Agriculture's Contribution to NY's Economy and Communities

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The following are examples of CFAP and other research that relates to the issues and opportunities raised by the Rural Vision Project, including agriculture's contribution to communities, marketing needs, value-adding needs, agritourism, and diversification.

First, understanding New Yorkers' perceptions of agriculture's contribution to local communities is critical for understanding policy and politics (local and state) and community needs. In 2004, Gillespie, Hilchey, Smith and Kay conducted a series of nine focus groups with farmers, agribusiness reps, and non-farming residents in three New York counties. They found that economic impacts such as business and job creation were the most commonly perceived impact. However, additional responses ranged from preserving open space and providing a local source of quality food, to promoting social values and preservation of highly valued rural heritage and traditions. Participants not connected directly with agriculture tended to favor small and family farms and to oppose larger farms, which they often seemed to view invidiously (but erroneously) as "corporate" (Hilchey and Gillespie, 2004).

Second, just as small business is a critical driver of the American economy, small agricultural enterprises are a critical driver to agriculture-related economic development. Yet there are still many questions about the needs, operations and economic opportunities and contributions of small agricultural enterprises, and CFAP has been addressing these:

What are the needs of roadside stand operators, farmers' market vendors and u-pick operators? Working with the New York State Farmers Direct Marketing Association, Francis and Hilchey (2003) conducted focus groups identify the marketing information needs of these agricultural product retail businesses. Overall, participants reported needing (a) more information on what motivates customers to buy; (b) techniques to understand who their customers are; and (c) other information that Cornell could develop to educate consumers about local products (e.g., the health benefits of particular foods). Francis and Hilchey are currently beta testing a new marketing tool called "MarketScape" which is designed for Extension field staff to use in working with farm clients to identify niche market opportunities, for example, as found in concentrations of ethnic, gourmet, and organic consumers.

While there is much interest in agritourism, there is little solid information that can inform agritourism policies and programs. Hilchey and Kuehn (2002) conducted studies of agritourism businesses and customers in New York, identifying their management barriers and opportunities, and measuring regional farm-based recreation and hospitality sales.

Organizing cooperative ventures in agriculture is another area where discussion and interest often exceed the information available to farmers and policy-makers. Hilchey, Gillespie and Henehan (2006) studied small-scale fruit and vegetable cooperatives in the Northeast to identify their opportunities and threats as well as their impacts on members' farms and families. They concluded that while members reported that their co-ops are critical to the success of their farms and the families, these co-ops are organizationally and financially fragile, with more than three-quarters of the co-ops' managers questioning the viability of their employment at their respective co-ops.

Another agricultural economic structure that is an engine of community and economic development is farmers' markets. CFAP has conducted a number of studies on the role of farmers' markets (Gillespie, et al., forthcoming; Feenstra, et al., 2003) in New York, Iowa and California. The studies clearly identify an "incubation function" that farmers' markets play in communities. They provide a low-risk, low-cost way to start a new farm enterprise or to test-market a new product. These studies have also highlighted the role farmers' markets play in bridging the cultural gap between farmers and local residents.

Microbreweries, brewpubs and regional breweries are also emerging as critical vehicles for the new agriculture-related economic development. In cooperation with the Northeast Hop Alliance (NeHA), CFAP conducted a market research survey in 2002 to learn about potential sales in the Northeast of regionally grown hops. The results support the conclusion that a potential market exists for regionally produced hops, perhaps including as many as several hundred small breweries in the Northeast and Ohio. Many brewers even reported a willingness to pay a small price premium (between 5 and 10 percent). Hilchey (2003) concluded from this research that it is possible for small hops yards to build partnerships with small breweries to produce specialty beers with Northeastern hops.

With these new ventures and directions in agriculture-related economic development, the "agricultural economic development specialist" becomes a critical figure in community-economic development planning and training. These Extension educators, planners, and NGO staffers were surveyed in 2004 by CFAP. Indeed, they indicated a growing emphasis on agricultural development, not just agricultural production. However, the study also suggested that agriculture economic development specialists need professional development training, especially in process skills, funding strategies, and project evaluation (Hilchey, 2004).

Farm to School is an example of an emerging approach to environmental change in school food service that helps schools provide fresh fruits and vegetables to students while at the same time assuring the future health of local food systems through essential market development (Graham, et al, 2004; CFSC, 1998; USDA, 1998). Active projects now exist in more than 400 school districts in 20 states (CFJ, 2005). Farm to School aims to increase children's consumption of fruits and vegetables by: (1) increasing their access to a wide variety of locally grown, fresh fruits and vegetables; and (2) connecting the cafeteria to the classroom and to farms through nutrition and food education. Food service directors are interested in farm to school for several reasons, including supporting their local economies and communities; accessing fresher, higher-quality food; and potentially increasing students' fruit and vegetable consumption (Izumi, et al., 2006). Model farm to school programs show

the potential for farm to school nutrition education development that promotes youth empowerment, environmental stewardship and healthy lifestyles (O'Brien, 2006).

Research studies have yet to inform:

- The links between community development and food and agriculture-based development, beyond economics (social capital, etc.)
- Innovative agricultural land preservation techniques (much has been done with existing techniques, but more could be done to propose new models)
- Links between agriculture, food, and health
- Opportunities for communities to link local health goals to local agriculture and food development initiatives
- The role of sub-state regions in bridging local and state policy
- Exploring the mutual interests of farmers, rural businesses, and urban consumer needs and desires.

Research questions:

- What is NAFTA's impact (positive and negative) on local food and agriculture?
- What are the impacts of CALS, NYSDAM, and SARE grant programs?
- What are the direct and indirect impacts of CALS research, extension, and outreach programs? For example, discussions about farm-to-school, Pride of NY, Agriculture in the Classroom, buy-local campaigns, and New York Farm Viability Institute funding—but what research points to impacts or effectiveness, particularly in the long term?
- How can development policy integrate the concerns of both urban and rural stakeholders and yield benefits for both?
- What are the social, economic, and environmental indicators by which we measure impact or progress?
- Studies on food system infrastructure have been piecemeal and lacked scientific approach. Statewide studies on USDA slaughterhouses, state licensed facilities, shared-use kitchens, co-packers, etc. are needed.
- How can Cornell Cooperative Extension shift its emphasis from farm production to agriculture and food system development (with strong connections to NYFVI)?
- What are the short and long-term impacts of food and ag-based development professionals on the food and agricultural industry and on community development?
- In what ways do viable and vibrant local food systems impact local health?
- In what ways do local agricultural marketing initiatives serve or not serve low-income members of our communities?
- What are proactive, effective local policies that increase the viability of the food and agricultural industry?
- What are the features of development projects which have proven to strengthen the ties between local farmers and the members of their communities?

Citations

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