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Hartford Courant (Connecticut)

November 9, 2003 Sunday, STATEWIDE

SECTION: COMMENTARY; Pg. C4

LENGTH: 1023 words

HEADLINE: WHEN OUR FARMS ARE GONE, THEY'RE GONE FOREVER;
CONNECTICUT'S ENDANGERED ACRES

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BODY:

The flight from Bradley Airport circled slowly west over the Farmington River Valley. Below me, wedged between the red and yellow flares of autumn foliage, were angular farm fields alternating at irregular intervals with home subdivisions. The mix of man-settled land and land cultivated by man produced a pleasant harmony of interests -- places to raise families blended comfortably with places to raise crops and livestock.

Yet the aerial view on this lovely autumn day was more disconcerting than it was pleasing, for efforts to achieve harmony between competing interests often prove ineffective. The new use usually trumps the old one, current trends crush old ways and the market sets a higher bounty on the highest return. The Connecticut farmer, who may generate gross revenues of only a few thousand dollars per acre in really good years, will never win the economic competition with subdivision lots that can grow millions of dollars in houses.

In spite of the market's iron fist, a dilemma nevertheless arises over what we choose to value and how. With respect to farming in Connecticut, it is insufficient to say that the contribution of farming to our lives is nothing more than the number of production units multiplied by the current market price.

We all know that farming is a constituent part of our state's beautiful landscape, open space, local heritage, education, wildlife habitat, flood control and food security. It is our personal experience of farms both past and present that reinforces our connection to place. How many times do we return to a former home and feel a sense of loss when we see the adjoining farmland that we knew so well now sprouting houses?

Our palate also holds special memories of tastes gone by, such as the summer tomato, sweet corn, the Thanksgiving turkey or farm-made ice cream. "Do not think that the fruits of New England are mean and insignificant," admonishes Henry David Thoreau, "[for] they educate us and fit us to live here in New England."

The Futtner Family Farm in East Hartford, just a half-mile from the spanking new Rentschler Field, is a case in point. Jim and Honora Futtner have

rented 17 acres of farmland there since 1969 and use it as a pick-your-own farm for their thousands of local customers who like to harvest their own tomatoes, peppers and beans. This unassuming couple work harder than most of us, but manage to wrest a respectable living from fields that have been farmed since the 1930s. Rather than complain, for instance, about the noise from this fall's Bruce Springsteen concerts, they jokingly credit his extended version of "Born to Run" with putting a little extra heat in this year's hot pepper crop.

But a developer recently offered the landowner \$1.5 million for the property. The Futtner would have to grow some remarkable crops to ever justify paying that much for farmland. As an alternative to commercial development of the site, the Futtners are trying to convince the Town of East Hartford and others to buy the land, place a perpetual agricultural easement on it, and maintain it as one of the area's last working farms. Their customers are so enthusiastic about the idea that over 800 of them signed a petition at the farm's sales stand in favor of that approach.

If something isn't done very soon, another 17 acres will join the 8,000-acres of farmland that Connecticut loses every year to nonagricultural uses. This is equivalent to losing the town of Wethersfield or Middlefield or Essex. If this rate of loss continues, Connecticut's remaining farmland base of 370,000 acres will disappear by 2045.

What can be done to stanch the loss of farmland? Farmland preservation programs are one line of defense, but Connecticut, which led the way in 1978 with landmark legislation to purchase the development rights of farms, has fallen behind other Northeast states. Although the state legislature is allocating more money to protect farmland, the Rowland administration, which controls the state Bond Commission and therefore the purchase of development rights, has done precious little to spend those dollars. In a sometimes desperate attempt to make up for the state's inaction, groups like the Connecticut Farmland Trust, the Nature Conservancy and the Trust for Public Land use private dollars, recently appropriated federal funds as well as the generosity of the landowners to preserve thousands of acres across the state.

Although farmland preservation funding is needed to protect our state's most valuable natural resource, we must also support efforts to enhance the economic viability of agriculture. The state Department of Agriculture's Farm Enhancement Program funds new farm enterprises like Cato Corner Dairy Farm in Colchester, which has demonstrated that the "get big or get out" approach to commodity milk production won't cut it by turning its milk into some of the best cheese in New England.

Likewise, local tax assessors are being forced by the reduction in state support for municipalities to increase local property tax revenues by eliminating the agricultural property tax exemption. When this is done, the farmer stops farming, sells the land to a developer who builds houses, which increases the town's cost of services. And in what has to be the greatest slap in the face to the state's agricultural community, the legislature voted to eliminate the Department of Agriculture by merging it with the Department of Consumer Protection. Without an agriculture department, Connecticut will lose its farmland protection, marketing and economic development programs and, more important, its primary voice for farming in this state.

When it's gone, it's gone. A state without farmland and working farms will be a poorer place indeed.

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LOAD-DATE: November 10, 2003