

HUDSON VALLEY Business

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by Jim Gordon

To farm, perchance to prosper at it Efforts afoot and afield to help

According to one food expert who should know – a farmer – about 1 percent of New York City's population now shops at farmer's markets. If that percentage could be increased to 5 percent, what would that increase do for farmers in the Hudson Valley?

That is the question and the hope for farm advocates in the fertile lands north of the Big Apple. Food is essential in people's lives, of course, but is often overlooked in assessments of strengths of the Hudson Valley economy. But those days may be gone.

"We take farming for granted and it is overlooked," said Judith LaBelle, president of the nonprofit Glynwood Center, a 225-acre farm and farm policy think tank and center for education in Cold Spring. "The federal agricultural census data five years ago looked at data for the 10 counties of the Hudson Valley as a region for the first time ever," said LaBelle. "And they found there are 1,000 square miles of agricultural land in that area. That's an astonishing amount of land wedged between Albany and New York City."

"What it suggests is that the farmers are a tremendous, but invisible, economy if you will, with enormous potential," said LaBelle. The group is working on a comprehensive report on Hudson Valley agriculture to be released this summer.

But farming is becoming more visible and attractive. "When things happen, like 9/11 and what is happening to the economy over the last year, I think people start looking at themselves and saying what is real substance?" said Ken Migliorelli, of Migliorelli Farms in Red Hook. "So there are career changes happening all around and there is something about farming, about working with the soil and being connected."

A third generation farmer growing more than 130 varieties of fruits and vegetables, Migliorelli says there is one foolproof way to help keep farmers in business: educating consumers about the value of fresh food to their own health, the environment and even the "food security" of the nation. And Migliorelli notes there is a great deal of room for improvement, a fact which is both frustrating and tantalizing.

"With all the farmers markets in New York City, we are still not even hitting 1 percent who buy their produce there," Migliorelli said. "Can you imagine if we hit 5 percent? It would be phenomenal."

Orange County, with the fertile Black Dirt region has 660 farms on 105,800 acres in 2007, according to the New York Agricultural Statistical Services Web site. The NYASS economic data are current only to 2002 and show Orange county farms produced \$66.2 million in agricultural products sold from farms.

Sullivan County has 360 farms on 62,300 acres producing \$37.8 million worth of products in 2002. Dutchess County has 630 farms on 110,200 acres producing \$31.7 million in products and Ulster County has 500 farms on 81,800 acres producing \$34.4 million. Westchester County has 125 farms on 9,600 acres, with \$8.9 million in agricultural products as of 2002. In Rockland County 30 farms on 900 acres produced \$3.2 million in goods.

Putnam County, with 50 farms on 6,600 acres produced \$2.4 million worth of products and is home to the Glynwood Center. LaBelle said regionally in the Hudson Valley, "The area has over 4,000 farmers, individual business people running those farms. That's a huge number of small businesses."

According to U.S. Department of Agriculture definitions, 90 percent of New York's farms are "small" operations

meaning less than \$250,000 annually in sales. Small farms comprise almost half of New York's agricultural sales and own half its farmland resources.

LaBelle said there are various ways that officials and the public at large can aid these small businesses. One idea would be for creation of a regional slaughterhouse to take advantage of the growing market in grass-fed meat raised on smaller farms for quality, as opposed to the huge output of feed lots.

"Meat processing is one of the great untapped resources for farmers here," said LaBelle. She notes that in many places the soil is ideal for growing grass and raising beef and even goats. "That kind of meat is really in demand, chefs want animals pastured on grass and not on feed because they literally have a different chemical composition. It tastes better. So there is a great demand for that meat."

But she said as agriculture was de-emphasized in recent decades, farm infrastructure withered, so now there is not sufficient meat packing capacity. She said to fill the void, the Glynwood Center is seeking to develop a mobile slaughterhouse, and is encouraging creation of local meatpacking plants for small- to medium-sized farmers.

Migliorelli said another way to help farmers is to reconsider the value of farm buildings when taxing farmer's properties. He said some progress has been made recently, so that for example, his housing for farm workers is not taxed. But he said that his packing house and cooler are heavily taxed. There is little logic there, he said, since he depends on both the cooler and the farm worker housing to run his business.

Migliorelli said another way taxes could be used to help farmers would be differentiating between farmers who do it for a living and so called "gentlemen farmers," who made their fortunes in other fields and have taken to the land as a hobby. Currently, he said, there is little difference in how their farm operations are assessed for tax purposes, but he suggested that more attention be paid to income and less to the amount of type of land involved.

Another concern for farmers are the growing number and complexity of regulations designed to ensure food safety. While Migliorelli welcomes the focus on consumer safety, saying the reassurance helps farmers market their products, he notes that the process is imposed on farmers without apparent consideration of the costs and difficulties involved in complying.

"I'm all for moving ahead on these sanitary protocols, but we farmers are busy doing a lot of stuff and we need guidance implementing them and maybe some funding to implement them," Migliorelli said. The latest spate of regulations could cost the farm \$100,000 to put in place over the next few years, he said, money that farmers cannot easily afford. "It's easy to pass these laws, but it is putting a strain on us," he said.