

AgriCorps Act of 2005

A Policy Initiative for a Demonstration Project of National Significance for America's Farms and Community-Based Food Systems¹

Agricorp Legislation on Behalf of
The New York Sustainable Agriculture Working Group
Hank Herrera, Managing Director
Katherine Mendenhall, Program Manager
And
Evan Lowenstein, Environmental Planner

As globalization and sprawl combine to devastate America's agriculture, an increasing number of civil society organizations have called for action to rebuild community-based food systems. These organizations, devoted to community food security, the survival of small family farms, and environmental, economic and social justice, question the direction of current agricultural policy and programs. They recognize and seriously act on the economic, environmental, social, and cultural costs that stem from the loss of our nation's farms and farmland. They develop and propose new policies and programs to safeguard farming and farmland and to improve access to affordable food, nutritious for all people at all times. Yet one critical element of sustainable agriculture needs greater attention from the government, civil society and the private sector: Farmers. We need not only save farmland, we need to save farmers and small-scale farming as a profession.

Our nation's farmers are retiring and dying out. The average age of family farmers is near sixty in many states. Fewer of the children of these farmers want to stay in the family business. The small-scale family farmer is vanishing as family farming is devoured by development and agribusiness, and there are very few young people wanting to continue or start smaller-scale, sustainable farms.

We must do something about this situation. We must remember that while we try to preserve farmland and farm operations, we also need to create and sustain a new generation of farmers.

We believe that sustainable, local-regional agriculture is a potential economic driver almost completely ignored by the local, state and federal governments seeking to promote economic development in upstate, central and western New York. Although it is one of the oldest forms of trade and business enterprise, and even though the demand for its products will never go away, agriculture is not considered enough as a form of economic development. Yet even if we recognize that smaller scale, local-regional agriculture and food systems are keys to our economic future, we will not be able to realize its potential if no one wants or is trained to be a farmer.

We have few programs, policies, and incentives to create a new generation of sustainable farmers. With this in mind, we propose AgriCorps, a pilot project to create and support this new generation.

In the Genesee Finger Lakes Region, farms and farmland are being rapidly lost to development and forces of global trade. We propose to conduct a pilot project of AgriCorps in this region in order to demonstrate the value of engaging and training a new generation of sustainable farmers. This project will preserve family farms, provide a much-needed “people-power” boost to existing small-scale farming operations, and help this region realize the economic opportunity that can come from a local-regional, self-supporting, sustainable food system.

Modeled after the AmeriCorps national service program, AgriCorps would link small-scale sustainable farming, small-scale food processing and urban agriculture operations with young or not-so-young persons seriously wishing to enter farming and agriculture. The AgriCorps members would receive stipends from a mix of local, state and federal funding and benefits such as free lodging and meals from host farms. They will receive invaluable on-the-job learning and experience. They would receive an award akin to AmeriCorps’ Education Award, which would be used to invest in further sustainable agriculture education or to help start or expand a sustainable agriculture enterprise. The host farmer and farm will receive much-needed people-power in the form of the AgriCorps member(s) and funding to offset the member’s room, board and training costs. AgriCorps members would also have academic study and community service requirement in addition to their actual farm training and work.

The idea of AgriCorps is to grow sustainable agriculture and to grow the success of local-regional food systems. Our research indicates that 1.64 million consumers living in the Genesee Finger Lakes Region spend about \$4 billion annually for food at home and away from home (e.g., in restaurants). However our farmers realize only about \$1 billion in revenue for their farm products. The gap of \$3 billion represents the purchasing of imported food—and the exporting of those consumer food dollars to other regions and countries. If regional farms and food producers capture only 10% of regional consumer food expenditures—thereby closing the gap by \$400 million—they would generate 800 jobs in the agricultural and related sectors. They would generate an additional 800 jobs for each additional 10% of regional consumer food expenditures they capture.²

But most importantly, AgriCorps will grow a new generation of farmers, willing and able to restore an economical, ecological, and equitable agriculture in our region and beyond. AgriCorps will not only encourage farming as a profession, it will provide a tangible outlet for the growing numbers of youth and adults who find themselves wanting to immerse themselves in sustainable agriculture. Through AgriCorps, they can learn and contribute simultaneously, and together reverse the distressing cycles we see in agriculture today.

We request that Senator Hilary Rodham Clinton take the policy leadership for this initiative and assist with the procurement of funds to pilot AgriCorps in the Genesee Finger Lakes Region of New York. Having been recently ranked the 11th most endangered farmland region in the country by the American Farmland Trust, this is an area that can benefit from such an initiative. We intend this pilot to succeed and serve as a model for

replication in other regions and states in ensuing years, as the newest and freshest form of national service.

