

GLYNWOOD

COMMENTS SUBMITTED TO

AMERICA'S GREAT OUTDOORS

HUDSON VALLEY LISTENING SESSION

August 6, 2010

We appreciate the federal government's decision to hold a "listening session" in the Hudson Valley in conjunction with the America's Great Outdoors initiative. This provides powerful recognition of the importance of the Valley's rich tapestry of landscapes, including its working landscape. And we appreciate this opportunity to submit comments on effective strategies that are being employed here to connect people with the outdoors, the challenges to greater effectiveness, and how the federal government could be a more effective partner.

Agriculture and food generate powerful connections to the land – for some these are life-long connections, for others newly discovered ones. In either case, these connections encourage stewardship of the land - a deep sense of responsibility for careful management and use that respects its environmental importance as well as its economic value.

Glynwood Center is a nonprofit organization located outside Cold Spring in the lower Hudson Valley. A primary focus of Glynwood's work is to help communities save farming, with a special focus on the Hudson Valley and the Northeast. Through our community-based work, we identify other needs that must be addressed at the regional level. We do this through workshops, training programs, studies and reports and, most recently, by taking the lead in the creation of critical infrastructure.

Through this work we have developed a deep understanding of the importance of farming to the future of the Hudson Valley and the challenges inherent in retaining agriculture within the sphere of a major metropolis.

THE IMPORTANCE OF AGRICULTURE IN THE HUDSON VALLEY¹

What We Glean from the Ag Census Data.

When most people think of agriculture in New York State, they think of “upstate”, not the Hudson Valley, which long has been subjected to intense development pressure from commuters and second home owners.

But in fact, according to the Census of Agriculture, in 2007 there were 848,214 acres of farmland in the Hudson Valley. That is equivalent to more than 1,300 square miles of land. This is an extraordinary resource, especially in light of its proximity to New York City. 17% of the land in the region is farmland – again an impressive figure given that the percentage for the entire state was 24.

The Census also identified more than 5,000 farms in the Valley, the vast majority of them owned by individuals or families. They are small and mid-sized farms: the average size was 144 acres and more than half were smaller than 70 acres.

Collectively, the Valley’s farms had sales of \$510,322,000 – *more than one-half billion dollars.*

Think of the impact of this money recirculating in the local and regional economy – and the negative impact if it were to be lost. Yet until very recently agriculture has been the “invisible economy” - overlooked in the context of economic development efforts that sought the “silver bullet” of new industrial development. Meanwhile, these farmers – critical small businesspeople – struggled to receive the support that they need and deserve from economic development and related agencies.

Agriculture in the Valley is transitioning in some ways, in response to new market opportunities. For example, more of the Valley’s farmers are taking advantage of the opportunities provided by nearby markets: from 2002 to 2007 direct sales in the Hudson Valley went up by 36%. In fact, one-third of all farms in the State of NY with direct sales were in the Hudson Valley. (We know from experience that while a significant part of the direct sales occur in New York City, especially through community supported agriculture programs and the Greenmarkets system of farmers markets, there is increasing demand for product within the Valley itself. This is a welcome sign of increasing support for farming within the communities in which it occurs.)

Now for the sobering side of this story: the average net cash income for the Valley’s farmers was \$13,624. That is only 42% of the NY State average net cash farm income of \$32,533. This reflects many things, including the high costs of doing business in a

¹ This is based on the 12 county definition of the Hudson Valley used by the Hudson Valley Greenway (excluding NYC).

metropolitan region. Clearly this is not sustainable without a family member working off the farm or other sources of income.

And perhaps in part because of this, the Valley lost 10% of its farmland between 2002 and 2007.

The continuing loss of farmland, at a time when the importance of fresh locally produced food is becoming increasingly apparent as a matter of public health and food security, indicates the need to take action on every level to support the economic viability of the region's farmers.

The Quadracentennial Visioning Process

As a culminating effort of the Hudson Fulton Champlain Quadracentennial celebration, six Task Forces were created to develop a vision for key elements of the Valley and to make recommendations for how the vision might be achieved. One of the six Task Forces focused on Food and Agriculture.

