



# Rural Futures



NYS Legislative Commission on Rural Resources

## Thoughts From the Chair

Rural New York, like all of rural America, is facing a lot of challenges. A volatile agricultural economy, threats to the rural workforce, and reductions in tourism and international trade are all important factors, and ones we at the state level cannot meaningfully change. But we are doing what we can in other areas, like broadband access, school funding, and housing. ConnectAll, the State's broadband connectivity program, has awarded nearly \$400 million to enhance access in nearly 54,000 locations around the state. This year's state budget provided an across-the-board increase in Foundation Aid to school districts, even those where student populations have declined. And we funded popular programs for rural housing construction and renovation and to replace mobile and manufactured homes that had fallen into disrepair.

One area of particular focus at the state level has been rural health care delivery. Over the summer I had the opportunity to speak at the White Coat ceremony for students graduating from LeMoyne College's Physician Assistants program. Six of the new PAs had earned an additional credential through the Le Moyne Education and Rural Behavioral Health Network (LEARN). This meant they had done rotations in family medicine, pediatrics, and internal medicine in rural primary care settings. They told me how impactful the experience had been, serving communities that may endure long waits for care and long distances to the nearest emergency room. They were truly excited to have been able to get the specialized preparation to serve the kinds of communities most of them came from.

In 2024 I was able to pass a bill making it easier for doctors to supervise physician assistants, which, in turn, will free up more PAs to serve in underserved communities. This past year Governor Hochul signed a similar bill that I sponsored for dental hygienists (S.3157). Dental care is particularly scarce in rural areas, and we hope that this change will make it easier for rural residents to be seen by a dental hygienist. Recently we also changed the way insurance payments reach emergency medical service providers to improve reimbursements, and this year both houses passed my bill (S.1515) making it easier for local governments to fund EMS.

It is hard to predict what the coming year will bring, but please know the Legislative Commission on Rural Resources is working hard to find ways to make the state government as responsive as possible to rural concerns.



Senator Rachel May  
Chair, Legislative Commission on Rural Resources

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## Winter 2026 Rural Futures

### NEWS OF INTEREST ABOUT RURAL NEW YORK STATE

A publication of the NYS Legislative Commission on Rural Resources

The NYS Legislative Commission on Rural Resources is a joint bipartisan commission of the State Legislature with a mission to promote the viability of rural communities.



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## Co-Chair's Corner

This year, I was grateful for the opportunity to serve as co-chair of the Legislative Commission on Rural Resources. The work of the Commission is designed to support and amplify the essential role our rural resources and regions play in the environmental, economic, and social well-being of New York State. Rural areas are often spoken about primarily in terms of agriculture, yet the resources they provide are far broader. They include the soil ecosystems that store carbon, the watersheds that supply drinking water and support tourism, the forests and open spaces that anchor biodiversity, and the land that supports food production and renewable energy generation.

Rural resources also include the systems that sustain community life. Access to healthcare, education, childcare, housing, transportation, and broadband operates differently in low density regions than in more urban areas. Distances are greater, providers are fewer, and the economies of scale that shape urban service delivery do not apply. Designing systems that reflect these realities supports rural communities and the expertise they contribute to the state. Tailored investment ensures that families, workers, and small businesses can rely on services that are effective and accessible.

In the Legislature, I have advanced initiatives that strengthen these foundations, including expanding access to reimbursement for medical services in rural areas, with a focus on sustaining emergency medical services that face unique staffing and distance challenges. I have worked to ensure both the statutory right and physical viability of community broadband, and supported investments in soil health, carbon sequestration, sustainable agriculture, and agrivoltaics so that renewable energy generation and agricultural production can coexist. I have also prioritized efforts to protect freshwater quality through legislation that improves monitoring transparency and watershed stewardship.

A central responsibility of the Commission is building shared understanding across regions. Statewide policy depends on collaboration between urban and rural members, who often face parallel challenges in water purification, emergency response, and land management. Highlighting these shared interests strengthens coalitions for legislative and budget priorities.

Over the past year, I have met with agricultural producers, conservation leaders, health professionals, educators, local officials, and community members throughout the state. These conversations deepen my understanding of the realities and innovations in rural New York and guide my work in Albany.

Rural New York contributes immeasurably to the state's stability and quality of life. I look forward to continuing the Commission's work to ensure that these resources are supported and recognized for the essential role they play in our future.



