

Just How Sustainable Is Local Agriculture in the Midcoast?

Article for *The Free Press*, published August 23, 2018

When a student asked if my farm was sustainable, I told her that I was certified organic, I managed my soil fertility through crop rotations and compost applications... [but] I didn't think my farm was sustainable. Like all the other farms I knew, my farm relied on uncompensated labor and self-exploitation... [and] the years my partner and I could continue to work without a viable income were numbered.

Jaelyn Moyer, "What Nobody Told Me about Small Farming: I Can't Make a Living" (Salon, 2/10/15)

A Foodie Culture

Every year since 2013, Maine has secured the number two spot on the national "Locavore Index," a measure of commitment to the availability and consumption of healthy local food [link to www.strollingoftheheifers.com/locavore/]. The culture surrounding fresh food is becoming one of the state's greatest lures—for visitors and for new farmers. In a State survey, nearly 60 percent of visitors ranked the state's cuisine as the reason for their stay (there's even a blog now devoted to Rockland's food scene, eatrockland.com). Between 2007 and 2012, the number of young farmers in Maine rose nearly 30 percent with Waldo County alone adding more than 200 farms.

A thriving restaurant scene, a network of co-ops and natural food stores, and a cornucopia of farmers' markets create a dependable market for local producers in the Midcoast. This region also holds an unusual concentration of nonprofit entities dedicated to fostering farming, including Maine Organic Farmers and Gardeners Association (MOFGA), Maine Farmland Trust (MFT), Midcoast Farmers' Alliance, Coastal Enterprises, Inc (CEI), Slow Money Maine (SMM) and two investment clubs supporting food-related businesses.

The region's farmers now benefit from a longer growing season as well. When the USDA updated its planting zone designations in 2012, the coastal region from Bath to Rockland received the same milder designation (6A) as coastal York County. "It used to be that you had to sell 90 percent of your product" between July 4 and Labor Day, says Dave Colson, MOFGA's agricultural services director. He recalls when the Common Ground Country Fair in late September marked "an end-of-season celebration." Last year, in contrast, people there passed out from heat stroke. But warmer falls and springs mean that farmers can take advantage of shoulder seasons, particularly with hoop houses, and can more readily supply winter markets.

Lay of the Land

Most farmers in the Midcoast rely primarily on "direct-market" sales to consumers and chefs, although some add in wholesale accounts (less than a fifth—according to the USDA's agricultural census—sell primarily wholesale). Mike Bahner, of Bahner Farm in

Belmont, ticks off an array of sales outlets, part of what he calls a “diverse marketing strategy.” The Camden Farmer’s Market provides the farm’s “bread and butter,” he says, while a Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) operation generates early-season income. Bahner Farm also has a Winter Buying Club and a summer farm stand. “To sell everything you grow is hard,” he says; “you have to be entrepreneurial.”

Many area farmers are starting to find existing venues saturated or, as Cooper Funk of Camden’s Dooryard Farm puts it, “all of us are running up against each other.” His farm has a prime location for a farm stand and Funk balances that with supplying restaurants and some wholesale customers; he launched his farm business here in 2014 (having farmed previously in California) and says “it’s a multi-year process to get on people’s radar, but it’s trending in the right direction.”

Wherever you are, “there’s a percentage of people drawn to what we do and then there’s the rest of the population,” he says, adding “that’s both the truth and a copout” (meaning that truth is not immutable). In Maine, the vast majority of food consumers do rely primarily on the convenience and variety of chain retailers, with only about 15 percent routinely buying local foods according to a 2008 report to the Maine Legislature [add link to https://digitalmaine.com/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?referer=https://www.google.com/&httpsredir=1&article=1000&context=ard_docs).

Data on who routinely buys local food are elusive, in part because some local food is sold wholesale to chain stores. Michael Norton, Director of External Communications with the Hannaford market chain, notes that most of the 125 Maine farms they work with deliver direct to one or more stores, while some also supply their distribution centers with larger volumes.

Elizabeth Sprague, a farm business planning project manager at MFT, sees potential for more farmers to supply wholesale accounts—whether chain markets or institutions like hospitals and schools. She’s done buyer surveys that indicate “demand for Maine grown products is higher than supply.” The challenge, she notes, is to have products conform to food safety requirements and regulations.

Among farmers who supply supermarkets, the experience has been mixed, Colson says. Staff turnover can make it difficult for farmers and some of the markets offer so much similar produce that it’s hard for local providers to compete.

Economies of scale often push farms to increase production and specialize to better serve institutional or out-of-state markets, but many area farmers would rather keep their operations small. Jed Beach, a farmer and business development counselor to other farms, finds that’s a transition “they don’t necessarily want to make.”

