

AMERICAN FARMLAND

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MEREDITH HEUER

JOSH BALDO



LEFT: Iridescent Earth Collective founders Jessica Tobón, Sea Matías, and Kadeesha Williams will grow produce on a portion of Tom Hutson's River Haven Farm, as Hutson transitions out of farming. RIGHT: Tom Hutson with his dairy herd in 2006.

A Lasting Legacy for River Haven Farm

Dairy farmer Tom Hutson has always been a pioneer. Now he has a creative plan for the future of his farm.

“I’m a farmer, so you just have to understand one thing,” said dairy farmer Tom Hutson, holding up a sample of bottomland soil scooped from his family’s 380-acre River Haven Farm in DeLancey, New York. “This is gold to me.”

Way back in 2006, Hutson was in New York City to accept a Steward of the Land award from American Farmland Trust, when he made a point of pulling a plastic bag of dirt from his pocket and commenting on its contents to the assembled crowd.

Seventeen years later, Hutson is still talking about soil: how glad he is to have it, how well his alluvial silt loam can grow food, and how fortunate he feels to be transitioning his fertile land to the next generation of farmers.

Hutson has lived on the farm his entire life, but he approached his retirement from dairy farming with increasingly bad knees and no heirs to take over.

“It was a blessing to be born here and able to grow up here and have the kind of soils that we have,” Hutson says. “Everything that I learned about valuing the land came from my dad, from the day I was big enough to tramp around behind him on the farm.”

Without children, Hutson knew his farm would eventually leave his family. But he didn’t want to see it go out of farming.

Hutson attended an American Farmland Trust “No Farms No Food” rally day in 2011, which gathered farmers to descend on the state capital in Albany to advocate for conservation programs that protect farmland and natural resources. There, he listened to aspiring younger farmers talk about how difficult it can be to find land in the Hudson Valley.

“I began listening to some of the speakers, and it enlightened me. The

light bulb was flicking, and I thought, “There are people who really do want to farm and deserve a chance,” Hutson says. “It made sense to me to use the farm to help young people get started.”

Leading by Example

Alongside one field on River Haven Farm is a huge sycamore tree where bald eagles tend their nests. Bagley Brook flows through his farm, a tributary of the West Branch Delaware River—one of the nation’s leading fly-fishing spots.

Water that flows through Hutson’s property and nearby farms has another purpose: It supplies clean drinking water for millions of downstate residents.

New York City faced a looming crisis in the early 1990s. The city’s drinking water supply originates upstate, primarily in the Catskill Mountain region west of the Hudson River. It’s one of the largest surface water systems in the world, delivering more than 1.1 billion gallons of drinking water daily to nine million people.

More than 30 years ago, New York City’s Department of Environmental Protection (NYC

DEP) faced the prospect of spending billions on a costly water filtration system. Instead, city officials launched a groundbreaking program to protect the water supply at its source. With help from American Farmland Trust and the farmer-led Watershed Agricultural Council, the agency partnered with farmers like Hutson who manage much of the area’s farmland and forestland.

Hutson volunteered to be one of the first pilot farms. He and other watershed farmers adopted conservation practices to manage their farms in ways that maintained the purity of New York City’s water. They also worked with the Watershed Agricultural Council and the NYC DEP to permanently protect their land with conservation easements.

Before the easement was in place, Hutson had to go up against some of the naysayers in his town who thought his farm would inevitably be developed. “I said, you don’t get a vote. You’re not paying the taxes. You’re not here on Sunday doing chores. No, don’t talk to me about what’s going to happen to my farm,” he says.

Since the watershed program began, more than 200 farm and forest families have protected their land, on over 32,000 acres. The conservation easements limit the location and density of development, while the landowners retain ownership of their property and agree to practice good stewardship.

“The nationally significant model has demonstrated that well-managed landscapes can act as a natural water filter while sustaining rural communities,” says Jerry Cosgrove, American Farmland Trust’s farm legacy director.

