

Ath-Mor Farm: Land, Water and a Vision



Megan Latour
The Nature Conservancy
February 06, 2013

Green pastures that roll between Lee Hook Road and the Lamprey River. If you didn't know better, you'd swear the scene was circa 1862 – the lush grass, the old farmhouse, the scenic vista to the floodplain and river. Aside from the addition of a few barns and modern dairy equipment, it's likely little has changed in the 150 years since. And now, thanks to the efforts of The Nature Conservancy as lead agent for the Great Bay Resource Protection Partnership, the Society for the Protection of New Hampshire Forests, Lamprey Rivers Advisory Committee, the Town of Lee and a farming family with deep local roots and a vision for sustainability, little – if anything – will change over the next 150 years and beyond.

For 15 years, Russ Atherton and Tom Morrell owned and operated Ath-Mor Holsteins in Lee. Named after both families, the dairy operation's top-notch pedigree cows, milk quality and production have garnered national regard and numerous awards. The 93-acre farm includes highly productive agricultural soils, a picturesque vista and 1,500 feet of frontage on the federally designated wild and scenic Lamprey River. That frontage boasts a floodplain system that includes a silver maple floodplain forest on a section of the river well-known for its excellent paddling. In addition to abutting the protected Brady Farm to the north and hundreds of acres of protected lands along Follett's Brook to the south, the Ath-Mor lands are also one parcel away from UNH's Organic Dairy Farm. Agriculture is at the heart of the land.

Dairy farming in New Hampshire was at a time one of the state's top industries. Nowadays, fewer and fewer farms remain, especially in the seacoast. So when the owners prepared for retirement and Ath-Mor Farm went on the market, Nathan Merrill of Stuart Farm in Stratham saw a once in a lifetime opportunity to expand his herd and grow the family business.

The Stuart Farm, comprised of 270 acres, has been a seacoast mainstay for over 50 years. In addition to running a successful dairy operation, the Merrills are active with UNH to promote environmental and agricultural education programs. They also take the long view when it comes to the land they love. "My grandfather and his brother moved to Stratham and started Stuart Farm in 1961 after their family dairy and poultry farm in Littleton, Massachusetts was taken by eminent domain for construction of Interstate 495," says Nathan. "The loss and destruction of land stewarded so carefully by generations left an indelible mark on the Stuart families. Their experience contributed to their willingness to permanently conserve the Stratham farm in the infancy of the land conservation movement. Agricultural Preservation Restrictions were sold to the State of New Hampshire in 1980. We care deeply about the future of open land and protecting it for future generations. When the opportunity arose this summer to purchase another local dairy farm and see it permanently protected in the process, we quickly determined it was the right thing to do."

To make their dream a reality, the Merrills enlisted the Great Bay Resource Protection Partnership and Lamprey River Advisory Committee to help in the protection of Ath-Mor Farm.

The Nature Conservancy the Society for the Protection of New Hampshire Forests, and the Merrill family designed a conservation easement for the farm that incorporates water resource buffers and a farm management plan that balances the ecological protection of the property with the economic uses for the farm. Great Bay Partner the Society for the Protection of New Hampshire Forests is the easement holder with the Town of Lee having a back-up interest in the easement. Along with Lee's financial contribution, the Lamprey Rivers Advisory Committee provided substantial much-needed funding for the project, allowing the Merrills to take ownership of the 93-acre parcel by the end of 2012. The outcomes benefit everyone - people and nature alike. The land's continued use as an active dairy operation is safeguarded. The water quality and habitat values of this stretch of the Lamprey River are protected, providing a host of recreational opportunities for paddlers, fishermen, swimmers, naturalists and more. Further, the rolling green fields maintain their agricultural heritage and will never become a housing development.

“The future of this particular farm in Lee is protected thanks to the community's commitment to conservation of agricultural resources for future generations,” remarks Nathan. “Voting for these initiatives is critical, as well as private donations to groups like The Nature Conservancy, Society for the Protection of New Hampshire Forests, and local land trusts such as Southeast Land Trust of New Hampshire. If funding and support weren't available immediately, we would not have been able to buy this farm. The farm could have ultimately been developed. We appreciate the fact that several sources of funding were available that could be combined to make the easement sale possible in a reasonable timeframe.”

Nathan and his family aren't the only ones excited about the farm's protection and continued use as a dairy operation. “The people of Lee are so excited,” notes Nathan. “They are encouraged to see that part of town continue to thrive as active farmland.” He hopes the community will use that excitement to continue supporting similar projects, and urges everyone to consider doing so. “Despite tough economic times, continued support is absolutely vital to efforts just like this one. I hope that others will use their voice, their vote and their generosity to ensure the lands they love are always there for everyone to enjoy and for the security of our future food supply.”

<http://www.nature.org/ourinitiatives/regions/northamerica/unitedstates/newhampshire/explore/ath-mor-farm-land-water-and-a-vision.xml>