

AMERICAN FARMLAND

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Cultivating Sustainable Futures

American Farmland Trust launches a new initiative to promote farm viability in agriculture.

BY EMERAN IRBY

“I grew up in a real farming family,” says Nathan L’Etoile, director of American Farmland Trust’s new national Farm Viability Initiative, whose family operates Four Star Farms, Inc. in western Massachusetts. “My aunt and uncle were full-time farmers, while my parents back then farmed part-time, and my grandparents were very active farmers.”

L’Etoile was immersed in farming from an early age. “Most of the vacations we had were to a trade show or an industry conference,” he says. “Conversations around the dinner table were about what was happening on the farm.”

Although he was born in Rhode Island, where his grandfather was once the largest potato supplier for several potato chip companies, L’Etoile’s parents moved the family to Northfield, Massachusetts, when he was eight years old. They purchased a 300-acre dairy farm and transitioned it to turf production.

“They were really building the farm from the ground up and took on a lot of debt to do so,” he says.

The experience made L’Etoile a passionate advocate for farm viability, which entails efforts to support the ability of farmers and ranchers to earn a living from the land and achieve their goals in agriculture. Armed with this personal knowledge about the difficulties that farmers often face, L’Etoile was tapped to lead a new national Farm Viability Initiative



Nathan L’Etoile (center), director of American Farmland Trust’s national Farm Viability Initiative, with family members (left to right) Robin, Edith, Jacob, Hugh, Elizabeth, Eugene, and Bonnie on their Four Star Farms in western Massachusetts.

that American Farmland Trust launched earlier this year.

Two decades ago, when L’Etoile’s parents decided to transition from part-time to

full-time farming, the family farm underwent a series of transformations. L’Etoile describes their operation as being “too small to be big and too big to be small” at the time, a complex challenge faced by many farms of their size. To survive, they explored multiple crops and products, including turf, small grains, custom flour for bakeries and restaurants, and hops for the brewing industry.

Despite their best efforts, the family faced obstacles in finding ways to manage the farm and stay profitable while maintaining the quality

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What can the everyday consumer do to help support their local farmer?

“Buy from them. Get to know your food. Get to know who’s selling it, who’s growing it, and buy it,” says Nathan L’Etoile, director of American Farmland Trust’s

new national Farm Viability Initiative. “The closer you can get to the people who are growing and raising your food, the better it will be. The more viable the farms will be.”

FROM THE PRESIDENT

Earlier this fall, American Farmland Trust staff gathered in the Chicago, Illinois-area for a retreat, marking the first time that our rapidly growing group of staff around the country had a chance to meet in person since before the COVID-19 pandemic.

As I looked out upon a sea of new faces—many of whom had been hired within the last year or even the last few months—I remarked on how far we had come. I joined American Farmland Trust as president seven years ago, a logical next step in a career dedicated to farming and sustainable rural development.

When I joined American Farmland Trust, we had 55 staff. Today, we have 200, with plans to add 75 more this coming year. Back then, our national work was limited to a few small initiatives. Today, it is broad and deep. When I began as president, we were doing substantive on-the-ground work in just eight states. By next year, that number will be 34!

Much of this growth is thanks to you—our members and donors, including many people who have stood behind us for years and even decades.

I truly believe that this moment is our time. American Farmland Trust has been working for 43 years to get to a place where we can implement conservation agriculture

at a large scale. Our strength has always been that we are a unique organization, one that considers the whole system of agriculture. And over the years, collaboration has been a huge part of our success.

We now have resources and opportunities that were not available before. We also have an incredible amount of work ahead of us.

The Inflation Reduction Act passed by Congress in 2022 embraces an economic development strategy that aims to combat climate change in various ways, including through new investment in renewable energy and conservation agriculture. The landmark law contains \$20 billion for Farm Bill conservation programs—an unprecedented level of new investment in the very programs that American Farmland Trust has championed for decades.

By passing the law, Congress was recognizing that agriculture and proven conservation programs are solutions to the climate crisis. This marks a sea change.

Another \$4 billion of federal funds was allocated by the USDA in 2022 for a special set of climate-smart projects under a highly competitive new program. American



Farmland Trust is a lead or supporting partner on five of these projects, which incorporate cutting edge strategies to help farmers adopt climate-smart practices and sustainably produce commodities such as grain, dairy, and beef

with verified and quantified climate benefits.

This is the type of work that we’ve been pursuing for decades—and it’s finally coming to fruition at a time when the stakes for our environment and society could not be higher.

As I looked out upon all the faces at our staff retreat in September, I realized that as different as we all are—coming from many states and backgrounds—we all value being part of an organization united in the belief that farming is our future. Now is our time.

Thank you for joining us.

John Piotti

John Piotti
President & CEO
American Farmland Trust

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of life for all involved. The farm was unable to compete in the grain market due to high labor costs, and the turf operation faced issues with distribution and a lack of connection to customers. Recognizing the need to adapt, they made the tough decision to discontinue their flour, grain, and turf production and instead focus on a product marketed directly to consumers. Now, Four Star Farms runs a successful on-farm brewery and grows over 17 acres of hops for breweries throughout New England. Four Star Farms’ brewery allows the team to stay connected to their customers, who can enjoy a beer while overlooking the vast fields of hop production. The growing business also helps to provide stable, long-term jobs for those in their community.

