

Livestock Focus Group Notes

Feb 6, 2014

12 Attendees

Neighbor conflicts

- Some participants do experience neighborhood trash, abuse of land.
- New neighbors don't respect agriculture or the land: knock over hay lots, new generation is disrespectful. Lack of public education about agriculture.
- One participant's operation borders state land, which is an illegal dumping site. Spends a lot of time cleaning out the trash, mattresses, washing machines, etc. Need better policing, although resources are limited.
- 4-wheelers cross private land without permission. Some vehicle vandalism.
- Manure spreading: some participants notify neighbors beforehand, helps a lot with complaints. One participant sends out fliers in the beginning of the year to ask about dates when he should not spread (i.e., if a neighbor has a big event at their house on a certain date). It's a timing issue.
- The biggest complaint issue is mud on the roads. Road sweepers on the tractors can address this but they are expensive.

Land pressures

- Participants haven't really felt much development pressures. A bigger issue is land availability, having to compete with the bigger farms for land. Small farms don't stand a chance. This was attributed to ethanol driving up corn prices.

Planning Board or Town Board issues/Zoning/Sub-division/ Site Plan issues

- One participant recounted a negative experience with a building inspector when trying to put up a new farm building. Felt that he was singled out for a supposedly required permit that other new buildings didn't seem to need (Sempronius).
- Other participants who recently moved from out of the area to establish their farm business asked about a sign and also wanted to do a farmstand but were told they can't do it, even though their didn't seem to be a local law restricting these things (Sempronius).
- These issues depend on a lot on the codes person.

Business Development – how did participants gain the knowledge they needed to run their farm businesses effectively?

- Lots of reading
- The internet was helpful
- Writing, goals, business planning only helps to an extent, not all that helpful in the end. A lot of resources are superficial.
- Trial by error. (*This comment from a participant got a lot of nods from others in the room, but they said that that they don't recommend it*)
- It would have been really helpful starting out to have had a legal and licensing checklist to cover things like DBA, insurance, etc. Participant pointed out that there are more workshops on this sort of thing now
- One participant got a Bachelor's degree in Ag. Business from SUNY Cobleskill
- One participant got a Bachelor's degree in Ag. Engineering from SUNY Morrisville, but it wasn't that helpful for the business side of things.

- One participant attended a few CCE meetings but they were hard to get to. Would be useful if they were webcast.
- Another participant did CCE classes, but they were expensive. Content was good, though. Small Farm Program courses, “Beginning Farmer Series”
- Mentorship or a relative to help you figure things out is very important
- For a horse business, the equine school helped. All success can be attributed to this resource.

What do you see in your farm’s future?

- Have to get bigger
- If you do it right, you’ll grow. There was discussion about Wake Robin, a farm just outside Cayuga County, located in Onondaga County. They had a lot of pressure to get bigger because there was a lot of demand for their product. Their yogurt was being sold in Wegman’s but they stopped that because they intentionally decided to stay smaller.
- One participant doesn’t plan to expand his herd, but does plan to diversify, maybe by adding a greenhouse and/or aquaponics so that the chore cycle is “stacked”
- Similarly, another participant noted that since he was already making the trip to the Syracuse Regional Market, he might as well take more there, so he’s adding a high tunnel to his existing operation.
- Another participant is also interested in diversifying. They’re still learning about farming. Just got their organic certification. They want a sustainable farm to serve the local community, including chickens, goats, vegetables, fruits, maple syrup, honey. Don’t plan to get bigger, just to access more markets.
- One beef producing participant plans to stay doing what they’re doing now
- Participants with a relatively new beef operation wants to diversify, says that they can’t do just beef because the price fluctuates too much. Looking to do meat goats, harvest timber on property, maybe raise pigs. But, need buildings to do all that.
- One beef and hog producer just put up a new barn. Meat goes to NYC and hay to Long Island and Connecticut
- Another participant is interested in maple syrup in addition to primary farm business. Also has 50-60 apple trees that produce, so want to find some way to use them.

