

## **Rockport Farmland to be Protected**

Rockport. Three organizations that work to preserve land –Maine Farmland Trust, Maine Coast Heritage Trust, and Coastal Mountains Land Trust—have joined forces to protect a large tract of local farmland from development and to keep it working.

The property, which is located on the south side of Route 90 less than a mile west of Route 1, has been on the market for over a year. Once part of the Erickson Farm, the parcel contains about 35 acres of highly visible fields and about 60 acres of wooded backland. The fields are currently utilized by Aldermere Farm, which is a program of Maine Coast Heritage Trust.



Maine Farmland Trust purchased the property on July 19, with the goal to permanently protect all of the open farmland and a good portion of woodland through an agricultural conservation easement. Maine Farmland Trust—a statewide organization with headquarters in Belfast—has helped preserve 10,000 acres of working farmland since its founding in 1999, often in partnership with local land trusts. This is its first project in the Camden/Rockport area.

“This is an important project for us and for the area,” explains John Piotti, Maine Farmland Trust’s executive director. “Mid-coast Maine is full of opportunities to boost local farming, but only if we can retain the land base.”

The easement that permanently preserves the property will likely be held by Coastal Mountains Land Trust, which stewards 5,825 acres of conservation land in the area. Once protected, the farmland will be conveyed to Maine Coast Heritage Trust, ensuring that the fields are forever available to Aldermere Farm.

“The site contains good hay land and pastureland,” says Ron Howard, who manages Aldermere Farm, known for its trademark Belted Galloways. “It’s very valuable to our operation now, and is critical to our future success.”

Beyond retaining working farmland and scenic vistas, this property also provides opportunities for local recreation and perhaps creative educational and community opportunities, said Howard. The land is located close to the Rockport Elementary School, the independent Ashwood School, and the Camden/Rockport High School.

The property sold for \$965,000. Maine Farmland Trust has secured a federal grant that will cover about a third of the cost. A small portion of the woodland could be re-sold to raise additional funds. But most of the remaining funds will come from local fundraising.

Project partners will soon launch a fundraising effort, in conjunction with the Fund for Rockport’s Future, an initiative authorized in Rockport’s Comprehensive Plan. As described by Charlton Ames, who chaired the Comprehensive Plan Committee, the Fund for Rockport’s Future is intended to help protect critical properties for future generations and for innovative community projects.

“We believe that the local community will be very supportive of farmland projects,” says Ames. “The Erickson Farm is a great place to start given its rural character and value to the community.”

The recent purchase does not include portions of the Erickson family land that lie north of Route 90. This land is also on the market. Project partners are interested in exploring the possibility of ultimately acquiring it as well.