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

On Reaching a Sustainable Food Production System in the Northeast US - A Farmer's View

Shane J. LaBrake
Farm Manager, RWS Ecosystem Farm
Accokeek Foundation, Accokeek, MD

In the Northeast United States there are many growers experimenting with ideas and technologies that would enable us to produce and provide a variety of fresh vegetables year-round using sustainable production techniques. Clearly, fresh vegetables represent only a portion of our diet and food needs. It is interesting to consider that using such year-round production methods, Northeast growers could supplant the current dependency upon the California-Mexico production system; a system that "sustains" much of the Northeast population's diet in terms of these nutrient rich foods.

A walk through the produce aisle of any major supermarket in any part of the Northeast, including the more rural areas, will reveal that very little of the fresh food on those shelves is grown within the region. Occasionally one will find some seasonal foods that make their way into produce sections. Most of the trade in regionally grown fresh foods, though, occurs not in the mainstream supermarkets but instead in regional farmers markets, restaurant sales, community supported agriculture, (CSA), programs or in other forms of "direct marketing."

While these venues can sometimes be very profitable for some growers, the question remains: "How many Northeast people are actually being fed by this small number of producers?"

This question is only a part of the larger question that looms over all of us that live in this region: Can we, and how will we, as producers sustain a regional population of about 100 million people using sustainable production techniques? Indeed, given current realities facing producers in the region - is it even possible? Perhaps even more to the point - given that the current California-Mexico paradigm is heavily dependent upon fossil fuels, an increasingly limited water and land base, a dependency upon a somewhat unstable migrant work force, and what seems like an incredibly short-sighted, profit driven management mentality - what will we do in the Northeast for fresh food should any of these variables erupt into a crisis? Can we in the production sector meet the challenge resulting from such a disruption? Even better - can we nip it in the bud, i.e. can we "subvert this dominant paradigm" before the inevitable ever happens?

Some parameters. As it pertains to a definition of the Northeast this paper will assume it is the region

defined by the USDA SARE Program and extend that boundary to include Northern Virginia down to Richmond. This then recognizes the I-95 corridor from the southern suburbs of Richmond right through to Maine with the Western boundaries being the state lines of West Virginia, Pennsylvania and New York. This is one of the most densely populated regions in the US, about 100 million people, (note this number). The word sustainable means many things to many people. For this discussion it will mean agricultural practices that are commonly accepted as organic and/or low- input. The writer acknowledges that the use of fossil fuels/petroleum based by-products on many of these farms is not truly sustainable in the long run, but is a current reality for food production at scale in the region.

To achieve a sustainable food production system for the Northeast region that addresses the above questions we must first assess the following elements vital to its success:

I. The development of a larger skilled and willing farmer/grower/producer base that is skilled in sustainable production techniques.
II. The preservation, and perhaps reallocation of lands to allow this emerging farmer base access to production ground.
III. A source of capital to help capitalize this new crop of farmers.
IV. An educated and supportive consumer base willing to sustain this new farmer, i.e., markets.
V. A support system that insures that those willing to farm have the emotional resources they need to keep farming.
VI. A resuscitation of local farm service enterprises. This is only a partial list, one that must evolve and be further refined as we better understand the vast challenge within the premise.

I. Creating more farmers.

To feed fresh food to the region's population we will need more farmers. Consider that the statistics within the region suggest that for most states the average age of farmers is between 55- and 65-years-old. Put another way, most of the people producing food in the Northeast region are approaching retirement age, (assuming farmers retire). And even if there were to be more people growing their own food in the region, (i.e. gardens), it will still be imperative to have more producers growing more food to supply the fresh produce needs of the majority of the regions 100 million inhabitants.

There seems to be widespread interest among younger people in experiencing farm work on organic vegetable farms. How far it goes beyond a summer is hard to tell. Many who experience farming for the first time this way, (depending on the farm - these young workers might be called apprentices, interns, farmworkers, etc.), quickly discover that farming is a lot of hard work that requires many skills that they have never learned in school. In fact for some, it seems to be an intimidating experience; an experience to quickly dispel any delusions of agriculture.

Sadly, the Land Grant universities charged with providing research and education in agriculture do a much better job of creating ag scientists than they do of creating skilled farmers. (Even more unfortunate is that the research agenda is often set by the interests of large agribusiness conglomerates.) It is only in recent years that some of the Land Grants even have begun to approach sustainable/organic production techniques in their curriculum and research.

There is a need, then, both to find more and better candidates for becoming farmers and for opportunities and programs to help train them.

II. Land

The availability of affordable, productive land that is close to markets is rapidly diminishing - if available at all in some areas. The American Farmland Trust recently released a report titled "Farming On the Edge." In it they identified the top 10 most threatened agricultural areas in the US. Three of these top 10 areas are in the Northeast US. Not surprisingly, given the current population numbers, the largest threat to farmlands is urban development. In 1997-98, 148,000 acres of land was lost to development in Maryland alone. Productive farmland is being sown into rows of sterile housing - its value assessed not in terms of food production but rather development potential. This pattern dramatically affects land prices and radically alters the landscape and our capability to continue to produce food sustainably and affordably within the region. Row- housing-crops is not a crop this farmer at all wishes to cultivate.

