

**Weantinoge Heritage Land Trust:  
Connecticut's Largest Land Trust and  
Loyal Ally for Farmers**

By Rachel Murray, for *UConn Extension*

Land trusts play a pivotal role in farmland access throughout the country. According to the USDA National Agricultural Statistical Service in 2014, real estate values in the northeast are perennially the highest in the country. Further, Connecticut averages over \$11,000 per acre, nearly a 1% increase from 2013. With this in mind, farmers increasingly face the burden of wanting to farm in Connecticut yet are challenged by the unwavering cost of land throughout this state. Fortunately, Connecticut Land Trusts are working hard to change this trend for farmers and make land more affordable, accessible, and readily available. Weantinoge Heritage Land Trust (Weantinoge), a premier regional land trust in Litchfield County, CT, has given hope to current farmers and future farmers alike with their farmland access prerogative over the last 50 years.

**Weantinoge Heritage Land Trust**

Litchfield County farmers and landowners seeking land conservation have a somewhat modest, yet demonstrable advocate on their side. Weantinoge has protected over 9,000 acres of land in Litchfield County and beyond (including northern Fairfield County) with approximately 30% of these lands categorized as prime, statewide, or locally important farmland soil. This is great news for aspiring farmers and current farmers looking to expand their business. Weantinoge has 15 working farms throughout 17 towns, as well as, being slated as the largest land trust in Connecticut and the 18<sup>th</sup> largest land trust in the U.S. based on the number of lands it conserves. Additionally, Weantinoge has recently been awarded accreditation by the Land Trust Accreditation Commission. This thorough and independent review process ensures to the public that Weantinoge is meeting the highest standards of excellence set nationally.

The name Weantinoge originates in the Native American term meaning, "Home Land." Weantinoge has a wide reach and progressive perspective when it comes to the permanent protection of land. Keeping land permanently as open space, forests, and wetlands is within the primary function of the mission statement, and so is the conservation of tillable and farmable land. This connection to the land holds true to the namesake of Weantinoge. Striving to work with farmers and advocate for the financial hardships associated with land ownership in Connecticut, Weantinoge offers leases that are below market value and often exchanges work in lieu of or at a further reduced rate. Lastly, partnerships and community support are widely adapted as successful techniques; Weantinoge effectively works with other local land trusts, the CT Farmland Trust, State of CT Department of Agriculture, and other groups in their farmland conservation and farmland access work.

**Smyrski Farm**

Smyrski Farm is a gifted parcel of farmland from Sophie and John Smyrski. Located in Merryall, an historic section of New Milford, CT, this property is one of the largest and most coveted agricultural preserves of WLT. Smyrski Farm encompasses



*Photo: Rachel Murray*

nearly 220 acres including a one-mile stretch of the West Aspetuck River with Class AA water, signifying the important environmental and health implications the river has on the community. On this property, Weantinoge owns the land while the State of Connecticut maintains the conservation easement over 162 acres. The acquisition of Smyrski Farm for Weantinoge allows several local farmers to expand their current operations providing critical farmland and barn storage facilities as these farm businesses continue to thrive. Stuart's Family Farm in Bridgewater, CT pastures part of their 100% grass fed beef herd on the property while they also cut hay on a portion of the parcel; Nick and Linda Pouder of Mayapple Hill Farm pasture their flock of sheep and maintains use of part of the barn; and, other local farmers cut hay and use some of the other barns for hay

storage. Indeed, Weantinoge plays a critical role in the support and development of these local farms.

Weantinoge maintains a Management Plan for all the property that it owns, while also requiring that farmers create and update Farm Management Plans on each property he or she is leasing. This allows for clear communication and expectations for the lessor and lessee. Going forward, Weantinoge intends to implement a plan to maximize the agricultural soils and lands on their properties based on a "Best Use" analysis currently underway. Connecting farmers to the land is a high priority for Weantinoge and one they continue to work on daily. Lastly, understanding the needs and the ability to better meet the necessities of new and beginning farmers continues to be a challenge Weantinoge is working to understand. The resources, capital, and experience of a new and beginning farmer often differ a great deal from a farmer coming in looking to expand his or her farm business, yet the success and reward of working with a new and beginning farm has the potential to be long-term and community building.

## **Connecticut Land Access Programs**

As more Connecticut land trusts realize the value in making land available to farmers, the importance to list and find properties is increasingly significant. The Connecticut Department of Agriculture's [CT FarmLink](#) is a statewide resource for farm owners and farm seekers to advertise land available and additionally to search farm properties that are available. Along with farm properties listed on CT FarmLink, [New England Farmland Finder](#) (NEFF) is another resource that includes all properties and farm seekers throughout New England. Utilizing these two matchmaking websites are excellent opportunities for land trusts to efficiently and effectively find a farmer for their land. A statewide reality is that there are significantly more farm seekers than there are farm properties available making the case that land trusts have the potential to significantly alter and improve the agricultural landscape in Connecticut.

[Land For Good](#) (LFG) is a New England based non-profit with Field Agents in each state working to improve farmland access and keep more farmers working the land. LFG has an extensive "Toolbox" available on their website with resources helpful for farm seekers and farm owners, including sample leases and different models to use as a guide depending on the needs of the land trust and farmer. Consultation to actually help craft the match between the two parties is also available. In addition, the [Connecticut Land Conservation Council](#), provides users information about land trusts throughout the state and has model agricultural easement language and leases to use as guidance. Lastly, [UConn Extension](#) has a helpful website with various agricultural programs and services they provide, from a list of essential resources for beginning farmers called "The Bucket List", to contacts for Extension educators and specialists, and the Farmland ConneCTions Guide and model leases. All of these resources are ready, available, and free of charge for land trusts, land owners, and land seekers alike to utilize.

The role of land trusts is becoming one of establishing a model for acquiring the land through creative partnerships, protecting the land, and establishing a farmer on the land. They can help lead the renaissance for agriculture in Connecticut.