

# North Country Regional Foods Initiative

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## Research Report on the Impacts of Local and Regional Foods in the Adirondack-North Country Region

### III

## Impact Analysis Research Brief D: Collaborations

### A. Overview

This brief, one of six in the *Research Report on the Impacts of Local and Regional Foods in the Adirondack-North Country Region*, presents results from a study of **local/regional foods operations** in Northern New York and is focused specifically *on which organizations and individuals, if any, these enterprises collaborate with and how, if at all, collaborations impact the enterprises.*<sup>1,2</sup> There are many New York farmers who are interested in direct marketing and local/regional foods. Furthermore, there are many consumers who are interested in knowing where and how their food is produced. The overall goal of this research is to better understand and document the impacts this type of production and marketing has on individual farms and food businesses, and the roles these businesses and markets play in Northern New York community and economic development. Community leaders are also exploring ways to support these local/regional food businesses, wanting to capitalize on ways they can benefit communities. With the goal of helping this region better support farm and food businesses utilizing local and regional markets and enhance the positive ways these businesses contribute to the region, the results of this analysis are intended as a resource for other farmers, food business owners/operators, consumers, policymakers and community & economic developers working to enhance and sustain agriculture in Northern New York.

<sup>1</sup> The North Country Regional Food Initiative is a one year project dedicated to understanding economic and social impacts of local and regional food initiatives in the Adirondack-North Country and enhancing the ways these initiatives positively contribute to the region. The project is a collaborative effort of the seven Cornell Cooperative Extension Associations of Northern New York (Clinton, Essex, Franklin, Hamilton, Jefferson, Lewis and St. Lawrence counties) and the Community and Rural Development Institute (CaRDI) at Cornell University.

<sup>2</sup> Although we recognize that “local” and “regional” food systems are not necessarily the same thing and in many, if not most, cases are very different, we couple the words “local” and “regional” herein and throughout the *Research Report on the Impacts of Local and Regional Foods in the Adirondack-North Country Region* for the following reasons: (1) Given the relative size of the Adirondack-North Country region, even a regional food system is relatively local, particularly in comparison to regional foodsheds that encompass multiple states (e.g. the Northeast Region); (2) Many communities in Northern NY border another state or another country, for people living in these communities, depending on whether or not “local” and “regional” are defined by distance or political boundaries, a distance that is local is literally local and regional at the same time (e.g.: When a NY consumer purchases apples from a Canadian orchard 12 miles away, it is a local purchase in terms of distance, though a regional purchase in terms of political boundaries.); and (3) An overarching goal of the NCRFI is to cultivate a regional approach to economic and community development - this goal is based on the understanding that communities conserve resources and gain assets by working together regionally. However, shifting from a “local” to a “regional” approach is not necessarily intuitive; by coupling “local” and “regional” we hope to cultivate a paradigm shift, one in which one’s locality is seen in regional terms.

## B. Collaborations

A summary of responses from qualitative interviews with 15 direct market farmers and food businesses are presented below. Recurring themes from individuals' responses are highlighted. We use direct quotes (in italics) to place the challenges, opportunities, and strategies faced and employed by these businesses in the context of Northern NY. To respect the confidentiality of the interviewees, individuals' or farms' names are not used in association with their quotes.

Interviewers inquired of the farmers and food business representatives:

- Which organizations or individuals do you collaborate with?
- Can you estimate the value of collaboration to your enterprise?

Collaborators	
CCE/Cornell University <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• NE Regional Fruit Program</li> <li>• Good Agricultural Practices Program</li> <li>• Local associations – classes, demonstration, resources</li> <li>• Beginning Farmer Project</li> <li>• Adirondack Harvest</li> </ul>	Non-profit sector <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Human service agencies</li> <li>• Schools</li> <li>• Volunteer firefighters</li> <li>• Traditional Arts in Upstate NY</li> <li>• GardenShare</li> </ul>
Market outlets <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Farmers markets</li> <li>• Adirondack Farmers Market Cooperative</li> <li>• CSAs</li> <li>• Finger Lakes Organic</li> <li>• North Country Grown Cooperative</li> </ul>	Northeast Organic Farming Association Farm Bureau
Promotional affiliation <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Adirondack Harvest</li> <li>• Pride of NY</li> <li>• Seaway Valley Wine and Viticulture Association</li> <li>• Maple Producers Associations</li> </ul>	NYS Department of Agriculture & Markets Grange

**Value of collaboration to the enterprise** In determining the estimated value of collaborations to their farm/food businesses, respondents primarily referred to value in terms of non-economic impacts. Overwhelmingly, though they couldn't place a dollar figure on the value of collaborations, study participants feel the collaborations contribute significantly to their operations.

*Invaluable, hard to estimate – save time/free!*

*Without these we would not exist – especially for start up.*

*We could not put a value on the knowledge and attention these entities have given us.*

For those that were able to calculate **dollar figures as a percentage of their overall income**, the values were high. Commenting in particular on collaboration through market outlets, one respondent indicated that these collaborative opportunities contribute to at least 75% of the enterprise's sales. Further reflection

prompted the respondent to suggest that the other 25% of earnings are also attributable in part to collaboration around shared promotion - a Local Food Guide.

