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Contact:

depressoffice@dep.nyc.gov, (845) 334-7868

Watershed Agricultural Council and Nyc Dep Announce \$43 Million Stewardship Fund for Long-Term Protection of Farm and Forest Easements

Fund will ensure protection of working landscapes and water quality for decades to come

The Watershed Agricultural Council (WAC) and the New York City Department of Environmental Protection (DEP) today announced the creation of a \$43 million endowment fund for WAC that will be used to safeguard agriculture and forestry easements for many decades to come. The endowment, which was fully funded by New York City, will be used by WAC to monitor activities and inspect easements that are owned by the council now and in the future. WAC currently owns easements across 25,845 acres of farm and forest land. These easements aim to conserve working lands while also protecting the watersheds that surround New York City's water supply reservoirs in the Catskills.

Money from the fund will be used to perform aerial and ground inspections of the easements, and to safeguard their boundaries against encroachments. The stewardship fund will also be used to protect the water quality of the New York City watersheds, and to oversee any farm, timber or other projects on these working landscapes to ensure all work is performed in a manner that is protecting of water quality.

"The Council has had a significant impact on the environment and the regional economy for over 20 years," said **Craig Cashman, WAC Executive Director**.

"Each of our service areas—agriculture, forestry, conservation easements, and economic viability—are a blend of our mission with the intent to strike a balance between water quality and economic viability."

"The preservation of agricultural land is a nationwide movement for all the obvious reasons," said **Fred Huneke, WAC Director and former Chairman**, who has been with the organization since its inception and recognizes the importance of protecting working lands. "Our partnership with New York City serves the dual purpose of preserving water quality and the agricultural industry through a variety of programing including easements on agricultural lands. The addition of this stewardship funding secures WAC's future as a land trust, protects water quality, and also maintains the working landscapes and economic viability of this place we call the Watershed."

"Since it was formed by local farmers more than two decades ago, the Watershed Agricultural Council has improved infrastructure at hundreds of farms, preserved thousands of acres of working landscape in the Catskills, and its work has measurably improved water quality in New York City' reservoirs," **DEP Acting Commissioner Vincent Sapienza** said. "The key now is to preserve these improvements for many generations to come, which is why the City has

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NYC Department of Environmental Protection
Public Affairs
59-17 Junction Boulevard
19th Floor
Flushing, NY 11373
(718) 595-6600

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funded this stewardship endowment at WAC. I want to thank the board of directors and all the staff members at WAC, and the farmers who've voluntarily implemented programs on their lands to help protect the water supply for 9.5 million New Yorkers."

Richard Giles of Lucky Dog Farm in Hamden, New York, is a prime example of conservation easements improving a farm's viability. "It makes it possible for this farm to remain a part of the working landscape beyond my time here. My children and my farm crew intend to continue the operation of our organic vegetable farm, and the stewardship endowment ensures that the land will be operated to conserve the soil and the clean drinking water into the future, and that unwise development of this piece of the earth will be prevented."

"The Land Trust Alliance commends the partnership between the Watershed Agricultural Council and the New York City Department of Environmental Protection," said **Andrew Bowman, President of the Land Trust Alliance (LTA)**. "This funding announcement helps ensure that land protection efforts in the New York City watershed stand the test of time. As a member of the LTA, WAC is setting the standard for easement stewardship and effective, permanent protection of working farms and forests, wildlife habitat and critical watershed lands that provide clean drinking water to more than 9.5 million New Yorkers every day. To protect substantial public and private investments in strategic land conservation, the Alliance encourages organizations like WAC to develop the stewardship capacity and financial resources to further safeguard such interests in perpetuity. We applaud this landmark investment and hope it serves as a model for municipalities and land trusts across the country as they collaborate to protect significant natural resources for generations to come."

"New York is home to some of the most threatened farmland in America," said **David Haight, New York State Director for American Farmland Trust**. "The equivalent of 5,000 farms have been paved over across the state since the 1980s. The partnership that the City of New York and the Watershed Agricultural Council have forged will protect farmland so that New Yorkers will enjoy clean drinking water, local food and a stronger economy for generations to come."

Since its inception in 2001, WAC's Agricultural Conservation Easement Program has protected 22 percent (25,845 acres) of the 288 currently eligible farms in the watersheds that surround New York City's reservoirs in the Catskills. This accomplishment marks one of the largest private land protection efforts in New York State. Conservation easements protect land for future generations by restricting or conditioning certain rights or uses necessary to protect specific conservation values, such as water quality, while allowing for the retention of other rights and uses by a landowner (including the right to sell or transfer). As such, a conservation easement restricted property can continue to provide economic benefits for an area in the form of jobs, economic activity and property taxes. WAC's conservation easements are designed to allow for continued intensive commercial activities such as agriculture, timber harvests and bluestone quarrying, so long as those activities have a conservation plan approved by WAC.

For more information on WAC's Conservation Easement program, please call (607) 865-7790, or visit the council's website: nycwatershed.org.

The Watershed Agricultural Council protects both the rural, land-based economy of the Watershed region and its drinking water quality for over nine million New Yorkers. Working with farmers, agribusinesses, forest landowners, forest industry professionals and others, the Council works to enhance both business profitability and environmental stewardship. It also champions the use of conservation easements as an option to keep land within a working landscape context and holds over 25,000 acres of protected farmland. The Council works through partnerships with other nonprofit organizations, government agencies and community stakeholders to achieve its purpose. For more information, visit nycwatershed.org.

DEP manages New York City's water supply, providing more than one billion

gallons of high quality water each day to more than 9.5 million New Yorkers. This includes more than 70 upstate communities and institutions in Ulster, Orange, Putnam and Westchester counties who consume an average of 110 million total gallons of drinking water daily from New York City's water supply system. This water comes from the Catskill, Delaware, and Croton watersheds that extend more than 125 miles from the City, and the system comprises 19 reservoirs, three controlled lakes, and numerous tunnels and aqueducts. DEP has nearly 6,000 employees, including almost 1,000 scientists, engineers, surveyors, watershed maintainers and other professionals in the upstate watershed. In addition to its \$70 million payroll and \$157 million in annual taxes paid in upstate counties, DEP has invested more than \$1.7 billion in watershed protection programs—including partnership organizations such as the Catskill Watershed Corporation and the Watershed Agricultural Council—that support sustainable farming practices, environmentally sensitive economic development, and local economic opportunity. In addition, DEP has a robust capital program with over \$14 billion in investments planned over the next 10 years that will create up to 3,000 construction-related jobs per year. For more information, visit nyc.gov/dep, like us on [Facebook](#), or follow us on [Twitter](#).

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