The Northeast Sustainable Agriculture Working Group
P.O. BOX 608, BELCHERTOWN, MASSACHUSETTS 01007 • PHONE 413/323-4531 • FAX 413/323-9594 • NESAWG@smallfarm.org

Regionalism to Nationalism...and Back?

Kate Clancy
Henry A. Wallace Institute for Alternative Agriculture
www.hawiaa.org

Let's start with history because it raises interesting questions and provides helpful context. In the decades between 1820 and 1870 farmers in the Northeast saw the markets offered by large cities like New York and Boston and started to produce for those markets. This marked the shift from regionalism to nationalism, and was aided by technologies like the mower and reaper, the settling of the West, and the development of the railroad. By the end of the 1870s agriculture had replaced mining and ranching as the major economic force in the West, and agricultural specialization occurred throughout the country. Dairy was suited to New York and New England, but farmers felt that feedgrain production was better on prairies than woodlands. The same topography explains the not coincidental shift to beef and away from hog production at the same time.

As nationalism grew middlemen increased to accommodate the food coming to the East by rail and steamer. Domination by wholesalers posed marketing problems for local farmers-it was about 1920 that the New York City market for Northwest apples was developed to replace NY state apples. Local growers were not producing the volumes needed to compete with farmers in other parts of the country, and by 1924 only 5 to 10% of the food supply of New England was locally produced. The situation was problematic enough that the 6 New England governors made a number of recommendations to help the region's farmers. Unfortunately, and possibly unknowingly, the proposals contributed to even less market access. This seems to be the last instance of a concerted political effort to protect the region's agricultural sector, although in the 1970s and `80s several Northeast states designated commissions to study and make recommendations regarding protection of regional farms, fisheries and food systems.

The switch from a regional to a national food system occurred 150 years ago. We follow on 75 years of concerned politician and citizen action to "assure an adequate present and future food supply" for the region's residents. And we toil to change a system that has become global in a way that those New England governors could not have imagined.

Since we are not pioneers in this endeavor, we might ask ourselves what we bring to this problem that these other folks did not. Are there things that we should do better this time around? I think there are at least 3 elements that could increase our chances of success (but will not if we decline to employ them). The first is an improved understanding and ability to engage in systems thinking; the second is a recognition of the importance of planning; and the third is savvy about economics. I can't say that these skills and understandings were not utilized in

previous attempts to address these problems. But I believe that without them it is unlikely that we will get much further than the earlier advocates did.

For example, we should be able to start modeling and calculating how much and what foods can be made available where and under what circumstances in the Northeast. But if this is only a model of farm production it will be of little use, because the model has to be built on realistic (yet forward looking) assumptions about market size, farmer attitudes, consumer attitudes and demand, processing and distribution capacity, local politics, Congressional politics, European Union concerns, WTO decisions, and many other things that are part of the system in all its reality. This doesn't mean we can't work on changing this reality, but we have to understand it really well first.

Our vision of the future sees much less hunger and dependency by low-income households on outside food or resources. Yet because only the very rare low-income neighborhood is totally isolated or self-contained, planning has to account for the places where less food secure households or communities interact with more secure institutions.

In the same vein, most of us envision a lower incidence of hunger in less developed countries. This will occur in part through trade mechanisms which encourage the production of foods, say in tropical areas, in systems in which workers are paid fairly, and the production methods are resource-conserving.

Given these and many other desired futures, how do we think about food self-reliance in the Northeast? How do we determine the balance between regionally-produced and imported foods? And, very importantly, how do we engage the vast majority of citizen/consumers who are quite comfortable with the status quo?

First of all, we do it with great patience. I know this is so obvious, but if the present system developed over 150 years, how can we not think it will take a significant amount of time to change it?

Given this fairly long horizon, there should be plenty of time for systems thinking, planning, and reflection. The temptation to engage only with action projects must be overcome at frequent intervals to allow a stepping back-- placing the action in a bigger framework, and determining if the capacity exists to do what people think should be done. Among other things, if, as some leaders in the Northeast have already seen, the parameters of a future food system (for economic and other reasons) should be the region and not individual states, regional institutions that may not exist yet need to be developed. Systemic thinking is not, and should not be an academic exercise for people who purport to be developing a new food "system"; but, to our detriment, it is rarely undertaken.

Finally, I think that we have to acknowledge that food is not the at the top of the list of concerns of the region's populace. Because consumers are not homogeneous, we need to learn a lot more about what values and concerns are most likely to capture various groups' attention. Thinking in community development terms, we want to identify what their issues are (they may not be directly related to food!) and link ours to them. For example, groups using the "sustainable community" rubric have often totally ignored food, but they are organized, have captured the interest of a lot of people through their environmental and community messages, and could be encouraged to address food problems linked to areas in which they are already working, such as mass transit, water quality, sprawl, jobs, etc. What it takes is learning their language and describing the connections to them-not asking people with no background or expertise in food to either make the connections themselves, or to accept our concerns and jargon standing alone.

Reaching out to other activist communities not only increases the saliency of food system issues, but, of course, enhances collaboration and builds networks. We need all the ideas and help we can get!---it is sobering to know that others before us tried and failed. The more optimistic view of this, however, is that we have better tools (e.g. planning and electronic communications), stronger issues (e.g. the environment), and a better understanding of the forces we confront (e.g. industrialization) than our predecessors did. One other thing that is very different is that now every state and region has experienced the same thing the Northeast did a century and a half ago. That means that allies across the U.S. and the world are working together to again become self-reliant. With so much passion and intelligence committed to this important work, how can we not succeed?