WHEN WE THINK of farming in Rhode Island, we picture Holsteins grazing along stone walls, fields ripe with sweet corn, farm stands overflowing with tomatoes. But there are other farms that don't come to mind, because they are underwater.

Across America, the Department of Agriculture is now holding public forums to obtain information for the development of the 2007 Farm Bill. In America's heartland, this piece of federal legislation is as familiar as quahogs are in Rhode Island.

Rhode Islanders need to be aware of the significance of the 2007 Farm Bill, because its impact on the state would be much broader than price supports for soybeans and subsidies for winter wheat. As important as the Farm Bill is for conventional agriculture, its reach extends to the core of what we value in Rhode Island.

Some of Rhode Island's most economically and ecologically important farms and coastal habitats are salt marsh, soft mud, sand bottoms and eelgrass beds. At the turn of the 20th Century, Narragansett Bay was being extensively farmed. Oyster farms proliferated around the Bay and there was a thriving scallop industry. Now, with the loss of a high percentage of salt-marsh habitat, the loss of all but 100 acres of eelgrass beds, and the pollution of open-water areas, Rhode Island's economically important oyster and scallop industries have been reduced.

The Farm Bill's Wildlife Habitat Incentives Program (WHIP) provides funds for restoring marine habitat around Narragansett Bay. Restoration efforts have been under way for several years, with significant results.

Eelgrass is a food for waterfowl, a habitat for crab and fish species, a water purifier, and a habitat stabilizer. Scientists estimate that along the Atlantic Coast, almost all economically valuable fish species spend part or all of their lives in estuaries such as Narragansett Bay.

In the Bay, marine-bottom areas provide the best habitat, support a great diversity of marine animals, and have far-reaching effects on water quality and estuary health. Small fish, such as mummichogs, find safe hiding places in the salt marshes, and such larger fish as juvenile winter flounder, juvenile bluefish and American eels use the eelgrass beds as nurseries, until they are large enough to venture into open waters.

The eelgrass beds also provide surfaces for invertebrate species, such as scallops and shrimp, to find a home.

Eelgrass beds improve water quality by trapping nutrients and sediment, and they reduce coastal erosion by dampening wave energy.

In addition to supporting marine-habitat restoration, Farm Bill funds have been used to promote aquaculture in the Bay. Aquaculture, the business of farming marine fish and shellfish, is expected to be one of the top-10 growth industries in the next decade. It is the nation's fastest-growing agricultural business.

It is hard to ignore that the Rhode Island landscape is changing rapidly. Rhode Islanders are confronted with development and the associated loss of farmland. When farmland is converted into condominiums and conference centers, Rhode Islanders lose: an industry that grosses over $100 million a year; their connection to food production; and the restorative power of agrarian landscapes and vistas.

Rhode Islanders put high value on rural landscapes, and they show this every election year when
they overwhelmingly approve open-space bond funding. Working farms define our rural heritage, and over the past decade $10 million of Farm Bill funding has been spent to protect working farms. Farm Bill funds have also been used to protect over $2 million worth of Rhode Island grassland and open-meadow habitat, one of our rarest ecological communities.

Rhode Islanders' priorities include keeping working farms working, supporting the type of agriculture that works here, and preserving the state's remaining farmland. Consider the Rhody Fresh milk venture.

Supported by Farm Bill funding, Rhody Fresh is a cooperative of five Rhode Island dairy farms. The venture enhances farming in the state, staving off development pressure. Now in its second year, the cooperative has annual milk sales greater than $1 million, and Rhody Fresh milk can be found in more than 75 stores statewide.

With so many Rhode Island farms lost, we must preserve what is left of our agricultural heritage by promoting innovative farming. At the same time, we must restore the health of our rivers, streams, grasslands and Bay, and develop underwater agriculture. Rhode Island needs a strong Farm Bill in 2007. The quality of life we value in Rhode Island depends on it.

Abigail Anthony is a writer for the Jamestown Press and a fellow of the University of Rhode Island's Coastal Institute.