue, west of Bailey Avenue, and north of Clinton Street. They are not permitted in the D-IH (Heavy Industrial), D-OS (Square), D-OG (Green), or C-R (Rail Corridor) districts.

The Green Code restricts sales of agricultural products produced in permitted Market Gardens. The agricultural products must be produced on the property or elsewhere in the City of Buffalo. On-site sales are allowed if the market garden use is the only use on the property or occupies at least 50% of the area of the property. Within certain zoning districts (N-2R, N-3R, N-4-30), on-site sales are limited to 10 hours per week and no structure other than one market stand may be used to sell produce or other goods.

The Green Code also permits certain agricultural uses as accessory uses in conjunction with a property’s primary use. Such accessory uses include apiaries, aquaponic operations, chicken coops, greenhouses, hoop houses, and market stands. The Green Code includes additional criteria and requirements for apiaries and chicken coops.

Chapter 193 of the Buffalo Green Code requires inspection of any cattle, sheep, swine or goats slaughtered for human consumption. Inspection is not required if the animal is intended for consumption by the person slaughtering the animal or by a member of that person’s family ([§193-17](#)).

Chapter 78 of the Buffalo Green Code prohibits breeding animals in a manner detrimental to public health and notes that a permit is required from the County Department of Health to keep cows, sheep, hogs or cattle. The regulations specify that one acre per cow is required. The Department of Health may establish rules and restrictions on the keeping of animals within the City.

7.2 Opportunities and Challenges

7.2.1 Numerous organizations in Erie County and the City of Buffalo support urban agriculture and provide a strong foundation for growth and collaboration.

Organizations that support and advocate for urban agriculture in the City of Buffalo and Erie County listed in Section 7.1.2 and 7.1.3 have extensive knowledge of the needs of urban growers. It is important for government officials to consult with representatives of these organizations in developing agricultural and land use policies and regulations. The recent appointment of an urban agriculture representative to the AFBP and engagement in the FPC are examples of recognizing the unique perspective of urban farmers.

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7.2.2 Restrictions in the City of Buffalo’s Green Code on allotted hours, use of city-owned lots, and structures used for on-site sales limits opportunities for City farmers to gain revenue from direct-to-consumer sales.

Buffalo’s Green Code limits on-site sales to, “Agricultural products, plants, eggs, and honey grown or produced on or within the subject property or within the City of Buffalo...if the market garden use is the only use of the subject property or occupies at least 50% of the area of the property. In addition, foods prepared on site or off site may be sold if the principal ingredients are grown or produced on the subject property or within the City of Buffalo. If the Market Garden is located within residential zoning districts N-2R, N-3R, N-4-30, or N-4-50, no structure other than one market stand may be used to sell produce or other goods and hours of sales are limited to 10 hours per week.

One advantage of commercial urban farms is their proximity to customers. Restrictions on on-site sales limit these farms from taking advantage of this opportunity. Additionally, some farm operations produce agricultural products outside of the City of Buffalo or non-consumable agricultural products. The Buffalo Green Code limits opportunities for these farms to sell these types of products directly to consumers in the city.

It should be noted that the right to zone rests with towns, villages, and cities in New York State. The County has no direct authority to require zoning ordinance amendments.

7.2.3 Municipal zoning regulations that restrict animal or poultry limit opportunities for small-scale agriculture as well as home-based food production in urban, village and suburban settings.

While raising chickens is permitted in the City of Buffalo, hooved animals are not listed as permitted in the Green Code. Another City code section references a requirement for Health Department approval. Some villages and suburban towns in Erie County prohibit raising chickens as well as the keeping of hooved animals on small lots that do not have NYS Agricultural District protections.

7.2.3 High property taxes present a challenge for urban growers.

Most land used for agricultural production in the city is classified as “vacant.” This classification is for assessment purposes and reflects that property taxes reflect the potential development value of the property rather than its actual value as agricultural land. Since assessment practices are regulated by NYS, municipalities have limited ability to affect tax assessments. New York State’s Agricultural Districts Law provides agricultural assessments for parcels used for farm operations that meet certain thresholds, such as generating at least \$10,000 in sales annually. While urban farms may be eligible for the agricultural assessment, to date none in Erie County have applied.

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To receive the agricultural assessment, eligible farm operators must complete a Soil Worksheet and apply through the local assessor. SWCD staff are available, for a fee, to assist growers in preparing the Soil Worksheet. If the property is owned by a not-for-profit entity, it is generally exempt from property taxes already and so would not be eligible nor would benefit from agricultural assessment.

In 2014, the State of Maryland updated its tax code to allow [tax credits](#) for urban agricultural operations and the City of Baltimore passed legislation the following year to make the tax credit available to urban growers in the City. The tax credit gives growers 90% off their property taxes, granted that parcel is used for urban agriculture for five years, produces at least \$5,000 in agricultural products annually, and the property is not used for any other purposes that are subject to property tax.

