

Farmland Forever: A Vision Becomes Reality

By Kim Ridley
Board Member, Blue Hill Heritage Trust

To visit Paul Birdsall at Horsepower Farm in Penobscot on a clear August morning is to have your hope restored in what a handful of people can accomplish through tenacity, vision and care. If it weren't for Paul and a handful of others, the rich farmlands along Route 15 might well have been stripped of their soils and sold off as house lots.

"I can't conceive of a life separate from the land," Paul says as he sips coffee in a sunlit room overlooking a pasture where two of his glossy Belgian draft horses graze among drifts of goldenrod. At 83, he has forged a deep connection with the land he has stewarded and farmed with horses for nearly four decades.

He also has gone far beyond caring for his own 383 acres. Soon after Paul and his late wife Molly moved to Penobscot and started Horsepower in 1973, they realized that the farmland along the Route 15 corridor could easily be "gobbled up" by development—just as it had in the once-rural Connecticut community where they had lived. "As far as farmland preservation goes, we were sensitized early," Paul says.

In Maine, he joined the county Soil and Water Conservation District and the Hancock County Planning Commission. Both groups soon issued reports that underscored the importance of farmland along the Route 15 corridor from Orland to Blue Hill and the threats. The SWCD determined that the farmland along the corridor harbors the best agricultural soil in the county: deep, sandy loam deposited by ancient glaciers. The Commission reported that nearly all development occurred within a quarter mile of a paved road.

"That was a precipitating event for me," Paul says. "I visualized development along Route 15." These agencies began laying the groundwork for protecting farmland, but no mechanism for actually doing so was yet in place.

In 1985, Paul joined Blue Hill Heritage Trust as a founding board member. "I joined with an agenda in my mind: I wanted to see farmland preserved," he says. He soon teamed up with others concerned about farmland, including Lorenzo Mitchell, who had joined the Trust's board and owned land along the corridor. In 1989, Lorenzo donated a gift to the Trust that made farmland protection a reality: the gift of a conservation easement on his 91-acre property near the Penobscot/Orland town line. Shortly thereafter, Paul donated a conservation easement on Horsepower Farm.

Paul, Lorenzo and others continued to work through the Trust to lay the groundwork for conserving additional farmland. Under their leadership, the Trust

established a Farmland Preservation Committee in 1998, which soon launched BHHT's "Farmland Forever" program—one of the first programs of its kind in Maine. The program's goal was to work with landowners to conserve the farming potential of high quality agricultural soils through the use of donated and purchased conservation easements.

The idea worked. Blue Hill Heritage Trust has now conserved 17 parcels totaling 1,940 acres of farmland on the Blue Hill Peninsula through conservation easements. In addition to preserving these soils, these easements help protect wildlife habitat, local culture and the classic rural landscape.

Much more has blossomed—literally—from conserving our farmland. Paul, Dennis King and Jo Barrett of King Hill Farm, Kendall and Flossie Howard of Ken Rose Farm and others who have been farming the land for years have shared their expertise, equipment and other resources to nurture a new generation of farmers. Today, ten working family farms operate on land protected by conservation easements through the Trust's Farmland Forever program. These farms produce a cornucopia of fresh, local vegetables and fruit, eggs, poultry, pork, beef, raw milk and cream and more, most of which is organically grown and raised.

Together, these farmers are stewarding the land and restoring connections that are rippling out across the peninsula. A prime example is the Blue Hill Farmer's Market, which provides a lively gathering spot, which is a rare thing in rural communities where people have few public places to mingle. Connections happen here that probably wouldn't happen anyplace else.

The Farmland Forever program is an example of how small, local land trusts can be effective vehicles for conserving precious land for everyone's benefit, contributing to healthy and sustainable communities. The people doing the work—like Paul Birdsall—intimately know and love the land they're working to conserve.

Our farmers are essential to the Peninsula's future in these days of concerns about climate change, peak oil and food security. A panel of local farmers will share their insights and experiences at "Passing it On: The Future of Farming on the Blue Hill Peninsula," on Thursday, October 14 at 6:30 p.m. at the Halcyon Grange in North Blue Hill. This special event, which is co-sponsored by the Trust and the Blue Hill Historical Society, is free and open to the public. We hope you'll join us.