The Vision statement encompassed a bright and important future for agriculture in the Valley - one that the Task Force thought fully achievable. It reads in part:

“The Hudson Valley is universally recognized as a world class landscape producing world class food. The Hudson Valley and the Napa Valley are coastal brackets for a country that has rediscovered its respect for food and for the people, water and land that produce it.The importance of agriculture to the region's quality of life – its economic and environmental well-being and the health of its residents – is understood and supported by public officials at every level, as well as residents in the entire metropolitan region....The Valley stands as a national model for how the many and complex components of a major metropolitan region can work together to support a food and agricultural system that benefits all residents.”

Many of the “propositions” set forth for actions to be taken to realize the vision relate to action by private individuals and organizations and state and local government. However, the broad themes are entirely consistent with those included in this document. The entire Task Force report, which may be of interest to our federal partners, may be found at <http://media.ourhudson.org/category/task-force-themes/agriculture-priority-themes-2/>.

WHAT IS WORKING: BUILDING COMMUNITY SUPPORT

A primary focus of Glynwood's work is at the community level, where both landowners and local governments make critical land use decisions. Through our community-based programs we have demonstrated that once communities understand the value of

agriculture, and develop strong networks of collaboration, they will take sustained action to support its continuation.

For example, our Keep Farming® program empowers communities to support farming and conserve farmland. The program engages community members to generate the data they need to assess agricultural resources and the contribution they make to the economy, environment and quality of life, including access to fresh, local food. In so doing new relationships are established among community volunteers, farmers and local officials.

We then assist each community in designing and implementing a strategy based on its unique circumstances. The new constituency developed through the program provides the basis for sustained action in support of agriculture, including enacting policies to create economic opportunity and growing essential infrastructure for local agriculture.

For example, in the town of Chatham, the data gathered by the local volunteers revealed that the town's farmers were spending about \$1.25 million per year on goods and services. The scale of their economic impact (even without the application of any economic multipliers) took most residents by surprise and generated strong interest in taking action. Eric Ooms, a dairy farmer in Chatham and Former President of Columbia County Farm Bureau, stated that: "In the Keep Farming process I was impressed how residents and farmers began having new conversations, developed a better understanding of shared issues and have continued to support agriculture in our community..."

As a result of the Keep Farming® program, the town of Chatham completed a comprehensive plan with a strong section on retention of agriculture, which has recently been supplemented with its Agricultural Land Preservation Plan, which has been approved by the Town, County and the Commissioner of New York State Department of Agriculture. The plan includes the Town's vision and goals for preserving farmland and promoting a viable agriculture economy. The organization that developed from the Keep Farming® program continues to promote the importance of farming through activities including an annual farm film festival and production of an agri-tourism brochure. *A recent evaluation of the Keep Farming program in Chatham revealed that there has been no net loss of farmland in Chatham in the five years since the conclusion of the program.* [For more short case studies from the Keep Farming program in the Hudson Valley, please see Supplement 1, below.

Keep Farming® is the first cousin of the Countryside Exchange program. Glynwood has been the lead United States organization for this program in more than 100 communities in the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom and other countries.

The Exchange uses the visit of a team of carefully selected volunteer professionals to catalyze a community to develop new networks of collaboration, define key issues,

develop new strategies for the future, and take action. The Countryside Exchange program, which has been conducted in partnership with the National Park Service and US Environmental Protection Agency among others, again reveals the powerful impact of using new incentives for collaboration, development of new information, and “fresh eyes” to encourage community residents to connect to the land and become active and effective stewards of their communities. [For more information on the Countryside Exchange and reports from past Exchanges, please visit the Glynwood website <http://www.glynwood.org/programs/past-programs/countryside-exchange/> and <http://www.glynwood.org/publications-multimedia/countryside-exchange-reports-1987-2004/>

Our understanding of the importance of local community engagement was confirmed recently by a study undertaken by land use attorney Joel Russell. Over the years Mr. Russell has helped several towns in the Valley design zoning intended to encourage agriculture. Last year he undertook an assessment of which of these efforts had been effective and why.

