

ALBANY — This week, the State Senate passed seven bills sponsored by Senator Jen Metzger to reduce the student debt carried by young farmers, eliminate unnecessary regulatory burdens, and expand access to technical assistance and markets. The package also included legislation co-sponsored by Metzger to expand farmers markets and encourage new farmers through a BOCES apprentice program. All of the bills won wide bipartisan support in the Senate.

“This package of legislation supports our long-term commitment to New York’s agricultural community, made up primarily of family-owned farms. We are making it easier for a new generation of farmers to enter the field, and helping existing farmers expand markets for the rich diversity of products that we produce,” said Senator Metzger, Chair of the Senate Agriculture Committee. “These bills also help to mitigate some of the financial and other obstacles that farmers face, particularly new farmers.”

Making Farming Easier for a New Generation of Farmers

A third of New York farmers are 65 or older. Several bills help to address the issue of succession of farm ownership by supporting new and young farmers:

Young Farmer Loan Forgiveness (Metzger – [S5715](#)): Expands eligibility under the New York State Young Farmers Loan Forgiveness Incentive Program, which helps young and beginning farmers, who obtain an undergraduate degree from a New York State college or university, pursue careers in farming. The program offers young farmers up to \$10,000 per year in student debt forgiveness for up to five years. The bill removes the requirement that an applicant must have graduated from college within the previous two years and replaces it with the qualification that an applicant must not have previously farmed for more than ten consecutive years.

Expanding Beginning Farmers Fund Eligibility (Metzger – [S5716](#)): Making it easier for new farmers to access grant funding by easing some of the restrictions on eligibility. In particular, it takes into consideration the importance of farm investments and allows new farmers who may be reporting less than \$10,000 in annual farm income to be considered for funding.

Young Farmer Apprentice Program (May – [S3837](#)): Creates a young farmer apprentice program, under the direction of Boards of Cooperative Educational Services (BOCES), to help the next generation of farmers learn and develop skills.

Helping Farms Expand Markets for their Goods

Several bills offer technical assistance to New York farmers and help to expand markets:

Food Hub Support (Metzger – [S4653](#)): This bill helps New York farmers compete in regional and national markets by providing technical assistance to small-scale producers and processors looking for opportunities to coordinate with each other to achieve economies of scale. Using mechanisms such as food hubs to aggregate, process, and

transport agricultural products, New York farms will be able to better meet the needs of larger-scale purchasers. It also provides information about local, state, federal and private grants available to farmers to help them to scale their operations.

Agriculture Hotline (Metzger – [S4655](#)): Creates a “one-stop” hotline, developed under the guidance of Cornell Cooperative Extension, to offer farmers and those interested in becoming involved in the agriculture industry with information on farm management, finances, grant opportunities, research, marketing and more.

Farmers Markets in Parks (Metzger – [S5822A](#)): Permits the establishment of farmers’ markets at local and state parks, increasing New Yorker’s access to locally grown and produced food, and providing new opportunities for producers to reach local consumers.

Expanding Regional Markets (Kennedy – [S251](#)): Creates and expands regional farmers’ markets focused on bulk and wholesale volume purchasers. This bill facilitates bringing more New York grown and produced products to New York consumers, with a particular emphasis on areas known as ‘food deserts’ that lack access to fresh, local produce.

Alleviating Regulatory Burdens

These bills make it easier for farms to operate and reduce unnecessary costs:

Agricultural District Protections (Metzger – [S5437](#)): This bill allows contractors working on a farm to be included under agricultural district protections so that they are not subjected to nuisance and other lawsuits resulting from doing the job the farm hired them to do.

Reducing Farm Vehicle Paperwork (Metzger – [S4945](#)): This bill alleviates a regulatory burden on farmers by reducing the paperwork required for farm plated vehicles, while continuing to give New York farmers a reduced rate for vehicle and plate registration for vehicles used exclusively in agricultural production.

Keeping Agricultural Property Taxes Affordable (Metzger [S5755](#)): Passed last week, this bill will help keep down property taxes for farmers by providing a 10-year tax exemption on agricultural buildings and structures, and making it easier to receive an agricultural assessment by streamlining the process. The bill also allows farmers to appeal to a small claims court in a valuation dispute, just like residential landowners are able to do.

“What I’m seeing as a trend with the Senator is a push to help new and smaller farms expand into agriculture, which is crucial to the success of the industry in the state,” explains Sarah Dressel of Dressel Farms, the first woman and youngest person to lead the New York Apple Association. “As a young farmer, I’m very aware of how fortunate I am to have the farm establishment that my family has built, and how tough it is for other young people to get involved. The average age of the American farmer is almost 60, so having legislation like

this that appeals to younger entrepreneurs is so important. It's encouraging to see Senator Metzger take such a vested interest in keeping agriculture viable within the state."

"Young farmers in New York State are working hard to build careers in agriculture," says Martin Lemos, Interim Executive Director of the National Young Farmers Coalition. "They are seeking out training opportunities, investing in their operations, and managing the risks of running a small business in order to sustain our state's farm communities. As the average age of farmers in our state nears 60 years, our agricultural economy depends on the success of these enterprising farmers. We are grateful to Chairwoman Metzger and Senator May for their leadership in advancing proposals that invest in the next generation of farmers."

Jen Metzger represents the 42nd Senate District, which includes all of Sullivan County and parts of Delaware, Orange, and Ulster Counties. Senator Metzger serves as Chair of the Agriculture Committee and sits on the Environmental Conservation, Education, Health, Energy and Telecommunications, Local Government, Women's Issues, Domestic Animal Welfare, and Legislative Commission on Rural Resources Committees.

-The Office of State Senator Jen Metzger