Agricultural assessments for urban farms may require modification of NYS Real Property Law.

7.2.4 Urban growers in Erie County lack the right to farm protections comparable to those offered to rural growers through agricultural districts.

As the NYS Agricultural District Program is not suitable for urban areas, farms in urban areas do not benefit from Agricultural District program protections such as: (1) discouragement of private nuisance lawsuits, (2) limitations on unreasonable local laws, and (3) restrictions on eminent domain procedures. As the size and output of commercial urban agriculture operations in Erie County would likely not meet the requirements for establishing an Agricultural District (see Section 2.1.1: Farmland Resources for more information), right to farm protections would need to be established through local municipal programs or regulations.

7.2.5 Some urban growers would benefit from encouraging institutional procurement of urban agricultural products.

See Section 1.2.3 for more information on encouraging institutional procurement.

7.2.6 Reducing existing barriers to entry for aspiring urban farmers is essential to expanding the local urban agriculture sector. Providing accessible resources, training, and support could help foster new opportunities and grow the workforce in this field.

Expanding the urban agriculture sector in Erie County requires addressing the significant barriers that aspiring urban farmers face, including limited access to land, equipment, and workforce training opportunities. Establishing equipment-sharing programs in addition to or in conjunction

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with The Tool Library, a tool lending library located in the University Heights neighborhood, can reduce financial burdens on new farmers by providing affordable access to costly tools and machinery essential for efficient operations. Workforce training programs, focusing on both technical farming skills and business management, can empower individuals with the knowledge needed to establish and sustain successful urban farms. Additionally, dedicating underutilized land as incubator spaces for urban farming enterprises can serve as a low-risk entry point for new growers, allowing them to develop their operations before transitioning to permanent spaces. See Section 4.1.6 for more information on workforce development.

7.2.7 Backyard farming and gardening offers urban residents an accessible introduction to farming while improving access to food in areas that lack adequate access.

Encouraging residents to grow food at home can improve food access, foster self-reliance, strengthen community food systems, and improve public appreciation for agriculture. As soils in many urban areas may be contaminated, education and technical assistance to facilitate soil testing are needed to ensure that foods produced in people's backyards are safe to eat.

In 2025, CCE Harvest New York initiated a Community Gardens Soil Testing Program, funded by the NYS AGM, that provides free testing for nutrients and heavy metals, as well as soil sample shipping and supplies. The program is open to community and backyard gardeners that grow food and share food with family, friends, or neighbors.

7.2.8 Community gardens often rely on access to publicly owned land. Short-term use agreements limit the extent to which community gardens can invest in soil and other improvements on the site.

Community gardens in Buffalo often depend on publicly owned land, but short-term lease agreements and limited protections create significant barriers to long-term investment and sustainability. While the City offers \$1 leases for vacant lots designated as community gardens in 3–4-year increments, operators can be given as little as 30 days' notice if the land is to be sold for development, leaving them vulnerable to sudden displacement. Additionally, farm stands are not permitted on city-owned land, restricting growers' ability to sell produce directly to the community.

A 2022 report titled “**Policy Framework for Vacant Lots Disposition**”, developed by a task force led by Partnership for the Public Good in collaboration with urban agriculture stakeholders, highlights the potential of Buffalo's 8,000+ publicly owned vacant lots. The report recommends creating neighborhood-specific plans for areas with significant concentrations of vacant lots, identifying pilot projects — including community gardens — that could maximize their use. Lessons from cities like Baltimore, which instituted an initiative that provides five-year leases to urban growers on city-owned lots with an 18-month notice requirement before termination,

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demonstrates how secure agreements offer growers stability and confidence to invest in soil health, infrastructure, and community engagement.

In November 2023, Governor Kathy Hochul vetoed NYS Senate Bill S629A, which would have required the community gardens task force to conduct an assessment of all community gardens located on publicly owned land in the state to facilitate each gardens' designation as a Critical Environmental Area. The FPC wrote a letter of support in favor of the bill, citing the importance of stronger lease protections for community garden organizations and the elimination of barriers for well-established land trusts to attain those properties for future protection.

7.2.9 Indoor agricultural production may be a suitable reuse for vacant parcels and buildings in urban areas and may be a means to support year-round urban agriculture.

Vacant parcels and abandoned buildings in the County's urban communities present a significant opportunity for greenhouse and indoor agricultural production, offering a pathway to year-round farming and increased local food access. However, the financial feasibility of developing and maintaining greenhouse infrastructure remains a challenge due to high upfront costs, ongoing operational expenses, and the reluctance of municipalities to make these spaces available for agriculture. Strategic investments, financial incentives, and innovative funding models can help to make these projects viable and unlock their potential to revitalize underutilized spaces, create jobs, and strengthen local food systems.