He concluded that farmland protection zoning *by itself* is never sufficient to preserve farmland. Instead, he found that communities with successful farmland protection programs have a distinctive *culture*, in which farming, farmers, and farmland are valued *for their own sake*, and not just for scenic value or as a way to prevent residential or commercial development.²

Mr. Russell’s conclusion buttresses the results of a study Glynwood undertook in conjunction with the analysis of the 2002 Agricultural Census Data for the Valley. We found that “...other areas of the country that have been working to strengthen their regional food systems have found that it is important to develop a widespread, fundamental and passionate belief that agriculture must be part of the region’s future. This belief galvanizes the community and policy makers to support agriculture and gives the farmers the confidence they need to persevere.”³

CHALLENGES: THE NEED TO STRENGTHEN AGRICULTURAL INFRASTRUCTURE

As explained above, the Hudson Valley is characterized by many dispersed, small and mid-size farmers. Over the past several decades, as much of the nation’s agricultural economy has shifted toward consolidation and commodity production, the network of small-scale processing and distribution infrastructure on which smaller, independent farmers depend has seriously frayed. As a result, it has become increasingly difficult for

² Joel Russell, Esq., “How Well Has Agricultural Protection Zoning Worked?”, *Practicing Planner*, Winter 2009

³ Jayne E. Daly, Esq., “The State of Agriculture in the Hudson Valley”, 2004, Glynwood Center, Inc.

many farmers to reach markets efficiently, which discourages optimal production and reduces farm viability.

For example, the Valley grows good grass and is a good place for pasturing livestock. The market for meat from pastured animals is very strong and growing, as more consumers understand its health and environmental benefits. But it is hard for producers to reach this market because there are too few USDA licensed slaughterhouses nearby. Glynwood's farm manager must schedule appointments 9 to 12 months in advance, often for only one or two steer at a time, then travel 150 miles round trip first to deliver the animals, then to pick up the meat. This certainly contributes to the fact that high quality meat from regional farmers is much higher priced than meat from the industrial system.

It also reduces the amount of regional meat that is produced. A recent study in Massachusetts, in a region quite similar to the Hudson Valley, found that nearly 60% of the farmers who responded to their survey projected increases in the number of animals they would bring for slaughter and processing with "better access to a reliable USDA-inspected facility". Between 45 and 80% of the farms who responded (depending on the species) indicated that they would expand their capacity and these increases would result in production per species for most farms more than doubling.⁴ Our less formal survey of producers in the Hudson Valley suggested a similar pent up opportunity for increased production of pastured livestock.

In 2008 Glynwood created a Task Force composed of a broad array of stakeholders to develop an effective response to this longstanding bottleneck. In April, Glynwood launched the first mobile slaughterhouse for large animals with a USDA license east of New Mexico. The Modular Harvest System (MHS) is in operation on its first docking site in Delaware County. Now we are beginning to create the network of docking sites through which the MHS will rotate to serve farmers throughout the region.

Our goal is to have one or more of the docking sites become the site of a cluster of food related enterprises, ranging from aging and butchering and value-added meat production, to vegetable cooling sheds and community kitchens. This clustering would encourage cooperation and synergy among the businesses and facilitate distribution. When we concluded that a mobile unit was the optimal response to this region's needs, many people told us that the USDA would never license a mobile unit here. However, the agency proved to be more open minded and forward thinking than that. The many USDA staff people involved in this project worked through a host of new issues and

⁴ Community in Support of Agriculture, "Demand Study: Assessing volume and attributes of farmer demand for slaughter and meat processing services in Massachusetts", June 2008, page 10.

questions in a timely and professional manner. We look forward to continuing to work with them.⁵

CHALLENGES: ENCOURAGING AND SUPPORTING NEW FARMERS

Glynwood is fortunate to have among its programs the operation of a farm and garden, which allows us to demonstrate the type of management practices that we advocate. This also allows us to provide a limited number of young people with the opportunity to work with our highly experienced farmer and head gardener. Many of these young people hope to start farms or garden operations themselves someday and this is a first step toward that career. This growing interest in farming as a career is reflected in the Ag Census data. Despite the fact that the average age of farmers is going up, and over half of the Valley's farmers are 55 or over, between 2002 and 2007 there was a 49% increase in the number of farmers under the age of 25