L’Etoile’s unique perspective on agriculture goes beyond the traditional focus on productivity and profitability. He emphasizes the importance of quality of life for farmers and farm employees, advocating for fair wages and not subsidizing low food prices by compromising the well-being of those working in the industry.

“It’s important to have a good, high quality, affordable product for a customer along with returns for the farmer, and farmers and farm workers who are paid a living wage,” he says.

Under the new Farm Viability umbrella, American Farmland Trust has placed three initiatives: the Brighter Future Fund, a microgrant program to help farmers overcome barriers; the Smart SolarSM program, which connects the need for renewable energy with the need for productive farms and ranches; and the Growing Equity program, which brings together a community of business technical assistance providers across the country.

“This is not new for American Farmland Trust,” says L’Etoile. “We have looked at our work holistically for decades. Our approach now is focused on three pillars of farm viability: economic sustainability, the quality of life for the producer, and environmental sustainability.”



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To L’Etoile, the Farm Viability Initiative takes an entire area of American Farmland Trust’s mission and builds a program around it, finding innovative solutions to the complex challenges facing modern agriculture.

“I’m looking forward to digging into the different types of agriculture across the country and finding ways to align our viability

work at American Farmland Trust with them,” he says. “I think it’s a sign that we’re trying to elevate our work. It’s not about doing it better or doing more of it but finding ways to connect the work we’re already doing.”

[For more information, visit farmland.org/farmviability.](https://farmland.org/farmviability)

SUPPORTER PROFILE

Helen Powell of Clear Creek Farm



Helen Powell worked with American Farmland Trust to create a plan for the future of her family’s Clear Creek Farm, outside Lexington, Kentucky.

BY EMERAN IRBY

Helen Powell thinks like an artist. Growing up in farm country north of New York City, she was always interested in the sounds and colors of the land. “There were a lot of woods where I grew up. I’ve always been very interested in the outdoors and countryside,” says Powell, a photographer, painter, and writer. Her work encapsulates a curiosity for the world around her and a passionate pursuit to understand it.

“I am very interested in nature. I’m also sort of poetic and enjoy listening to the sounds of nature,” she adds. In the 1950s, Powell’s father bought a cattle and row crop farm southwest of Chicago, where she would visit. “My father was very innovative with it. He insisted on no-till, which was unheard of at the time,” she says. Years later, Helen and her five siblings inherited Clear Creek Farm, a horse farm outside Lexington, Kentucky, from her great-aunt, which Powell stepped forward to run. “I enjoyed it, and I was very good at it,” she says. “I went my own way and just took care of the farm.”

As Powell got older, she started to think about how to transition the farm, which was being divided among her relatives who also owned an interest in the land. While she was negotiating this process, Powell reached out to American Farmland Trust for help. She connected with Jerry Cosgrove, director of the Farm Legacy program, and has been working with American Farmland Trust since to create a plan for the future of her farm.

The idea of a legacy for farming drives Powell’s belief in conservation. “Our Farm Legacy program fit perfectly with Helen’s vision for her farm—honoring and respecting its past history, and securing its agricultural future for subsequent generations,” says Cosgrove. “In addition, Helen’s generous support will help secure American Farmland Trust’s future legacy for our important work.” Powell fought hard for her portion of the farm amidst a difficult partitioning process by hiring lawyers, surveyors, and working closely with American Farmland Trust to ensure her farm would not fall into the hands of developers. “The process of farm transfer is very tricky for anyone,” Powell says. “But

Jerry really helped me navigate through it. The dialogue with him has been fabulous for me.” In addition, Powell received assistance from Kentucky resident Billy Van Pelt II, American Farmland Trust’s director of special program development and senior advisor. If recent development trends continue, 456,500 acres of prime farmland in Kentucky are projected to be paved over, fragmented, or converted to uses that jeopardize agriculture, according to American Farmland Trust’s “Farms Under Threat” report. To Powell, it took soul to see beyond the potential profits to be made from the farm and instead imagine a future that includes viable careers for farmers and fertile land for them to farm. Powell’s creativity led the way in imagining what’s next for the farm, which she gifted in September to American Farmland Trust. She sees the farm as a blank canvas and an opportunity to understand what future farmers may need. As she paints the future, she envisions a thriving grazing operation, perhaps divided between a few different

Farm Song Lyrics

BY HELEN POWELL

Let it be, the creek water whispers
in this grove of waning ash trees
where cattle have wallowed
in the summer heat.

Their legs sink into the mud
as they rise up with soulful eyes
begging for respite from the flies
and their fate just down the road.

In the farm’s cool shade,
sleek mares nurse their foals.
Their horseshoes are custom made
while the bluegrass works its magic.

After seventy years of ups and downs
the farm is now self-sufficient.
Something I’m proud of,
And yet...

