

Easements help provide peace of mind for farmers with strong connections to the land

Agriculture Commissioner Steve Troxler, center, presents an ADFP Trust Fund sign to Lin Andrew and his family, owners of Chestnut Hill Farm, in 2009. With Troxler are, from right, former Sen. Bob Atwater and former House Speaker Joe Hackney.

In three decades working the land of his family's Chatham County farm, Lin Andrew has never seen change quite like in the last five years.

It is those changes, and the uncertainty they bring, that led Andrew to be one of the first participants in the North Carolina Department of Agriculture and Consumer Sciences' conservation easement program.

The owner of Chestnut Hill Farm at on Moon Lindley Road near Pittsboro, Andrew took over the farm from his father after graduating from college in the late 1980's. The farm primarily produces hatching eggs, with six chicken houses which are home to 55,000 hens. Chestnut Hill also has a cow/ calf operation with about 75 brood cows.

Farming is in Andrew's blood. His father began feeding chickens from his bicycle in the 1930's and worked in the poultry business his entire career. With his father now 88 years old and not as active on the farm anymore, Andrew has been the farm's primary operator for several years now.

He has worked hard to build up Chestnut Hill over the years. At one point, Andrew said, the farm as it stands now would have been considered large for what it produces. That is no longer the case as agribusinesses and integrators have taken on increasingly large facilities.

"When I built my first two chicken houses up there on the hill, that was considered a large farm. Then when I built the third one, it was the biggest you'd find around here," he said. "Now, I've got six, and it's nowhere near what I need."

A cow on Chestnut Hill Farm. The farm, while primarily a poultry site, also raises cattle.

Increases in costs and expenses have outpaced farm income over the last several years, Andrew said. Everything from energy costs, taxes and the cost of insurance to general farm supplies and personal family expenses have risen far faster than farm income, forcing farmers to get larger and larger to stay in business, he said.

“Many farmers look to picking up additional income from jobs outside the farm, which is something I can’t do because of being so involved with the operations here,” Andrew said. “In many cases farmers end up actually making less than they did in the past even though they are larger.”

Andrew said that he often worries about the future of his farm, which he said has struggled to turn a profit in recent years. He is anxious about whether he will be able to find anyone to work the land when he retires as labor is already nearly impossible to find, he said.

Andrew considers himself a conservationist at heart — he has won several environmental stewardship awards over the years — and is deeply connected to the land he has worked his entire life. When he learned about the first cycle of easement grants, Andrew jumped at the opportunity.

Easements like the one at Chestnut Hill Farm provide landowners with a sum of money in return for designating certain areas as off-limits for development. This keeps farmland safe from being enveloped by residential or industrial development, while also giving farmers a monetary boost they may need to sustain their lifestyles.

The easements are managed by the Agricultural Development and Farmland Preservation Trust Fund, a program created by Agriculture Commissioner Steve Troxler and written into law by the General Assembly in 2005 specifically to support the purchase of agricultural conservation easements. Individual grants are handled by organizations like the Triangle Land Conservancy, which oversaw the placement of the Chestnut Hill Farm easement.

Open land at Chestnut Hill Farm. Lin Andrew, the farm’s owner, was one of the first participants in the ADFP easement program.

“Conservation easements are designed to help deal with some of the exact challenges facing farms like Chestnut Hill across the state,” said Dewitt Hardee, NCDA&CS Farmland Preservation division director. “Through the NCDA&CS grant program, we can help farmers keep farming while also protecting valuable working farmland for generations to come.”

Despite an innate love for agriculture and the hard work that goes into it, Andrew admitted that things have been hard in recent years.

“Sometimes I feel like most people just don’t really care about where their food comes from. As long as they can go to the store and get their steak, or their chicken sandwich, they don’t really care where it comes from,” he said. “I try really hard not to sound negative, but it’s been hard.”

Andrew also worries about what could happen to the land itself should no one take over the farm. Chestnut Hill and the surrounding farmland are less than an hour from both Greensboro and Chapel Hill, and residential development has expanded greatly in the region in recent years. The planned Chatham Park development in Pittsboro is an example of just that kind of explosive growth, Andrew said, and he does not want to see the land he has poured so much of his life into become a subdivision.

“I see all these changes, I go to Pittsboro 15 minutes away and I see all of these houses going up on all of that land. That hurts me. It hurts me because I just have a tie to the land, and intrinsic value to the land,” he said. “I don’t deal well with changes anyway, it’s just my nature, and when I see that it just hurts me.”

Agricultural easements can help ensure that farmland stays farmland, Hardee said.

“Development pressure is a very real thing that farmers across the state are dealing with more and more,” he said. “Agricultural conservation easements help give farmers financial security along with a buffer between their farming interests and residential and commercial expansion. Hopefully, some peace of mind comes along with it.”

Despite the worries and negativity that Andrew contends with, he has been thrilled with how the conservation easement placed on his land has helped him.

“It was my hope that this would remain a real working farm. I was glad that the Department of Agriculture and the trust fund really were looking at working farms. A lot of times, the Triangle Land Conservancy are looking in more open space and parks, but I really liked the working farm thing,” he said. “I saw the potential in this area, what we could do with having a large chunk of land protected as working farms. I just hope that the farming industry changes so that we can keep these farms working, and so you can make a living.”

Small farmers across North Carolina face many of the same struggles that Andrew does, and Andrew said that he is not sure what the future holds for himself or the industry at large. One thing he does know for certain is that the easement program has been a major boon.

“Triangle Land Conservancy partnered with me real well, I can’t think of a process really [that I would have changed.] It was a good thing, and it did what I was hoping it would do,” he said. “On the money side it was good, it allowed to pay down some debt. Ten years ago, if I hadn’t put the easement on, I might have sold the land and divided it up to turn into housing developments. This helped me to justify not doing that.”