



# The Northeast Sustainable Agriculture Working Group

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## *What Contemporary 'Metropolitan Agriculture' Tells Us About the Region's Food System Potential*

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Much of the nation's food growing capacity currently exists in those places which are more accurately categorized as within the rural-urban fringe, places located between 10 and 40 miles of a city or a suburban center. Throughout the country, and certainly in the Northeast region, the number of farms and the farmland base in the rural-urban fringe has stabilized, and farmers located there have adapted to emerging market opportunities, thus creating a more dynamic farming system. Farms in the rural-urban fringe, what we have come to call "metropolitan agriculture," do not represent a relic of times past as much as a harbinger of some types of agricultural activity for the future. Addressing the future needs of metropolitan farmers, and realizing the potential these farms represent for the future of the region's food system, constitutes an important public policy challenge.

Nationally, approximately one third of all farms are located within Metropolitan Statistical Areas. In the Northeast region metropolitan farms rise to one-half to the total (Heimlich, 1989). Metropolitan farms produce more than two-thirds of all fruits and vegetables and three-quarters of greenhouse, nursery, and horticultural crops.

A recently published American Farmland Trust study indicates that the country's 1,549 "urban-influenced countries" produced nearly ninety percent of all fruits and nuts, and eighty-six percent of all vegetables. Even for products raised on a large scale, such countries are highly productive, these farms produced forty-seven percent of all grains, forty-five percent of all livestock and poultry, and almost eighty percent of all dairy products nationally (American Farmland Trust, 1994). Some comparable data developed for the Northeast developed by Pfeffer and Lapping (Pfeffer and Lapping, 1995), suggests much the same pattern for the region. Additionally, metropolitan farms in the Northeast have tended to specialize more in high-value commodities and sell more commodities directly to consumers (Lapping and Pfeffer, 1997). While tending to be smaller and more intensive in their use of resources when compared to farms in deep rural areas, metropolitan farms in the Northeast region appear to be more closely connected with their markets and are highly flexible in responding rapidly to changes in the marketplace. They generally do more with less, and tend to follow what Stewart Smith has called a "value mode of agriculture" (Smith, 1987).

Large parts of the metropolitan agricultural community are actively developing alternative models of farm organization that depart from the highly specialized, government-supported and regulated agricultural system that for so long has dominated the national food-supply system. The diversification of farm operations and production is geared to specific market niches offering premium price opportunities in rural-urban fringe areas (Heimlich and Barnard, 1992). Producers with direct access to urban and suburban consumers appear to get better prices that help to compensate for greater risks of operating without government price and income support guarantees. A very large fraction of such producers combine farming with other income-generating activities. Some of these are farm-based, such as tourism, animal boarding and training, and estate management. Still, most nonfarm produced income is earned in nearby urban communities by either the farmer or other members of the farm family.

Surveys suggest that Northeastern metropolitan farmers will continue to produce the following commodities well into the future:

#### Food/Feed Crops

- animal feeds (hay and small grains)
- fruits and vegetables (especially organic)
- greens
- herbs
- jellies, jams, pies
- table grapes, wine
- maple syrup

#### Animal/Products

- fish
- goat's meat and milk
- specialty cheese
- local beef, veal, pork, lamb
- organic eggs and poultry
- horses

#### Other Products/Services

- bark mulch, fuel wood, pulpwood, saw timber
- animal boarding, breeding, training
- farm retreats, tours, and vacations
- bedding plants, cut flowers, trees, turf, sod
- wine tastings

Despite these potential and emerging opportunities -- and doubtless there are others which will develop over time as producers take advantage of markets yet to be defined -- several problems threaten farming in the metropolitan Northeast. First, policy makers must come to realize that farming in the region constitutes a primary form of wealth creation and that enhancing and sustaining local agriculture is a valid form of economic development.

Second, metropolitan agriculture in the rural-urban fringe is most immediately threatened by the conversion of farmland to alternative uses. development pressures directly harm agriculture by increasing property tax burdens on farm operators, reducing the number of farms to below the "critical mass" necessary to maintain the profitability of essential agricultural support businesses, and making it ever more difficult for new farmers to enter agriculture because they must bid against developers and others for increasingly expensive land. Furthermore, sometimes an impermanence syndrome develops, where existing farmers no longer make investments in their operations, believing that imminent land conversion will make any investment irrelevant. The result is that these farms often fail. Large farms are often subdivided into smaller units as a result of development pressures. This leads to a checkerboard distribution of farmlands, with few contiguous fields, making it difficult for farmers to monitor crop growth and animal safety, move equipment efficiently, and control pest populations effectively. No region has experimented more nor longer with alternative methods to preserve

farmland than the Northeast. It is high time that effective public policy be crafted to effectively protect some of the nation's most intrinsically productive and vulnerable farmlands.

Third, mechanisms to better connect consumers and producers must be forged. Nothing will do more to sustain the region's food system than will more robust connections between farmers and consumers. Community Supported Agriculture mechanisms (CSAs), land trusts, city markets, farmers markets, direct sales at the farm gate, all these and more must occur in greater density and with greater frequency. Each will lead to the emergence of a renewed "food literacy," which will ultimately be the value and vision which undergirds and sustains a revival in the Northeast's food system.

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