Assemblymember Anna Kelles  
Co-Chair, Legislative Commission on Rural Resources

## LCRR Updates: 2025

*By Rural Resources Staff*

As a new legislative term started in January of 2025, we were enthusiastic to have Assemblywoman Anna Kelles named co-chair of the Commission. We've always admired her passion, leadership, and advocacy, and we know that she has the interests of rural communities at heart.

We wasted little time getting started during our busiest year yet, crafting the Farm Equipment Fair Repair Act (S.5771/A.6601A), sponsored by both Senator May and Assemblywoman Kelles. The legislation would require the manufacturers of farm equipment to make documents, parts, and tools available to independent repair providers and equipment owners for the purposes of diagnosis, maintenance, and repair. Our goal was to empower farmers with the right to repair their own equipment, as they have historically done, saving them both time and money. That bill will be a priority for us moving into 2026.

In March we held our third annual Rural Resources Fair here in Albany. This year we expanded to hosting almost forty rural groups from around the state. Our guest of honor was Rocky, a miniature horse, who came to us from Heritage Farm in Bouckville. We also worked with ConnectAll to facilitate a breakout session on rural broadband, specifically focusing on municipal broadband projects. The 2026 fair is slated for March 25 in the Well of the Legislative Office Building in Albany. Preparations are already underway!

When the State Budget passed, we once again published our rural summary that highlights relevant legislation and spending. As always, that is available on our website, and it's now become an annual publication that gets more robust with each edition.

Right around that time we were hearing in meetings how difficult it was for local governments to staff positions, particularly for specialized roles. It was hard for them to get the word out, and, as an applicant, searching individual town, village, or county websites gets very time-consuming. In response, we drafted legislation (S.7237A/A.8023A) that would allow municipalities to post open positions on the State Jobs Website. We are proud to say that the bill passed both chambers unanimously and was signed by Governor Hochul in December.

At the end of April, Steve Gamache, our deputy director, had the privilege of presenting at the Democratic Rural Conference in Albany. He discussed the history of the Commission, recent legislative and budget pushes, and our priorities for rural New York moving forward in the current political landscape. Other speakers included NYS Senator Pat Fahy, Assemblywoman Carrie Woerner, Assemblyman John McDonald, Congressman Paul Tonko, and Governor Hochul.

In May the Senate Committee on Environmental Conservation hosted a hearing on harmful algal blooms, or HABs, in New York State. A wide range of witnesses from agriculture, environmental issues, and local governments offered testimony. We compiled a report summarizing the testimony along with policy proposals coming out of the hearing, and there is a brief summary of that report later in this issue. The document in its entirety is available on our website as well.

When the legislative session wrapped in June, we made it a priority to travel around the state, as we always do in the second half of the year. A non-exhaustive list of events that we attended includes: the New York Fashion Innovation Center's Annual Meeting at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute; the grand opening of Cayuga Milk Ingredients' expansion project; the Rural Schools Association's Summer Conference in Lake Placid, where Rural Resources Executive Director Corey Mosher received the Leader of the Year Award; the Adirondack North Country Association's Annual Meeting in North Creek; the Rural Summit for Cradle

## LCRR Updates: 2025 Continued

to Career Success in Syracuse, hosted by the Rural Schools Association and the NYS Community Schools Thruway Coalition; the NYS Association for Rural Health Summit in Geneva, where our chairs, Senator May and Assemblywoman Kelles, sat on a legislative panel; and a Farm Bureau Tour of Rensselaer County. We logged a lot of miles, but there are still parts of the state we'd love to get to next year, including Western New York and the Southern Tier.

As we move into 2026, we are going to stay focused on amplifying the needs of rural New York here in the Legislature and communicating the progress of the policies that we are fighting for. We will continue to build out coalitions among different regions and sectors, even finding common ground with urban and downstate causes. We're determined to get our bills passed to ensure the right to repair for farmers and streamline the hiring process for our local governments. We will maintain our dedication to food security and SNAP, work to provide telehealth services in our rural schools, and look for new ways to expand and support the community schools model. We feel like we have a lot of momentum right now, and we are carrying that with us into a new year!