During the first year of the pilot, AgriCorps will organize its administrative infrastructure. Also AgriCorps will develop and implement a marketing and recruitment campaign for AgriCorps interns and host farms. The program will also develop a matching program to maximize the “fit” between intern’s prior experience and interests and the needs of the host farm. Interns will receive a total compensation package that includes basic salary, health insurance and a contribution to an Individual Development Account (IDA) to use for either further education or as seed funding for purchasing a small farm. Host farmers will receive a compensation package that includes an allowance for providing lodging and meals for the intern plus a stipend to offset the cost to the farmer of providing training for the intern. In addition, AgriCorps will provide each intern and host farm with a mentor/consultant to facilitate the process of building a strong learning environment for both the intern and the host farmer. AgriCorps will build on the foundation of experience in training new farmers acquired over the past two decades by groups such as the Northeast Organic Farming Association of New York, the Small Farms Institute, and the Small Farms Program at Cornell. These partners will provide the consultation, training and technical assistance to the AgriCorps interns and farmers. Last but not least, the AgriCorps interns and host farmers will receive support to attend one national and two in-state educational meetings per year.

We have initially estimated the total cost of the pilot demonstration project as \$7,738,207 over five years. We anticipate that the start-up and implementation costs of this project will exceed the ability of partners to provide in-kind contributions. The five-year project period will allow ample time to develop, implement and evaluate the operation of the AgriCorps. The project cost will cover the expenses outlined in the budget table below.

We propose that the New York Sustainable Agriculture Working Group (NYSAWG) serve as the lead agency for this pilot project. NYSAWG has the leadership, operational capacity and collaborative relationships required to conduct the demonstration project. Collaborative partners include the Common Good Planning Center; New York Farms!; the Northeast Organic Farming Association of New York; the Growing New Farmers Program of the Small Farm Institute and the Northeast Sustainable Agriculture Working Group; the National Campaign for Sustainable Agriculture; the National Family Farmers Coalition; the Community Food Security Coalition; the New York Hunger Action Network; the Regional Food and Farm Coalition; and Cornell University’s Small Farms Program and Community, Food and Agriculture Program.

AgriCorp Budget Outline	
Administrative Personnel	Total Cost Over Five Years
NYSAWG Managing Director	\$ 129,060
AgriCorps Project Director	\$ 309,744
AgriCorps Administrative Assistant	\$ 232,308
AgriCorps Director of T&TA	\$ 290,385
Total Administrative Personnel	\$ 961,498
General Administrative Non-Personnel Costs	
Computer equipment for AgriCorps staff	\$ 16,000
Other equipment for AgriCorps (copier, fax, postage, AV, etc.)	\$ 7,500
Annual equipment maintenance	\$ 3,903
Consumable supplies	\$ 26,020
Travel (2 national meetings annually + in-state travel per person)	\$ 46,836
AgriCorps Advisory Board (12 people, 3 meetings per year)	\$ 124,897
Marketing and communications consultant cost	\$ 520,404
Evaluation consultant cost	\$ 390,303
Program contingency cost	\$ 260,202
Administrative overhead	\$ 520,404
Total General Administrative Non-Personnel Costs	\$ 1,916,470
AgriCorps Intern, Host and On-Site Education Costs	
AgriCorp Intern stipends @ \$7/hr, 40 hrs/wk, 52 wks/yr	\$ 1,800,318
AgriCorp Intern fringe benefits @ 20% of stipend	\$ 360,064
AgriCorp Intern IDA deposit upon completion	\$ 600,000
AgriCorps Host Family Lodging, Meal and Training Allowance	\$ 10,000
AgriCorps On-Site Training consultant cost	\$ 618,241
AgriCorps Intern & Host meetings & travel (1 national, 2 in-state)	\$ 445,134
Total AgriCorps Intern, Host and Education Costs	\$ 5,060,239
Total Cost of AgriCorps Demonstration Project	\$ 7,938,207

¹ The authors wish to thank the following individuals for reviewing this proposal in its current form and for their contributions: Judith Gillan, the New England Small Farm Institute, Belchertown, Massachusetts; Joanna Green, the Small Farms Program, Cornell University; Elizabeth Henderson, owner of Peacework Organic Farm, Wayne County, New York; and Ora Rothfuss III, Agriculture Development Specialist, Wayne County Planning Department, New York. For future drafts we will seek additional review and comment from Cathy Sheils, NY FarmNet, R. David Smith, the Farm Viability Institute at Cornell, and others. We deeply value the contributions of these individuals and, of course, take full responsibility for all errors we may have made in the interpretation and inclusion of their suggestions.

² Herrera, H., Barnes, A., Smith, J. (2004). The Economic Development Potential of Regional Food System Capacity to Meet Consumer Demand in Two Regions of New York State. The Center for Popular Research, Education and Policy in collaboration with the Common Good Planning Center and the New York Sustainable Agriculture Working Group. Rochester, New York.