

Bodwell Farm Conserved for Generations to Come

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KENSINGTON -- When Harold "Hal" Bodwell's wife Elaine takes a walk with one of her daughters on the family farm in Kensington, she's likely to stop and say, "That would be a beautiful spot for a house." But her husband always has a swift response: "If there was a house there, you couldn't walk."

The Bodwell family has taken the future into their hands by putting the last piece of their 300 acres under conservation easement. They closed the deal with the Southeast Land Trust this past Friday, ensuring that the land will remain open for future Bodwells and everyone else.

Jeremy Lougee, a project manager with SELT, said that the efforts to conserve the Bodwell land predate his tenure with SELT. "When I came to SELT, they were already working on it," he said in a phone interview Tuesday. The project has been in the works for about four years, and was done in two phases because of its scope, he said. "It was too much for one fell swoop."

"The first phase encompassed the land on the south side of Stumpfield Road, about 100 acres, and we closed on it in 2016," he said.

"That involved the area including the main farmhouse and barns."

The second phase, closed on Friday, includes the 200 acres on the north side of Stumpfield Road, a mixture of farmlands and forests.

The property, still a working dairy farm, is important in several ways, Lougee said. According to the New Hampshire Fish and Game Wildlife Action Plan, it contains some of the highest-ranking habitats for animals. The property boasts several streams which flow into the Exeter River, and not developing the property will protect drinking water, he said.

The land is open to the public, as it always has been, and the easement contains very few restrictions on use, according to Lougee. The agricultural easement means the Bodwells can continue farming and forestry activities. "They are great stewards of this land," Lougee said. "They've owned it for a century."

Hunting is allowed, he said. "They do not post the land, except for where there is active agriculture or cattle in the field."

And the Bodwell land is the last piece of a conservation puzzle, making a contiguous strip of almost 2,000 acres of conserved Kensington land, he said.

The purchase of the earlier easement was \$485,000 and was accomplished largely through LCHIP funds and donations from the 1772 Foundation, an organization committed to preserving farmland, Lougee said. The second and most recent easement was \$940,000 and funded by a combination of LCHIP (\$175,000), the town of Kensington (\$100,000), and substantial private donations. "We received," Lougee said, "a tremendous amount of support."

Bob Gustafson, a member of the Kensington Conservation Commission, said in a phone interview Tuesday that the piece is important for two reasons: its size, and the fact that it remains open for active agricultural use. "If someone wants to grow crops on it, they will be able to do so," he said. "Active

agricultural use” is something the commission recommends to those considering easements, though “it’s always up to the landowner,” he said.

“We’re excited,” Gustafson summarized.

Hal Bodwell said in a phone interview Tuesday that the property has always been a dairy farm, though at times they also diversified into vegetables and chickens.

He grew up helping his father work the farm and enjoyed it well enough, but wanted to try something different. Enrolling at UNH, he majored in zoology. But in his junior year he “took a few ag courses,” and discovered the science behind what he’d done all his life. He was fascinated and ended up minoring in dairy studies.

The call back to the land came later. He and Elaine moved to New York State, where she had a job offer in occupational therapy, and Hal first worked construction and then got a job with the state Department of Agriculture.

But he couldn’t escape the desire for hands-on farming, and eventually returned to Kensington and joined his father. “We kept expanding, we added cows and remodeled the milking parlor,” he recalled.

With his UNH minor and Department of Agriculture experience, the younger Bodwell was eager to apply what he’d learned. “I thought I’d show my father and uncle how to do it,” he said with a laugh. “It didn’t take me long to realize that it’s more complicated than it looks.”

But he stayed on, saying, “I wanted to live on the land. I enjoy making things grow.” He applied the science he’d learned in school to the practical experience of his forebears, and weathered several economic slumps to remain in business today. He and a staff member manage 125 cows, with a sideline in grass-fed beef and niche marketing to smaller vendors and “eat local” fans.

Bodwell has had his sights on conserving the property for a while, noting, “I worked too hard to clear this land, picking out rocks. I didn’t want to see it filled with houses.”

He isn’t sure whether his two grown daughters will want the property. “But if my family doesn’t own this land in 100 years, it’s still a legacy for Kensington,” he said.