Colson isn’t convinced that farms in this region have to scale up to succeed. Farther north in Maine that may be necessary, he says, “but that’s the unique thing about the Midcoast;

it's still somewhat a decentralized set of communities" yet collectively they represent Maine's second biggest market, particularly when population booms in summer.

Direct market sales can only grow if farmers can reach a greater diversity of consumers, drawing more people to markets, farm stands and CSAs. "Changing consumer behavior is really hard to do," Beach says, "and takes a long time." But he sees cause for optimism; buyers of his farm's produce tell him that "local as a brand is continuing to rise."

Groups are working statewide to make local foods more accessible and affordable to lower-income Mainers through several initiatives: Good Shepherd Food Bank's program, Mainers Feeding Mainers [link to <https://www.gsfb.org/programs/mainers-feeding-mainers/>], which has directed more than 5 million pounds of Maine farm produce to needy families; Maine Federation of Farmers' Markets "Maine Harvest Bucks," [link to www.maineharvestbucks.org] which offers vouchers for bonus fruits and vegetables to those shopping at farmers' markets with a SNAP/EBT card; and Maine Department of Agriculture's "Senior FarmShare" program [link to <https://www.getrealmaine.com/index.cfm/fuseaction/home.showpage/pageID/77/index.htm>]. What's still needed, notes Gray Harris, senior program director of natural resources at CEI, is a better incentive system for schools to acquire more local produce to supply school lunch programs.

Rep. Chellie Pingree and others introduced a Local FARMS act for incorporation into the Farm Bill, which includes a "Harvesting Health" pilot program where doctors could "prescribe" fruits and vegetables in low-income settings—providing vouchers so patients could acquire that produce free from local markets. However, the fate of the local agriculture provisions, and the larger Farm Bill, remains uncertain.

A Rocky Field

Because federal subsidies go primarily to industrial-scale agriculture, small-scale farmers are at a competitive disadvantage in pricing their products. There's an inherent tension, Harris says, because the costs of running a farm business "don't always square with what a consumer is willing to pay." Local producers feel pressured to match supermarket prices, all the while realizing – in Bowdoinham farmer Abby Sadauckas' words, "We can't make a living if we can't cover our production costs."

The 2012 agricultural census confirms that small-scale farming does not necessarily translate to "making a living farming," much less a comfortable one. Fully half of Maine's are not profitable according to census figures, Sprague notes, and "what I see leads me to believe that's accurate." The census reports that less than a third of the farms operating in Lincoln, Knox and Waldo counties have an annual value of sales over \$10,000 and roughly half of farmers there report working off-farm for their primary income.

"Farmers need fair-trade pricing on what they grow," Sprague asserts. Consumers routinely weigh considerations of producers' needs when buying artisanal coffee, she

adds, but “it would be useful and beneficial for us to think about the same sort of concerns for farmers here.” Their prices need to reflect a margin that covers health needs, retirement savings and their investments in building soil health. “In general,” Colson reflects, as a farmer “you’re not rewarded for being a good steward. You’re rewarded only for cutting costs.”

Systemic Supports

Recognizing that agriculture needs to be economically as well as ecologically sustainable led to the creation in Maine of new supports over the last decade that are helping buoy fledgling and established farm operations. “Access to capital is a problem” for farmers, Sadauckas says, in part because lenders don’t always understand farm constraints. As a former teacher of MOFGA’s Farm Beginnings program and a field organizer for the regional organization Land for Good, she sees this dynamic frequently and cites an example from her own experience. The federal Farm Service Agency wanted her farm to supply “letters guaranteeing sales” from customers in its loan application as if the farm had wholesale accounts. But for a business selling through farmers’ markets, the request was nonsensical. Still, the agency provided a reduced loan when that requirement was not met.

Farms can have difficulty getting small or bridge loans for essential and time-sensitive expenses – like a delivery vehicle or walk-in cooler. Slow Money Maine, an informal network of private lenders and grantors, has helped fill that gap directly and through two investment clubs it helped spawn, No Small Potatoes and Maine Organic Lenders. When the farming community voiced the need for more accessible capital, Bahner notes, “they stepped up relatively quickly.” These three groups combined have put more than \$4.5 million into Maine farms and local food businesses since 2010, and an application is now pending to start a Maine Harvest Credit Union targeted to farms and food businesses.

Those successes still pale relative to the need, observes longtime SMM board member Linzee Weld, who helped found No Small Potatoes; “in fact we ARE small potatoes; we’ve filled a gap in providing small loans.” She wishes more people understood that farms are inherently high-risk and low-margin businesses on which we collectively depend; “I just don’t think there’s any substitute for public support.”

