

Summary of Results - Ulster County Agriculture Survey (February 2024)

The Ulster County Agriculture Survey invited members of the public, farmers, and farmland owners to provide their perspectives on farming as part of the development of the updated Ulster County Agricultural and Farmland Protection Plan. The survey is divided into three sections, with questions appropriate for each group. Survey questions cover various topics related to farming, including challenges faced by farmers, opinions on land use, government support, and future plans. Among the key themes that emerged are concerns about land availability, the financial viability of farming, high taxes, development pressures, and the importance of preserving local agriculture. Respondents expressed a desire for more support for farmers, including financial assistance, educational programs, and infrastructure improvements. Some respondents also mentioned specific initiatives or organizations aimed at supporting local agriculture. Overall, the survey provides insights into the perspectives of residents, farmers, and property owners in Ulster County.

The 266 survey participants included:

- 166 members of the public
- 60 farmers
- 4 farmland owners

Results of Survey 1: General Public

Q2. Responses were received from individuals in all parts of Ulster County except the Towns of Hardenburg and Plattekill and the Village of Saugerties. The largest shares of respondents were from the Towns of Olive (17%) and Hurley (12%) and the City of Kingston (16%).

Q3 and Q4. 93% said farms are Very Important. People value farms for their healthy local food (97%), jobs and support of the local economy (90%), contribution to retaining community character (82%), environmental benefits (77%), and agricultural lands requiring less public infrastructure and fewer community services than residential or commercial uses (57%). 35 people offered additional information as to why farms and farmlands are important to them: e.g., farms are calming, beautiful, have many environmental benefits, and most frequently, ensure local resiliency and for providing healthy local foods.

Q5. When making food choices, people value freshness and/or quality (94%), that it is locally grown (87%), its nutritional value (74%), and taste (61%). Of somewhat less importance are price (55%), convenience in purchasing the product (53%), and the product being organic (50%). Comments as to what is important to people when they buy their food also include its social impact, knowing the farmer, and whether the farmer is a woman, BIPOC farmer, or reflects diversity.

Q6. 82% of public participants regularly buy agricultural products grown or raised in Ulster County so these people represent dedicated local food buyers.

Q7. 71% buy their local foods at a farmers market, or directly at a farm (66%). However, 56% buy from independent/specialty grocery stores. 37% buy local foods from chain grocery stores and 33% from a personal or community garden. 21% buy from CSAs.

- Q8. Respondents feel it is easy (52%) to very easy (31%) to buy locally grown or raised agricultural products in Ulster County. 14% said it was not easy.
- Q9. 62% of respondents feel there has been a significant loss of farmland in Ulster County. Many are not sure (35%), but only 4 people (3%) said that there has not been a major loss of farmland.
- Q10 and Q11. 89% of respondents feel farmland should be better protected from being developed or converted to non-agricultural uses, and a similar percentage would support use of public funding for land conservation to protect agriculture. Only 4 people (3%) oppose spending public funds for this purpose.
- Q12 and Q13. 69% feel that agriculture is a topic of general importance to other residents; 26% were not sure. Conversely, only 39% said that agriculture is a topic of importance to municipal leaders; 49% were unsure and 13% said that agriculture is *not* important to municipal leaders.

Q14. Many respondents offered comments about agriculture, expressing various concerns and perspectives related to local farming and land use. Several common themes emerged:

Development Pressure and Land Use: Many respondents expressed concerns about farmland being sold for housing or commercial development, leading to the loss of agricultural land. They mentioned issues such as zoning laws, the influence of developers, and the need for protections to preserve farmland.

Support for Local Agriculture: Numerous respondents emphasized the importance of supporting local farmers and agriculture. They advocated for measures such as tax reductions, incentives for farmers, and increased funding for agriculture-related initiatives.

Environmental Sustainability: There was a strong emphasis on environmentally sustainable agricultural practices, including organic farming, reducing pesticide and fertilizer use, and protecting natural habitats and wildlife.

Community Engagement and Education: Respondents highlighted the need for community involvement in agriculture through initiatives such as community gardens, educational resources, and programs to promote farming practices among residents, including home gardening, beekeeping, and raising chickens.

