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SPECIAL SECTION

TRADE & AGRICULTURE

New crops, tourism aim to keep them farming

By Jean Gossman

There is no question that the United States has experienced a decline in small farms during the postwar era. Although the Currier-and-Ives-print lifestyle is not gone by any means, the agricultural landscape has irrevocably changed to include zoning clusters, "farmettes" and barn-preservation societies.

But the rise of Internet sales, agritourism and organic and other specialty crops, especially in communities within striking distance of an urban restaurant market, is quietly breathing a bit of new life into American small-farm production and farmland preservation and use.

Fifty-six percent of New York state's farms are within metropolitan counties, and almost all of the rest are in adjoining counties. Specialty crop farming and horse boarding are expanding rapidly. In 1997, more than 10 percent of New York's farmers reported income from direct sales to consumers at stands or at pick-your-own or similar operations. Even without proximity to a large city, both conventional and specialty crops such as maple syrup, nuts and grass-fed beef are increasingly sold through the Internet.

New York state's Lower Hudson Valley, like much of the rest of the state, is experiencing such a change. Mark Adams, president of the Farm Bureau of Dutchess County, N.Y., is the owner of Adams Greenhouses. His business in Poughkeepsie employs 36 people on the land where his family raised vegetables for three generations.

Why a greenhouse after decades of vegetable farming? Citing foreign and domestic competition, he explained, "I couldn't make any money. We [farmers] don't think there's a level playing field. ... We don't mind the competition; we're hardworking in this country," but "we need to produce a crop we can sell at a profit." He noted that, in particular, New York's famed apple crop has been hurt by encroachment from China, with its sub-par labor standards and unregulated pesticides.

"There're a lot of interesting things being grown around here," Adams told The Hill. "We're trying to be like Provence."

He warned that a niche item "has to be incredibly profitable" to keep it in production. Nevertheless, he said, "it's a way to keep the land open. ... You can't just grow a commodity anymore; you've got to grow something you can get a better price for."

Then you have to find the market for it and distribute the product. Sullivan County's fresh foie gras, served at a nearby restaurant, certainly fills that bill. Traditionally, farmers do not do their own marketing and distribution, and that poses a challenge for those working with niche crops.

Many are now turning to seminars and using the Internet as a "virtual extension agent."

A 2001 survey of young farmers and ranchers that was conducted by the American Farm Bureau Federation revealed that almost 80 percent use the Internet for family education and business.

Also, with organic regulations under the control of the U.S. Department of Agriculture, consumer confidence in these products is expected to increase and the organic foods market will grow along with that confidence. The U.S. organic market is projected to grow from \$9.35 billion in 2001 to more than \$13 billion in 2003.

Many countries also welcome genetically modified crops, and those products are another niche for retooling individual farm production.

The 2002 Farm Bill created a new program of grants to create and sustain local farmers

markets. Under the Farmers Market Development Grants program, communities can apply for funding for farmers markets to create new marketing opportunities for farmers and better provide quality fresh produce to consumers.

Farmers across the country can expand the number of consumers their products reach through local markets. Many of the farmers who participate in those markets are small family farmers who rely on those programs as an important customer base.

If communities begin to rely on farmers markets for their fresh produce, it relieves some of the development pressure that farms near cities often face and helps prevent urban sprawl. That enables those who might otherwise simply bemoan the decline of small family farms to tangibly support them by buying their products.

On the other hand, there can be a problem with conventional suppliers if stores and restaurants purchase from local producers. Contracts for regular delivery of fresh produce from nationwide suppliers can conflict with accepting local seasonal products that are subject to Mother Nature's whims, as well as consumer tastes.

Farm tours, farm-based bed-and-breakfast operations, farm vacations, seasonal festivals and other forms of agritourism are attracting visitors.

States and farm groups are assisting operators with business and marketing plan development. The Appalachian Regional Commission funds New York's AgriCluster project, which includes a three-phase rural economic development concept that relies on agriculture and non-agricultural organizational collaboration.

Agritourism allows parents to show their children where the milk they got from a supermarket actually comes from, and operators can show their patrons the value of their stewardship of the land.

Although Mark Adams calls agritourism "the last gasp," it provides opportunities for operators not as close to urban regions with tony restaurants to retain their open farmland. In these areas, there are not many buyers for subdivided farmland, even if families and communities favored it. Adams told The Hill that "farmland is a precious resource, and getting politicians to understand that is tough."