

Gleanings

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AGRICULTURE IN TRANSITION – RECENT TRENDS IN THE HUDSON VALLEY

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"The transition is from dairy to hay to horses or houses."

A Hudson Valley Dairy Farmer

Jayne Daly is the Director of Programs at Glynwood Center. As Director of Programs, Ms. Daly is responsible for the development and delivery of Glynwood's international and domestic programs which include leadership training and community capacity building. Through its Agricultural Initiative, Glynwood has been working in partnership with a variety of agencies and organizations throughout the Hudson River Valley to strengthen the regional food system. Glynwood has several programs focused on agriculture, including Keep Farming and the Glynwood Grange.

Ms. Daly is a land use attorney and certified mediator. Before joining the staff at Glynwood Center, she was Co-Director of the Land Use Law Center at Pace University School of Law.

National and global economic and political forces are fundamentally impacting agriculture, changing not only what is produced, but how and by whom. Nationally, the result has been a shift to corporate agriculture and ever-larger farms. But in some fortunate areas, such as the Hudson River Valley, agriculture is still based on small and mid-sized farms. How are they doing in the face of these larger forces—and regionally intense development pressure?

As part of Glynwood Center's work to strengthen the regional food system in the Hudson Valley, we learned that very little data was publicly available about farming in the region. As a result, it is difficult to generate the public and private support needed to sustain it. In response, we undertook an analysis of the available data, including the recently released 2002 agricultural census, and vetted our findings with farmers and others to explore underlying trends.

Why does it matter? Small and mid-sized farmers support the regional economy, protect the environment, preserve beautiful landscapes and provide fresh, healthful food. Our research indicates that agriculture in the Hudson Valley is holding its own in some ways, but is transitioning from producing food to more profitable ventures such as greenhouses, horses and hay. These uses provide many public benefits, but not food, which is vitally important to the health of the Valley's residents and the security of the region.

Although the focus of our study was the Hudson River Valley, we believe the insights gained are relevant to other regions, especially those heavily influenced by metropolitan areas, but with a significant agricultural base of small and mid-sized farms.

THE STATE OF AGRICULTURE IN THE HUDSON VALLEY

Is agriculture on the run? Some of the evidence is compelling. Land values have risen dramatically, making it enticing for older farmers to sell their land and difficult for new farmers to buy. Production costs increased an average of 25% during the last five years. More and more farmers are telling the next generation not to enter the "family business." Even some state officials believe that "real agriculture" in New York is north and west of the Hudson Valley.

But is the evidence conclusive? Not according to our analysis.

Even though the Valley, which extends from New York City to Albany, has been under extreme development pressure for the past twenty years, 17% of the land is still in farming—that is over 650,000 acres or 1,000 square miles.

There are 3,998 farms in the Valley and virtually all are owned by individuals or families. Most of the farmers own the land they farm and many rent even more. The farms range in size from 1 acre to over 2,000 acres, with an average of about 150 acres.

Agricultural production is diverse: 28% of the farms produce grains, soybeans and hay; 25% raise animals (cattle, poultry, hogs, etc.); 21% breed, raise or board horses; 14% produce fruits and vegetables; and 12% grow and sell horticultural products.



Equine operations are a growing sector in the agricultural base of the Hudson Valley.

MAJOR TRENDS – AGRICULTURE IN TRANSITION

The land base is stabilizing, but the nature of the agriculture is changing. When the 2002 Agricultural Census Data was released, regional newspapers headlines read: "Region Grows More Farmland" and "Loss of Farms Slows in Latest Farm Census." The articles said that residents should be comforted by data showing that the Valley had lost only 5 farms since 1997 and gained 16,500 acres of farmland. Given the changes that we had seen in the landscape we wondered, how could this be?