Business Support

- One participant said that there is a need for better networking. People are very busy, takes time to learn about existing resources. Learned about SWCD because they knocked on his door.
- Regulations and licensing are very complicated and very difficult to find out the real answers. Specifically with regards to product labeling for sale at markets, food safety. Every two years NYSDAM changes regulation rules about how to sell chickens and eggs, frozen temperatures versus fresh temperatures. Very complicated. Tatiana at Cornell has helped.
- Organic inspectors – what passes depends on the person doing the inspection – NOFA.
- It took one operator 9 months to get their organic certification through ICS.
- One participant noted that it wasn’t worth doing an organic certification for his operation because the cost of organic feed was too high.

Processing

- USDA –except for chicken, there are not enough USDA certified facilities to meet demand. Existing ones are in: Moravia, Romulus, north of Oneida Lake, and northern Pennsylvania.
- Cuts of meat that are sold must be processed by a USDA certified facility. Cuts for personal consumption can be processed in a state certified facility.

- In Vermont, farmers can sell cuts of meat within the state that have been processed in a Vermont-certified facility. How to get a NYS-USDA reciprocal certification? Ask Marty Broccoli about this (*Agricultural Economic Development Specialist, Oneida County CCE*).
- Brutus Hardware runs a mobile chicken processing unit.
- One participant noted that he was ready to invest in his own processing facility for his own products because there is just not enough capacity available to meet his needs.
- Another participant already has his own processing facility, and is planning to upgrade it later this year
- Another participant shared that he would love to be able to sell cuts in state especially since he has a connection to a local convenience store, but that he only has access to a state certified facility which makes this impossible.
- Market access is dependent on access to processing facilities
- Yet another participant skips over the local market entirely and sends his meat to Tyson and JBS USDA-certified facilities in Pennsylvania. Beef gets marketed under the Pineland Farms label and is sold in Wholefoods.
- Most culled cows get slaughtered in PA.
- A participant mentioned that Happy Hooves farm is certified organic, probably sends their animals to the certified organic USDA facility in PA. Farmer has various drop off/sale points in the local area where she sells, in and out of the county.

Marketing

- One participant mostly does freezer beef. Has done beef for about 35 years, hogs for about 10 years. Sell through word of mouth. Been around a while. Business can't get bigger because of land, but costs are increasing.
- One participant sells under the Pineland Farms label. The farmer-mentor that participant had worked with sold his beef this way, so that was the initial connection. The premium price they get from this arrangement is definitely worth the trip to PA. Wants to do freezer beef, gets a lot of questions from the local public about it, but aren't set up to do it yet.
- Local market – it's hard to get a good price for it, but don't have the price problem downstate, so that market is more appealing.
- One egg producer-participant sells at the Syracuse Regional Market, the Syracuse Real Food Cooperative, a summer farmstand, a CSA in Rochester, and several other places. There is a big demand for local food, people at the markets want to meet the farmer. Before, was wholesaling to NYC but it was less rewarding. Enjoys the relationship marketing aspect of the farmers markets. *Are the farmers markets economically rewarding also?* It varies from farm to farm, farmers value their time differently. We continue to sell out at the farmers market. Have to sell a large volume of eggs to break even and finally make a profit. The cost of feed is constantly going up. The cost to rent land has increased, which drives up the cost of growing the feed.
- Another egg producer-participant sells eggs to restaurants, Mesa Grande and Elderberry Pond, both in the county. Goes to the Skaneateles Farmers Market and sells at the Skaneateles Tops Market all year round. Would like to do more restaurants, do not want to do wholesale. The Skaneateles Farmers Market is expanding. It's managed by the farmers, which can be challenging. There is no coordination /collaboration among the various farmers markets in the area. A lot of them are controlled by the town or village that it is located in, they can control when and where, signage, and other things. Wants to see CCE be 3rd party Farmers Market managers – to advise on what they're doing right and what they're doing wrong. Would like to see farmers working together to purchase collective inputs in bulk to save money (pooling purchasing). Very interested in participating in something like this.