Economic Viability: Many of the participants expressed concerns about the economic challenges facing farmers, including rising costs, low profits, and access to affordable land. There was also discussion about the impact of climate change on agriculture and the need for resilience and adaptation.

Cultural and Historical Significance: Some respondents underscored the cultural and historical significance of agriculture in Ulster County, emphasizing the importance of preserving farmland and agricultural traditions for future generations.

Q15. There were a diverse range of opinions and concerns regarding agriculture in Ulster County which are summarized as:

Many believe that community gardens could provide both a sense of purpose and a solution to hunger.

There's a call for more educational resources and classes on gardening, beekeeping, and raising chickens.

Concerns about the cost and availability of housing for agricultural workers are raised.

Some advocate for a shift towards more sustainable agricultural practices, emphasizing soil restoration and biodiversity.

Protection of agricultural land from development is seen as crucial for preserving the county's identity and environment.

Support for local agriculture is widely endorsed, with calls for tax breaks, incentives, and protection of farmland.

Organic farming is emphasized for its environmental and health benefits, with concerns about chemical use.

Suggestions include promoting small affordable homes near farms and opening a food cooperative.

There's a desire for more support and resources for farmers, including funding and education.

The importance of local agriculture in addressing climate change is emphasized.

Some express concerns about gentrification and displacement of local communities due to tourism and housing trends.

Results of Survey 2: Farmers

- Q16. Farmers from throughout the County participated in the survey, with high concentrations from the Towns of Marlborough (17%), Gardiner (13%), and Rochester (13%). No responses were received from farmers in the City or Town of Kingston, the Towns of Hardenburg, Rosendale, and Woodstock, and the Villages of Ellenville, New Paltz, and Saugerties.
- Q17 and Q18. 71% of the farmers have all of their land and 7% have some of their land within a NYS Certified Agricultural District; 21% were not sure. Among those who have land in an Agricultural District, 17% were in Ag District #1, 4% in Ag District #2, 6% in #3, and 6% in #4. More predominant was that 68% of farmers were not sure which Ag District they were in.
- Q19. 72% of the farmers receive Ag Value Assessments, 21% do not, and 7% were not sure.
- Q20. Of the 28 farmers who said that they lease land, 24 indicated that the landowners receive Ag Value Assessments.
- Q21 and Q22. Most participants have been operating their farm in Ulster County for 20+ years (52%) or 10-20 years (21%). 5%, however, are new farmers, farming in the County for 2 years or less, and 10% have been farming here for 3-4 years. Most of the new farmers indicated that they came to Ulster County to farm because they had grown up in the County or nearby and returned to farm.
- Q23 and Q24. The acreage owned by participating farmers ranged from 1 to 515 acres, and averaged 102 acres, with a median of 52. The number of acres rented from other property owners ranged from 2 to 650, and averaged 48 acres, with a median of 12.
- Q25 and Q26. The survey respondents represent farms that grow and raise a wide diversity of agricultural products. The most common products among participants are fruits and berries (46%), vegetables for fresh market (38%), and hay (34%), followed by beef (26%), flowers for cutting (23%), herbs (23%), poultry for eggs (23%), and nursery and greenhouse products (16%). Other products grown or raised by more than one but fewer than 10 participating farms included, in order, horses/ponies/donkeys, corn for grain or seed, hogs/pigs, poultry for meat, maple syrup, mushrooms, grains, sweet corn, dairy, goats, heifers, sheep, honey, and soybeans. It is clear that many farms grow and raise multiple products. Nearly half of the participants identified fruits and berries or vegetables for fresh market as their *primary* product.
- Q27. Most farmers (82%) have not made a major change in the past 10 years in their farm's primary product. Eleven farms have transitioned, for example, from dairy to crops, from fruit and vegetables to grain and hay or grapes to nut trees.
- Q28 and Q29. Many of the farms represented among the survey respondents indicated that they engage in one or more farm-related activities and practices. Among the most common are agritourism activities (36%), grass-fed animal production (30%), value-added production or processing (30%), u-pick operations (28%), and organic production with USDA certification (26%). Others include a farm-based brewery, cidery, distillery, or winery (18%), organic production without certification (16%), solar energy for farm use (8%), and solar energy for electrical grid or off-site use (8%). Farmers that said that they have agritourism activities offer farm tours, farm stays, cider, tasting rooms, flower arranging workshops, summer camps, etc.
- Q30. By far, the most prevalent way that farmers distribute and sell their agricultural products is direct to consumer (84%). However, 30 farms, or 49%, also do wholesale. Only 2 farms sell directly to institutions such as schools, hospitals or prisons.