Senator May and Rocky at the Rural Resources Fair

## Grants

### John May Farm Safety Fund (JMFSF)

The John May Farm Safety Fund provides up to \$5,000 in matching financial assistance to small and mid-sized farm operations in New York State for repairs and upgrades that make for a safer workplace. Past projects include updating electrical wiring, adding slip-resistant surfaces, upgrading animal handling equipment, and fixing silo ladders. A free, non-regulatory, and confidential safety walkthrough of the farm will be conducted by a NYCAMH safety specialist for all eligible applications as part of the approval process. Once notified of the approval and estimated award amount, the farmer starts the project, with the understanding that the actual award payment is made upon completion of the project. Awards will not exceed 50% of the estimated total cost of the project, with a maximum award amount of \$5,000. Applications are accepted year-round.

Contact: 800.343.7527 or [jmfsf@bassett.org](mailto:jmfsf@bassett.org).

Visit: [www.nycamh.org/johnmayfund](http://www.nycamh.org/johnmayfund) to learn more.

### USDA Rural Development Water & Waste Disposal Loan & Grant Program

This program provides long-term, low-interest loans for clean and reliable drinking water systems, sanitary sewage disposal, sanitary solid waste disposal, and storm water draining to households and businesses in eligible rural areas. Rural areas and towns with populations of 10,000 or less, private nonprofits, and federally-recognized tribes may be eligible. Loans with up to a 40-year payback period are offered, and, if funds are available, a grant may be combined with a loan to keep user costs reasonable. The application period is rolling.

Contact: [brenda.smith@ny.usda.gov](mailto:brenda.smith@ny.usda.gov)

<https://www.rd.usda.gov/programs-services/water-environmental-programs/water-waste-disposal-loan-grant-program-29#overview>

### Looking for grants but don't know where to start?

Try the NYS Grants Gateway website:

<https://grantsmanagement.ny.gov/>

In a few minutes you can register your organization in the Statewide Funding System (SFS), search for funding in SFA, and get prequalified for NYS Grants.

Nonprofits who wish to apply for Bid Events must first get prequalified using the SFS. Once registered, an organization can apply for grants, manage contracts, and request payments. The website also provides links to live webinars, documents and materials, and instructional videos.

# Harmful Algal Blooms in New York State: A Summary

By Steve Gamache, Deputy Director, Legislative Commission on Rural Resources

Harmful algal blooms, or HABs, form in freshwater bodies when blue-green algae multiply rapidly, discoloring water and forming scums. This process is amplified by warmer temperatures, sunlight, high nutrient levels, and calm waters. These blooms threaten public health, aquatic life, and local economies. In an effort to more effectively mitigate HABs, the Senate Standing Committee on Environmental Conservation held a hearing in May 2025 where various stakeholders from agriculture, local governments, academia, and non-governmental organizations offered testimony about the state of HABs in New York and what additional actions are needed to combat bloom formation. The full hearing can be viewed here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kYe1J23-iEc>.

After the hearing, the Commission on Rural Resources compiled a report summarizing the findings and policy recommendations based on witness testimony. What follows is a brief description of the report's main points.

## Findings

In New York State, HABs have become an increasingly widespread phenomenon, particularly over the past decade. While New York has focused on monitoring more than in the past, which could account for some of the greater perceived scope and frequency, the consensus across panels was that warmer temperatures and greater rainfall as a result of climate change have caused the proliferation of HABs. Additionally, other contributors to HAB formation were nitrogen and phosphorous runoff from agricultural land, residential fertilizer usage, wastewater, and failing septic systems.

New York State and several of its agencies are focused on monitoring and preventing HABs. For example, the Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC) has invested over \$500 million since 2018 in water quality improvements. They also oversee a public reporting system, NYHABS, which has helped to record HAB formation in 650 water bodies since 2012. For its part, the Department of Agriculture & Markets (DAM) runs numerous programs such as Agricultural Environmental Management, Agricultural Nonpoint Source Abatement, and Climate Resilient Farming to reduce nutrient runoff in an effort to curb HABs. Over the last five years the State has provided these programs with \$125 million towards these ends. Still, due to the breadth of the issue and the amount of freshwater across the state, each panel suggested that funding limitations were a challenge and that more would need to be invested to fully address the threat.