However, to help set the stage for these young people (or others who are transitioning into farming as a career) to be successful over the long haul, we must begin to provide a more comprehensive training and mentoring program. Glynwood and our colleagues at the Stone Barns Center for Food and Agriculture are collaborating on the development of a new farmer training curriculum that will be launched in stages beginning this winter. It will be a serious, though initially limited, response to a growing need and opportunity. We view it as an extension of the work that both organizations are currently doing to support the CRAFT (Collaborative Regional Alliance for Farmer Training) program in the region. With more resources, a more comprehensive program could – and we hope will - be developed.

At the same time, the Hudson Valley would benefit from the creation of a “farm incubator” where new farmers with basic experience could try their hand at various kinds of production under the supervision of an experienced farmer, then learn how to develop a business plan for their operation and be assisted through the transition to a new farm (at least new to them) while still being able to call upon a farmer mentor or others who could provide assistance when they are first out on their own.

This type of program would benefit from multiple partnerships, with input and assistance provided by people from various organizations and agencies who have relevant expertise or resources.

Another barrier for access for new farmers is the high cost of farmland, which can range up to \$10,000 per acre. However, there are increasing numbers of people who have

⁵ Glynwood created an affiliate, Local Infrastructure for Local Agriculture, Inc. (LILA) to own the MHS and oversee its operation and provide education services related to it. For more details on the unit and docking site design, please visit www.lila-northeast.org.

purchased former farmland as a second home who are now interested in having it farmed. But they don't know how to determine what their land is suited for or identify a farmer and establish a long-term relationship. Glynwood has worked with some of these owners and understands their needs. Land trusts also know many of the owners who are interested in having their land farmed. But there is no overall training program that 'graduates' new entry farmers who we know have the skills to successfully begin farming this land.

By developing a corps of new farmers, with some solid experience, a business plan and access to mentoring, we could leverage the investment that the landowners, land trusts and municipalities have already made in protecting farmland while providing new jobs and economic activity.⁵

A MORE EFFECTIVE FEDERAL ROLE: *Recognition, Flexibility and Funding*

The farmland and farmers of the Hudson Valley make an extraordinary contribution to public health and welfare. Agriculture in this region already provides fresh, healthy food to hundreds of thousands of residents of the Valley and New York City. It has the potential to produce a great deal more. If this potential is met, it will help respond to many of the pressing issues of our era – from public health to job creation to climate change to the preservation of a working landscape that is at the heart of one of America's iconic 'great outdoors'.

Yet agriculture in the Valley is profoundly different from the type of agriculture on which the federal government has focused its attention and financial support in past decades. The "get big or get out" mantra did not suit this region and never will. The farmers of this landscape – producing environmental and economic benefits while they produce the food we need – are small and mid-size farmers, many with very diverse production. If the USDA is to be a more effective partner for them and for this region it must find ways to support and encourage this type and scale of farming. What it accomplishes in doing so can be replicated where this type of farming still exists near other major metropolitan centers as well, with profound and lasting impacts.

Recognition: The Opportunity Afforded by the Agricultural Census.

Farmers in the Hudson Valley often feel that government agencies at all level, including the federal, do not respect their importance to the local economy or the potential they hold to strengthen the food system in the metropolitan area.

⁵ For Glynwood's report on best practices in the land trust community regarding the productive use of "saved" land, please see: "Land Trusts and Agricultural Land: Protecting Farmland or Farming", <http://www.glynwood.org/publications-multimedia/land-trusts-and-agricultural-land/>

Yet it is hard to make the case for their importance because the best data we have is from the Ag Census. And while it is extremely useful - as evidenced above, we use it to the fullest extent possible - it does not adequately capture detailed information about the kind of farming we have in this region: small and mid-size farmers with mixed production. So we don't have enough clarity in the data as it applies to our smaller, diversified farmers who are making a living at farming.

Revamping the Ag Census – or adding additional questions that would more clearly pertain to the type of farmers that are important to this region – would generate data that would be extremely helpful.

