

Creating a Regional Food System in the Hudson Valley – A Background Paper

During the last decade, the Hudson Valley has received significant national recognition for its scenic, cultural and natural resources, including designation as both an American Heritage River and a National Heritage Area.

At the same time, The National Trust for Historic Preservation designated the Valley as one of the “Eleven Most Endangered Historic Places” and American Farmland Trust ranked it among the country’s ten most threatened agricultural regions.

Therein lays the challenge. This nationally recognized landscape – centered on the majestic Hudson River and its verdant valley – is being transformed.

Once known as the nation’s “Bread Basket”, the Hudson Valley has more than 900,000 acres of farmland stretching from the Adirondack Mountains to the outskirts of New York City. These farms, with their livestock, fields, orchards and vineyards are at the heart of many of the scenic vistas that led to the coveted federal designations.

But these farms are being lost at a rapid rate.¹ There are many complex causes, including concentration within the food industry and globalization, which have put small and midsize farmers at a competitive disadvantage. Soaring land prices, coupled with rising property taxes make selling to a developer increasingly attractive. Young people from farm families are lured to more lucrative jobs off-farm.²

Ironically, this loss of farms is occurring at the same time that increasing numbers of Americans are recognizing the value of locally produced food.³ It tastes better and the consumer can have the satisfaction (and of increasing importance, the peace of mind) of knowing the farmer and how it was produced. Well managed farms also provide habitat for birds and other wildlife, enhance water supplies and contribute to strong local economies. Strengthening the regional farm economy will also help stem sprawl.

Buying local food also reduces the need to transport food over long distances, a practice which has increased our dependence on oil, contributes to air pollution and makes our food supply ever more vulnerable to disruption.

Every farm lost to development diminishes the current and potential strength and diversity of agriculture in the Hudson Valley. Therefore there is a pressing need to stabilize farmland by helping to keep farmers actively on the land. This will afford us the opportunity to work to ensure that the food they produce becomes ever more widely – and equitably – available within the region.⁴

A Regional Food System for the Hudson Valley

Glynwood Center is seeking to partner with others who share our commitment to helping sustain the region’s farmers. For example, there are many

agriculturally-related studies underway in the Valley. We plan to contribute to them, learn from them, and help to publicize their results.

But we also intend to identify pilot projects and other action steps that can be undertaken immediately and in the short-term. For example, many farmers and nonprofits have initiated projects which could achieve greater success by working together, but they are not even aware of each other's work. By sharing information and connecting the dots, we can begin to help some farmers immediately. There are also untapped markets for Hudson Valley products, if the necessary connections are created. (Not a simple, but a necessary, step.)

In short, we propose to develop a regional network with complex layers and types of connections among farmers, businesses, others with an interest in agriculture, and consumers. This "regional food system" will evolve over time to provide a vital infrastructure of support for regional agriculture. Its participants will have an enhanced ability to identify and take advantage of previously unrecognized opportunities to increase mutual effectiveness and well-being.

For purposes of this initiative, Glynwood Center offers the following definition for discussion and to set a vision for what can be achieved:

A Regional Food System connects food production, processing, distribution and consumption in ways that enhance the economic viability of the region's farmers while promoting the region's quality of life and the health of all its residents. It is a complex adaptive system – its connections support the communication needed for adaptation to change. It operates within a regional economy which provides farmers with additional opportunities for diversification and income.

As a first step in creating a regional food system in the Hudson Valley, Glynwood Center is inviting a core group of individuals including farmers, government agencies, academic institutions, funders, nongovernmental organizations and other interested individuals to refine this concept and discuss initial steps to be taken to implement it. These initial Key Partners meetings will be held in March and May. After these meetings, the initiative will continue to be refined, specific pilot projects identified and next steps agreed to.

Why Glynwood?

Glynwood is known for taking a broad, integrating approach to complex issues that relate to land use and conservation. We have experience and skills in bringing different sectors and interests together to identify unique opportunities and develop strategies for overcoming roadblocks. We strive to listen intelligently to all points of view, not favoring any one approach or interest, but taking a balanced, practical approach, recognizing that we must work with people with diverse points of view to get things done.

Our international network of practitioners provides access to a broad range of ideas and approaches, often from countries that have been attempting to develop sustainable agricultural regions for a long time.

Our site and facility give us direct experience in both producing food products (and thereby the roadblocks to selling them in “value added” ways) and in purchasing and serving food (and the difficulty – and value – of obtaining regional products).

1. From 1982 to 1997, New York state lost 1,935,089 acres of farmland or 21% of its total farm acreage. The rate of loss in the Hudson Valley is even more staggering. From 1978 to 1992, the Valley lost 174,098 acres of farmland, or 33% of its total farm acreage. GovStats – USA Counties, Commerce, Counties and Agriculture, www.govinfo.kerr.orst.edu; American Farmland Trust Farmland Information Library, Resources by State, www.farmlandinfo.org.

2. For more on the challenges faced by farmers in the Valley see “Saving Working Landscapes: A Campaign for Hudson Valley Farms”, Scenic Hudson, Inc., American Farmland Trust, Open Space Institute and the Hudson Valley Agricultural Heritage Partnership (undated).

3. For more on this see “A Revolution in Agriculture”, by Frederick Kirschenmann, Glynwood Center Gleanings, Spring 2002.

4. The Food Research and Action Center estimates that approximately 13.6 million children under the age of 12 in the United States – almost 30 percent of such children – live in families that must cope with hunger or the risk of hunger during some part of one or more months each year.