## Policy Recommendations and Interventions

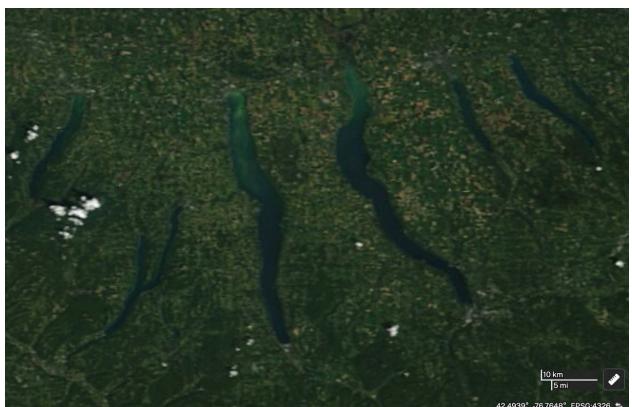
Since each harmful algal bloom is unique, one solution offered throughout the hearing was more monitoring, forecasting, and research, particularly done locally. Investments in technology that can read water conditions in real-time would also lead to quicker responses. Several advocates expressed support for existing legislation, such as Senator May's HABMAP Bill (S.1833), which would require State agencies to coordinate responses

based on data that is collected, establish a public website acting as a HABs clearinghouse, direct DEC to create regulations using all levels of government to formulate a unified response, and create a grant program for municipal and intermunicipal organizations to combat HABs.

Panelists identified that there may be additional ways to treat HABs—methods that are not currently practiced in New York. Alum and peroxide-based treatments are two potential tools. As of the hearing, DEC was studying alum, and Senator Harckham has a bill, S.5936A, which would create a permit that would allow it to be used to treat HABs. DEC has been reluctant to support either solution due to possible unintended ecological consequences.

Witnesses also suggested some ways that State agencies could be better partners: by streamlining permitting processes, hiring more staff, allocating more money, updating local watershed rules and regulations, and strengthening communication between agencies. As far as allocations, while New York has spent \$6 billion for clean water infrastructure since 2017, its infrastructure remains outdated and in need of repairs and upgrades. Significant investments for stormwater and septic infrastructure would curtail the proliferation of HABs. Furthermore, current programs run by DAM would need more funding to adopt Best Management Practices, or BMPs, in a more universal way whereas programs like Agricultural Environmental Management are voluntary.

As we begin a new legislative session in 2026, protecting our most vital natural resource, water, will remain a core focus of our Commission, and we will be evaluating the most effective policies for reducing HABs in freshwater bodies as we approach the State Budget. In the meantime, we encourage you to read the full report, which is located on our website.



HABs at the north ends of Seneca Lake and Cayuga Lake are visible from space. Source: NASA

## State Makes Steady Progress in Addressing Rural Housing Needs

*By Michael J. Borges, Executive Director, Rural Housing Coalition of New York*

In a joint survey with the NYS Association of Towns of rural municipal leaders in the Fall 2024, the Rural Housing Coalition was able to identify the three main obstacles to building housing in rural New York. The top three obstacles identified were: 1) lack of infrastructure, 2) lack of local capacity, and 3) lack of State programs targeted to small rural communities.

State policymakers responded by including funding to address all three obstacles in the 2025-26 State Budget.

First, the Governor included \$100 million in infrastructure funding tied to Pro-Housing Community designation in the State Budget. Rural communities often lack the infrastructure (roads, water, sewer/septic, etc.) needed for development and add extra costs to building housing that are not common in urban/suburban areas of the state.

The Legislature then acted to address the other two obstacles by investing further in local capacity through increased funding for the Rural Preservation Companies, a statewide network of local nonprofit housing and community development organizations. The Rural Preservation Companies (RPCs) are the main conduit for achieving the state's housing goals in rural areas of the state and provide an array of services ranging from housing counseling and weatherization to repairing, rehabilitating, building and managing affordable housing. Funding in the 2025-2026 State Budget for the Rural Preservation Program increased from \$7.5 million to over \$8 million.

The Legislature also addressed the lack of State programs targeted to rural communities by investing further in the Small Rental Development Initiative (SRDI), which was established in 2022 with state funds to address the unique needs of small communities for affordable rental housing. The program, which provides grants for the development of rental housing of 5-20 units and are more appropriate in scale and density for small communities that are prevalent in rural areas of the state, saw an increase from \$7 to \$10 million in funding in the 2025-2026 State Budget.

Although much progress has been made, further actions are needed by State policymakers. The New York Main Street Program, which provides funding to mainly villages and hamlets to revitalize their main corridors with new or renovated mixed-use buildings of commercial space and housing, has been underfunded for a decade.