Farmers should also be encouraged to know that the Census information is used on their behalf, and their contributions through the Census surveys are critical for those of us who wish to support their efforts.

For more detailed recommendations regarding the Agricultural Census Data, please see Supplement 2, below.

Flexibility

The Know Your Farmer Know Your Food initiative and the recognition and assistance it has provided to small and mid-size farmers has been a tremendous boost. This broadening of the USDA's thinking to reflect the importance of farmer of all sizes should continue. All federal programs (including grant programs) should be reviewed and revamped if necessary to ensure that they are flexible enough to serve the needs of the different types of agriculture and the different scale that characterize the Valley.

For example, farmers often indicate their frustration with government sponsored credit and insurance programs. While there may be funding available, the application processes are often onerous and seem overly complicated, likely reflecting the fact that the funds which are critically needed by these farmers are far less than the amounts generally sought through these programs, larger sums that may appropriately require more paperwork.

The need for "scale appropriateness" is also critical with regard to regulations that apply to the smaller scale processing and distribution infrastructure that this region's farmers need. For example, significant concern has been expressed about how new food safety regulations, such as the proposed HACCP Systems Validation may impact the smaller processors needed by producers in this – and other similar - regions.

Funding

Of course, while funding is tight everywhere, there is no end of ways in which federal dollars could leverage the funding that can be raised from both public and private sources within the Valley. Here are a few:

- Funds to support creation of a comprehensive new farmer training curriculum and mentoring program that would include a range of new resources and providers, including a farm incubator;
- Funds to build capacity for development of agriculture- and food-related businesses;
- Funds to support programs that develop the constituencies needed if agricultural viability and conservation efforts are to be effective over the long-term;
- Funds to support voluntary land and easement acquisition programs.
- Funds to compensate farmers for ecological services and the many other benefits they provide. (Possibly in conjunction with private carbon sequestration projects.)

There will be ample opportunity to consider exactly how these new programs could be supported during the course of the drafting of the next Farm Bill.

SUPPLEMENT 1

Keep Farming® Community Case Studies

Rural Agricultural Land Use

The Town of Chatham, NY

Located in northern Columbia County, the Town of Chatham, NY is approximately 30 miles from Albany and is the last stop on the Taconic Parkway before connecting to Interstate 90, which provides easy access to the Berkshires in Massachusetts. Historically an agricultural community, Chatham is experiencing pressure from developers targeting it as a prime destination for the New York and Boston second home market. Many of the town's population of 4,000 are second homeowners, and more houses are appearing in vacant fields every year.

In 2003 the community was in the process of updating its 30 year old comprehensive plan, a direct result of development pressures and a sincere desire by residents to have input regarding how and where the development would occur. The community was also interested in learning about land preservation tools that could be used to protect their farms.

The town's Comprehensive Plan Steering Committee had been working for approximately 18 months and not making much headway. When community representatives about Keep Farming contacted Glynwood, they noted in their letter:

The "Keep Farming" assessment will help us to obtain the data we need while not spending unnecessary time deciding what to do next. We would like to take advantage of this very strong research and analysis tool. The Town of Chatham is subject to growth pressures typical in the towns that comprise the Hudson River Valley. We believe this project can enhance the perspective of all participants regarding the issues and challenges facing the region.

Chatham experienced some remarkable effects from the information gathering by its Keep Farming assessment teams. One eye-opening piece of information was how much money farmers spent each year in the community. The Agriculture Economic Assessment showed that they spend at least \$1.25 million each year in the town, purchasing goods and services. Farmers depend on local services like feed, equipment repair, and animal care services. If the farms were no longer there, the support services would no longer be in the community either.

Chatham now had specific information to refer to, and non-farming residents in particular gained a new appreciation of how important agriculture is to the region's economy.

The Keep Farming assessment process also showed that little of the community's farmland was protected and that 60% of the land being farmed was *not* owned by farmers. Almost two-thirds of the total acreage in agriculture is used by commodity dairy farmers. Residents realized that over half of the farmland currently in production was at risk.

