

# Land Use Planning

## 2025 NEW HAMPSHIRE FOOD AND AGRICULTURE STRATEGIC PLAN

**Purpose:** To understand the laws, policies, planning and zoning related to the utilization of working lands and natural (agricultural) resources in conjunction with housing and other development.

## What's at Stake?

Increasing local food production will build resilience in New Hampshire. The regulation of local land use is a critical tool to increase our food production. New Hampshire continues to see farmland permanently lost to development, at a record rate, due to the difficulty farmers have in remaining profitable and the development pressures driving up land values, especially in southern New Hampshire. While our state law provides some protections for agricultural land use, additional tools and land use controls must be adopted at the local level to encourage land preservation for food production, animal husbandry, and agriculture, slowing the loss of farmland throughout New Hampshire.

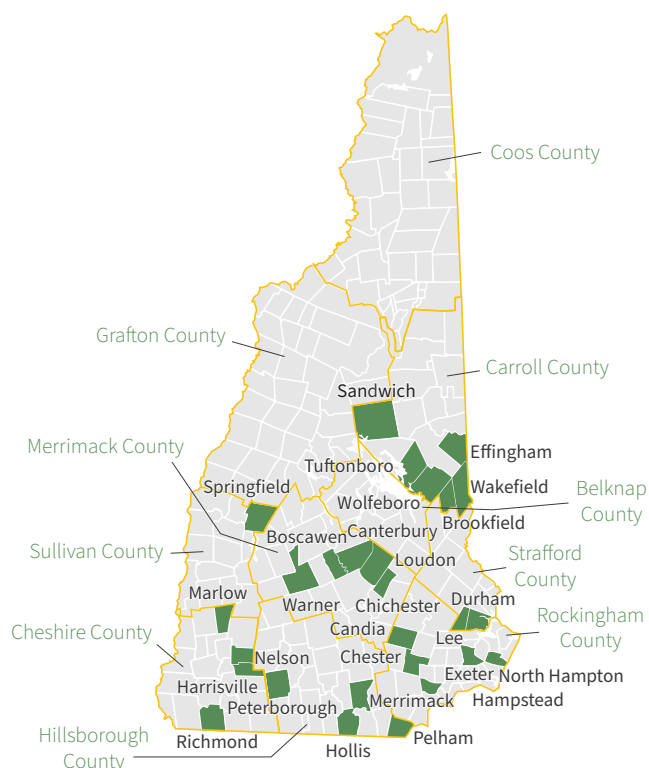
## Current Conditions

State law impacts the agricultural activities that can take place in different communities. Several laws provide protections for existing agricultural uses, as well as related accessory uses, such as agritourism, used by many farms to reach or maintain profitability. While some municipalities have adopted the state's definition of agriculture, some have chosen more narrow definitions, and others haven't defined agriculture at all in their zoning ordinance.

Local land use planning decisions are made by a variety of actors in New Hampshire, many of whom are volunteers, with varying degrees of structure, guidance, and support. The NH Municipal Association (NHMA), the Office of Planning and Development at the NH Department of Business and Economic Affairs (BEA), and the NH Association of Conservation Commissions (NHACC) provide training to support these individuals, but the flow of information is slow and the rate of adoption of agriculture-friendly regulation is even slower.

In recent years, significant attention and resources have been devoted to communities becoming more housing-friendly and less attention and resources have been paid to communities becoming agriculture-friendly. It is essential to find ways for housing land use and agricultural land use to coexist.

