

Watershed Agricultural Council

**STRATEGIC PLAN
2011–2014**

**PREPARED WITH ASSISTANCE FROM
NEW YORK COUNCIL OF NONPROFITS
272 BROADWAY, ALBANY, NEW YORK
518-434-9194 • WWW.NYCON.ORG**



INTRODUCTION

The Watershed Agricultural Council (WAC) completed its first comprehensive strategic planning process in 2004. In the years since that plan was completed, WAC programs have grown and become more complex to administer, leading the Council to seek more intensive assistance with reviewing its internal decision making processes and structure in 2009. The latter assessment resulted in significant restructuring of the board/staff working relationship and reallocation of decision making authority throughout the organization. These adjustments, in turn, were followed by a change in executive leadership in 2010. In an effort to assist with the ongoing implementation of the restructuring recommendations and to help provide direction for new leadership, WAC sought assistance with development of an updated strategic plan as well as executive and board coaching in early 2010, selecting the New York Council of Nonprofits (NYCON) to help facilitate both the planning and coaching processes.

Guided by the WAC Council's executive committee, the strategic planning process utilized a standard planning model: reviewing the mission, vision and values statements developed during the 2004 planning process, engaging a full complement of stakeholders in assessing the current operating environment, and then identifying key goals and related strategies based on the environmental assessment. The primary methods for soliciting stakeholder input throughout the process included facilitation of a full board of directors retreat, a full staff retreat, a meeting of WAC's Advisory Committee, meetings with WAC's executive board and staff leadership group, and a survey distributed to a random sample of 200 farmer participants as well as 430 individuals on WAC's email list.

The following document summarizes the key themes and recommendations generated through the planning process and presents the specific vision, goals, and strategies that comprise the WAC's strategic plan for the next five years. WAC will use the framework provided by the plan to develop annual work plans that more specifically guide both staff and board efforts going forward.

MISSION, VISION, AND VALUES

Given both current and anticipated future contractual requirements, WAC's primary focus for the next several years is to sustain and strengthen current programs and services while expanding emphasis on promotion of economic viability of the agriculture and forestry in the watershed region. Toward that end, the board of directors recommended modifications to the mission, values, and vision statements developed through the 2004 planning process. These modifications strengthen the emphasis contained in all three statements on the attention placed on promoting and enhancing economic viability.

MISSION STATEMENT

WAC'S CURRENT MISSION STATEMENT:

To support the economic viability of agriculture and forestry through the protection of water quality and the promotion of land conservation.

REVISED MISSION STATEMENT:

To promote the economic viability of agriculture and forestry, the protection of water quality, and the conservation of working landscapes through strong local leadership and sustainable public-private partnerships.

VALUES STATEMENT

REVISED VALUES STATEMENT (ADDITION NOTED IN ITALICS):

- WAC balances the economic viability of agriculture and forestry with protecting water quality.
- WAC advocates for natural resource conservation within the context of the working landscape.
- WAC promotes comprehensive natural resource planning and best management practices.
- WAC promotes the development of partnerships that serve to enhance its mission.
- WAC strives to serve its clients well.
- *WAC actively promotes the economic viability and growth/development of agriculture and forestry.*





VISION

REVISED VISION STATEMENT (ADDITION NOTED IN ITALICS):

The Watershed Agricultural Council will be a leader in conserving the agricultural and forestry landscape in the New York City Watershed region by promoting:

- Agriculture and forestry as viable economic lifestyles in the watershed;
- Efforts that protect water quality;
- Implementation of management plans throughout the wide geography of the watershed on farms and forests of all sizes and types;
- Utilization of a science-based approach to the application of Best Management Practices;
- Land conservation through procurement and stewardship of agricultural and forestry easements;
- Long-term financial stability for the organization;
- Continued organizational and programmatic flexibility;
- Responding to new needs as they arise; and
- *Cultivating positive cooperative relationships with stakeholders and partners.*

CURRENT OPERATING ENVIRONMENT

(Note: In the following section, the order in which bulleted points are listed is not intended to suggest their relative priority.)

ACHIEVEMENTS SINCE 2004 STRATEGIC PLAN

Over the past several years, WAC made significant progress toward achieving the goals articulated in the 2004 Strategic Plan. The primary accomplishments have served to strengthen overall service delivery, diversify funding, improve working relationships with partners, and streamline internal operating systems:

- WAC has maintained its strong programmatic emphasis on implementing agricultural and forestry Best Management Practices (BMPs). With 96% of the large farms in the watershed now participating in the Watershed Agricultural Program (WAP), WAC has well surpassed its original goals. The Farm to Market, Forestry, and Easement programs also have experienced continued growth.
- In 2008, WAP developed a BMP repair and replacement strategy as hundreds of initial BMPs began to meet or exceed their lifespan. A new method for prioritizing approval and implementation of BMPs has also been developed now that WAC has achieved its initial goals for “Substantial Implementation” of Whole Farm Plans (WFPs).
- In accordance with both the 2004 strategic plan and 2009 Development Services Association (DSA) recommendations, the whole farm planning (WFP) process has been significantly streamlined.
- Funding streams are more diversified and \$600,000 has been reserved in an endowment to support long term easement stewardship.
- WAC has engaged a broader range of constituents, particularly through the expanded partnership development of the Farm to Market initiative.
- The most recent contract renewals with subcontractors included more clearly defined expectations and role boundaries, resulting in improved relationships over the past year.
- Inter-program collaboration and coordination has increased significantly since 2004 and should be further enhanced through use of the consolidated data base currently under development.
- The data base also offers potential to serve as a valuable research tool once fully implemented.
- Annual work plans have been used for program planning and monitoring purposes for the past three years.