*75% of profits for everything but roadside stand (although that was mentioned in the local food guide).*

Another type of collaboration exists for those that sell through farmers' markets, and have access to Electronic Benefits Transfer (EBT)/Food Stamp program income and/or the Farmers' Market Nutrition Program (FMNP). FMNP provides income eligible seniors, families with young children and pregnant mothers set benefits to be spent at farmers' markets through local Office for the Aging and WIC agencies, while Food Stamp Program participants are able to utilize their EBT cards at participating markets. All of these programs require collaborating agencies and market entities to exist. Of the 15 interviewees, three participated in both programs and one FMNP only. The value of this collaboration ranged from 1% of sales, or as another farmer reported \$90-\$100/year, to 2/3 of sales at the farmers' market (no dollar figure was given).

## C. Challenges<sup>3</sup>

At least one respondent found collaborations not effective:

*I am too busy and have not found "teamwork" effective. I try to do things that will benefit others, but it seems to happen better if I just go ahead and do what I can rather than working in organizations.*

Likewise, another respondent conveyed that while she had worked collaboratively with several groups on specific projects, she has also been invited to participate in or give presentations about her operation. She saw these invitations not as collaborative opportunities but as relationship building. She feels these opportunities are important for raising awareness about her business, but also time consuming. For her, determining which opportunities to pursue for collaborative work is difficult, as so many times these collaborations end up being more work on her part than if she does not participate in them.

## D. Opportunities

While every challenge can also be seen as an opportunity, opportunities specifically identified by study participants include the new and expanding interest in local/regional foods, in New York, and nationally, and room for growth of this market in the Adirondack-North Country region. Citing the nationwide trend towards increased awareness regarding food sources, many owners/operators see the opportunity for more farms to become involved in local/regional food markets and the need for more farmers to meet

<sup>3</sup> Although we did not specifically ask study participants to identify challenges, opportunities, and strategies potentially impacting the future of their local/regional food market enterprises, all three were clearly articulated in their responses to the questions posed. In general, the challenges shared are of a specific nature in the sense that they relate to the individual topic addressed in each Research Brief on the farm and food business operations (not the one on organizational support for these operations): *Market Outlets, Training and Educational Resources, Farm/Food Business Economics, Collaborations, and the Roles of Local/Regional Food Businesses in Northern NY* in this report. Conversely, the opportunities and strategies that were identified are of a general nature and, as such, are equally relevant to all five research briefs included in the report. Thus, while the "Challenge" sections of these five research briefs are different, the "Opportunities" and "Strategies" sections, are verbatim.

this demand. They also see an opportunity for collaboration; in particular, shared purchasing of supplies, equipment, and marketing materials were all suggested. Interviewees also see the development of more support groups as an opportunity, viewing these groups as important to their success.

## E. Strategies

What should communities do through local officials and community & economic developers in collaboration with agricultural organizations to better support farm and food businesses utilizing local and regional markets to sell their farm and food products?

Based on these interviews, two types of strategies are needed to encourage further growth of a vibrant local/regional food economy in the Adirondack-North Country region: **education** and **infrastructure development**. Interviewees seek **consumer education** that: (1) addresses the importance of healthy diets (not just low fat) and the relationships between healthy diets and local/regional foods; (2) identifies sources of local/regional foods, and recognizes these foods as valuable, quality products and a community resource. Interviewees also seek educational materials that offer assistance with **enterprise and market analysis**, particularly regarding pricing strategies and expected profit margins for specific market outlets. They also seek educational opportunities, ranging from fact sheets to demonstrations, that share successful farm models and help them better understand production, equipment, and insurance concerns.

In terms of **infrastructure development**, producers seek support for working together to strengthen production/storage/transport/handling linkages. From their perspective, collaboration in the development of these types of infrastructure would benefit local and regional food producers and the communities they reside in through increased enterprises, market outlets, and export opportunities.

## F. Conclusions

The farms and food businesses explored herein represent a small subsection of agriculture in the Adirondack-North Country. However, local and regional farm and food businesses are filling a growing niche in the region's agriculture and business sectors through the products they supply and the lifestyles they offer farmers and business owners/operators. Specific to collaborations with other individuals and organizations, this research suggests that collaborative activities contribute significantly to these organizations. While further research is needed to determine what, if any, type of collaboration is more useful than another, team work at the local/regional level clearly benefits these businesses, increasing the likelihood that they will, in turn, contribute to the social and economic well-being of the communities in which they exist. Communities across the country can and are working together to strengthen these businesses. This research suggests the communities of Northern New York should consider thinking about

ways to promote opportunities for further collaboration: between local/regional food enterprises and the organizations that support them, among these organizations; and between these local/regional food businesses and organizations and *enterprises in other sectors*. In this way, the region would be expanding the network of support between and among its business sectors and organizations committed to furthering these sectors, and the communities in which they exist. In the *Conclusions and Recommendations* section of the *Research Report on the Impacts of Local and Regional Foods in the Adirondack-North Country Region* we share several recommendations designed to help Adirondack-North Country communities work together as a region to support these enterprises and capitalize on the ways they contribute to life in Northern New York.

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