

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:

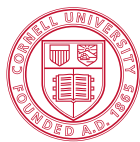
I Executive Summary

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This report is a product of the North Country Regional Foods Initiative (NCRFI), 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 NY (Clinton, Essex, Franklin, Hamilton, Jefferson, Lewis and St. Lawrence counties) and the Community and Rural Development Institute (CaRDI) at Cornell University. The full report, including Sections I-IV and appendices is available online at: nnyregionallocalfoods.org.



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I. Executive Summary

A. The North Country Regional Foods Initiative and its Research Component

This report is a product of the North Country Regional Foods Initiative (NCRFI), a one-year project dedicated to understanding economic and social impacts of local and regional food initiatives in the Adirondack-North Country region and enhancing the ways these initiatives positively contribute to the region. Project components included research, training, outreach, and network development targeted to farmers, consumers, community and economic development professionals, and local legislators in the region. The information presented herein documents the *research* component of the NCRFI. The project is a collaborative effort of the seven Cornell Cooperative Extension associations of northern NY (Clinton, Essex, Franklin, Hamilton, Jefferson, Lewis and St. Lawrence counties) and the Community and Rural Development Institute (CaRDI) at Cornell University. Funding for the Initiative was provided by the U.S. Department of Commerce's Economic Development Administration University Center, designated in New York State as Cornell University and hosted by CaRDI.

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.

The NCRFI and, in particular, the research documented in this report reflect a recognition, on the part of the Cornell Cooperative Extension Associations' in the Adirondack-North Country, of the need to: (1) identify and better understand their region's changing food and agricultural landscape, specifically a growing interest in production for local and regional food markets and the internal and external opportunities and challenges associated with these changes for agricultural producers and communities; and (2) to begin to develop a baseline by which we can monitor and evaluate these changes.

B. Research Goals and Methodology

This research was specifically designed to explore:

1. How local/regional food production and marketing in the Adirondack-North Country impacts agricultural production and farm profitability;
2. How local/regional food initiatives contribute to community and economic development in the region;

3. How collaborations and organizations committed to strengthening local/regional food markets influence local/regional food businesses as well as the communities in which they are located and serve;
4. How the region can better support and capitalize on any positive ways local/regional food businesses and their owners/operators contribute to the region.

We sought to address these questions through a variety of methods, including a review of the literature on local/regional food systems studies, analysis of published statistics and secondary data, and qualitative interviews, conducted in early 2008, with select farmers, other food business owners/operators, and organizational representatives in the Adirondack-North Country region.

C. The Report Format and Intended Use

The North Country Regional Foods Initiative project team has designed this report as a resource for farmers, consumers, policymakers and community & economic developers working to sustain and enhance agriculture, build regional food systems, and strengthen communities in Northern New York now and in the future.

The report is divided into five sections, each designed to be read as stand-alone pieces as well as components of a whole:

- (I) The **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY** provides a brief overview of the content of the report, emphasizing the overall project of which the research documented herein is a part, the questions this research was designed to address, how the research was pursued, the intended use of the report, the report format, key findings, and given these findings, activities the research team recommends be pursued through support of the Northern New York Regional Agriculture Program's Direct Marketing/Local Foods Team.
- (II) The **INTRODUCTION/OVERVIEW** contains a brief review of published studies that have analyzed local/regional foods and their social and economic impacts as well as a summary of secondary data analysis that is designed to place local/regional food enterprises in the context of Adirondack-North Country agriculture more generally
- (III) The **RESEARCH BRIEFS** (Market Outlets, Economics, Education, Collaborations, Roles of Local/Regional Food Businesses and Organizational Support in Northern NY) provide six separate summaries of data collected through interviews with farmers and other local/regional food business owners and operators and representatives of organizations whose work supports these businesses.
- (IV) The **CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS** section identifies several recommendations for strengthening local and regional food initiatives in the Adirondack-North Country region.
- (V) The **APPENDICES** contain North Country Regional Food Initiative Fact Sheets, Interview Guides, and a Select History of Local Food Events in Northern NY as additional resources compiled and generated in support of the North Country Regional Food Initiative project.

D. Key Findings

In this section we summarize key findings that emerged during our analysis of the information shared by farm and food business owners/operators and organizational representatives during our interviews with them. Presented in the *Research Briefs* section of this report, this information represents the primary source of data for this research study.

The Research Briefs demonstrate an array of preferences and experiences among the farms and food business owners/operators, and representatives of organizations supporting those businesses. This diversity is likely due, at least in part, to the research design: The interviews were designed to capture the distinct characteristics of 2-3 farm and food businesses, *that were specifically selected to represent one or more of eleven different types of local/regional food enterprises* prominent in the Adirondack-North Country region and all community-based organizations supporting them, no matter their mission. In other words, it is reasonable to expect representatives of enterprises that differ in product and outlet and representatives of organizations that differ in mission to have different experiences.

The relatively small size of our sample of farm and food businesses necessarily limits us from generalizing any particular finding to all similar types of enterprises in the region. However, when taken together, the information shared during each of these interviews provides a snapshot of why and how these owners/operators got into farming and, in particular, local/regional food markets, how they financed start-up costs, how they handle cash flow gaps, how they learn the skills of their trade, how they make decisions about their businesses, whether or not they find collaborative opportunities valuable, the roles they see themselves and their businesses playing in northern New York communities, and the challenges and opportunities they see for their enterprises.