Part of that support has come to the Midcoast through the state’s Land for Maine’s Future program and federal grant programs that have helped local land trusts, Maine Farmland Trust and Maine Coast Heritage Trust support continued farming at settings like Beech Hill in Rockport and Dooryard Farm in Camden. State support also filters down from FAME’s Agricultural Loan Fund and its “Maine Ag in the Classroom” program. Some public support comes through school districts that commit to funding school garden programs (like the thriving one at Belfast’s Troy Howard Middle School) or to extensive local food purchases, as Five Towns CSD makes (with \$10,000 spent last year on products from four area farms).

Anticipating Change

For their operations to be economically viable long-term, though, Maine farmers will need more public support. That could take many forms, explains Harris. It might involve more supportive state policies (an agricultural policy platform for gubernatorial candidates, she notes, is currently being developed). Infrastructure improvements like broadband would benefit many rural farmers, she adds, as would strong investments in the University of Maine's Cooperative Extension and research work. Many people in the farming community would like to better succession planning with those who own and farm the land now. The average age of Maine farmers is 57 and "too often the land is the retirement strategy whether that was planned or not," Harris says.

Area farmers, like other small business owners, also need help getting consistent workers in the growing season, a problem exacerbated by the shortage of affordable housing during summer months. Funk says there are plenty of young folks from around the country who would welcome a chance to try the farming life in coastal Maine for a summer but only if the farm could house them: "Housing is a huge issue," he says, "Everything is going to Airbnb."

The region has some training opportunities for potential farm workers, like the Teen Ag Crew at the Erickson Fields Preserve, Youthlinks and the University of Maine Gardening Program for inmates at the Maine State Prison, but the numbers they supply are not adequate to meet demand.

Bahner, Beach and others mention the need for more support and infrastructure to engage in value-added production of processed goods like sauces and jams or "foods to go," all of which offer a higher profit margin. Improved systems for helping small farmers aggregate their goods for sale and distribution could also help. Beach notes that this is happening informally, led by farmers, but support for more such efforts could improve distribution channels.

Some farmers and farm advocates would like to see the Maine Department of Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry shift its focus from international trade to building local markets and creating the stable infrastructure and seasonal work force needed to support farm operations here. Recent research from the University of Southern Maine's Food Studies Program [link to <http://mainefoodstrategy.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/08/Scaling-Up-Maine-Agri-Food-Businesses-Project-Overview.pdf>] suggests basic resources the State could provide, including a resource directory (to funding sources, relevant agency supports and technical assistance opportunities), an open-source employee handbook, and a consistent labeling program for Maine-made goods.

A critical role for the State, in the view of Sadauckas and Sprague, is to reinstate the State Planning Office that once provided guidance on land use planning and could tackle related policy development (such as balancing farmland protection with provision of affordable housing), and research (like determining the support infrastructure needed in each agricultural region).

Ultimately, though, the most essential public support might simply be the public: a broad base of consumers who understand the value of local food—not just for personal health or nutrition—but for community well-being.

In a world where global markets experience ever-more hiccups and natural disasters can disrupt food-supply chains, local foods could help buffer Maine from those disturbances. A 2017 report gauging the “food resilience” of Portland and four other cities [link to http://icic.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/01/Rockefeller_ResilientFoodSystems_FINAL_post.pdf?x96880] suggested that a next step for Maine’s urban center would be to conduct a regional assessment of its food system resilience. The Midcoast might benefit from a similar analysis, getting better data to determine what improvements – like processing centers or distribution channels—could strengthen both farm profitability and community resilience.

Greater profitability of farms, in turn, might fuel further economic growth in the region. Research done in the Midcoast 15 years ago points to that conclusion. The Institute for Local Self-Reliance assessed how much money remains in the local economy from purchases made at locally owned businesses versus big-box stores. The data drew from storefront businesses, not farms, but the same spending patterns generally apply (in that locally owned businesses and farms typically bank locally and rely routinely on local service providers—like accountants and repair people whereas larger chains do not). The contrast was stark: \$100 spent at a locally owned business returned \$45 dollars to the local economy whereas only \$14 of those dollars remained locally when spent at a big-box store.

An economic analysis of buying local, done in Portland in 2011 [link to https://www.mecep.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/12/MECEP_Report_-_Buying_Local-12-5-2011.pdf], suggests that shifting just 10 percent of consumer spending from national chains to locally owned businesses would generate 874 new jobs offering \$35 million in wages.

For a state that just received an abysmal projection from the Department of Labor [link to <https://www.pressherald.com/2018/08/06/report-projects-near-zero-net-job-growth-in-maine/>], with a net gain of no more than 100 jobs in Maine through 2026, the potential for job growth tied to local foods could spark interest. Not everyone in the Midcoast cares how far their tomato traveled, but most would agree the prospect of greater regional vitality sounds delectable. Is it possible the first taste of that renewal lies no farther than the nearest farm stand?

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