

200-acre Auburn Farm Protected

first completed deal in new farm preservation program

Auburn. When Ray Nichols and Tina Brooks recently purchased 200 acres of farmland, it marked a major step toward realizing their dream to own their own farm. But it also marked a major success for Maine Farmland Trust, a statewide organization that works to preserve working farms.

The couple bought their new farm not from another farmer, but from Maine Farmland Trust. The Trust bought the land a few months previously from George Lucas, who liked the idea of seeing his horse farm protected, but was anxious to sell the property. So he sold it to Maine Farmland Trust, knowing that the organization would permanently preserve the land through an agricultural easement, then re-sell it to a new farmer at an affordable cost.

This is Maine Farmland Trust's first project in a new program it calls "Buy/Protect/Sell."

"This program adds an important new tool to our tool box," explained John Piotti, Maine Farmland Trust's executive director.

"In seven years, we've helped preserve over 10,000 acres of Maine farmland," said Piotti. "But we've done it by working with landowners who want to put easements on their property. That's very different from targeting land that is about to go on the market, as this program does."



The new program allows Maine Farmland Trust to preserve farmland that is arguably the most vulnerable in Maine, because it is about to be sold. Maine Farmland Trust ensures that the land is sold to a new farmer.

In the case of the Nichols/Brooks' new farm, Maine Farmland Trust sought potential buyers from within the farm community, starting with the farmers registered in the FarmLink program. After finding the new owners, the Trust worked with them to craft an agricultural easement that would permanently protect the farmland—the Trust's goal—but in a way that gave the new owners the flexibility they needed to farm the way they wanted.

When land is permanently protected under this program, its market value is lessened. This allows farmers to purchase properties at more affordable prices. That is increasingly necessary to get new farmers on the land, according to Piotti.

Yet this program is not feasible for all farm properties that are up for sale, only those that are practical financially. The Trust needs to make up the difference between what it buys the farm for and what it can sell the land for once it is protected.

“Perhaps the best way to make the numbers work is if the farmland owner sells the property to MFT below full market value,” explained Piotti. “Some landowners are willing to do this because they want to see the land protected and stay a working farm.”

In other instances, the Trust will attempt to make up the difference by allowing a limited amount of development on the non-farmland portion of the property. The Trust believes that preserving 90% or 95% of the property is far better than not preserving any of it. In still other instances, some targeted fundraising will be used to “fill the gap.”



To date, the Trust has purchased three farms, with a fourth under contract. The Auburn farm is the first to be resold.

Ray Nichols and Tina Brooks will operate a full service equestrian center on their property, under the name Oakwood Equestrian Center. The farm is ideally suited to this purpose, with an existing indoor riding ring, stables, plenty of pastureland and beautiful hay fields.

The family has already moved onto the property and has undertaken many improvements. Their new farm business is up and running and showing great promise—thanks to their vision, hard work, and a partnership with Maine Farmland Trust.