

# Seabrook farm deal to preserve 1,770 acres

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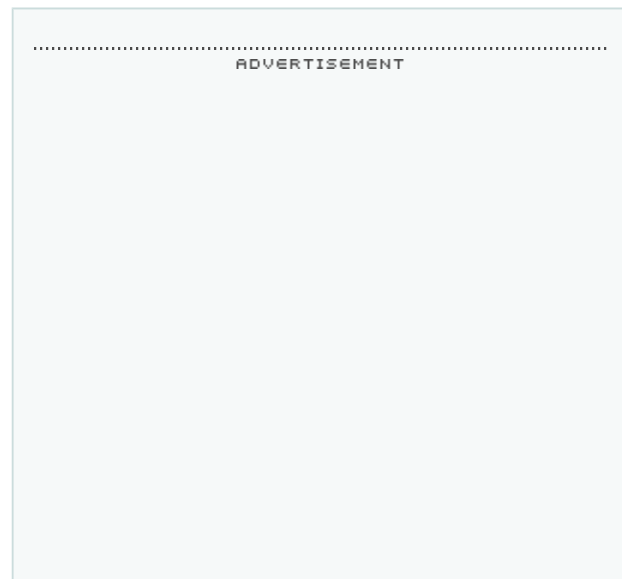
MANNINGTON TOWNSHIP - It has been 50 years since Jack Seabrook took any part in

the farming business his family built from the fertile soil across southern New Jersey. But to conservationists across the Garden State, Seabrook's decision to preserve almost 2,000 acres of Salem County property for farming is tantamount to leaving an agricultural legacy that likely will keep the region green and growing forever.

State officials announced earlier this month that Seabrook, 91, had sold the development rights to 1,770 acres of land he owns in Mannington Township for \$15.5 million. An additional 140 acres also was set aside for a state-managed wildlife recreation area.

It is the state's largest farmland preservation deal to date.

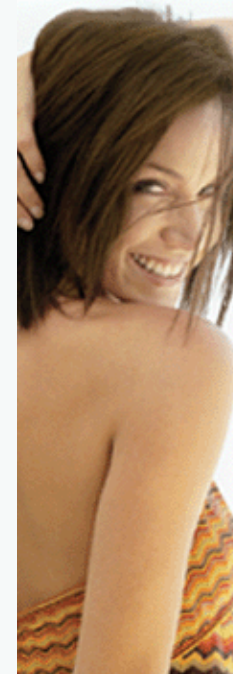
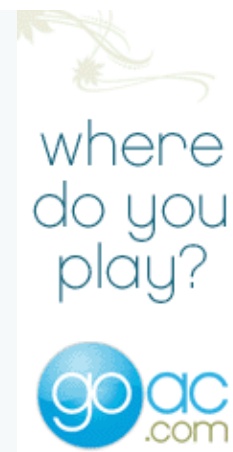
"I see the Seabrooks as real leaders," said Bill Rawlyk, director of land preservation at the Princeton-based DNR Greenway Land Trust. "They stepped up and said, 'We're going to do something really important that will define this region.'"



To many in southern New Jersey, the Seabrook name is almost synonymous with agriculture. It was Jack's father, C.F. Seabrook, who grew his father's small Upper Deerfield farm into a corporation that eventually became the world's largest vegetable freezing operation. At its height, Seabrook Farms packed and froze produce grown on 50,000 acres.

The Seabrook story, however, is also filled with intrigue and betrayal. Jack Seabrook, who had played an increasingly active role in managing the company as a young man, was ousted from the family business in 1959 after five years of serving as chief executive. After that upheaval, which was caused by his father deciding to abruptly sell the business to outside interests, Jack Seabrook chose to pursue a career in international business rather than continue farming.

The Salem County land he owned, however, continued to be actively worked by small local growers who, like Jack Seabrook, are the products of multi-generational farming families.



According to Bruce Seabrook, Jack's son, the family showed an interest in preserving the land in the 1990s but there was neither enough funding nor political will to make it happen.

About three years ago, a developer showed interest in buying the land for a large residential community. The land was placed under contract, but the project ultimately collapsed when the housing market went south.

This time around, it was the state that approached Jack Seabrook to renew talks about preservation.

"Timing is everything," said Michele Byers, executive director of the New Jersey Conservation Foundation. "In this case, the timing was such that a development project had to fall through and the market had to drop. Everything was ready to go. I know the state worked very hard on this. I know this was a priority for them."

Agriculture Secretary Charles Kuperus said the Seabrook preservation is significant because it leaves an intact landscape for future generations to farm, which some experts believe may become an issue as global population numbers continue to surge.

"There is a potential to produce agricultural products that ultimately could help sustain populations in the future," Kuperus said. "There is a growing level of concern around the world about how far food travels and if food production areas can sustain their surrounding population. This is a great example of why we're doing what we're doing."

The preservation also comes at a time when many farmers in southern New Jersey see a bleak future for agriculture in New Jersey.

Matt Blake, a program manager at the American Littoral Society in Bridgeton, said the Seabrook preservation deal sends a clear message to naysayers who think the only available option to landowners is to sell to developers.

"To have a storied landowner like the Seabrook family decide to leave this type of legacy is a clear indication that farming is here to stay, especially in southern New Jersey, where it matters most," Blake said. "Something like this is going to inspire others. What it does is signal to everyone else is that if a family like the Seabrooks see a future of farming, then all

the pessimists have been off the mark."

Rawlyk, of the DNR Greenway Land Trust in Princeton, agreed, adding that it may encourage southern New Jersey farmers to continue making innovations in how they grow, harvest and process their crops.

"What's happening in these southern counties is really exciting," Rawlyk said. "There's very creative, very productive agriculture going on down there. It's the guys that are there who are committed to agriculture adapting to the future and being innovative and shrewd in how they operate."

Rawlyk also said the region's existing agricultural infrastructure - in terms of warehousing space and freezer capacity - enables southern New Jersey farmers to position themselves as one of the top agricultural producers along the eastern seaboard.

"The land, the agricultural infrastructure and the innovative farmers all in one place: It's the perfect storm," he added. "This is just the beginning of it."

Bruce Seabrook, Jack's son, said his father's decision to preserve the acreage was really motivated more by sentiment than by any kind of strategy to keep agriculture.

"There's an emotional connection to it," Bruce Seabrook said. "He grew up on a farm in South Jersey, and he didn't want to see townhouses put there. He's a businessman too, though. I heard him say many times that there was no point preserving farmland if there's nobody to farm it. It's rewarding that people are excited about it."