



# The Northeast Sustainable Agriculture Working Group

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## *Northeast Food System Analysis*

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### Analysis:

Living as a farmer in the northeast in the final decade of the twentieth century is pretty precarious. The usual factors that have plagued farmers - weather, unstable prices, lack of public recognition - continue to take their toll. In a society that gives little thought and less honor to physical labor, farmers share work values with a shrinking group of artisans and trades people. Where I live in Western New York, conventional farmers complain of feeling hassled by increasing regulations and financial worries; labor issues loom large. Farm families usually expect work contributions from their children, which sets them off from most families where work has ceased to be a shared family ritual. At farmers' meetings, the percentage of younger people drops steadily. There is a sense among farmers of being part of a dying breed, aging holdouts with few new recruits in sight. Some of the larger scale farmers I know accept the logic of the "free market," which may eventually dictate that they too will have to bow to the fate that has struck down so many of their peers. The remedy coming from the farm press and the land grants is GMOs will solve technical problems, contracts are good business, and farmers need to learn to play the futures market to stabilize their incomes.

Organic farming gatherings have more younger people. Women play a larger role in leadership. For vegetable, grain and fruit growers, at least, markets are abundant and expanding. While margins are painfully slim, there is a sense of hopefulness, especially among CSA farmers. The values gap from the majority of the population is as severe for organic farmers as conventional ones. Both groups have a tendency to paranoia - I know this because I experience it too. There are so many factors making farming a hard life choice that it relieves tension to have a few clear enemies to blame for your situation. The Farm Bureau is expert at playing on these feelings.

We cannot have a sustainable and secure food system based on long trucking hauls. The current Northeast food system depends on a large percentage of food shipped into the region from long distances because that is cheaper than local production. However, the land resources still exist in the region to produce a much larger portion of the food consumed here. The human resources for this production and the necessary economic environment and technical support system are lacking. If more of the prime farmland were converted from corn or grain production for livestock to vegetables, and more intensive small

produce farms and greenhouse operations were developed, upwards of 80-90% of the region's vegetable needs could be met. There is already extensive fruit production that is shipped out of the northeast where it is outsold by fruit from the west. Many more farmers and farm workers would be needed to create an adequate number of farms and processing enterprises.

#### Visioning:

I offer you all the Vision for a Sustainable Food System I wrote in 1993. Perhaps it can serve us as a point of departure. I imagine many of you have seen it already, and perhaps our white papers for this conference will become the revision I invited in that essay bringing us closer to an inspiring and energizing vision we can all share.

For producers, I would like to envision a future in which the public recognizes and supports the value of farmers and their work. Farmers' morale would lift if they felt that their realities were seen and their voices heard, if they felt less under attack from environmentalists, government, animal rights activists, etc., and so forth. Even a very modest upturn in the local farm economy with a leveling off of farm numbers would be a big improvement. Flourishing local markets - both direct sales from farmers to consumers and brokered sales through institutions, restaurants and supermarkets - would arrest the loss of farms. Like everyone else, farmers need a sense of hope. Seeing more younger farmers, experiencing respect for the role of food producers, knowing there were people anxious to either inherit or purchase their farm businesses would sooth the inescapable hardships of weather and the increased complexity of social regulation. Having available the information, training, and technical assistance farms require to be flexible enough to survive would be reassuring. For new farmers, access to land is critical: more farmland off the real estate market and held by

community land trusts will give more young people the opportunity to start farming on slim resources. A universal movement, linking active farmers with other regions and around the world would be morally sustaining for many farmers. The chance to live and work in another culture for a few years gives young Americans a more realistic perspective when they return home.

#### Strategies:

The sustainable agriculture movement is already actively engaged in building local markets. We may even have created a bandwagon. I received a mailing last week from American Farmland Trust soliciting my support for their "new" initiative to help create more farmer-controlled farmers' markets. (They gave no credit to any of us who have been working on this for two decades, but never mind.) We are learning how to do this well - now we need to do it systematically. The NE SARE funded project on Ag. Economic Development just getting under way will help move this along. We should learn from this project which approaches to ag. and community development are most effective, create criteria for judging and guiding future development efforts, and establish a growing and active network of practitioners.