In 1997, the federal government expanded the definition of agriculture to include equine as an agricultural use and since then, more and more horse farmers have been completing the census forms. Also, the federal government sets a very low financial threshold for what constitutes "a farm"—i.e. "any operation that produces or sells over \$1,000 worth of product," and properties that don't look like a "traditional" farm still qualify under the definition simply by producing more than \$1,000 worth of honey or cut flowers on very few acres.

So, while the number of farms and the amount of farmland in the Valley remained relatively stable between 1997 and 2002, a closer examination of the census data reveals some subtle but significant trends.

There is a clear shift away from using farmland to produce food for people. In the five years between 1997 and 2002, the Valley lost almost 500 dairy and beef farms and almost 100 orchards and vegetable farms. They were replaced by more profitable ventures such as horse farming and hay production. For example, more than 300 new horse farms were reported. Hay production increased 72% as dairy farms transitioned to hay.

More farms are transitioning to more profitable product lines. As more land is developed for housing, one expanding agricultural sector is greenhouse/nursery production. More than 5,000 acres in the Hudson Valley are cultivated for sod,

Christmas trees and landscaping materials. Another 126 acres are under glass or plastic—the vast majority of which produce flowers and plants for gardening.

The greenhouse/nursery sector may be only a transitional use. Big box retailers have begun selling bedding plants at prices substantially below cost. In areas where land values are high, particularly in the counties of Rockland and Westchester, greenhouses have already given way to development.

Hunting preserves such as the 2,500 acre Ten Mile River Preserve in eastern Dutchess County are perhaps the newest trend in the Valley. While the Town of Dover hated to lose the dairy farm on this site, the preserve was seen as a better alternative than more than 700 houses that would have required costly services.

Hunting preserves reflect another expansion in the definition of agriculture. NYS Agriculture and Markets has determined that raising animals to hunt and crops to feed them constitute agriculture uses. Therefore, the preserves qualify for property tax exemptions and other benefits created for more traditional farms.

WILL FARMS IN THE VALLEY CONTINUE TO PRODUCE FOOD?

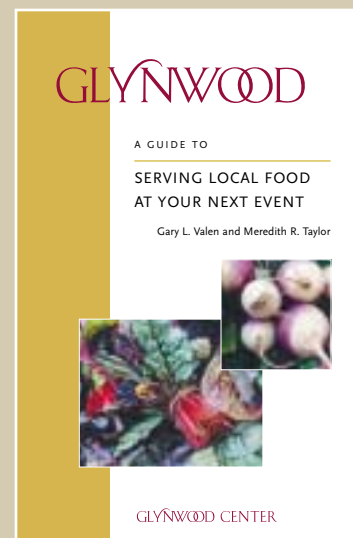
Despite the loss of food-producing farms, there are some positive trends.

More consumers are demanding and purchasing local foods, spurred in part by the work of non-profits and restaurants and chefs that feature local products.

GLYNWOOD CENTER'S AGRICULTURE INITIATIVE – RESOURCES ON THE WEB

Since Glynwood launched its Agriculture Initiative two years ago we've created a series of publications that are designed to help spread the word – and spur activity – about local farming, its importance, and ways that it can be supported. Please visit our website, www.glynwood.org, to read more about these issues. Below are some of the publications you will find there.

- A Guide to Serving Local Food at Your Next Event
- Gleanings Spring 2004 – Farmers and the Richness of Life
- Gleanings Autumn 2003 – Connecting Communities, Farmers and Food
- Gleanings Harvest 2002 – Local Food Odyssey
- Gleanings Spring 2002– A Revolution in Agriculture
- Could the Hudson Valley be the Next Napa?
- Is Agriculture in Our Future? Preserving the Quality of Life in Warwick
- Creating a Regional Food System in the Hudson Valley
- Keep Farming
- www.ChathamKeepFarming.org
- www.MoveableFeastforWildlifeandPeople.org
- Agritourism Exchange in the Hudson Valley



Farmers are becoming more entrepreneurial in their production and marketing methods:

Between 1997 and 2002, 10% more farmers began to sell direct to the consumer—through farmers markets, community supported agriculture (CSAs) and the internet and the value of these sales increased 58%. These statistics should encourage other farmers to become involved in direct marketing programs. Farmers are also diversifying - producing everything from goat's milk and currants to ethnic herbs and heirloom vegetables. Because processed foods offer greater profit margins, many farmers began producing value-added foods such as salsas, ice cream and yogurt. And increasing numbers of farmers are attracting customers to their farms through corn mazes, farm-tours and seasonal activities such as cut-your-own Christmas tree and haunted hayrides.