INTERNAL STRENGTHS

WAC's operations are built on a firm foundation that includes:

- Stable, adequate funding that supports WAC's ability to achieve its mission and underwrites adequate supplies and up-to-date technology for job implementation;
- Knowledgeable, professional staff with a shared belief system and ethics who enjoy their work and care about their constituents;
- A good work environment supported by the leadership of the Executive Director;
- Diverse programs and services that are flexible and adaptable to the unique needs of WAC customers;
- Strong local leadership and volunteer support;
- The positive contribution WAC makes to the local economy;
- Strong relationships with partners, including collaborations that can generate additional support; and
- National recognition as a unique model program.

INTERNAL CHALLENGES

WAC continues to address many of the same challenges identified during the 2004 planning process as new ones emerge with continued program growth:

- The total proportion of WAC's budget funded by government grants remains the same as in 2004 with a decrease in DEP funding for the forestry program balanced by an increase in federal funding. Service provision is therefore largely defined and, to some extent, limited by contractual obligations to governmental funders.
- Efforts to increase discretionary funding have encountered significant obstacles. The board lacks members with fund development experience or expertise and it is difficult to make a case for needed support given the size of the current funding base.
- Continued DEP support at current funding levels is not assured given both current economic pressures and the lack of certainty about how long New York City can continue to avoid water filtration.
- The continued growth of the easement program is presenting considerable challenges as WAC, DEP, and local stakeholders seek to implement increasingly complex policies and procedures related to easement acquisition.
- WAC's well received programs focused on enhancing regional economic viability lack sufficient resources to have a major impact.
- WAC's partnering organizations all have different goals, operating structures, and regulatory policies. Although relationships with subcontractors have been strengthened considerably since 2004, some tensions

continue to exist related to the necessity of adhering to subcontractors' standards for project implementation.

- Regulatory and funding requirements for WAC's diverse programs continue to create programmatic "silos" that make it difficult to establish a unified WAC identity. The complexity of the full array of WAC's programs and services is potentially confusing to landowners and there is some brand and mission confusion with other organizations addressing both environmental and economic development issues in the watershed region. WAC still needs to develop a marketing plan that increases understanding, visibility and support for its programs and services.
- Several staff and board members serve on an array of federal, state, and local advisory committees, but WAC has not developed a unified approach to advocacy efforts and, to date, has not developed official positions on issues that potentially affect its ability to achieve its mission. The potential benefits and risks of assuming a more visible advocacy role differ for each WAC program.
- Although WAC still offers considerable potential to serve as a laboratory for others' research initiatives, there is no longer designated funding for research in the WAC budget. Little staff time or expertise is available to devote to research activities.
- Efforts to strengthen the governance structure are an ongoing "work in progress." Board committees are currently challenged to redefine their role and focus given the recent increase in decision making responsibility delegated to staff in accordance with the 2009 DSA report recommendations.
- Recruitment of new board members is difficult given the time demands associated with board membership. Efforts are underway to recruit members with a broader range of skills and experience.
- There is insufficient office space to adequately house current staff or allow for additional program growth.

EXTERNAL OPPORTUNITIES

Ongoing economic and demographic changes in the watershed region offer several potential opportunities for deepening and expanding WAC's role:

- The anticipated economic recovery is expected to result in population growth in the watershed region, fueled by developers currently purchasing low cost land. Local farmers and foresters should be positioned to tap expanding local markets as well as to establish connections to NYC markets. Whole farm plans and forestry management plans potentially could be expanded to include economic viability planning.
- Expanding WAC's educational efforts beyond its traditional constituencies potentially could help build a market for watershed products and





create broader understanding of and support for WAC's role in sustaining both economic viability and environmental protection in the watershed region.

- In counterpoint, increased development pressure will also heighten interest in WAC's role in preserving open space and protecting existing farmland. Development pressure is expected to be highest in the East of Hudson areas of the watershed.
- Forest owners in the watershed have not been involved to the same extent as the agricultural community. Increased attention could be devoted to engaging owners in preparing forest management plans and exploring revenue generation opportunities.
- There may be a role for WAC in the development of alternative energy sources. Helping to develop markets for hay pellets and local biomass fuels could support both conservation and economic viability goals.
- A myriad of policy issues related to federal regulations, taxation, etc. currently limit efforts to support sustainable agriculture and forestry. Advocacy efforts can be strengthened by WAC working with partners to promote a unified agenda.

