



The Northeast Sustainable Agriculture Working Group

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Paradise Paved

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What is a sustainable and secure regional food and agriculture system?

Life is constantly changing and always a risk. Who knows this better than farmers, who must adapt to the vagaries of weather on a daily basis? Security is important in as much as it implies stability and strength. But we can't base a sustainable system on a desire for security. Instead, we must be vigilant in our efforts to supply the necessities of nourishment to people, communities and our ecosystems so they can withstand the inevitable changes and risks that come as a matter of living. Thus, my comments in this white paper are focused on sustainability rather than security.

The promise of sustainable agriculture is that it emulates nature and tries to create a system that can adapt to present conditions as they change over time. In nature, all things are connected. A sustainable system must connect diverse people and unique places, agricultural producers and consumers, ecological practices with economic profit and so on. And because 21st century agriculture will be practiced in an increasingly urban environment, this means that sustainable agriculture must take place within a context of sustainable development.

America is farming on the edge. Between 1982 and 1992, every state in the nation squandered prime and unique farmland to urban sprawl at an average rate of 50 acres every hour of every day. American Farmland Trust's *Farming on the Edge* study shows a gradual dispersion of urban population to suburbs and small towns. This incremental process threatens our best quality resources and limits our ability to deal with a host of social, economic and environmental problems in the future. For those of us in the Northeast, this should come as no surprise. We have experienced the erosion of our agricultural base for at least a generation.

Sprawling development patterns add competition for land and land use conflicts to the host of economic and environmental challenges faced by modern producers. Escalating land values and property taxes make it hard for farmers to buy or rent land, expand their operations or transfer their land to other farmers. Neighbors complain about the sights, smells and sounds of commercial production. Farmers are outnumbered in local planning and zoning decisions. Declining profitability and discrepant community expectations lead to a decline in farmer satisfaction with agriculture as a business and as a way of life.

The process of farmland conversion tends to be incremental with one farm going out of production here and another one there. As a result, the cumulative loss is often unappreciated until the last remaining farms become islands in a sea of new development. Much of the impact of unmanaged growth is on the best managed and most successful farms. Ironically, this same development can create new opportunities, for example to produce higher value crops or to retail products directly to consumers. People's longing to reconnect with the land and healthy living has led to community supported farms and an increasing desire for locally grown, organic and specialty produce. This creates demand for farmers' markets, pick-your-own operations, community supported agriculture and on-farm recreation.

A major challenge of sustainable agriculture is to make sure that farmers who choose to farm can take advantage of these opportunities to profit and prosper. We can't sustain agriculture if farmers don't find farming rewarding and lack confidence in its future. This is tied to the quantity and quality of land that is available for them to farm, and to the types of community pressures that affect them.

Sustainable agriculture is about more than management practices. We have focused too much on production and not enough on profit. We must pay more attention to the infrastructure for farming and farmers. This includes protecting the natural resource base and keeping a critical mass of high quality land available and affordable to commercial producers. It also means developing the agricultural economy – individual operations, of course, but also equipment dealers and suppliers, processors and distributors. It means getting to know consumers and devising effective marketing strategies to satisfy them. We must build community support for agriculture in general and help urban and suburban people understand the importance of sustainable agriculture to their lives.

This is where I see the connection between sustainable agriculture and sustainable development. We must approach sustainable agriculture within a larger framework of policies and programs that also include sustainable forestry and sustainable communities. We must make the case for the agricultural, environmental and economic values of farmland and explain how they fit within a whole community framework. Increasingly, environmental agencies and conservation organizations are protecting farmland as part of a larger strategy to protect wetlands, watersheds and wildlife. Local governments are combining farmland protection with economic development. To me, this is a very hopeful sign. People are beginning to see that saving farmland is a good investment in the future of their communities. Without it, there can be no agricultural industry and all the associated businesses that support it.

My general concept of community is broad. It does not matter much to me whether we define it locally or regionally, or if we expand our definition to include ecosystems, watersheds or working with like-minded people wherever they are. I think it is time to break free from political or geographic boundaries and consider the broad coalition of people who rely upon our food and agriculture system. Can we achieve our goals globally? After all, the whole world needs a clean environment, strong economies, healthy food and social justice.

On the other hand, land use decisions are generally made at the local level. So local efforts are likely to be more successful and garner more support than efforts at the state or federal levels. State and federal policies are essential to provide incentives, support and legitimacy for local initiatives. Regional approaches, while good in theory, are rare. Certainly the lack of regional systems is a barrier to achieving a more sustainable regional food system! Thus, the recommendations that follow are oriented at the local level.

Recommendations, in no particular order:

- Support local farmers and buy local products;
- Define and map strategic agricultural and community resources;
- Get involved with local planning and zoning decisions;
- Find out which farmland protection programs and policies are available in your state or community;
- Defend laws such as current-use assessment when they are under attack;
- Strengthen local right to farm laws;
- Develop active participation and a broad coalition of support from the entire community;
- Approach farmland protection in the context of smart growth and economic development;
- Combine incentives and regulations to take advantage of all the resources at your disposal;
- Act early before development pressures and politics take precedence over objective, strategic planning to meet long term goals.

*"Don't it always seem to go,
you don't know what you've got
till it's gone.*

*They paved paradise,
and put up a parking lot."*

- Joni Mitchell