Q31. Among farms that have direct to consumer sales, 76% have a farm stand, on-farm store, or a u-pick operation. 24% sell at a farmers market in Ulster County and 20% at a farmers market in New York City. Eight farmers (16%) have a CSA operation, 7 (15%) use an online marketplace, and 2 (4%) have a farm store offsite. A few farms sell products at craft fairs, farmers markets in other locations, and weddings, or offer local delivery.

Q32. Among farms that have a wholesale operation, 62% sell to retail outlets such as supermarkets, specialty food shops, food cooperatives, etc. 18% sell wholesale to intermediaries such as distributors and food hubs and 14% to restaurants. Only a few farms have wholesale sales to food and beverage processors, florists, or flower stands.

Q33. Asked if they were interested in expanding into new markets, 33% said yes, 26% said no, and 41% said they were not sure.

Q34. Digital media are very common for advertising and marketing agricultural products to the public. 73% of the respondents said that they use social media, 50% have a website, and 42% use email. Other methods include roadside stand signs (46%), print media (22%), regional efforts such as Pure Catskills (17%) or special events on farm property (17%). About 10% do not advertise. Many farms use multiple marketing tools. Word of mouth advertisement was mentioned as an other method to market products.

Q35, Q36, Q37 and Q38. Asked to estimate the annual gross revenues of their farm, 12 respondents (21%) indicated that they grossed \$100,000 to \$249,999, 11 (19%) grossed \$500,000 or more, and 7 (12%) had gross revenues between \$250,000 and \$499,999. However, 48% of the farms have a gross annual income of less than \$100,000 with 30% earning less than \$25,000. About 38% of the respondents consider their farm their household's primary source of income, while 23% do not rely on the farm as a source of income. Twenty-four farms, or 39%, have secondary sources of income that supplement their farm income. About 43% of farmers consider their farm to be somewhat profitable. Only 2 farmers said that their farm is very profitable, while 22% said it was not profitable and 20% said they were break-even. Compared to ten years ago, 32% said their farm was less profitable, 33% said there was no change, and 35% said their farm was *more* profitable.

Q38 (part 2). Reasons given as to why their farm is less profitable than ten years ago included:

- **Costs and Expenses:** Including labor, materials, fuel, taxes, equipment, repair parts, and interest rates.
- **Financial Strain:** Financial difficulties due to increased expenses, stagnant product prices, and loss of income.
- **Regulations and Legislation:** Labor laws and environmental permits impacting farming operations.
- **Environmental Challenges:** Issues such as flooding and land management restrictions impacting crop yields and financial stability.
- **Competition:** From other well-funded farms, leading to market pressures and decreased profitability.
- **Labor Issues:** Including increased labor costs, the need to hire more employees, and difficulties in managing payroll expenses.
- **Political Factors**

Q38 (part 2). Reasons given as to why their farm is *more* profitable than ten years ago included:

- **Strategic Changes:** Transitioning to new breeds or crops, such as Wagyu cattle, cut flowers, or organic vegetables, to improve business practices and meet changing market demands.
- **Investment in Infrastructure:** Building new facilities, such as cold storage and packing facilities, and replanting orchards to increase efficiency and reduce production costs.
- **Experience and Maturity:** Gaining experience over time, leading to increased efficiency in farm operations and reduced spending on infrastructure and equipment.
- **Persistence and Adaptation:** Acknowledging the time it takes to become profitable and the ongoing investment needed in the business and property to achieve efficiencies, despite challenges such as labor shortages.