I question its future.
A family of starlings seems to answer
as they escape down the chimney
of our shared legacy farmhouse.

In the hush of evening gratitude
silent barns and mended fences murmur
This land is your land,
This land is mine.

farmers and a space where community members can come to learn about agriculture or simply take in the beauty of nature. “I think this needs to go into the hands of the farmers of the future,” she says. “We have 250 acres. Two hundred, we think, is going to be in cattle farming and grazing. And 50 might be an agricultural education park, which we’re very excited about. So that is where we are with it, and it’s a very thrilling opportunity.” Thanks to her foresight, future visitors to the farm will be inspired by the land in the same way that Powell was as a child.

For more information about the Farm Legacy program, please contact **Jerry Cosgrove** at (518) 281-5074 or jcosgrove@farmland.org.



Helen Powell (pictured) donated her family farm to American Farmland Trust so it would not fall into the hands of developers.



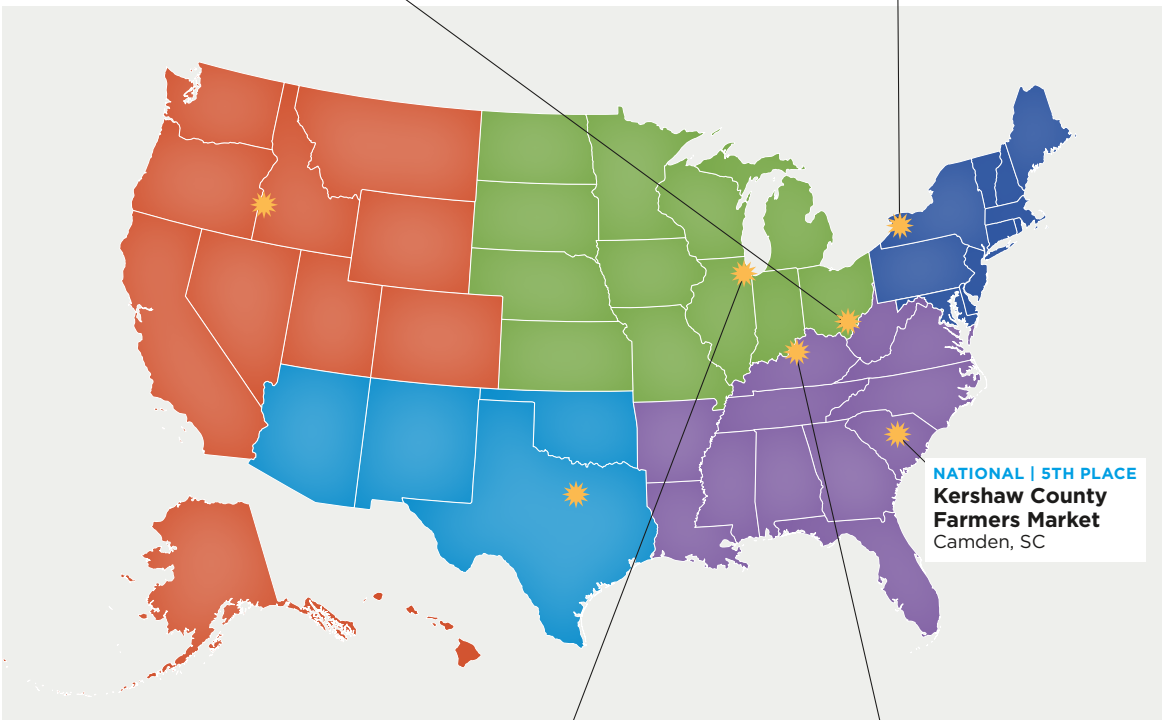
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Join Us in Congratulating the Winners of the 15th Annual America's Farmers Market Celebration™



REGIONAL WINNERS				
MIDWEST Meigs County Farmers Market Pomeroy, OH	NORTHEAST North Tonawanda City Market North Tonawanda, NY	PACIFIC Nampa Farmers Market Nampa, ID	SOUTHEAST Mt. Washington Farmers Market Mt. Washington, KY	SOUTHWEST McKinney Farmers Market at Chestnut Square McKinney, TX

In September, American Farmland Trust and the Farmers Market Coalition announced the winners of the 15th annual America's Farmers Market Celebration, a national event honoring the important role of farmers markets.

More than 2,000 markets nationwide participated in the 2023 celebration, with over 10 million supporters engaged through voting, visiting the celebration website, and participating with the celebration on social media.

Markets that received the most public votes were declared the national winners. The celebration also recognized the top markets in five regions nationwide and in all 50 states.

National winners were awarded \$5,000 for first, \$2,500 for second, \$1,500 for third, \$750 for fourth, and \$250 for fifth. The funds will be used by markets for marketing, communications, and other needs that help expand their reach and impact.

Since 2008, the celebration has highlighted the major role that farmers markets play in educating consumers about where food comes from while fostering direct relationships between community members and farmers.

Congratulations to all the national, regional, and state winners!

American Farmland Trust

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