

Farm Bill Conservation Field Tour

By Shari Cohen



On November 7, 2011, the NH Fish and Game Department hosted a **Farm Bill Field Tour** attended by the NH Commissioner of Agriculture, representatives of the four U.S. congressional offices, the NRCS, the Farm Services Agency, NH Fish & Game, UNH Cooperative Extension, Great Bay Partnership, The Forest Society, The Nature Conservancy, Great Bay Estuarine Research Reserve, and some NH County Conservation Districts. The group toured four sites, representative of NRCS programs and partnerships, near Durham, NH.

The Forest Society's Hills Tract in Durham, NH, owned by The Society for the Protection of New Hampshire Forests (SPNHF) and abutting a NH Fish & Game property, was the first stop on the tour. This site is part of a larger New England Cottontail (NEC) initiative designed to recover the NEC population throughout its historic range. The NEC is a candidate for listing under the Federal Endangered Species act. If the NEC population continues to decline as it has over the last forty years, new federal regulations could prove costly to agricultural producers. NRCS will provide financial assistance through an agreement with the NH Association of Conservation Districts to revert the area to dense thickets which are NEC's required habitat. Part of the plan includes controlling invasive plants, removing low quality pasture pine and planting native dogwoods.



Emery Farm, Durham, NH

Emery Farm, Durham, NH. In 1655, The King of England granted this land, one of the oldest farms in the United States, to Joseph Smith. Owned by the Hills family, and protected forever by the NRCS Farm and Ranch Lands Protection Program (FRPP), the easement is held by the Society for the Protection of New Hampshire Forests (SPNHF). The farm provides local produce to the seacoast area and is a favorite fall stop for families during harvest. Mr. Hills gave a tour of his farm and explained the importance of local food production, conservation, and history. The Town of Durham has recognized The Emery Farm in its Master Plan as a critical conservation priority.



Rick Ellsmore, STC, chats with NH's legislative representatives

Tuckaway Farm, Lee, NH. The tour stopped here for a locally harvested lunch and to look at several of the innovative techniques the Cox family uses on their farm to improve yields and soil quality. A member of the Northeast Organic Farmers Association (NOFA), Dorn Cox, owner of Tuckaway farm, and winner of the 2007 NH Farm Bureau's Young Farmers Achievement Award, introduced the chef from Blue Moon Evolution in Exeter, NH and described the simple, but exquisite menu



Signs on the door of Tuckaway Farm

made entirely of seasonal local ingredients, produce, meats, and breads baked from local grain. The spinach in the salad was grown in Tuckaway's High Tunnel (built with NRCS financial assistance) and picked the night before – one week after a major snow storm hit the region. He explained that the spinach's sweeter flavor is due to a slightly higher sugar content that results from growing in a colder climate. He will grow winter greens through January and start again in March.

After scraping their plates into the appropriate buckets (mulch, animal feed ,etc.), the group piled into a large, flat wagon, pulled by two draft horses driven by Dorn's father for a ride around the 11-

generation family farm. Dorn and his Dad took turns describing no-till and low-till equipment used to return carbon to the soil, while harvesting grain and seed crops for animal feed and biodiesel production. They also lease small field plots where members of the community can garden. In general, the site produced some interesting conversation among the group about innovative farming approaches and the future of New England farming.



Dorn Cox speaking to the group before the tour

Old Mill Properties, Lee, NH. At the last stop on the tour, Don Keirstead (*NRCS Ecologist*) spoke to the significance of protecting a key aquifer which provides UNH and the surrounding towns much of their water as well as several thousand feet of riparian habitat on the Oyster River. NRCS reached out to four private landowners to sell conservation easements with assistance from the NRCS Wetlands Reserve Program (WRP) and, in turn, helped the Town of Lee develop a conservation area where people enjoy bird watching and walking. Additionally, 40 acres of abandoned gravel pits were restored to their natural state. This project serves as an excellent example of people in the community working together with federal programs to protect water quality and declining wildlife, while preserving open space for beauty and recreation.



Restored swamp at Old Mill Properties