### MUNICIPALITIES WITH AGRICULTURE COMMISSIONS



**SOURCE:** 2023 NH Municipal Land Use Regulations Survey, *Agriculture Commission Layer*.

# Challenges and Opportunities

## CHALLENGES

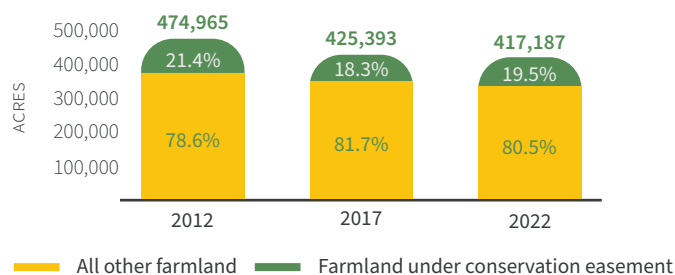
- Many communities lack the technical expertise, capacity, or funding to update their land use regulations and become more agriculture-friendly.
- There is minimal support or guidance for communities interested in creating and operating a local agricultural commission. Funding for regional planning commissions also varies widely across the state and the focus of each differs depending on the federal funding they are awarded.
- New Hampshire's housing shortage and the significant increase in housing costs has emphasized the need for new housing, resulting in housing developments frequently being situated in areas with high-value agricultural soils.

## OPPORTUNITIES

- There is no shortage of tools available to New Hampshire municipalities for creating farm-friendly, regulatory environments, including establishing local agricultural commissions and agriculture-friendly land use regulations, such as agricultural preservation ordinances. There is overwhelming room for growth in the adoption of these tools. For example, while 179 municipalities allow conservation subdivisions, only five have adopted an Agricultural Preservation Ordinance. Only 27 municipalities have an agricultural commission, and even fewer have adopted an agricultural resources section in their master plan.
- Some of the state's regional planning commissions already provide circuit rider planning services to their member communities, which could be expanded to include technical assistance with agriculture-friendly planning.

### NH LAND UNDER CONSERVATION EASEMENT

In 2022, New Hampshire had the highest percentage of farmland under conservation easement (19.5%, 81,398 acres) of all New England states by a considerable margin. The next closest state was Vermont at 12.2%.



SOURCE: USDA 2022 Census of Agriculture, [Table 47: Land Use Practices](#).

# Recommendations

- **House agriculture-friendly tools and land use regulations on a central website.** The site could be organized similarly to the NH Housing Toolbox and include case studies of innovative methods and models, as well as newly-developed, agriculture-friendly zoning ordinances models, nuanced by zoning district type. This would support farming enterprises with access to markets, including the ability to establish farmers' markets and flexibility to permit farm stands and agritourism activities.

- **Convene housing and agricultural advocates on land use issues.** Host conversations throughout the state between housing advocates and agricultural advocates to foster dialogue, find alignment on common interests, and encourage smart development to preserve agricultural land.
- **Launch and fund a circuit rider program for regional planning commissions.** A circuit rider program would provide funding for New Hampshire’s regional planning commissions to support communities with the adoption of farm-friendly land use regulations and the establishment of local agricultural commissions throughout the state. Circuit riders will meet with planning boards, conservation commissions, and the Zoning Board of Adjustment to increase the capacity of local land use boards and assist towns with agricultural planning.
- **Identify high-value agriculture soils and prime farmland.** Create a map viewer identifying high-value agriculture soils and prime farmland in support of farmland protection and smart decision-making at the local level. This will overlay the Soil Survey Geographic (SSURGO) database for the New Hampshire GIS layer and could be accessible through NH GRANIT’s Geodata Portal.
- **Incorporate Agricultural Preservation into the Master Planning Process.** Add “Agriculture & Food Production” as a section on the list of optional sections in the Master Plan statute (RSA 674:2) and encourage Master Plans at the local level to include an “Agriculture & Food Production” section to ensure agricultural issues are raised during the Master Planning process.

## Authors

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**New Hampshire**  
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This brief was developed through a participatory process led by the NH Food Alliance, a program of the University of New Hampshire. The brief content is comprised of the opinions, perspectives, and information gathered by the authors and participants, and does not necessarily represent those of the NH Department of Agriculture, Markets, and Food or the NH Food Alliance.

For more information, including references and opportunities to get involved, visit the 2025 NH Food and Agriculture Strategic Plan web page on [nhfoodalliance.org](https://nhfoodalliance.org) or scan the QR code on the inside front cover of the print version.