The senior population continues to grow and further investments in programs like RESTORE, which funds emergency repairs for low-moderate income seniors, needs to be broadened to include any repairs that keep seniors safe in their homes (and off of ladders and other repair work that can lead to injury).

Lastly, we need to streamline regulations like MWBE requirements that do not take into account the geographic difficulties of finding qualified contractors within 50 miles of a worksite and outsourcing repair work (like RESTORE) when the repairs can be done by in-house staff.

Moving into the 2026 legislative session, the Rural Housing Coalition will be pushing to build on this progress and advocate for the necessary funding that our rural communities deserve. For more on our work, you can visit our website: <https://ruralhousing.org/>.



**Rural Housing Coalition  
of New York**

## DEC and Attorney General Reach New Agreement to Streamline Conservation Efforts

By Staff

On November 10, 2025 Governor Hochul and Attorney General James made a landmark announcement: the Office of the Attorney General and the Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC) signed a Memorandum of Agreement (MOA) which paves the way for faster completion of land acquisition under certain projects. The MOA creates new guidance for the Office of the Attorney General, or OAG, to use commercial title insurance for low-risk projects, as defined in the MOA. This should significantly speed up the timeframe for completing the transaction in those cases.

For some background, in 2022 Governor Hochul signed the 30x30 Law, which committed New York State to conserving 30% of its lands and waters by 2030. The law was intended to serve several purposes: increasing climate resilience; protecting natural resources; preserving biodiversity and farmland; expanding public access to nature; and safeguarding the character of our rural areas. Since then, the State has been working to meet this ambitious target.

However, land acquisitions meant for conservation often saw delays for administrative reasons. At the launch of 30x30, New York's title review process was among the most extensive in the nation, making it time-consuming and costly, and applicants found themselves in a backlog where time and money are critical components in finalizing these transactions. The OAG conducts this title review, but the law did not authorize the Attorney General to accept commercial title insurance in the approval of these transactions—a practice that is allowed in most other states. Instead, New York has historically sought what is known as "perfect title", a lengthy process that requires a search for defects in title going back 100 years.

After meeting with land trust advocates in 2023 and learning about the issue, Senator May introduced a bill to authorize the Attorney General to accept title insurance in the review process, which would make the land acquisition process more efficient. It passed the Senate in 2024 and 2025 but died in committee in the Assembly. Governor Hochul mentioned this proposal in her 2025 State of the State address, but it was not until later in the year that she announced the MOA between DEC and the Attorney General to make this new policy a reality.

Moving forward, the Attorney General will be empowered to process title reviews more efficiently, saving time and money, and, as a result, the State is now in a better position to meet its conservation goals. As of July 2024, New York had conserved approximately 22% of its lands and waters and, with the new MOA in place the State is well positioned to achieve the goal of 30%.

To get the latest data about DEC's land acquisitions, visit:

<https://dec.ny.gov/nature/open-space/recent-land-and-conservation-easement-announcements-acquisitions>

## Upcoming Events

### The Lake George Winter Carnival

**Date:** Every weekend (Friday-Sunday) from February 7 to March 8, 2026

**Location:** Lake George, NY

**Description:** This event celebrates its 64th year in 2026. It incorporates a wide variety of activities, such as racing, contests, the Polar Plunge, fireworks, and more!

**Website:** <https://lakegeorgewintercarnival.com/>



### New York Farm Show

**Date:** February 26-28, 2026

**Location:** New York State Fairgrounds, Syracuse, NY

**Description:** The biggest agricultural technology event in the Northeast spread across six buildings, with more than 400 vendors, thousands of farmers and industry professionals and the latest innovations in farm equipment, tractors, crop protection, seed technology, and more.

**Website:** <https://www.newyorkfarmshow.com/en/home.html>

### Capital Region Flower & Garden Expo

**Date:** March 27-29, 2026

**Location:** Hudson Valley Community College, Troy, NY

**Description:** The McDonough Sports Complex is transformed by large-scale gardens and floral-themed exhibits, and a marketplace filled with over 190 flower and garden-themed retail exhibits, an indoor farmers market, and NYS wine tastings. There are educational stations throughout the show to provide valuable insights into maintaining and creating unique outdoor spaces and over 50 hours of lectures and demonstrations.

**Website:** <https://flowerandgardenexpo.com/>



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