

A seed to combat sprawl is planted on farms

Jersey boosts demand for agriculture with ideas for new products

BY JEFF DIAMANT
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It seems like a simple enough idea to help battle sprawl in New Jersey — come up with 10 ideas a year to increase demand for agricultural products, thereby boosting farmers' profits and reducing pressure on them to sell their land to developers.

"The public has to make the connection between the economic viability of agriculture and smart growth," said Soji Adedaja, dean of Rutgers University's Cook College, which works closely with the state Department of Agriculture on marketing ideas for farmers. "I've al-

ways said that the reason we lose farmland (to development) is because the farmers who sell don't have the ability to make a decent living off their land."

The urgency to help keep farmers afloat stems from concern over a dwindling amount of farmland due to sprawl and agriculture's tough economics. In 1950, New Jersey had 26,900 farms covering 1.8 million acres; in 2000, there were 9,600 farms totaling 830,000 acres.

Since the 1980s, the state's main effort to help farms survive has been to pay millions of dollars for selected farmers' land-development rights. That will continue. Through its farmland preservation

program, the Agriculture Department wants to preserve 20,000 acres of farmland per year, up from the 15,364 acres preserved in 2001.

The marketing program is a complementary effort, state officials said during the Governor's Smart Growth conference in Ewing Township last month.

Some ideas already are in the works.

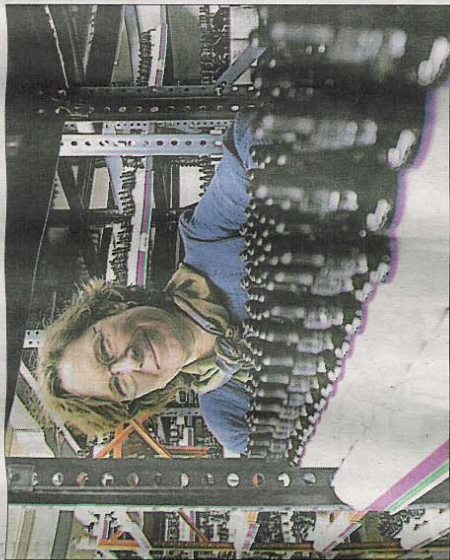
Corn farmers are trying to close a deal on a South Jersey site for an ethanol plant that would convert their corn into automobile fuel, thereby increasing demand for their crop. And in Sussex County, dairy farmers are devising a way to use a variation of the well-known

"Jersey Fresh" label on state-produced cheese and ice cream, even if minor ingredients come from out-of-state. Under current rules, only crops grown in New Jersey can carry the label.

"It's good public policy to create new opportunities for farmers," said Charles Kuperus, the state's agriculture secretary. "When you think of 'Jersey Fresh,' you think of fruits and vegetables but why shouldn't New Jersey dairy farmers be able to market their products with that unique brand?"

In June, a national task force also recommended increased marketing for Jersey crops, noting that the number of harvested acre

[See **FARMS**, Page 24]



ROBERT SCARRINO/THE STAR-LEDGER
Beth Lambert is managing director of Blueberry Health, based in Warren County, which helps produce Jersey Blues iced tea.

FARMS

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 21

Marketing effort for Jersey crops

decreased last year for 10 of 11 of New Jersey's top vegetables.

To help, the U.S. Department of Agriculture recently awarded \$390,200 in grants for five New Jersey projects aiming to boost "val-

ue-added" production — the process of adding value to crops through processing or packaging. Projects include studying those markets for peaches, culinary herbs, corn, dairy products and tomatoes.

Past marketing efforts include Jersey Blues iced tea, sold in Kings supermarkets and farmers' roadside stands; Blueberry Solid Extract, sold at health-food stores for up to \$30 a jar; and a program for South Jersey farmers to sell crops

to the state Department of Corrections to feed prisoners.

Increased marketing "is good, as long as the ideas are good ones," said Beth Lambert, managing director of Blueberry Health, which helps produce Jersey Blues and the solid extract. "The challenge is coming up with practical things that can be done."

Distribution has been a challenge for Jersey Blues, Lambert said.

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"People love it. It's just hard getting it transported around," because of competition from Snapple and other branded ice teas on distributors' routes, she said.

Jersey Blues is a model for the new marketing program. Cook College researchers came up with the iced tea idea about four years ago in an effort to broaden blueberries' muffin-, pie- and pancake-filling appeal to increase demand for struggling farmers. Production this year has been about 125,000 bottles, a fivefold increase from 2000, Lambert said.

Other products have seemed promising, but slow to take off for regular farmers. Technology to grow tasty tomatoes in greenhouses, developed at Rutgers, has long been available, but farmers have not taken to it, said Dave Specca of Cook College.

Meanwhile, officials with Garden State Ethanol, a company formed to develop a New Jersey ethanol plant, have worked for more than a year to locate a plant site in Gloucester or Cumberland counties.

The state's 1,500 corn growers, plagued by declining prices, see an opportunity to cash in on the expected increase in demand for corn-based ethanol, a gasoline additive. Farmers hope the demand for ethanol will rise because the rules governing gasoline additives are changing, and because of a national goal to decrease U.S. reliance on foreign oil, especially after the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks.

The plant would cost about \$60 million, and the group would need at least 5 percent upfront to acquire financing, said Ed Stahl, the company's coordinator.

"We need things like that," said Jake Bilyk of White Township in Warren County, a corn farmer who is considering contributing to the ethanol plant, and who now sells most of his corn in Pennsylvania. "We gotta do something with all our corn."

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NEW JERSEY

Page **21**

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