

# Research & Policy Brief Series

ISSUE NUMBER 26/FEBRUARY 2009

## Exploring Regional Food Systems: A North Country Example

by Heidi Mouillesseaux-Kunzman (Cornell University) and Katherine Lang (Cornell Cooperative Extension of St. Lawrence County)\*

### What is the Issue?

In New York State and throughout the United States, agricultural landscapes and food markets are changing. In the midst of globalization, producers are increasingly growing for local and regional markets as consumers demand more regionally produced foods. Communities, too, are grappling with these changes. Community-based organizations, municipal agencies, and even local legislators are exploring how local and regional foods might contribute to community and economic development. To help NYS's "Adirondack-North Country" (A-NC) explore these themes regionally, the North Country Regional Foods Initiative (NCRFI) was formed in early 2008. With funding through the Economic Development Administration's University Center in New York State, and the support of the Northern New York Agricultural Development Program, seven Cornell Cooperative Extension Associations in New York's A-NC (Clinton, Essex, Franklin, Hamilton, Jefferson, Lewis and St. Lawrence counties) partnered as a region with the Community and Rural Development Institute (CaRDI) to better understand the impacts, opportunities, and challenges associated with local and regional food initiatives in their communities. This brief considers some of the ways that this research partnership might inform similar efforts and policies elsewhere.

### Adirondack-North Country Agriculture in Context

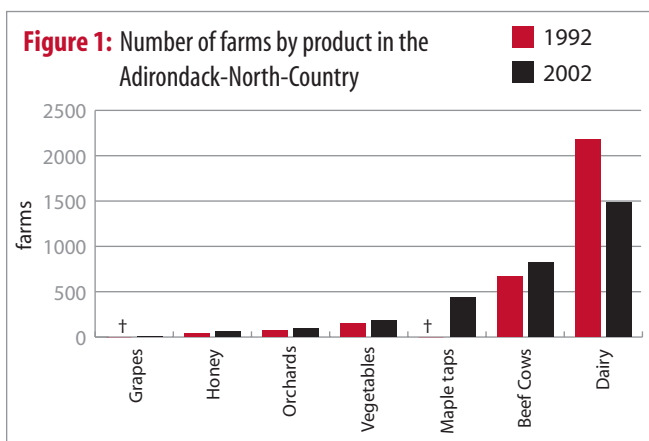
The region is known primarily for its dairy farms. Although this sector retains the largest number of farms in the A-NC (Figure 1), this number has decreased even as the total market value of dairy products sold has increased. At the same time, other types

of farms have been increasing in number, representing an overall diversification in farm types in the region.<sup>1</sup>

Direct-to-consumer sales in this region have also changed dramatically. Direct market producers sold almost \$3.5 million in farm products directly to residents and visitors to the region in 2002. This represents a near doubling (83% increase) over the 1997 figure of \$1.89 million. In addition, the numbers of farms selling directly to consumers increased from 441 to 506 during this same period.<sup>2</sup>

These trends have both fueled and been influenced by farmers, local chapters of farm advocacy organizations, members of nonprofits working to end hunger, economic development departments, the media, and other individuals, agencies, and organizations. All share a dedication to improving the well-being of the region. Through the efforts of these groups, the region has seen the formation of a regional brand (Adirondack Harvest), farm-to-school committees, new farmers' markets, local/regional food events, a growers' cooperative, the Seaway Wine Trail, a regional Maple Weekend, and local/regional food guides.

Cornell Cooperative Extension (CCE) associations in the region are involved in this process. They are increasingly called upon to support farmers' interest in local and regional markets, to address hunger and nutrition concerns, and to support community and economic development. CCE has provided leadership and partnership in many related developments. However, like their partners working to support local food initiatives, they have had mostly anecdotal evidence about the impact of these initiatives. To better evaluate A-NC impacts, challenges and opportunities, the region's CCE county associations, in collaboration with CaRDI, set out to answer four specific questions: (1) How does local/regional food production and marketing in the A-NC affect agricultural production and farm profitability? (2) How do local/regional food initiatives contribute to community and economic development in the region? (3) How do organizations that provide support services to farmers, consumers, and communities, and collaborations among them, influence local/regional food businesses as well as the communities in which they are located? and (4) How can A-NC communities individually and collectively better support and capitalize on the positive contributions local/regional food businesses make to the region?



