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Burlington County reaches milestone in preserving 30,000 farm acres

[Carol Comegno](#), @CarolComegno

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(Photo: Photo by Brian Wilson)

Burlington County has surpassed 30,000 preserved agricultural acres on 250 farms with the easement purchase of nine more farms since the summer.

The last two of them, the M&N Farm in Chesterfield and Fenimore Farm in Pemberton, had property closings last week on preservation easements. The farms received compensation in return for the deed restriction that mandates the land be forever reserved for agriculture.

“The significant achievements ... further demonstrates the freeholder board’s ongoing commitment to preserving the quality of life in Burlington County through open space and farmland preservation,” said

Freeholder Linda Hughes.

“The two additional farmland easement acquisitions further protect the county’s important agriculture industry, ensuring it continues to contribute to our local economy.”

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County officials said their ultimate preservation goal is 40,000 farmland acres. The county has led all New Jersey counties in farmland preservation for years.

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Launched in 1985, the county farmland preservation program's first five preserved farms in Chesterfield were also the first preserved in the state. Since then, the county program has preserved farms in 21 municipalities.

The county draws from a dedicated farmland and open space property tax trust fund to preserve land when its cost share is required. So far the county has financed \$68 million of the \$178 million preservation cost of the 30,000 acres, with much of the remainder coming from the state and federal government and sometimes a municipal cost share.

Brothers Matt and Noah Bassett, owners of M&N Farm, were not raised on a farm but have lived all their lives amid country farms in northern Burlington County, where their grandmother grew up on one.

But they decided to venture on their own into the agriculture business by buying and selling hay as teens even before graduating from high school.

That business led them to eventually begin leasing farmland in 2013 to till and raise crops of hay and alfalfa to sell.

After a few years, they were able to buy 40 acres of farmland in Chesterfield and then applied to preserve all but two acres through the county farmland preservation program.

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Freeholders recently approved total spending of more than \$3.6 million to preserve the Bassett brothers' M&N farm and eight other farms, all but one of which not only preserve agriculture but continue a program to surround the joint military base in that part of the county with a five-mile buffer zone against housing and commercial development.

"The county's program keeps the garden in the Garden State alive," said Matt Bassett, 25, who lives in Columbus since the new farm in Chesterfield has no farmhouse.

The county bought the development rights to 38 acres of the farm for \$235,750. The non-preserved acreage would allow the brothers to build a house or agriculture-related structure.

Bassett said the county program also is competitive enough to attract farm applications by buying their development rights with deed restrictions and ensuring tillable land for future generations.

The brothers grow vegetable crops, such as sweet corn, tomatoes, peppers and cantaloupe as well as alfalfa, orchard grass and hay on their new farm.

However, they farm much more than those 38 acres.



Noah and Matthew Bassett, owners of M & N Farm, stand in a cornfield on their newly preserved farm in Chesterfield, Burlington County. (Photo: Provided)

"We now lease and farm 1,000 acres in four different counties," said Bassett, whose grandmother is a member of the longtime farm family of Fred Wainwright in Florence.

Mary Pat Robbie, director of the county department of resource conservation, said there is a great cost advantage to this year's batch of preserved farms because the state and the federal government are absorbing the entire cost of preserving the eight farms in the Joint Base McGuire-Dix-Lakehurst buffer zone.

Most of the nine farms, especially the four in Chesterfield, will be "filling the holes in the doughnut" formed by previously preserved farms around the base, said county farmland preservation coordinator Brian Wilson

Normally the county or municipality devotes a local cost share to preserve farmland, but the Readiness and Environmental Preparedness Initiative, an 11-year-old federal program, provides money to help protect military bases from encroachment and avoids disturbances to developed areas by military activities such as aircraft and weapons firing on practice ranges.

Robbie said the federal government already has paid the county for the eight farms.

The most expensive of the nine newly preserved farms and the largest is the Thompson South Farm of 136 acres, which is also in Chesterfield and cost \$737,300.

The other farms, some owned by development companies and raising grain or sod, are:

- Linda Hatt Farm: 69 acres, Chesterfield, \$593,184
- Lanwin Development Corp. Farm: 132 acres, Chesterfield, \$690,900
- Fenimore Farm: 74 acres, Pemberton Township, \$248,455
- Harold and Gail Kirby Farm: 56 acres, Pemberton Township, \$238,620
- Alloway North Farm: 118 acres, Southampton, \$518,868
- Alloway South Farm: 46 acres, Southampton, \$183,200
- Patel Farm, 33 acres, Springfield, \$199,800

Carol Comegno; 856-486-2473; @carolcomegno; ccomegno@gannettnj.com

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