Q39. Strengths of farming in Ulster County, according to farmers:

- Ability to provide for family and community
- Access to a consumer base seeking local organic food
- Agricultural districts
- Appreciation of the beautiful landscape
- Being able to work outdoors
- Clean water and air
- Climate conditions
- Close proximity to markets, including NYC
- Community support for local farms
- Educational opportunities
- Enthusiasm for farm produce
- Favorable growing conditions
- Friendly zoning laws
- Good soil and water quality
- Historical significance of agriculture
- Housing market trends
- Location near NYC and markets
- Preservation of land and sustainability
- Quality of life
- Supportive networks and organizations
- Tradition and regional culture
- Tourism opportunities
- Younger demographics with disposable income

Q40. Asked about potential actions related to their farms over the next five years, 33% of the respondents indicate they will increase acreage or production, 30% will stay the same, 25% will develop agritourism activities, 25% will diversify their crops grown or animals raised, 18% plan on decreasing acreage, and 17% intend to retire. 15% plan to sell land for non-farm uses, while 12% plan to sell or rent land to keep it as a farm. Only a few farms indicated plans to transition to a new crop or commodity, donate or sell development rights, or stop farming and pursue other employment.

Q41. About half the participating farms have a succession plan, while 43% do not, and 8% are not sure.

Q42. Actions that farmers felt would best improve their capacity to increase revenues, reduce costs, or reach additional markets included:

- Housing for farmworkers (44%),
- Affordable, high-quality farmland to purchase (35%)
- Processing facility for livestock (31%)
- Affordable, high-quality farmland to lease (28%)
- Aggregation and distribution facility for local farm products, like a food hub (28%)
- Assistance securing capital financing (28%)
- Cold storage facility for local farm products (28%)
- Business planning assistance (24%)

Actions selected less often by the respondents included marketing assistance (15%), succession planning assistance (13%), employee/workforce training (7%), and a processing facility for fruits and vegetables (7%).

Q43. 75% of respondents indicated that farmland should be better protected from conversion or development of non-agricultural uses.

Q44 to Q47. A series of survey questions asked respondents to indicate whether certain issues were major ones, minor ones, or not an issue for their farm. By scoring the responses, it was possible to identify the top 10 issues, as follows:

- Production costs relative to price received for agricultural products
- Changing weather patterns and weather extremes
- Farm equipment and machinery repair costs
- Difficulty finding labor (skilled or unskilled)
- Farm equipment and machinery acquisition costs
- Cost of labor (skilled or unskilled)
- Property taxes
- Land prices
- Availability of agriculture-related services and supplies for farms
- Fewer people interested in farming as a career
- Increased pest or disease pressure

Q48. An open ended question asked farmers to comment about the biggest issues facing their farm operation in Ulster County. Based on the statements provided, the responses can be categorized as follows:

Challenges and Frustrations:

- Feeling abandoned by representatives.
- Legislative changes impacting agriculture negatively.
- Increased taxes and restrictive land use regulations.
- Difficulties in selling land.

- Financial struggles and declining profitability.
- Concerns about the future viability of farming.

Need for Support and Preservation:

- Calls for substantive support systems for agriculture.
- Preservation of farmland and agricultural heritage.
- Critique of agritourism and housing developments on farmland.
- Desire for dialogue between farmers and government officials.
- Protection of right-to-farm laws.
- Support for young farmers.
- Access to USDA programs and assistance.
- Importance of infrastructure for farming operations.

Environmental and Public Use Concerns:

- Opposition to using farmland for solar installations or housing.
- Preservation of publicly owned farmland for agricultural use.
- Advocacy for public access to farmland for agritourism.

Community and Governance Issues:

- Criticism of politicians and officials.
- Need for more proactive action rather than just conversation.
- Desire for better communication and understanding between farmers and residents.
- Concerns about the impact of tourism on farming communities.

Economic Considerations:

- High taxes and stagnant commodity prices.
- Corporate influence and greed affecting farm operations.
- Challenges related to competition and market conditions.

