

# 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 C: **Training and Educational Resources**

#### **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 *how the farmers and other food business owners/operators interviewed educate themselves about farming and marketing*.<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 Adirondack-North Country 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. Training and educational resources

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 owners/operators:

- How did you educate yourself about farming and marketing?

Twelve of the fifteen interviewees cited **experience** as a main source of learning about farming; some referred specifically to trial and error, while others cited their backgrounds:

*We were both born on farms (dairy farm); [we] have it in our blood.*

Others refer to previous work or personal experiences such as participating in community supported agriculture (CSA) operations, farm *hopping* (meaning working on multiple farms), and home gardening.

The second most common form of education reported was **workshops/classes/meetings/conferences/tradeshows**. These include Cornell Cooperative Extension and Cornell University programs, Northeast Organic Farming Association of NY conferences, producer association meetings, and NYS Department of Agriculture and Markets and Farmers' Market Federation of NYS meetings. These forums include general training (e.g. Marketing 101 and sessions on production techniques) as well as specific certifications (e.g. pesticide applicator training) and coursework (e.g. Quickbooks).

Another source of training and educational resources cited is **other farmers/mentors**. Some examples of resources include: formal programs, like the Regional Farm & Food Project mentor program and 'twilight meetings' at farms through Extension; and informal collaborations with past owners of an operation and farm visits in general. Some respondents seek input from customers for certain market outlets (college food service directors or cow dealers), while one interviewee commented on the value of just watching how others do things, reading fliers and advertising, and listening to customers' feedback regarding that farm operation as well as those of others.

As frequently cited as other farmers/mentors was **reading/websites/internet lists**. These resources range from organizational newsletters, to Extension fact sheets, to farm magazines/trade publications and regulatory materials.

Interviewees mentioned **organizations** as playing a role in their education, through membership or resource sharing. Often the Small Business Administration is accessed for business plan development, as well as Cornell Cooperative Extension, and, interestingly, non-farm related groups for general leadership skill building and facilitation skills (St. Lawrence Leadership Institute and PTA).

Only two interviewees referred to **formal education** as a factor in their farm/food business training, both attended college level courses in some type of agricultural field.

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

A specific barrier raised by an interviewee in regards to training and educational resources is that the *cost of workshops and related travel are getting too expensive.*

This seems especially relevant as many educational programs of interest to farmers are held outside of the region.

## 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 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 Northern New York: **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.

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<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.

## F. Conclusions

The farms and food businesses explored herein represent a small subsection of agriculture in the Adirondack-North Country region. 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<sup>4</sup>. The training and educational resources offered by publicly funded institutions, professional associations, and community-based organizations, are clearly important to these businesses. Local/regional farm and food business owners/operators draw heavily on these resources for professional development opportunities, with few having pursued agriculture through higher education channels. Communities across the country can and are working together to strengthen these businesses. Based on this research, professional development opportunities are an important resource communities can provide in their efforts to support local/regional food enterprises and reap the benefits they provide to communities. 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.

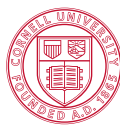
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<sup>4</sup> To learn more about these businesses refer to the other Research Briefs in Section III of this report at: [www.nnyregionalllocalfoods.org](http://www.nnyregionalllocalfoods.org).

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