

Region's farming boom provides much to chew on



Recorder/Paul Franz

Paul Lacinski and Sidehill Farm now have 220 acres on this Hawley hilltop for their Normandy cattle they raise mainly for their yogurt business.

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(First of two parts)

The bounty of this region's farming boom is hard to miss, whether walking into the winter farmers market at Greenfield High School, seeing the growing number of farm stands and markets and Community Supported Agriculture operations around the region.

But other than the array of local produce, are there really benefits to seeing more people growing more kinds of tomatoes, squash and kale?

Beyond tangibles like gross agricultural sales and a boost in farm payroll, there may be harder to define pluses from the recent surge of interest in farming around the region, say some local observers.

Even current data about the economic impact is harder to come by than local winter greens, since the last agricultural census dates back to 2007. Yet the Census does report a 26 percent growth in the number of county farms and a 33 percent increase in the market value of agricultural products sold in the county between 2002 and 2007, totaling nearly \$57 million.

But that direct economic activity doesn't begin to suggest the real financial impact, including "multiplier" business activity through the Western Massachusetts Food Processing Center, the Franklin County Farmers Cooperative Exchange, Sirum Equipment in Montague, Orchard Equipment in Conway and other businesses.

What's more, a series of interviews with agricultural leaders around the region suggests there's more to this picture, even if the broader perspective

isn't as easy to quantify.

Take environmental awareness, for example.

It may be a chicken-and-egg question of cause and effect, but there may be reason to suggest that a region with as much farmland as ours is more attuned to the impact of natural forces on farming and vice versa than in urbanized areas.

There's a real danger of over-romanticizing the connection that farmers — or their neighbors — have with the land, warns Brian Donahue, a Gill livestock farmer and Brandeis University agricultural historian who has spent three decades working on a community farm in suburban Boston.

But it's a reality, he adds, that farmers historically understood their land very well and wanted to be good stewards of it, and that's been intertwined with a desire to make a living from it.

"As people in the (community farm) program go on with their lives, we hope they gain some greater appreciation of the land around them, of the soil and what it takes to do this kind of thing," says Donahue.

Paul Lacinski of Sidehill Farm says living in an area where farming is still vibrant plays an important part in how people perceive the environment.

"Because we live in a region that's still an agricultural region, the drought is news not just because we can't water the lawn," he says. There's an awareness that it's connected to the landscape that surrounds us.

Abrah Dresdale, who directs the Farm and Food Systems program at

Greenfield Community College, agrees.

“Whether it’s from directly participating in agriculture or going to the farmers market, there is a greater environmental connection, because it means there is more intimacy with land, either from working the land or from buying foods that were directly harvested from the land here,” says Dresdale. Just being surrounded by “working landscapes” that produce our food, she says, affects our sense of valuing our land and the agriculture that helps keep “our bucolic New England” scenery.

What’s more, Dresdale said, she’s seen students who had been pretty much disaffected “turn on like light bulbs” when they begin working with growing and harvesting food.

“Whether it’s a class in organic gardening or foraging mushrooms, there’s something that becomes re-ignited, a passion and enthusiasm that returns,” she said. “There definitely is a romanticization, and you can’t know if it’s for you until you’ve tried it, because farming is a lot of hard work and a lot of hours.” Yet, despite the real-world financial pressures that can be enormous, she described one CSA farmer who turned to farming as a way of “healing. It keeps him centered to be outside every day with the soil, with plants and with the birds. For him, it’s therapeutic.”

Self-reliance

Another side effect of farming as a way of life may be the sense of personal self-reliance and community resilience, say many observers, who note life on a farm has traditionally meant having to know how to fix every problem from a broken tractor or hay baler to caring for a sick animal and perform every aspect of running a business.

A popular component of GCC's new Farm and Food Systems program is a series of "re-skilling" courses, in areas ranging from mushroom foraging, four-season farming and cultivation to beekeeping, food preservation and storage, which Dresdale said has been very popular among students and people in the community interested in learning basic skills like canning.

Similarly, Deborah Habib of Seeds of Solidarity Farm in Orange says she's seen a palpable boost in self-confidence as people young and old in her "Grow Food Everywhere" gardens around the North Quabbin region, and among teens in her SOL Garden program begin to master the skill of growing their own food.

"For the families we work with, a big premise is, 'You can do this.' It's about self-reliance, and it's not only good for your health and empowering, it's also a healing thing. It's a basic need to be able to shift, even a little, from giving that power up so you don't have any connection to your food, to the source of your food, to access to your food. Being able to reclaim even a part of that is very profound."

Jay Lord, the founding director of Just Roots in Greenfield, sees a similar kind of empowerment tied to food-security issues as the Greenfield nonprofit community agriculture organization tries to broaden the appreciation and familiarity among all classes of people for local foods they can grow and prepare.

"We're talking about rebuilding a culture, and that includes cooking and growing and being connected with your environment," says Lord, explaining that sense of connection has been broken, and has left people feeling further and further removed from the source of the food or even knowing what they're eating anymore.

Just Roots hopes not only to grow food for community programs but also to teach schoolchildren about food and to teach people nutritious ways of preparing local produce. It can also play a role in building the market for local agricultural products that a majority of people still have trouble connecting with.

“We understand that change comes slowly,” says Lord. “This is a huge change, and one of the best ways to work on it is through education, through kids and through the concern of parents for their kids.”

End of an era

More than simply returning a sense of self-mastery to people who feel we’re too dependent on forces outside our control for basics including the very food we eat, getting people to grow their own food and support local growers is also a response to the end of an era of cheap oil, says Lord.

“The average dinner has traveled something like 1,500 miles, and has food from four countries in it,” he says, and when the price of oil reaches a certain point, it won’t be economically viable to truck it cross-country. Even before those long-distance realities become apparent to many of us, becoming more self reliant will clearly become more important, he says.

Donahue has researched how New England could move toward more self-reliance in providing its own food, and has helped the Franklin Regional Council of Governments in its own study of how to do the same. He cautions that historically, farmers have become more specialized in producing the products they’ve grown best or could produce most cost-effectively.

“I think that’s a complicated story where we might have always been moving in a couple of directions at once I’m not interested in trying to recover an

idealized past, where everyone in the countryside was provisioning themselves.”

Based upon his research, Donahue estimates in his “New England Food Vision” analysis that New England now provides about 10 percent of its own food. But he hopes to see that improves dramatically over the next 50 years.

“I think we could and should move toward self-reliance on the local and regional level,” he says. “I think we in New England could produce about half of our food within the region.”

(Thursday: Toward
better quality of life)

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