Q49. Other comments received can be summarized as follows:

- Some farmers feel it's time to sell or move on due to inability to compete with rising costs and stagnant prices.
- There's a call for county programs to assist farmers with sale, transfer, or donation of development rights.
- Concerns are raised about the impact of conservation efforts on younger farmers' ability to retire.
- Suggestions include creating tax-funded models for land protection and providing financial support for young farmers.
- Some criticisms are directed towards decisions that were perceived to prioritize personal agendas over farmers' interests.
- Farmers express struggles with high taxes, lack of services, and labor shortages.

- There's dissatisfaction with governmental support for agriculture and a sense of abandonment by representatives.
- Various concerns are voiced about the preservation of farmland and opposition to alternative uses like solar installations.
- Suggestions for improvement include better access to USDA programs, infrastructure development, and addressing taxation issues.
- Farmers express frustration with public perception, customer attitudes, and the challenges of running agricultural businesses.

Several interesting differences were observed in the survey results of farmers based on their profitability (as identified in their responses to Questions 37 and 38). These are listed as follows:

More Profitable Farms

- Have more direct to consumer sales than less profitable farms
- Use more marketing methods
- Are more likely to have a website
- Lease more land that receives an Agricultural Value Assessment
- Have more diversity of products
- Are more likely to be vegetable farms
- In the next five years, are more likely to be seeking more acreage or keeping their operations the same, and are less likely to be planning to retire
- Have fewer farms with transition plans
- Are not as interested in having farmland protected from conversion to non-agricultural uses
- Identify global consolidation as more of a major issue than less profitable farms
- Are more interested in farmworker housing

Less Profitable Farms

- Are more interested in expanding into new markets
- Are more likely to be fruit and berry farms
- In the next five years, are looking to take different and more actions including decreasing acreage/production, pursuing agritourism activities, using conservation easements, retiring, selling their land, or getting out of farming entirely
- Have more issues with development pressure, and loss of farmland to non-farm uses like housing
- Perceive a lack of support for farming by the public as a major issue
- Are more likely to sell wholesale
- Are more concerned about liability and risk management
- Are more interested in aggregation and distribution facilities and cold storage facilities than more profitable farms
- Are more interested in securing capital financing
- Are more interested in business planning assistance and marketing assistance
- Are less interested in farmworker housing

Results of Survey 3: Farmland Owners

There was a very small response by farmland owners to the survey (four).

Q50. Farmland owner land holdings ranged from 2 acres to 280 acres.

Q51. Farmland owner respondents were from towns of Esopus, Gardiner, New Paltz and Rochester.

Q52 and Q53. Two farmland owners indicated their land was in a NYS Ag District and two indicated they were not sure if their land was in a NYS Ag District. None of the 4 farms were sure what specific Ag District their land may be located in however.

Q54. Positive features of farming in Ulster County were identified as having benefits of agricultural tax exemptions, the beauty preserved by preventing overbuilding, the support from agencies like Soil and Water Ulster County, and the access to fresh produce and markets. Also noted was easy access to knowledgeable individuals and equipment sharing. Additionally, the favorable climate and strategic location near major markets contribute significantly to the local economy.

Q55. Two of the farmland owners received an Ag Value Assessment, one did not, and one was not sure.

Q56. A wide variety of agricultural activities take place on farmland that is rented. Most common were growing fruits or vegetables, specialty crop growing, and use of buildings for storage or animals. Some farmlands had field crops or were used for forest land.

Q57. Three of the four respondents indicated they would continue renting the same number of acres for farming. One farmland owner indicated they would be selling their land for agricultural use within 5 years. One also indicated that they may increase land availability for agriculture.

Q58. Issues identified by farmland owners included cost of land to farmers, farm worker housing, difficulty making a living farming, taxes, and development.

Q59. Some additional comments received included funding farmers to produce local organic food, educating the community on what it takes to farm, and the importance of farms for the environment. Another comment was about the importance of continuing small farming in Ulster County and the need to maintain local, fresh produce. Finally, one comment was added about the difficulty some farmers or farmland owners have had with farming when there is a conservation easement on the land.