Non-profits and municipal governments are more actively supporting farming.

Many local governments are reviewing their regulations and modifying them to support the business of farming. Some are raising money through bond referendums to purchase development rights and even entire farms. And large land trusts are helping municipalities pay the 25% match required for state purchase of development rights programs.

Small and mid-sized farmers in the Hudson Valley support the regional economy, protect the environment, preserve beautiful landscapes and provide fresh, healthful food.¹

WHAT FARMERS NEED TO CONTINUE PRODUCING FOOD

Farmers have indicated what is needed if they are to continue to produce food in the Valley:

- Access to new markets such as local restaurants, retail stores and institutional buyers, where the farmer can receive a fair price for his or her product;
- An efficient distribution network that doesn't require the farmer to make the deliveries;
- More local facilities such as community kitchens and slaughterhouses where farmers can produce value-added products;
- Smarter consumers who understand the value of local food and appreciate that price is only one consideration; and
- Educated local politicians and boards who understand how their policies and decisions either support or undermine farming.

THE CRITICAL INGREDIENT

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.

¹ Photo commissioned by Minetta Brook as part of *Watershed: The Hudson Valley Art Project*.

ACTIONS SPEAK LOUDER THAN WORDS – OR NUMBERS

This passion can take root in the Hudson River Valley—and other regions—but policy makers, farmers and residents will need to be convinced by actions and not just words or statistics.

There are many things you, as an individual, can do—and there are many resources on the Glynwood website to help you. Some are noted below. For example:

- Use your food dollar to support regional farmers. Buy and serve local food at home and work and encourage institutions and organizations to use local products. Our *Guide to Serving Local Food at Your Next Event* may help you get going. Or you may want to sponsor a Moveable Feast for Wildlife and People to help support "wildlife friendly" farmers and educate others as to their importance to biodiversity. More background information is provided in our *Gleanings*, "*Farmers and the Richness of Life*".
- Support restaurants that use and promote local products and help make other connections between farmers and consumers. The "*Local Food Odyssey*" *Gleanings* tells about creating a university-based food system and "*Connecting Communities, Farmers and Food*" provides examples of inspiring community-based programs from around the country that support local agriculture.
- Raise the issue of supporting farming at municipal meetings. You may find some good ideas in "*Farmland Protection: Market and Policy Tools for Improving Farm Viability*" and "*Is Agriculture in Our Future? Preserving the Quality of Life in Warwick, New York.*"

There's a great deal to do and a great deal that can be done. Agriculture in the Hudson Valley will depend on our commitment to its future ... and our actions.

A more detailed report containing the data upon which this *Gleanings* was based will be available later this fall from our website, www.glynwood.org.

Glynwood Center works with communities, and those who serve them, to address change in ways that conserve local culture and natural resources, while strengthening economic well being.

Glynwood Center does this by gathering, developing, testing and sharing ideas and initiatives from the United States and abroad.

Glynwood's Agricultural Initiative is helping to connect communities, farmers and food. The overall goal is to help sustain small and mid-size farmers whose work generates many public benefits including fresh, healthful food, scenic landscapes, wildlife habitat and sound local economies. These are the "farmers in the middle" who are most at risk as a result of federal policies that favor large farms producing commodities for export.

For more information about Glynwood Center and its Agricultural Initiative visit www.glynwood.org.



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Gleanings is an occasional series of publications through which Glynwood Center shares ideas drawn from its programmatic activities.

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