Providing on-going training for current farmers, and training and support for new farmers are things we know how to do. We need to think about cradle to grave paths for market gardeners and farmers, to reinforce the existing elements, and fill in the gaps (an obvious example of a gap is the total lack of pension funds for retiring farmers as an alternative to selling their land). We also have learned how to communicate with the Land Grants and the Extension, so we should be able to create a much stronger system of continuing education for farmers, combined with technical assistance. We need to pursue this more aggressively and give the Land Grants something

useful to do. Even setting up mechanisms for the financing of changing or new enterprises is not beyond our capacities: there are excellent models to emulate, such as the revolving loan fund for sustainable agriculture (Minnesota), and the Farmland Viability Act, which gives farmers incentives to do whole farm plans, and then provides grants to implement them (Massachusetts). The Practical Farmers of Iowa provide an excellent model of farmer-led research with Land Grant support.

The attendance at the 1997 NE CSA Conference, the 1998 NOFA conferences, the burgeoning college-based organic market garden projects, and the response to the Proposed Organic Rule all supply evidence that there are young people with a passionate interest in sustainable ag. issues. We must not let this moment pass - there is a real possibility of hundreds of new farmers and thousands of well-informed supportive consumers. We need to strengthen and expand upon internship programs so that those of us who have been at this for close to two decades train our reinforcements. We need to do this well - CRAFT is an excellent model. The NOFA-NY Mentoring Project provides another model of how to link experienced farmers with new ones. We need to connect the FarmLink projects with internship programs, so that graduating interns can farm either land of their own or land trust land. Chuck Matthei of Equity Trust provides an invaluable resource for finding creative ways to take land off the real estate market and preserve it in community holdings.

As important as having great programs with many active participants is how we go about conducting our movement. In his talk at the NOFA Summer Conference, Wendell Berry admonished us to be radical in our thinking and analysis, to give up all belief in one shot solutions, and to avoid self-righteousness and self-betrayal. If we have the

good fortune to attract large numbers of young people, we must be supremely careful of this precious social capital. We must share the understanding that Berry conveys with such dignity, that the work we are doing is hard, long term, unglamorous, and yet very much worth doing. And we must impart the skills to live this life in a healthy, enjoyable way. Too many of our farms and organizations are set up for quick burn out of both individuals and relationships, so we have a lot to learn ourselves about sustainable management and lifestyles. We might consider doing a Holistic Resource Management goal setting and planning exercise for the sustainable ag. movement in the northeast.

We need to learn to communicate better with other farmers. One great service we can perform for them is to bridge the gap between farmers and environmentalists. The National Campaign and the SAWGS have made a good beginning already. The best way to move other farmers along seems to be through direct communications. As I set up this new farming enterprise in Newark, I am aware that all the neighboring farmers are watching what I am doing. I have deliberately found excuses to visit with half a dozen of them, to announce myself as a new neighbor and to tell them my plans. My success or failure will color their view of all of sustainable agriculture. In New York, one of the most effective ways we have found to stimulate changes on farms has been through the Transitions Conferences: at the morning general session, we had speakers like Marty Strange, Tom Frantzen and Fred Kirschenmann. Then we offered workshops divided up into fruit, dairy, and vegetables in which farmers talked about changes they had made to reduce the use of chemicals (we tried to include both conventional and organic), and then researchers who would confirm what those farmers said and give additional examples from research. But the farmers took the lead and set the tone.

NOFA-NY would like to revive this conference. Getting farmers to work as groups - by watershed, or through local or regional marketing efforts is an important way to empower us. There is very little money available for whole farm planning and economic development as such, but there is money for clean water/clean air. We need to make the link between these environmental issues and the importance of maintaining the economic viability of farms. AFT has grasped this connection for preserving farmland. We need to continue working on the other environmentalists, the planners, developers and politicians.

I would like to conclude this brief discussion of strategies with a few words about our internal process. I think we have learned a lot about good group process over the past decade or so - we run better meetings, we listen more actively to one another, we document our work. We still have a long way to go in learning how to set ego aside and work together in mutual respect and cooperation. If we want a movement that will create a world we will be proud to live in, we need to make participation enjoyable, rewarding (morally, not financially), spiritually and emotionally enriching. As Gandhi once said, "You must be the change you wish to see in the world."