

# Cultivating success: RI's new farmers help the state buck national trends

**Alex Kuffner** Published 5:04 a.m. ET Feb. 27, 2024 | Updated 4:44 p.m. ET Feb. 27, 2024

PROVIDENCE – Bucking national and regional trends, the number of farms in Rhode Island and the total area of farmland both grew in the latest federal Census of Agriculture.

From 2017 to 2022, 11 new farms opened in Rhode Island, bringing the total to 1,054, while farmland increased by 4% to 59,076 acres, according to the report released this month by the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

The numbers stand in contrast to losses in both metrics nationally and in every other New England state.

Rhode Island's gains reflect a strong interest in local food and sustainable agriculture that only grew during the COVID-19 pandemic when food shortages and price spikes in supermarkets drove people to look for producers closer to home, said Ken Ayars, chief of the Division of Agriculture and Forestry at the Rhode Island Department of Environmental Management.

“There was so much interest in purchasing local food, so having access to farms was important,” Ayars said.

The heightened consumer demand, for example, spurred Farm Fresh Rhode Island to extend home delivery through its Market Mobile service from restaurants to residential customers.

The agriculture sector includes horticulture, which also benefited from people staying at home during lockdowns and taking more of an interest in their gardens, Ayars said.

Support for farms and nurseries is born out by a big increase in the market value of farm-grown products sold in Rhode Island, the annual total jumping from \$58 million in 2017 to \$93 million in 2022.



Rebecca Scheff of Roots Farm in Tiverton sells produce at the farmer's market in Bristol last Saturday. *David Delpoio/Providence Journal.*

## **Ups and down of farming in Rhode Island**

While the findings are undoubtedly positive for the industry, they only fractionally make up for losses in the previous five-year period, when the state saw 200 farms close and nearly 13,000 acres converted to other uses.

Still, if there's good news for Rhode Island's agriculture sector, it's that it's not following the steady downward trajectory for agriculture on the national level that has seen farmland acreage and farm numbers fall in every census over the last 25 years, including a 2% drop in the latest reporting period.

Rhode Island agriculture has been more of a roller-coaster ride. With support from the state's thriving food culture, the sector saw a boom in the early 2000s. The number of farms grew by almost half in the decade between 2002 and 2012, and more than 8,000 new acres were put to use as farmland.

The following five-year period saw a scaling back but then reversed course again in more recent years.

Despite the encouraging findings between 2017 and 2022, there are still threats to the future of agriculture in the state, none more so than the pressure to redevelop farmland for housing or solar power. Indeed, while Rhode Island saw an increase in the number of small farms, less than 10 acres, there was a net loss in farms of between 50 and 499 acres.

### **RI has the highest percentage of new farmers in the US**

There are, however, other good signs for Rhode Island in the report.

While the national average for beginning farmers, defined as anyone with 10 or fewer years of farming experience, is 30%, the ratio in Rhode Island is the highest in the country, at 41.4%, meaning more new people are entering the industry.

It appears that they are primarily investing in smaller operations. The number of farms between 1 and 9 acres jumped from 379 to 452. Their small size makes sense in a state where farmland is valued at \$17,500 an acre, more than anywhere else in the United States and nearly five times the national average.

At the same time, big operations are doing well in Rhode Island. The number of farms with more than \$1 million in annual sales jumped from 8 to 22, including one business with more than \$5 million.

Even though the overall workforce is aging, the average age is younger than the national average and the number of farmers in Rhode Island between the ages of 25 and 44 increased from 2017 to 2022.

The ranks of farmers are also growing more diverse. The share of farmers who are female is nearly half, at 43%, higher than the national average of 36%. There are more Asian, Black, Latino and Native American farmers than in 2017.



Nikki Ayres, Farm Fresh Rhode Island's director of giving, with local produce featured in a buy-one, give-a-free-one-to-charity Thanksgiving produce and pie box promotion introduced last fall. "We know that food insecurity is at an all time high," Ayres said, "and we also know how generous the community is in Providence and Rhode Island." *David Delpoio/Providence Journal, File.*

## State support helping farmers

Ayars said the higher number of farms in Rhode Island may in part be due to a better accounting of smaller properties in urban communities like Cranston or Warwick, often operated by minority farmers and supported by the Southside Community Land Trust and other groups. Because they don't fit traditional models for farms, they may have been overlooked in past censuses.

Diane Lynch, president of the Rhode Island Food Policy Council, agreed that an uptick in sales at farms during the pandemic helped the agriculture sector in the state. Continuing support from state government is also helping, she said, from grants for local agriculture and seafood businesses to technical assistance for farmers.

"Rhode Island's robust network of well-managed farmers markets and the steadily increasing amount of local produce that is being purchased by our institutional buyers and emergency food buyers could also be factors in this growth," Lynch added.