EXTERNAL THREATS

Several economic and regulatory challenges present potential immediate and long range barriers to WAC's ability to achieve its mission:

- The economic viability of the region as a whole is threatened by diminished returns from agriculture, the lack of a diverse commercial base, and a declining tax base. Since WAC's inception nearly 20 years ago, the number of large commercial dairy farms has declined, average farm size has decreased, and the number of animals on active farms has decreased.
- Property taxes are increasing as the tax base declines, thereby increasing the cost of housing and limiting the ability of the region to attract a qualified labor pool.
- Federal milk marketing rules present considerable challenges to attempts to expand markets for local dairy products.
- A stricter regulatory environment and evolving practice standards are increasing the cost of implementing BMPs as well as operating farms.
- As yet unidentified contaminants may still eventually necessitate NYC water filtration.

GOALS AND STRATEGIES

Based on the assessment of the current operating environment, WAC's strategic plan for the next five years will focus on four primary strategic issues:

- Program growth and development,
- Marketing and stakeholder relationships,
- Advocacy and education, and
- Board governance.

The specific goals and strategies related to each of these focus areas are outlined below.

STRATEGIC ISSUE: PROGRAM GROWTH AND DEVELOPMENT

GOAL:

Increase WAC's role in enhancing the economic viability of agriculture and forestry in the watershed region.

STRATEGIES:

- Convene regional partners and stakeholders in a collaborative planning process to develop a unified plan for economic development that includes farm and forestry products.
- Define WAC's unique role in economic development.
- Seek funding to support WAC's newly defined economic development role.

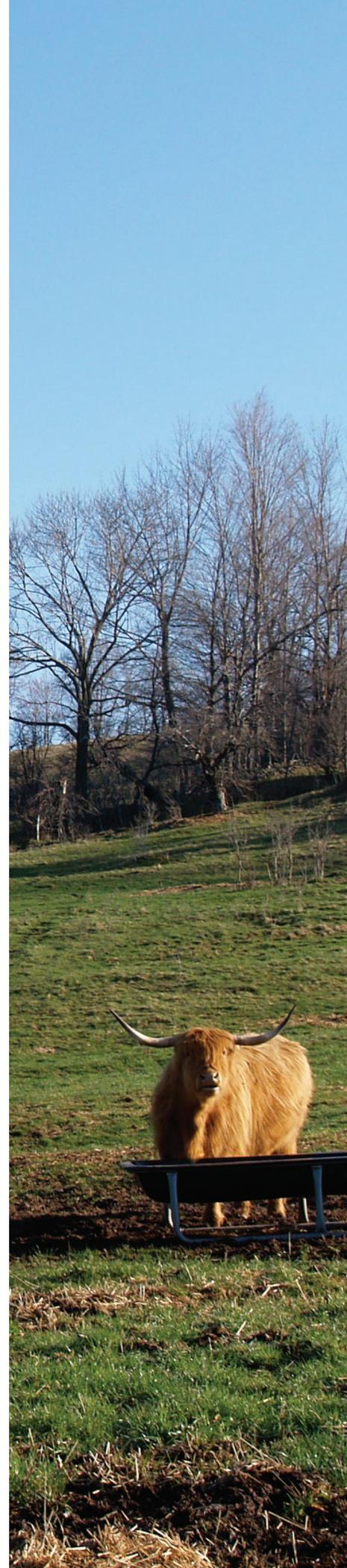
STRATEGIC ISSUE: MARKETING AND STAKEHOLDER RELATIONSHIPS

GOAL:

Expand and strengthen relationships with key partners and stakeholders.

STRATEGIES:

- Increase presence throughout the watershed around issues critical to WAC's agenda and program operations.
- Continue to strengthen mechanisms that support positive relationships with current program participants.
- Develop a marketing plan that promotes:
 - ◆ WAC as a unified organization,
 - ◆ WAC's role in supporting both the economic viability and environmental protection in the watershed,
 - ◆ The benefit of WAC programs to the community-at-large.
- Use the Board of Directors to assist with re-engaging original stakeholders' support for WAC goals.





STRATEGIC ISSUE: ADVOCACY AND EDUCATION

GOAL:

Build on WAC's knowledge, experience, and partnerships to influence policy and practices.

STRATEGY:

- Build board capacity to conduct advocacy activities.

STRATEGIC ISSUE: BOARD GOVERNANCE

GOAL:

Continue to develop and engage a Board of Directors that supports an evolving, innovative, and effective organization.

STRATEGIES:

- Diversify the Council Directors membership.
- Plan for Council leadership succession.
- Strengthen Council understanding of both governance and operational roles of nonprofit boards of directors.
- Continue to implement DSA recommendations.

A special thank you to the Council of Directors, Committee members, the Advisory group, staff and interested parties for their input. We realize this is an ongoing process and welcome additional feedback and direction from our partners, constituents, participants and communities both in the watersheds and at the tap.

2011 COUNCIL OF DIRECTORS

Dave Cammer, Vice-chairman, Retired dairy farmer/maple syrup producer,
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Abby Wilson

Marianne Kiraly

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