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# NEWS RELEASE

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## **USDA announces \$4.3 million to protect Massachusetts farmland this year**

The USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) has signed an agreement with the Massachusetts Department of Agricultural Resources (MDAR) to contribute \$4.3 million in federal funds to the state for the preservation of Massachusetts farmland in 2004. The agreement was signed by NRCS State Conservationist Cecil B. Currin and Massachusetts Commissioner of Agricultural Resources Douglas P. Gillespie recently at Hixbridge Farm in Westport, Mass.

This funding, provided through NRCS's Farm and Ranchland Protection Program and administered through the state's Agricultural Preservation Restriction Program, will protect an estimated 1,500 acres of prime Bay State farmland. NRCS and MDAR work in partnership with communities, local land trusts and other organizations in preserving farmland across the commonwealth.

Under the state Agricultural Preservation Restriction Program (APR), the state purchases from a farmer, a restriction on his or her agricultural property. The APR value is the difference between the land's agricultural value and its fair market value. The farmer still owns the land and retains the right to sell it, lease it, or will it to his or her heirs. The farm must remain in agriculture in perpetuity, even if sold or passed on to someone else.

The federal Farm and Ranch Lands Protection Program (FRPP) provides funds to purchase the development rights to farmland, preserving productive farmland for agricultural use. Working through existing programs, USDA joins with state, tribal or local governments to acquire conservation easements from landowners.

More than 160 acres of the Tripp family's Hixbridge Farm dairy operation were protected under an APR restriction this year. The land, which has been in the Tripp family since 1953, is currently used as pasture and to grow silage corn and hay for the livestock.

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“Development pressure is so strong in Massachusetts, that requests for FRPP and APR assistance far exceed the available funding,” said Currin. “I’m pleased that this year’s FRPP funding increased nearly seventy percent over last year, which means that we will be able to help more local farmers keep their productive land in agriculture.”

“This federal funding leverages our state funding so that we are able to protect many more acres of farmland,” said Gillespie. “Farmland and economically viable farms are an important resource for all Massachusetts citizens. Both federal and state government are serious about protecting these resources.”

Since 1977, Massachusetts state government has invested over \$126 million to protect more than 500 agricultural properties totaling more than 51,000 acres. Through 2003, \$8.2 million in FRPP funds have been awarded to purchase easements on approximately 5,897 acres of valuable agricultural land in Massachusetts since the FRPP program began in 1996.

Massachusetts has a total of 6,100 farms and 520,000 acres of farmland, according to the USDA New England Agricultural Statistics Service. The average annual rate of agricultural land converted to developed uses in the Bay State is 5,440 acres, according to American Farmland Trust.

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