The threat comes from more than just sprawl, however. In terms of sustainable production, anyway, there is much farmland in the Northeast that is imperiled by current use and production patterns. In particular, the DelMarVa peninsula, an area that once was a large scale vegetable production and canning center, (serving the Northeast region), is now farmed heavily in corn and soybeans to feed a vertically integrated poultry industry. Without elaborating on details there is very little in this model that is sustainable over the long term. The goal should be not to eliminate poultry from the diet, but to find healthier production systems - healthier for the environment, the consumer, the farmer and the animal.

One result of sprawl and questionable use of ag land is that there is little productive and affordable land left for "new" farmers to care for, especially within reach of sound markets. What land remains may be overpriced, far from markets, and of poor production quality. The challenge of farming these marginal soils includes increased production costs and higher burnout potential as the returns take longer to realize.

III. Capital

Like any other business venture, it all comes down to money. Assuming that a new crop of farmers are trained and willing with access to land, they will still need capital to finance the farm. Farms require infrastructure, (outbuildings, water, housing, etc.). Regardless of technologies employed, (say tractor power vs. draft animal, or even a walk-behind rototiller), there is a need for some infrastructure for the operation to be efficient and effective so as to be profitable. Sustainable food production should not be debt inducing - at least over the long term.

While there are many ways to approach the capitalization of a farm, few of them involve getting start-up capital from a bank. Working an off-farm job, or having a partner with an off-farm job is one method to maintain some income - and oftentimes benefits such as health insurance too. While this can help meet the mortgage, it detracts from food production. For some, they work in other areas to establish a capital base to help finance a farm. Inheritance, of farm or money, is another means for a few. The truth is that there is little help available to fund new farm ventures if the above options are non-existent.

IV. Markets

Assuming a new corps of farmers that is skilled, landed and capitalized emerges, these new growers will obviously need markets to sustain their farms. Current direct marketing strategies seem to be very profitable for some farmers. Whether it be through wholesaling, a CSA or a roadside stand - there are growers supplying some regionally produced food to some Northeast residents. Their impact on numbers in the region, (i.e. the percentage of 100 million people that eat local food regularly), is probably quite small.

For example, some in the CSA movement cite the goal of 1% participation of the population of a community. For Rochester, NY, (pop. 1,002,410. 1990 US Census Data), that would mean that approximately 10,000 people would get their fresh vegetables from a CSA. Current numbers

suggest that maybe 1000 people in Rochester get their fresh vegetables from a CSA, and at that, only for a portion of the year. Progress - certainly. But this is still a far ways from regional sustainability.

For the concept of a sustainable regional food production system to be viable over the long term there will need to be a large-scale shift in consumer attitudes and eating patterns. The message of "Eat fresh, eat local, and eat in-season," will have to be the practice of millions of consumers throughout the region. Further, consumers should expect to pay more to sustain the people who grow their food, (although this further begs the question of how to insure food access to the region's poor and hungry, and also - should this even be the responsibility of the farmer?). Farmers work too hard and with too much risk to deserve a low return from their financial, physical and spiritual investments. It is time to dispel the myth of a cheap and abundant food supply. A myth that can only exist because land and millions of people here and in other countries are exploited to keep our food cheap and plentiful - regardless of whether or not it is even safe or healthful. It is the consumer population that must be willing and ready to rise-up and meet this challenge. "Support your local Farmer" should be a sticker on every refrigerator.

V. A Farmer Support System

A recent editorial in Growing For Market assessed the impact of farming on farm couples. The gist of the piece was that farming is stressful and that the stress often is disruptive, if not fatal to some farm-couple relationships. Sadly, this is not news to anyone who is a farmer or to anyone who is close to farmers.

Farming is not a job, it is a lifestyle choice. It is a choice that puts the life and death and well being of plants and animals, (and soils too!), above many of a farmer's personal needs. It is a choice that revolves around weather and the humbling fact that we control very little. It is a choice that is frequently misunderstood by urban and suburban dwellers. Farmers are aggrandized for their aesthetic and cursed for spewing noise and odors. As the ranks of those who can say that they grew up on a farm, or that their parents grew up on a farm, dwindle, so does an inherent understanding of what farming is and how it affects farmers and their families.

For farms and farmers to thrive and survive they need to be valued and supported by the people they feed. And amongst ourselves we farmers might benefit from taking time to gather with one another more frequently to offer support, friendship, understanding and relaxation. Land, skills, adequate cash flow and markets are vital and will help insure the material and physical aspects of farming. Ignoring the spiritual and the need for community could be just as fatal.

VI. Local Farm Services

For the past several years, farmers in the Northeast have witnessed a disturbing trend of farm service businesses closing and/or leaving the region. This fact also complicates the work of farming. Implement dealers are farther away. Specialized repairs are harder to arrange. Quick and easy access to parts, information and specialists - important to the time=money equation - is no longer available in many places.