Hutson joined the Watershed Agricultural Council as a board

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MEREDITH HEUER

River Haven Farm in DeLancey, New York

FROM THE PRESIDENT

Dairy farmer Tom Huston, who you'll read about in the cover story, is a real character—as well as a stand-up person. Tom is a diehard, life-long farmer. As he likes to say, he was following his dad around the family's River Haven Farm when he was still in diapers.

American Farmland Trust began working with Tom in the 1990s, when he and farmers in New York's Catskill Mountain region were part of a pilot program to adopt conservation practices, like strips of vegetation along streams, that protected the water flowing downstate to supply drinking water for millions of residents.

Along with the farmer-led Watershed Agricultural Council, American Farmland Trust was involved in developing this ground-breaking program, which also uses conservation easements to protect the watershed's farm and forest land—keeping it undeveloped as a natural filter for the water cascading through the mountains.

As a result, New York City was spared spending billions of dollars for a water filtration plant. And in the process, over 32,000 acres of land were protected on more than 200 farms.

It's a true success story. But as Tom faces retirement without heirs, he faces a common dilemma for the nation's farmers. What to do with the land that they love and want to see stay in farming? Tom could have sold to the

highest bidder, but he knew there were many younger and beginning farmers looking to get a foothold in the Hudson Valley's competitive real estate market.

This is a challenge that our Farmland for the Next Generation initiative works on every day, developing resources and programs to ease the transition from retiring farmers to those eager to get started.

American Farmland Trust also has Farm Legacy and Land Protection programs that directly step in to give farmers and ranchers more options for their land. This spring, American Farmland Trust purchased Tom's farm, and we plan to help transition it to the young farmers in Iridescent Earth Collective, as well as to the newly forming Great Northern Catskill Agrarian Commons—with Tom's great assistance and blessing.

In more good news, on page three, you'll read about 24 farms in Maine that were protected in the last few years through a partnership between American Farmland Trust and Maine Farmland Trust.

A little history: American Farmland Trust was one of the first agricultural land trusts in the country—and remains the only one with a national scope. We began crafting agricultural conservation easements on



threatened farms and ranches over 40 years ago, when few other groups did.

Then, as regional and state-based groups like Maine Farmland Trust sprouted up around the country, sometimes with our help, American Farmland Trust began to

focus elsewhere—primarily on federal policy, research, regenerative farming practices, and nationally significant demonstration projects.

But, as the Maine projects demonstrate, we still partner with other land trusts on land deals. And sometimes we have helped to fund those deals, in places like Michigan, Wisconsin, and California. We also remain an agricultural land trust and strategically acquire new easements where other land trusts aren't active or where there is an opportunity for innovation.

This is all thanks to American Farmland Trust's members and donors, who make possible all that we do to tackle the many challenges facing the nation's farmers and ranchers. Thank you! Onward!

John Piotti
John Piotti
President & CEO
American Farmland Trust

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member, where he has advised the council for years. "As long as we use the 'two R's,' which are responsibility and respect for each other, both sides can benefit, whether it's agriculture up here or the city and their water supply," he says.

In 2006, Hutson received the Steward of the Land award from American Farmland Trust for his leadership in protecting farmland and caring for the environment while serving as an inspiring model for other farmers.

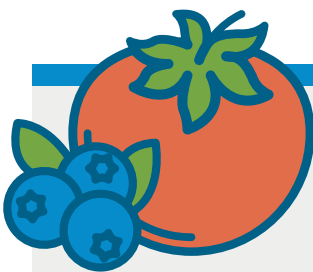
Looking to the Future

Now Tom is serving as a model again. His land is protected with an agricultural conservation easement, but as he lacks a next generation to take over the farm, he decided to partner with American Farmland Trust to make sure his land transitions to next-generation farmers.

"Tom has always been a guinea pig, but I think pioneer is a better term," says American Farmland Trust's Jerry Cosgrove, who helped guide the watershed easement program from its early days. "I've known Tom for 30 years,

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Tom Hutson (LEFT) and Jerry Cosgrove



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America's Farmers Market Celebration, now in its 15th year, is the pre-eminent ranking of the nation's favorite farmers markets.

