

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 E: Roles of Local/Regional Food and Farm Businesses in Northern NY

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 the roles the owner/operators of these operations see themselves and their businesses playing in Adirondack-North Country communities*.^{1,2} 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.

¹ 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.

² 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. Roles

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. At our invitation, the farmers and food business owners/operators interviewed for this study reflected on how they, as business persons with a local/regional focus, contribute to their communities. In their responses, they described their roles in terms of interactions as buyers and sellers of food and farm products, as land owners, and as business people and citizens concerned about public health. What came across clearly is that many of these individuals see themselves as business persons and much more; they also see themselves as educators, and food security facilitators, that is, providing access to products that may not otherwise be available to local consumers. It is important to note that they not only see themselves as playing these roles but as responsible for fulfilling these roles – in other words they are intentional about contributing to their communities in the ways they identify.

It is my responsibility to provide a clean, fresh, safe quality product. I want to be proud of the products I offer and of my farm where it is grown.

In terms of education, the farmers and processors we interviewed see themselves as obligated to both convey the work and costs involved in food production to the public, and promote the benefits of their products in terms of quality and taste. Moreover, some businesses see their educational work as one of a mentoring nature – that is, they strive to model for others the potential of local production and local consumption and the ways both are possible.

Many of the owners/operators in this study also feel they are maintaining the knowledge base of agricultural production in this area by continuing its practice, and, most importantly, by doing so in an economically viable and environmentally sustainable way. They also believe that by providing their products to local consumers they are supporting and strengthening demand for such goods and, in so doing, ensuring their own future as well as that of other farmers needed to meet a growing demand.

[We are] an educational organization, a community development group – helping local agriculture come back to a healthy state – especially vegetable production, creating income opportunities for farmers, stopping economic leakages (purchase of products from outside the area that are produced here), providing healthy, good quality food to community, [and] keeping land in production rather than going back to brush.

C. Opportunities³

Opportunities specifically identified by study participants include the new and expanding interest in local 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 farmers see the opportunity for more farms to become involved in local/regional food markets and the need for more farmers to meet 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.

D. 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.

³ The opportunities and strategies shared by study participants are of a general nature and, as such, are equally relevant to the five research briefs (*Market Outlets, Farm/Food Business Economics, Training and Educational Resources, Collaborations*, and the *Roles of Local/Regional Food Businesses in Northern NY*) documenting the experiences of farmers and food business owners/operators included in the report. Thus, the “Opportunities” and “Strategies” sections are verbatim.

E. 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/operators⁴. Communities across the country can and are working together to strengthen these businesses. This research suggests Northern NY communities should continue to support these enterprises and consider exploring ways to meet the challenges they face as a means to realizing their contributions to the region. 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.

⁴ To learn more about these businesses refer to the other Research Briefs in Section III of this report at: www.nnyregionalllocalfoods.org.

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