Source: 1992, 2002 Census of Agriculture and the Northern New York Agricultural Development Program NNY Regional Profile (<http://www.nnyagdev.org/nyregionalprofile.htm>) †Data not available

<sup>1</sup> 2002 Census of Agriculture

<sup>2</sup> See Fact Sheet 2: *Local Food and Agriculture Trends* (Hilchey, Duncan 2008) at [www.nnyregionallocalfoods.org](http://www.nnyregionallocalfoods.org), for a more detailed analysis of this data.

\* David Kay serves as guest editor for this issue.

## Research Methods

To answer these questions, the project team (consisting of CCE educators and Cornell faculty and staff) analyzed secondary data and conducted interviews. The secondary data analysis was designed to understand the broader context of local foods in the A-NC region. The team conducted interviews in early 2008 with 15 farmers or other food business owners/operators and 11 representatives of organizations which support these businesses in the region. The interviews were designed to capture the distinct characteristics of 2-3 farm and food businesses per county. The businesses were selected to represent one or more of eleven different types of local/regional food enterprises prominent in the region. The organizations selected for the study include all of those in the region known to have primary programming activities that support local and regional food markets (retail and wholesale) and connections between local and regional producers and consumers. These include such organizations as marketing associations, commodity associations, local chapters of national farm advocacy organizations, buy local campaigns, hunger prevention organizations, and economic development agencies.

## What we learned

The most notable results of the study relevant to community and economic development policy are presented below:<sup>3</sup>

- Local/regional food business owners' and operators' business decisions are commonly tied to their personal interests and lifestyle goals.
- Owners/operators are intentional about contributing to their communities and see themselves doing so in multiple ways that include their contributions to the local economy.
- Organizational support for education and collaborative opportunities (primarily joint promotional and sales activities) are valuable to the local/regional food businesses.
- The organizations do not currently coordinate their activities across the region. However, most indicated they would like to be part of a network offering mutual support and learning opportunities.
- Organizations see the region's people as the primary asset in support of local and regional food initiatives. They report that the region's people have the skills, talent and interest in making local foods work.
- Although the owners/operators experience periodic cash flow gaps and/or have trouble affording insurance, they are optimistic about the future of local/regional food markets in the region. They expect increases in profitability and in capital to reinvest in their businesses.

These results suggest that the interviewed A-NC business owners and operators find the efforts of the support organizations

valuable. The organizations, in turn, see A-NC residents (as consumers, producers, and engaged citizens) committed to local and regional foods as the region's greatest strength for these businesses. Both the businesses and the organizations that support them are committed to working in the region to strengthen local and regional food initiatives for the benefit of producers, consumers, and whole communities.

## Next Steps

In light of these findings, members of CCE's NCRFI Project team have agreed to:

1. Strengthen CCE's support of local and regional food initiatives through the Northern New York Agricultural Program's Direct Marketing/Local Foods Team.
2. Support existing regional and county-based efforts to strengthen agriculture, food, and overall community and economic development.
3. Build on the Spring 2008 conference, "The Role of A-NC Foods in Community and Economic Development" by *regionally* coordinating efforts to share these research findings with policy makers. Invite a conversation about how A-NC communities might work together, as a region, to support local and regional food initiatives.

These approaches will provide CCE's A-NC partners with tools and support for a long-term conversation that could lead to *broader collaboration*. This collaboration would involve sharing of assets to address needs and to capitalize on opportunities relating to local and regional foods, ultimately achieving broader community and economic development goals.

## What is the broader relevance of the project?

This study addresses two issues that communities throughout New York State and the country are grappling with: local and regional food initiatives and regional economic development. Local officials and community and economic developers are increasingly recognizing that local and regional food can contribute to community and economic development.<sup>4</sup> The NCRFI offers an evolving model of how Cooperative Extension, in collaboration with Land Grant Institutions and other partners, can support and enhance existing regional efforts to achieve shared community and economic development goals. This model includes the following three elements: (1) Where appropriate, engage communities as a geographic, cultural and economic region; (2) explore the impacts of local and regional food initiatives (or other development strategies/sectors), and, if appropriate, organizations which support them, from a regional perspective; and (3) articulate steps to share research results with community and economic developers and policy makers, and to support related development activities. ▲

<sup>3</sup> The full results of this research are presented in the "Research Report on the Impacts of Local and Regional Foods in the Adirondack-North Country Region," available online at: [www.nnyregionalllocalfoods.org](http://www.nnyregionalllocalfoods.org)

<sup>4</sup> See: *Growing Home a Guide to Reconnecting Agriculture, Food, and Community*. (2002). Ithaca, NY: Cornell University, Community, Food, and Agriculture Program and *Food System Planning*. May 2007, American Planning Association EIP-16. (<http://myapa.planning.org/APAStore/Search/Default.aspx?p=3853>).

