What are Agricultural Plastics?
Plastics have taken the place of the longer lasting and/or natural materials that used to be widely used on farms. Many of these substitutions make good sense: Plastics are often safer to use, improve production efficiency, cost less, and permit more flexibility in management than the concrete silos, glass greenhouses, sisal twine and other products and packaging they replace.

AGRICULTURAL PLASTICS INCLUDE:
- dairy silage bags
- bunker silo covers
- bale wrap
- bale net
- polytwine
- maple tubing
- irrigation drip tape & tubes
- greenhouse & hoop house covers
- high tunnels
- nursery pots
- & plug trays
- mulch & fumigation films
- farps
- bird netting
- pesticide & dairy chemical containers
- seed, feed & fertilizer bags
- low tunnels
- row covers
- bee hive bodies & frames
- aquaculture supplies

How Do Farmers Get Rid of Agricultural Plastics?
Some used plastics are hauled to a solid waste transfer station or landfill. Much of the rest has been left in the fields, plowed into the ground, or burned in open fires.

Burning agricultural plastics in an open fire generates high levels of dangerous, polluting emissions—including particulates that settle in the lungs, and extremely toxic dioxins that can deposit on food and feed and enter the food chain. Stashing waste plastic on the farm can clog water channels, be a choking hazard for livestock and wildlife, and create breeding habitat for mosquitoes and rodents. And it is not pretty.

The Recycling Ag Plastics Project
Recycling has not been a viable option for most agricultural plastics because they are typically dirtier than other used plastics. They may retain chemical residues, which limits marketing options. Their bulk and dispersal across the rural landscape adds cost and complexity to collection. Until recently, there has not been the motivation nor the funds to develop a collection infrastructure to guarantee the steady supply of plastic feedstock needed by processors. For these many reasons, few recycling markets have been willing to handle agricultural plastics.

To overcome these barriers, the Recycling Ag Plastics Project (RAPP) is working on many fronts to promote product stewardship, farmer engagement, and recycling of agricultural plastics:

- RAPP is cultivating the interest of regional manufacturing markets to process used agricultural plastics into new products (e.g., plastic lumber, roof and sidewalk tiles, sweet crude oil);
- RAPP is promoting consumer markets and “green purchasing” of products made from recycled ag plastics;
- RAPP is encouraging farmers to adopt Best Management Practices to keep plastics suitable for recycling;
- RAPP is acquiring mobile compaction equipment for cost-efficient transport of plastic from farms to recyclers.

RAPP began with the motivation of protecting human health and the environment from the hazards of open burning and dumping, and to conserve the resources lost by these practices. Since the October 2009 enactment of NYS DEC’s “open burning ban,” RAPP is also strongly motivated to assist NYS in offering farmers a legal and practical option for disposing of the plastics that have become essential to agriculture production and sales.

Recycling of agricultural plastics is not, at this point, self-sustaining. New York State support is needed. In September 2009, RAPP was awarded a $350,000 contract with NYS DEC, drawing on a FY2008 Environmental Protection Fund allocation. These funds have been used to purchase six BigFoot balers, to continue to establish outreach and plastic collection programs in multiple locations across NYS, and to support staff and field partners in working with farmers to collect about 250 1000-lb bales of film and other types of agricultural plastics.

The FY2009 Environmental Protection Fund allocated $450,000 for agricultural plastics recycling. However, these funds are not yet in the DEC spending plan, and no contract has been developed. Without a contract for the FY2009 EPF, the Recycling Ag Plastic Project field program will not be able to continue.