We are left with phone/FAX/INTERNET connections moving parts and info via UPS/FEDEX. At least we have these, but it is not the same as driving into town to pick-up the part, get some advice on how to install it and a chance for some company and commiserating too. Local shops and servicefolk are essential to the vitality of farming communities - both rural and urban. These too need to be sustained and supported to insure a sustainable production system in the region.

~ ~ ~

There are now many technologies and practices in place that indicate that it is possible to produce fresh produce within the northeast region year-round. Further, evidence suggests that there are some strong markets for this produce. The above discussion indicates, however, that there are many barriers that currently prevent the application of these methods at a scale sufficient for the entire Northeast region. If we are to create a sustainable regional food production system that feeds the region - this must change.

The challenge to all of us in the region is to dismantle these barriers. We must cooperate to advance the concept of a viable regional food production system. This production system will need to expand from its current base and must expand rapidly. As a food production system that is maintained by farmers, it is critical that these individuals get the support needed to maintain their lives and their farms and their families. This means that somehow, sooner or later, consumers must assume a greater responsibility for their food, either by paying more realistic prices, or by doing some of their own food production via gardening or maybe participating in a CSA.

It is disturbing that many in our culture will quickly complain about high food prices, (and one might question which food prices, e.g. frozen foods?, potato chips?, convenience foods?, etc.), yet so readily spend money on all types of high-priced entertainment. If only regional farmers and food production were as valued to a community as much as their professional sports franchises or shopping malls and theater complexes. In essence, to reshape the regional food production system, there must be widespread consumer support and a shift in community priorities.

Farmers and farming must become a valued resource in the region's communities. In all arenas - academic, public policy, community development - farms must be considered in terms of the intrinsic value they represent to the security and well-being of the community. It would be a welcome development to see mini-farms or gardens planned into new housing developments, school expansions and community sport centers.

The challenge to the region, in terms of developing a sustainable regional food production system, is really two fold. There must be mechanisms established that address the above six areas and others necessary to birth and support new farms and farmers. And there must be consumer support to insure the viability and success of these new farms and farmers. It seems both simple and obvious.

There is already much underway to foster the development of more farmers in the region. Indeed there is a synergy emerging among different groups and institutions, (including the Land Grant system), directed at the issue of establishing more farms and farmers. It seems likely that opportunities for better training will develop. What is needed next is creative financing; for once the farmer is trained, how will they obtain ground to farm? One idea would be for the Federal Government, or some other entity, to create a parallel of the GI Bill that would guarantee low- interest loans for "new" farmers that have "graduated" from an accredited "land-based" farmer training program. This "Small Farmer Bill" could help many interested and trained people get on the land without having to first have a pool of assets to back them up.

Another possibility is the creation of cooperatively owned farms - many farmers joining together to finance the land and to share in the risk, and the rewards, too.

Establishing more small farms that are viable and successful is probably possible within the next 10 - 20 years. Creating a consumer base that will support their existence is where the real challenge lies.

The worst case scenario is that an unforeseen crisis forces consumers to seek out regionally produced foods. Out of necessity the goal of greater consumer awareness and demand

becomes reality. But in the immediate real world, how does this happen? - and without increased hunger and suffering.

It will require an enormous public education effort, to redirect the values around food, of the majority of the region's population. Could it ever be possible that the majority of the 100 million Northeasters will ever "eat fresh, eat local and eat in season?" (We should remember too, that there are millions each day who eat much of their food from restaurants and fast-food joints; is fast food sustainable?) Will these folks give up their California iceberg lettuce and "pink baseball" tomatoes that fill their quarter-pounders and whopper sandwiches?

There are no simple answers here. More farms and farmers - sustainable operations - can probably be created. Maybe it is even possible to establish enough with adequate skills that can realistically produce fresh food for the region's population. How to change the attitudes of the consumer, though?

It will take all of the above ideas and more. There is now an established base to build from. Many among us are cooperating and collaborating in a grassroots revolution to insure viable food production and food security within our region. We are still a tiny minority, though. We must question which are the most effective avenues for change. The recent debacle with the USDA's attempt to regulate organic food production is a timely reminder of how much of our energy can be robbed by processes that in the end, leave us worse off then when we started. It seems like such a logical choice to affect positive change.

It is almost tragic that the goodwill, the thoughtfulness, and the energy of so many respected people could so readily be bypassed as it was in this recent fiasco. As we continue to regroup and consider new means to develop our agenda in developing a sustainable regional food production system, we should consider other ways to achieve our goals.

One idea would be to look at the success of the religious right in moving their agenda forward by establishing a strong position in the local arena to then catapult their issues with more support to higher levels; perhaps a redoubled effort to "think globally, act locally." Certainly this is the essence of some of the efforts and organizations that already exist. The caution offered here is to carefully consider where we place our energy to achieve our goals.

In the end, food is power. Maybe the message to the consumers in the region ought to include this simple fact. We empower ourselves by assuming control of our food supply. Indeed, entire communities could be "redeveloped" around this very notion. Local food production and local food processing for local consumption. It could happen. It may have to happen. Let's hope we are ready.