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Land Protection Successes in Maine



It's often said that it takes a village of people to cooperate to achieve a common goal. The protection of our natural working landscapes is no different. Fortunately, the national land protection movement now includes many different organizations and agencies that share a common purpose in sustaining farmland and ranchland for people, wildlife, and natural resources. American Farmland Trust works closely with many of these groups, in multiple ways.

One such example occurred in 2021 and 2022, when American Farmland Trust directly supported the farmland protection work of Maine Farmland Trust. Thanks to generous members who care deeply about Maine farms, American Farmland Trust provided one-quarter of the funding needed to purchase easements on 24 properties at risk of development.

Black Kettle Farm | Lyman and Waterboro

Laura Neale's Black Kettle Farm is a thriving organic vegetable operation in Maine's most densely developed region. While small, the 12-acre CSA farm plays an important role in the community by providing high quality local agricultural products and strengthening the connection between farmers and consumers. Neale's vision for the farm is for it to remain farmland forever, producing food for the community. Given its location, this property would likely have been developed without being protected by an agricultural conservation easement.

Flat Road Farm | West Bethel

Flat Road Farm is located among Maine's western mountains along the banks of the



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Shawn and Ellen Savage of Savage Farm; Peter Hedden and Tracey Wilkerson of Flat Road Farm; Laura Neale of Black Kettle Farm; dairy farmer Tom Drew; and Ruth and Calvin Gammon of Waters Hill Farm.

Pleasant River. Owners Peter Hedden and Tracey Wilkerson recognized that they needed additional land to allow for the growth and sustainability of their grass-fed beef business. They worked with Maine Farmland Trust to place agricultural conservation easements on their home property and an additional 35 acres of rented land where they grazed their cattle, which helped them purchase the additional land at a more affordable rate and keep the pasture in farming.

Savage Farm | Livermore

Shawn and Ellen Savage were drawn to Livermore's rolling farm fields. While not farmers themselves, they gradually acquired three parcels along River Road, intending to partner with a young farmer who wants to enter Maine's growing agricultural economy. One hundred and thirty-three acres of Savage

Farm are now protected with an agricultural conservation easement. Their fields, currently producing high-quality-hay, have been in continual agricultural use for the past century. The landowners are working with Maine Farmland Trust's Farmlink program to find a farmer to utilize the farmhouse, barn, and fields.

Waters Hill Farm | Livermore

With majestic views of the White Mountains and Central Maine highlands, the farmland owned by Ruth and Calvin Gammon has been highly coveted by developers. The agricultural conservation easement will permanently protect 153 acres. The land is hayed and occasionally planted with corn by the Castonguay Family Farm, whose generations of farmers are a vital presence in Androscoggin County. While the protection from development motivated the Gammons, they also have a desire to see the property revitalized as a family farm. The remnants of the homestead foundation and stone walls are reminders of the thriving farm that once operated here.

Farrington-Jensen Farm, Robert Griffeth Farm, Bouchard Farm | Woodland

Tom Drew runs one of the few organic dairy farms in Aroostook County. In 2021, Maine Farmland Trust bought, protected, and then re-sold three farm properties in Woodland to Drew, who had been leasing the fields for organic hay and pasture. Drew would not have been able to afford the purchase if the protected farms, which total nearly 450 acres, were sold at their full value without agricultural conservation easements in place. Drew was pleased to secure access to the properties and happy to have the land protected from the increasing non-farm development in Aroostook County.

Maine Farmland Trust was pleased to have American Farmland Trust's support for our farmland protection work, ensuring that these properties remain free of non-agricultural development and available for farming. This work adds to Maine's growing base of protected farmland while at the same time investing in and supporting agricultural operations, contributing to the sustainability of Maine's agricultural economy and landscape, and creating more affordable land access opportunities for future farmers.

