

The Problem with Agriculture in Rhode Island

Wendell Berry in *The Unsettling of America: Culture and Agriculture in America* (1977), states:

... we and our country create one another, depend on one another, are literally part of one another; that our land passes in and out of our bodies just as our bodies pass in and out of our land; that as we and our land are part of one another, so all who are living as neighbors here, human and plant and animal, are part of one another, and so cannot possibly flourish alone; that, therefore, our culture must be our response to our place, our culture and our place are images of each other and inseparable from each other, and so neither can be better than the other.

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Mr. Berry is telling us the state of our land is a cultural statement – and how we use land reflects the current state of our culture.

The Rhode Island Food Economy

99% of our food comes from 'somewhere else'.

Rhode Island farmers - even the few that have cash flows above \$1M (a few vegetable operations and a few nursery/sod operations) - have very low profit margins. The smaller ones (the majority) work very hard for little money.

In my opinion, state and local governments have responded to the increasing demand for high quality local food with only marginal economic improvement programs. The State, with some private foundation support, provides \$200,000 each year for competitive grants to small farmers. Good hearted as it is, it is a trivial amount of money if our communities are serious about improving the agricultural economy.

A large part of the problem is a national problem. The food economy is large - and concentrated - in many and complicated ways. Large growers of grain, livestock, and specialty crops; large food processors; and large aggregators, distributors, and brokers dominate the market.

99% of the State's food, therefore, has nothing to do with our local economy, other than some local retailers and processors have businesses that resell out-of-state food. Even the local retail, processing, and distribution are dominated by non-local companies (Whole Foods Market, Stop and Shop, Shaw's).

As a final economic thought, it is my intuition that numerous Rhode Islanders hold equity stocks or bonds (through personal portfolios or pension/annuity accounts) in some of those 'somewhere else' food corporations.

What agriculture is appropriate in Rhode Island?

Rhode Island is a glacial landscape full of rocks and soil deposited by a past ice age. The soils vary broadly – and much of the soil is rocky with qualities that make it inappropriate for agriculture. The weather can be harsh, so the growing season is narrow in comparison to more temperate places.

There are, however, areas with important agricultural soils.

It appears, from my work with a number of local farmers, that those important soils make very good ground for specialty vegetable crops.

Other areas of the State provide good pasture for livestock and good land for orchards and other fruit production.

Rhode Island is not the ‘fertile delta’, but it is hospitable to very good production of vegetables, livestock, and certain kinds of fruit.

From our research, it appears there are several thousand additional acres of land that could provide a good home to farmers and their diverse crops.

Developing a Culture that Supports Expanded Local Agriculture

My own experience over the past twenty years indicates, to a very large extent, the barriers to significant expansion of local agriculture are primarily cultural.

Let me first list some economic and agro-economic principles we believe critical to an expanded agriculture:

- 1) The environment is not a minor factor of production - but rather is ‘an envelope containing, provisioning, and sustaining the entire economy’ (Paul Hawkin).
- 2) The limiting factor to farm economic development is the availability and functionality of life-supporting natural services that have no substitutes (many also have no market value – ‘public goods’ – air quality, etc.).
- 3) Misconceived or unintelligently designed business systems, historically poor population settlement patterns (mostly as a result of a lack of knowledge), and wasteful patterns of consumption are the primary causes of the loss of life-supporting natural services.
- 4) Farm and food economies can be best managed in democratic, market-based systems of production and distribution in which human work, manufactured goods, finance, and life-supporting natural services are all fully and adequately valued.

- 5) A key result of knowledgeable, effective and empathetic employment of people, money, and life-supporting natural services is a significant increase in resource productivity - farm methods emphasizing practices that promote enhanced resource productivity utilizing new agro-ecological knowledge and practice experiences from the past twenty (20) years with organic, biodynamic, permaculture, and traditional agriculture.
- 6) Community welfare is best served by improving the quality and flow of desired natural services delivered – plainly, we best serve the community by improving the environmental qualities and agricultural productivity of the State’s farms.

Basic agro-ecological economic principles:

The innovations occurring in the ‘sustainability sector’ of agriculture take two interwoven and complimentary paths:

- 1) Increase the resource and ecological effectiveness of all forms of farming, seeking new ways to enhance production utilizing fewer resources - both through direct increases in productivity and through biomimicry and closed loop non-toxic practices.
- 2) Design agricultural practices so that the farm restores, sustains, and expands life-giving natural services with only limited, no-harm external inputs.
- 3) Regenerate the farm’s economy by utilizing innovative customer/financing arrangements such as community-supported agriculture and collaborative farm/value- added food business relationships to leverage increased productivity – providing additional asset and enterprise growth.

These principles are the work of many practitioners of sustainable agriculture. They are based upon traditional ‘settled’ agriculture, the work of indigenous farmers, and the work of modern agro-ecologists.

If the people of the State want to implement these practice principles, Rhode Island is perhaps fortunate that it is not dominated by commodity crop farmers and concentrated animal feeding operations. We, therefore, do not have the direct friction of those agricultural lobbies.

We are, however, dominated by financial industries and financial industry lobbies – as is the rest of the country. The access to any significant capital for the development of a robust local food economy is not available through traditional banks. Farm Credit East helps as it can, but they also have standard credit protocols and collateral requirements that make any start-up farmer ineligible.

The result is little capital for food economic development.

The other HUGE problem is that our State's monetary economy is also largely 'somewhere else'. It appears that a large number of our citizens are either satisfied with that economy or resigned to its workings.

The great 'satisfier' for the larger population appears to be the pension plan or annuity....and the hope of retirement. The great 'satisfier' for many wealthy individuals appears to be they have won, and others have lost – somehow the economy becomes a contest for domination and bragging rights.

Pension plans and annuities would be helpful if they were the result of healthy economic practices. Unfortunately, they have become an abstraction of real honest money management. Large investment pools like pension funds also have allowed financial brokers and 'just clever' executives to concentrate wealth through very large fee and compensation packages.

This is a cultural problem – where a group of 'winners' do not truly consider the losers. It also leads to enormous problems for those economic 'losers'.

That same cultural problem is also the primary constraint to a more robust local food economy. In essence, there is no real 'monied' interest in creating that larger local food economy because the lack of an aggregated existing local food economy does not provide a means to extract a portion of a large cash flow through profit sharing agreements, large fees, or compensation packages.

Are there practical and feasible ways to encourage significant change in the agricultural economy?

Solving the problems of the national/international economy are complicated, difficult, and impossible to conceive. In the United States there are a number of impediments to even considering agricultural economic reform.

As a reaction to climate change stresses, there are some significant changes in cash flows toward technology driven reforms to agriculture – large scale greenhouses, precision agriculture, etc. Although these efforts might provide some environmental improvement, few of them address the deeper cultural problems.

Creating just, intelligent, and productive farms and food businesses seems more sensible and feasible. It also only requires the cooperation of a small number of like-minded individuals, families, communities, and investors.

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