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# Maine's growing: The state has the second-highest rate of new farms in the country



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[Lewiston-Auburn](#) | Saturday, November 22, 2014 at 11:28 pm

TURNER — Kate Abbruzzese wrestled bales of hay in the rain late Monday afternoon to feed her flock, head wrapped in a scarf, hood up, eager for the any-day-now that the sheep will be in their new canvas-covered hoop house and this chore will get a little easier.

Five beef cows wandered in a pen across from a dormant field of winter wheat, unfazed by the weather. Her son, Teo, a former polo player with a master's degree in agriculture, tended to the horses.

was established in 2010 when Kate and her husband, Chris, moved here from Illinois to farm.

Neighbors were initially skeptical when the couple bought the former dairy spread, especially when it looked like they were knocking down the 1799 farmhouse. They didn't; they just moved it up the hill to a better spot off Upper Street. The barn, too. Relations have been warm ever since.

"All our neighbors are seventh- and ninth-generation farmers — these are our heroes," said Chris Abbruzzese. "The community here is amazing."

So is the trend: As farms folded around the country, Maine was one of 16 states to add farms in the latest U.S. Agriculture Census.

The state has the [second-highest rate of new farmers](#) in the country: 33 percent of all farms here are 10 years old or younger. Only Alaska had more new farmers. (Two other states, Rhode Island and Hawaii, tied with Maine for the second-place distinction.)

Officials point to more interest in eating local, land that's still reasonably priced, growing markets and a state that's done agriculture well for a long time.

The reaction from established farms, frequently: Bring it on.

Bob Neal started what's now The Turkey Farm on former dairy land in New Sharon in 1980. The largest turkey farm in Maine "by a feather," he'll raise almost 2,600 birds this year. By the amount of business he turns away, Neal figures Maine could support another 12 to 18 turkey farms his size. And he'd welcome it.

"If I had a problem and needed to borrow a major piece of equipment from the turkey farmer down the road, hey, she ain't there — there isn't one," said Neal, 74. "The more we have, the more possibilities we have for that to happen.

"We're nowhere near the level of bloody competition," he said.

### **Maine farmers: More active, younger, more diverse**

The farming landscape here, according to the [2012 Ag Census](#), released earlier this year:

- \* Maine added nearly 1,000 farms in the past 10 years, from 7,196 in 2002 to 8,136 in 2007 to 8,173 in 2012. It has more farms than any other New England state.

- \* Maine had 1.45 million acres in farmland in 2012, about as much as New Hampshire, Massachusetts, Rhode Island and Connecticut combined.

- \* Our farmers are slightly younger. The average age in the U.S. of a principal farm operator is 58.3. Maine's is 57.

- \* Farmers here are more diverse: Nationally, 14 percent of all farms are headed by women. In Maine, it's 29 percent.

Since 2006, the Maine Farmland Trust's Maine Farm Link program has paired 111 would-be farmers with 13,541 acres of farmland.

Beginning Farmer Program Coordinator Erica Buswell said the level of out-of-state interest the past few years stands out.

"Every time I go through my applications, I'm like, 'Wow, there's a lot of folks who want to be here,'" she said. "I'm also frequently surprised at the number of folks who are retiring from careers and looking to get into farming as a way to get back to the land, sort of like out of the rat race."

With deep, decades-old roots in the back-to-the-land movement, Maine has earned a reputation as a good place to start. Several nonprofits partnered last year to launch a website for the Beginning Farmers Resource Network of Maine, a one-stop shop to reach 18 agencies and reams of advice, along with a ["Do You Have What It Takes?" quiz](#).

"There's a ready army of folks that are excited and wanting to assist new

farm businesses to get up and running," Buswell said.

She's seen many people take a scatter-shot approach, getting into vegetables, livestock and value-added products (for instance, wreaths, cheese or bread).

"It gives them lots of options for gaining entry into the markets," she said.