In contrast to the relative nature of the information shared during the farm and food businesses interviews, because the organizations included in the study are all those known to be in some way working to support local/regional food enterprises in the region, the information shared during the interviews with their representatives is presumed to represent the perspectives of the entire known population. In their interviews, the organizational representatives were asked to talk about: how primary support for local/regional food enterprises is to their mission; how they support these businesses; the types of challenges these businesses face in the North Country, and the challenges their own organizations face in their work to support these enterprises.

At the same time this research documents a variety of experiences among local and regional food enterprises, it also reveals several common themes:

1. The business decisions made by the local/regional food business owners and operators interviewed for this study are commonly tied to their personal interests and goals; in other words, their lifestyle goals influence their business decisions.
2. These owners/operators are intentional about contributing to their communities and see themselves doing so in multiple ways, including contributions to the local economy.
3. Experience is the primary way in which these owners/operators have learned about farming but educational training opportunities and informational resources provided by organizations are important to their ongoing professional development.
4. Collaborations, in general, with agencies and organizations are very important to the success of these enterprises.
5. At the same time, ironically, the development of local and regional food businesses is not the primary goal of most organizations which support these businesses; it is rather, an offshoot of more primary programming.
6. The owners/operators are optimistic about the future of local/regional food markets, seeing the profitability of their enterprises steadily growing or providing them with capital to reinvest in the businesses. At the same time, some experience periodic cash flow gaps and/or have trouble affording insurance.
7. The owners/operators have several ideas about the challenges and opportunities they face and the ways North Country communities can help address these challenges and opportunities.

E. Next Steps:

In light of these findings, the North Country Regional Foods Initiative research team proposes that the Cornell Cooperative Extension Associations in the Adirondack North Country region continue working together as a regional partnership to support local and regional food initiatives. More specifically, working through the Northern NY Regional Agriculture Program's Direct Marketing/Local Foods Team, the Extension partnership should take the following steps to strengthen local and regional food businesses and the organizations that support them, and, through both, help the region's communities meet their community and economic development goals:

1. Share a copy of this report with the following groups reflecting specifically on the recommendations herein and the relationships between local/regional food-based development and broader community and economic development: study participants, cce-nnylocalregionalfoods-l list serv participants, "The Role of Adirondack-North Country Foods in Community and Economic Development" conference participants, and community and economic development professionals in the region, using a database developed for outreach purposes as part of the North Country Regional Foods Initiative.
2. Request an opportunity to make a presentation on the North Country Regional Foods Initiative, including the purpose of the project, its goals, outcomes, and recommendations, and proposed next steps for CCE, to local legislators and community and economic developers within Adirondack-North Country communities, inviting them to consider the ways they may help address recommendations locally and be part of a regional partnership to do so.
3. Engage interested stakeholders (farmers, other food business representatives, food consumer advocates, community and economic developers, legislators, and other interested citizens) to devise a comprehensive plan for addressing local/regional food market challenges and opportunities in a coordinated and collaborative fashion, one that ensures existing and newly developed resources are used in a regionally efficient manner.
4. Build on to the baseline of knowledge about Adirondack-North Country local/regional foods established through the North Country Regional Food Initiative research component (detailed in this report and its appendices) through further research. Specific items suggested for further study include a market analysis that assesses current and potential consumer demand for regional products at food service and retail outlets in the North Country, a direct marketing producer survey, an agritourism survey, and an examination of the effectiveness of local/regional brands, including consumer awareness of these brands.²
5. Use the baseline established through the NCRFI and further research to evaluate and monitor progress to strengthen North Country local/regional food businesses and the positive ways they can contribute to community and economic development.

F. Conclusions

The North Country Regional Foods Initiative research highlights the multitude of models and ideas underway in the North Country for furthering a sustainable local/regional food and agricultural system. It is evident that direct market farmers and those using regional identity marketing are building on an agricultural tradition in the Adirondack-North Country region that emphasizes the social and ecological,

²Refer to the "Conclusions and Recommendations" section (IV) of this report for a list of strategies proposed to enhance local and regional food markets and further regional community and economic development in the North Country.

as well as economic, contributions that farms and farmers make to their communities. These business people are working to attain a quality of life for themselves that also lends itself to building trust and confidence in their products among their customers and neighbors, and intentionally contributes to the communities and region they share.

The farmers, food business owners/operators, and organizational representatives interviewed for this work as well as conference presenters and participants at the April 18th, 2008 event in Tupper Lake, NY recognize the potential for and the hard work involved in re-establishing a regional food system. Agriculture and farming are an integral part of life in Northern NY for those pursuing farming as a livelihood and for consumers interested in reconnecting with their food sources. Communities also benefit from these pursuits. The research and recommendations presented in this report are intended to help create a regional environment wherein these related goals - production for local/regional food markets' consumption of locally and regionally produced foods, and community and economic development - can be achieved. As Extension professionals we look forward to working together, in a regional partnership, with Northern New York communities, to support the pursuit and achievement of these goals.