—ADAM BISHOP, DIRECTOR OF FARMLAND PROTECTION AND FARMLAND ACCESS, MAINE FARMLAND TRUST





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As a member of American Farmland Trust, you make an invaluable impact on our mission to protect farmland and the future of farming. Here are a few ways to leave a gift that endures for generations:

- Include American Farmland Trust in your will or trust.
- Consider naming American Farmland Trust as a beneficiary of a life insurance policy or your IRA.
- Establish a charitable gift annuity, in which you make a gift of cash, securities, or property in exchange for regular income payments for life.
- Make a gift of your farm or ranch, allowing American Farmland Trust to protect it while supporting farming long into the future.

With a legacy gift, you'll join our Farmland Forever Society, a special group that supports our mission.

Paul Caspersen, director of planned giving, at pcaspersen@farmland.org or (352) 727-0454.

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but more recently, I've nudged him to think about the future of his farm. What's next? We had many conversations and decided we should take matters into our own hands and come up with something creative."

In April, Hutson sold River Haven Farm to American Farmland Trust in exchange for cash and a charitable gift annuity that will provide him with income for the rest of his life as he transitions out of farming.

"We will lease most of the crop land to neighboring dairy farmers, the hay ground and pasture to Tom for his heritage beef herd, and a small parcel to the Iridescent Earth Collective, who have developed an amazing relationship and rapport with Tom," says Cosgrove.

American Farmland Trust plans to hold the property while the Great Northern Catskill Agrarian Commons gets up and running. Once formed, GNCAC will purchase the farm and lease it long-term to new and beginning farmers at affordable rates. American Farmland Trust and GNCAC are working in partnership with the Agrarian Trust, a national organization that forms local "Agrarian Commons" around the country.

There are currently Agrarian Commons in development in several states, including Maine, Vermont, Minnesota, West Virginia, Montana, Virginia, and Tennessee (see agrariantrust.org). The goal in part is to create opportunities for affordable access to land and infrastructure for farmers from all backgrounds.

"This is a new approach to land ownership that American Farmland Trust is supporting in



Kadeesha Williams of Iridescent Earth Collective, which will grow food on a portion of Tom Hutson's land.

this project," Cosgrove says. "We hope that this potentially will be a new model for transitioning land to newer farmers."

Iridescent Earth Collective, a Queer, Black and Latinx led farm enterprise, will farm vegetables on a small portion of River Haven Farm. The collective's three members—Jessica Tobón, Sea Matías, and Kadeesha Williams—have over a decade of experience in educating people on farming and growing fresh produce for residents of the Bronx.

"Our main objective is not only to grow vegetables and flowers, but we also are interested in connecting with other farmers to distribute the food," says Tobón of the collective, which is a co-founder and anchor lease of the Great Northern Catskills Agrarian Commons.

In 2022, Iridescent Earth Collective grew 10,000 pounds of food on seven acres in Charlotteville, New York, while gaining hands-on experience through a farm incubation program. The collective distributed the food to mutual aid partners in New York City, such as the Friendly Fridge in the Bronx, which gives away free food to the community.

Iridescent Earth Collective is looking forward to making a new home at River Haven Farm.

"We've known Tom since the end of 2021, just developing the relationship with him, and he's shown us so much about the land," says Tobón. "We've seen him work. We've had so many conversations, and that's helped shape what we want to do on the land and strengthened the community aspect of our project."

My brother said to me, 'I know you want to die with your boots on.' That's probably how I intend to do it. But luckily, I met these young people who want to farm, and I'm very enthusiastic. You have to respect and encourage that. And that's what I'm trying to do.

— TOM HUTSON




"We want to build more community capacity for more folks to be able to have this pathway into farming," Tobón adds. "Many farmers are having serious issues with accessing land or stable leases. Our collective has benefited so much from being part of the pilot farm here. We're so excited to get on the land and get our hands into soil again."

Of course, Hutson doesn't plan to go very far in retirement. "My brother said to me, 'I know you want to die with your boots on.' That's probably how I intend to do it," Hutson says. "But luckily, I met these young people who want to farm, and I'm very enthusiastic. You have to respect and encourage that. And that's what I'm trying to do."

i For more information about leaving a gift of land or other options for your farm or ranch, please contact **Jerry Cosgrove**, AFT's Farm Legacy Director at (518) 281-5074 or jcosgrove@farmland.org.



American Farmland Trust



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