When Chatham began Keep Farming, it was interested in developing a Purchase of Development Rights program. But, an advisor brought in by Glynwood showed that Chatham could not support a PDR program. Glynwood's training helped the town gain a better understanding of other tools and strategies that could be used to support land preservation. Chatham has moved ahead with creating a Community Preservation Fund for farmland preservation that is funded through a 2% real estate transfer fee.

Throughout the Keep Farming process, farmers were involved and served as members of the Community Agriculture Partnership (CAP). Recommendations on strategies to be implemented in the community relating to agriculture were agreed upon by the farmers and it was the farmers who presented the final recommendations to the Town.

Chatham has since created a permanent role for the CAP as a town committee. Now all town initiatives that may have an impact on farming must be approved by the CAP.

Chatham completed its Comprehensive Plan and incorporated the recommendations from Keep Farming into the Plan's section relating to agriculture. In 2007, Chatham was one of the first communities in the state to receive a Municipal Planning Grant from the NYS Department of Agriculture and Markets. The grant was used to review the Town's agriculture and farmland protection efforts. Chatham completed its Agricultural Land Preservation Plan in 2009. The plan includes the Town's vision and goals for preserving farmland and promoting a viable agriculture economy. It has been approved by the Town, County and the Commissioner of New York State Department of Agriculture.

The CAP also understands how important it is to constantly educate the community about agriculture and farming activities in Chatham. A website has been established to keep the community informed about Keep Farming and ag related activities. An Essential Guide to Agriculture in Chatham is produced each year to educate residents about local farms, farmers, land preservation techniques and why buying local is so important. The CAP also hosts an annual Farm Film Fest at a local theater featuring a variety of short films about farming. A discussion follows about the state of farming in

Chatham. This education program has been very helpful in continuing the community support for agriculture.

Five years after completing the Keep Farming, Chatham reports that there has been zero loss of farmland.

The Town of Durham, NY

Located in the Catskill Mountains in Greene County, the Town of Durham launched its Keep Farming initiative in 2007 after receiving a Department of State Quality Communities grant. The focus of the Durham project is the development of a strategic business plan to improve the economic viability of farmers in the northern Catskills.

Once a thriving dairy community, many of Durham's dairy farms had closed due to the poor milk market and the increasing cost of production. Durham has the best agricultural soils in the county but due to its topography, much of the land is best suited for grazing. Many of the former farms have been purchased by New York City residents who come to the area to ski. These individuals do not want to sell their land for development. However, much of the land is going fallow or is being used for hay.

In preliminary discussions with Glynwood's Keep Farming staff, the Town's Agricultural Committee maintained that the best economic development plan for the region would be creation of a local dairy processing facility, even though there were only two small dairies operating in the area. Glynwood proposed that completing the first phase of Keep Farming – including an assessment of the state of agriculture in the Town, would at least enable development of a business plan based on facts and trends.

Durham has had a remarkable Keep Farming experience because new ideas have created new and unexpected opportunities that the Town would not have been aware of, and local farmers now have the support they need to increase their economic viability.

The Keep Farming assessment showed that the Town contains large parcels of forestland owned by local residents. An advisor brought in through Keep Farming informed the landowners that they have some of the best forestland in the state. Many of the landowners however are not productively managing their wood lots, instead allowing logging companies to harvest trees indiscriminately.

The Keep Farming assessment also revealed that there are several livestock growers in the Town, but that they lack the infrastructure needed to take advantage of markets that would provide them with greater income. The assessment further showed that

several farmers were interested in developing agritourism but lacked expertise to get started.

After completing the Keep Farming assessment, the Ag Committee concluded that there was no capacity to sustain a regional dairy processing facility. However, based on an analysis of the data collected and the advisor brought in by Glynwood, the Committee decided that several agricultural business opportunities could be readily implemented to the benefit of the farmers, the local business community and the region's environment.

As a result, Durham is pursuing better management of forests and new options for forestry products they had never thought about before. Keep Farming revealed that Durham's woodlots had once been a source of maple syrup. Landowners learned of maple syrup entrepreneurs who will rent their trees and do the tapping. And because it is an agricultural product, non-farming landowners who allow tapping on their land will qualify for the ag tax exemption.