"It's also fairly common that once folks get five, 10 years into their farming careers they're sort of looking to scale back the number of things they're producing in order to be more efficient and focused. It will burn you out pretty quickly if you have to know how to do all of those things well."

In 2010, 15 people signed up for Tori Jackson's farm business management class for new farmers at the University of Maine Cooperative Extension. Last year, the same class drew 25.

Statewide in 2013, the extension worked with more than 1,000 people who said they wanted to be farmers, "which is pretty staggering," said Jackson, an associate professor of agriculture and natural resources. "Physically, economically, it's a tough business to be in. I really attribute it to the huge interest in local foods. Maine and Vermont are at the top of the list in saying 'I value local food' and then actually buying it."

That top ranking was in the [Strolling of the Heifers' 2014 Locavore Index](#).

### **Words of experience, caution**

Like any field, there are challenges.

Jackson warns new farmers that they won't see a profit for three to five years, and "that's if things are going well."

There have been so many newcomers that in some areas it's more difficult to sell their crops: Southern Maine is saturated with vegetable growers, she said. It's getting tough to get into farmers markets.

Weather can be an undeniable issue. Officials say they're seeing more farmers grow in unheated hoop houses over the winter to combat that.

Nate Drummond at Six River Farm in Bowdoinham said that's helped him even out staffing levels and helped him keep a constant presence at Brunswick farmers markets. There's no having to bank on customers finding him again come spring.

There are also expenses, rocky soil and often a major learning curve to consider.

Maine was the first state in the country to have a farming apprentice program to help with the latter. The Maine Organic Farmers and Gardeners Organization started it in 1975, according to Abby Sadauckas, educational

programs director.

"Since 2009, we've consistently seen about 300 applications come in (each year) to apprentice on a Maine farm," she said.

A more intense Journey Person program annually draws about 30 applicants.

In his [fall Turkey Times newsletter](#), Neal ticked through the slew of questions facing would-be Farmer Janes and Joes: How big do you want to be? What about financing? Lease the land or buy it? Hire employees or find apprentices? How — and where — do you sell?

"An awful lot of people who get bit by this bug have an opportunity to try it out as an apprentice for a year or two and see if they're really suited for it," Neal said. "Probably in 10 years from now, a lot more of those start-up farms will exist because these young and not-so-young people got into it with a fair bit of experience under their belts. They knew they weren't going to make their first million for at least a couple of years."

### **Lots of help along the way**

On Thursday, the publicly funded Maine Farms for the Future program awarded \$6,000 grants to eight farms to draw up a business plan before venturing into new markets or looking to expand.

Since 2001, it's helped nearly 230 farms.

"It's helped folks make really good, strategic decisions," said Stephanie Gilbert, farm viability and farmland protection specialist at the Maine Department of Agriculture.

Five of the most recent farms were 10 years old or younger.

Should they need an outside perspective, there are voices of experience all over the state.

Founded in 1799, Weston's Farm & Markets in Fryeburg is the second-oldest farm in Maine.

"I had no idea I'd ever be raising vegetables," said George Weston, 73. "My ancestors were cattle dealers. Right after the Civil War, they had cattle drives from here to Boston to the stockyards. With the demise of so many dairy farms in this area, if we were going to stay in agriculture, we needed to find something else to do."

The farm today has a retail market. It sells Christmas trees in the winter, maple syrup in the spring and vegetables in the summer and fall.

"A lot of people now like to know exactly where their food comes from," Weston said. "There's a definite demand for locally grown produce."

His 103-year-old mother frequently talks with him about life on the farm during the Great Depression. He's seen interest rates spike and the economy tank in the 1980s, and then tough times again with the Great Recession.

His father told him he didn't have to be a farmer. He told his son, John, the same thing.

He's been happy he chose the life. He's happy others are joining in.

"You go to a farm meeting and you look around the room at the average age and it scares you sometimes," Weston said. "A lot of us are old, gray-haired guys. When you see a few young, new faces, that's wonderful. Wonderful."

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