7.2.10 Collaborative solutions could enable small urban farms to scale up in production while meeting the needs of larger processors/purchasers.

Small urban farms face many of the same opportunities and challenges that small farms in rural areas face, including challenges in finding suitable labor, high start-up costs, and need for technical assistance. Collaborative marketing, aggregation services, and last-mile distribution enterprises could help these small farms maintain economic viability. See Section 4 for more information on the integrated agricultural economy.

7.2.11 Some farms in Buffalo and other municipalities in Erie County face challenges in accessing public water supplies and other municipal services for use in their operations. For some farms, the high cost of water is a significant barrier.

Access to public water supplies remains a significant challenge for farms in Buffalo and other municipalities in Erie County, with high water costs posing a substantial barrier for many growers. While organizations like GGWNY have successfully established an agreement with the Buffalo Water Board to access hydrants with prior notification from April to October, this arrangement is not a sustainable long-term solution for all urban farms. Installing permanent water spigots, which

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would provide more reliable access, is currently not permitted in the city for agricultural purposes, and even if allowed, could cost up to \$12,000 — an expense that is out of reach for many small-scale operations. Addressing these barriers through policy changes, infrastructure investments, and innovative funding mechanisms is essential to ensure equitable water access for urban farms and support the growth of local agriculture.

Some urban agriculture operations may benefit from municipal trash pickup. The City of Buffalo assesses a base “user fee” for all properties, including vacant properties. Residential and commercial properties pay higher user fees based on the number of garbage totes provided. The revenue is used to support trash collection as well as clean-up of vacant lots. “Vacant” parcels used for agricultural production may be able to request reclassification as “commercial” but would likely pay a higher user fee in exchange for a tote and pick-up.

7.3 Goals, Policies, and Recommended Actions

Goal: Expand opportunities for urban agriculture, including commercial growers, community and school gardens, and home gardening.

Policies and Recommended Actions

1. Engage in an ongoing discussion with the City of Buffalo to support urban agriculture.
 - a. Share information with and maintain communications with City of Buffalo staff and officials regarding policies and programs that affect urban agriculture in the City, including obtaining agricultural assessments for commercial growers, making land available for community and school gardens either permanently or with 5-year leases with an extended notice of termination, and supporting safe home gardening.

Lead: DEP, FPC, CCE Erie

Partners: City of Buffalo staff and officials

2. Include organizations that represent urban agriculture interests in policies and decisions relating to agriculture and land use.

- a. Continue to have a farmer representing urban agriculture on the AFPB.

Lead: AFPB

Partners: Erie County Legislature, DEP

- b. Continue to involve urban growers and advocates in the FPC.

Lead: FPC

Partners: DEP

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3. Encourage municipalities to expand opportunities for farming in villages, suburban towns, and cities, while incorporating reasonable protections for residential and other neighbors and community members.
 - a. Provide information and technical assistance to municipalities to assist with zoning revisions to better accommodate urban agriculture, on-site sales, and other related enterprises.

Lead: DEP, FPC
Partners: Municipalities
 - b. Encourage municipalities to adopt and implement reasonable water access policies that facilitate water hookups at reasonable rates to support agricultural production and related enterprises.

Lead: DEP, FPC
Partners: Municipalities
 - c. Provide information and technical assistance to local assessors and urban growers to facilitate agricultural assessments through the NYS Agricultural Districts Law to apply for eligible farm parcels.

Lead: SWCD, DEP, FPC
Partners: Municipalities, RPTS, Local Assessors
4. Maintain and increase support for community gardens and home gardening in urban areas.
 - a. Encourage municipalities to make publicly owned land available to community gardens either permanently or with 5-year leases with an extended notice of termination.

Lead: FPC
Partners: Municipalities
 - b. Provide information about sources of assistance in obtaining garden beds and soil.

Lead: FPC
Partners: GGWNY, CCE Erie, SWCD, Buffalo Freedom Gardens
 - c. Share information on safe growing in urban soils and make soil testing kits more readily available.

Lead: Erie County
Partners: GGWNY, CCE Erie, SWCD, FPC

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5. Support the next generation of aspiring urban growers by developing a clearinghouse of information regarding support services and technical assistance.

- a. Coordinate with other organizations to host workshops on the topics of starting an urban agriculture business or ancillary business

Lead: FPC

Partners: CCE Erie, Erie County OHE, GGWNY and other agriculture-enabling agencies/organizations, DEP

- b. Support the inclusion of urban agriculture relevant information in traditional agricultural education mediums

Lead: CCE Erie, FPC

Partners: DEP, AFPB

- c. Investigate the feasibility of assisting urban growers with procuring equipment necessary for their operations, such as retired fire hoses from municipal Fire Departments.

Lead: FPC

Partners: Municipalities, Tool Library