Through contacts introduced by Glynwood to Durham, livestock producers have found a market that provides top dollar for grass fed-beef. And business templates have been developed for farmers who want to increase their herds and transition to grass-based livestock.

Finally, through recommendations and information provided by Keep Farming, the community has begun to explore ideas for agritourism on its farms. Durham was once a mountain recreation destination, and could be again if the town puts policies and infrastructure in place to draw people to its farms. An influx of tourism would benefit other businesses in the region, providing another multiplier effect.

Similar to the Town of Chatham, Glynwood's Keep Farming® Program helped Durham to gain a much better understanding of its agriculture and introduced Durham to experts who provided sound advice.

SUPPLEMENT 2

Recommendations for the Census of Agriculture

Using the Census

As champions of our regional farmers, we need to have data that helps us to illustrate the state of agriculture in our region – *good* data that we can hold up to say: “farming isn’t dead!”

The Census of Agriculture is an important source of such data, particularly important because it is often the *only* source of periodic and consistent information on farming at the county level.

We are currently completing an analysis of agriculture in the Hudson Valley region by compiling the county level Census data for the 12 counties that make up our region. We’re interested in understanding the make-up of the farms in our region, better understanding the great diversity of farming we have here, and what the challenges and opportunities are for our farmers.

And we’re finding that the Ag Census data has some limitations.

Regional Ag Economy

Agriculture is the “invisible economy” – the money farmers spend on locally available services and supplies can have a major impact on the local community. One informal survey that we conducted in the Hudson Valley showed that \$1.25 million of the local farmers’ expenses was spent right there in that community. It was an eye-opening discovery.

The Census asks farmers to report what they spent on services and supplies, which tells us a lot about what it costs to farm here.

How about asking them *where* they spent it? Even a general percentage of dollars spent within the region would give us a powerful sense of the strong role that farmers play in our local economies.

Distortion by Definition

The Census requires only \$1,000 or more in sales to define an operation as a farm. Because of this definition, our numbers can easily get distorted.

While *any* farming contributes positively to an awareness of the value of agriculture and the importance of regional food production, we are concerned with saving *the business* of farming, and we seek to support farmers in making a living from farming.

The new inclusion in 2007 of farm typologies took a step in the right direction by correlating things like farm sales and the primary occupation of the farmer. It shows us how many farms are being operated by someone with another career, vs. farmers who rely on farming for their livelihood, and their general level of sales.

We need to have more information related to this kind of scheme. We need to be able to filter information by typology, but also show what farmers in each typology category are producing, what they're spending, how big their farms are, etc.

Diversified Farms

The Census uses industrial classification codes to categorize farms according to their principal production. Meaning: if half or more of a farm's sales were from one thing (dairy, for example) that is how they are categorized. It can be a useful way to assess the strength of various ag sectors within the overall picture.

However, many of our farmers in the Hudson Valley practice diversified agriculture – meaning, a combination of things at once. This may provide a way to diversify income, spread risk and/or try to develop new products.

But if a farm has sales split across a few different sectors (vegetables, poultry, and goats for example) they are classified in the catchall “Other” categories.

Not surprisingly, most of our farms fall into these “Other” categories. Which leaves us without much of a fine-grain understanding of what those farms are doing.

It also suggests that the Census is better suited for capturing information about farms that are not diversified.

We suggest that the USDA consider adding some greater specificity so that the Census could better illustrate the vital role of diversified agriculture.

Making the case for the Census

When we've shared our work with others, we've encountered a sense of skepticism that farmers, who are extremely busy, have completed and returned the surveys with thorough information. And there *are* some areas of the Census where we feel we may be seeing some underreporting.

Our reliance on the Census means we are therefore depending on farmers to carefully complete the Census surveys – so that we can use that data on their behalf.

We believe that if farmers could see how valuable that information is for groups like ours, who use it to benefit them, they would see its value.

The USDA could do more to show farmers that the Census data *is* used on their behalf, and that their contributions through the Census surveys are critical for those of us who wish to see farming persist.