

**Statewide Agricultural Forum
on the Future of Rhode Island Agriculture**

Rhode Island Agricultural Partnership

Tuesday, November 9th
University of Rhode Island

Written and Oral Comments and Questions

Building Food and Farm Markets

- What do we as a state plan on doing about national sovereignty & self-reliance & self-provision as a nation when on a federal level this doesn't seem to be their concern? As a conventional, multi-generational farm enterprise, not wanting to be continually relying on the government for our survival—we feel out on the fringe & at enmity with many of our peers and state emphasis, and feel our voice is trying to be silenced.

- The wording seems to place more value on food producers than on ornamental, nursery stock, vineyards, recreation, and other products.

- RI must support farmers. We need taxes to be lowered. Property taxes and others make it very hard to survive. Cost of water must be controlled.

- State legislature needs to look at marketing of raw milk. We are here to voice what farmers would like and to make changes within our state, not to be told it is not possible.

- Include urban agriculture

- Expand the term RI Food and Farm Products to include “experiences” RIFFP&E

- For every new farmers market, farm stand, etc there is a drawdown on existing farmers markets and farm stands. There is only “X” amount of buyers for “Y” amount of growers. RI state markets for RI growers who grow their crops, not bought or brought in from out of state.

- How about ethnic needs and market response? Heritage foods / seed saving? Forestry and logging? Services that effect landuse—planning, design, landscape construction?

- Expand/promote Rhody Native. Incentive to preserve, protect resources, water, habitat—marketability?

- USDA Rural Development has a value added producer grant program that is under-utilized in RI

- What about ornamental agriculture—driving force in RI?

- RI nursery—export product out of state and bring money into the state. Important to look at out-of-state markets, which are not clearly mentioned. Need to look at scaling-up.

- “RIFFP” definition—ag-tourism, site development, destination of farms—these things are not clearly included in “RIFFP”. The term limits what you are looking at. Public/residents may not clearly recognize this important aspect of agriculture—include ag-tourism in the definition of agriculture. Include ecological habitat and non-traditional ag products.

- Marketing of certain products is limited – i.e. raw milk. How can this be addressed?

- Important to insert language that acknowledges urban agriculture's contributions and goals, in the context of the state's overall plan for agriculture. In addition to the productivity of urban farming, there is also the factor of urban markets which are essential to both urban and suburban farm viability.

- Although I understand that turf and nurseries are a large part of the agricultural sector in RI, I think that it is questionable to lump them together with food production when thinking about providing government support or farm service assistance. It is in everyone's best interest to make sure that we have a safe and healthy food supply, and to work with farmers to help them produce high quality food and keep production and environmental costs low, however, I do not think that the government or farm service agencies should give the same attention to nurseries or turf growers, because it is not in everyone's interest to make sure that we have plentiful turf and nursery stock, these are luxury goods that should not be government subsidized. I am unhappy to know that my tax dollars are spent to subsidize these industries, it is money poorly spent.

- If we are to begin to grow more than 1% of our food (and I think that this is a wonderful goal) I think that we need to think about ways to support farmers in using practices that increase productivity. It also makes some sense to convert unused farmland back to farming, but I think that we could increase productivity with what we already have under cultivation in two ways, by encouraging intensive production, and by increasing soil organic matter. I run a 2 acre farm, and harvested over 14,000 pounds of produce (including a significant amount of fresh herbs and greens) in 2009, a terrible growing season, generating \$40,000, and I am a relatively inexperienced grower. Very small farms can be much more intensively managed, with minimal waste and extreme attention to soil and crop health. Encouraging very small scale, intensive growing could help increase food production. Increasing levels of soil organic matter will increase the

productivity of agricultural land. Two ways to do this are to: 1) add organic matter. I would like to see many more large scale composting facilities taking organic matter out of the waste stream so that it may be used on farms. 2) Keep organic matter from oxidizing into the air through the use of conservation tillage techniques. RI farmers lack equipment and experience with conservation tillage, we need to be moving towards this more aggressively.

- Marketing/promotion: Consider hosting a 'slow food' festival such as the San Francisco Slow Food 2008. With appropriate timing and location such an event could further improve public awareness and might impact those segments of the population that have had less exposure to agriculture. Make the 'Food Inc.' movie available to all college and high school students.

- Build upon the compost collection initiative by EcoRI; attempt to extend this beyond the Hope Artiste farmers market. Attempt to further municipal composting programs.

Business and Technical Support to Farmers

- Who would run and regulate the “new farmers training programs”? Adult education through high schools and colleges? Larger businesses? (Who are the teachers of these courses?) Will participants be certified? Will participation be regulated? Optional?

- Our farm used SCORE and it was very frustrating and futile

- Recognize the fact that labor is not only scarce, but the level of being able to follow directions and perform tasks per instruction and directions has become a very serious situation. If this is a reflection to the current education system—go back a generation (or 3) as to reading comprehension and language comprehension skills.

- Goal #4.3: expanding and revitalizing “agricultural education” programs (as it is now referenced) is a positive goal. We need, however, to find a way to redirect federal funds sent to the state Department of Education earmarked for vocational type programs. To my knowledge these funds are passed on to RI vocational schools. Currently, there are no ag-ed programs in these schools. The 5 programs in the state in local high schools exist by the tenacity of the ag instructors and the willingness of the local school boards to retain such programs. This is becoming increasingly tenuous due to funding issues as well as a perceived value. A look at the CT ag-ed programs would be valuable.

- Why should we supply stipends for travel to UConn, Cornell, etc. when there is a need for agricultural support in RI. We need to develop a division of farm support at URI that is comparable to other land grant universities. Also, there needs to be an expansion of agricultural majors at URI.

- Is there a way to make new agricultural technologies more available to farmers, etc. education, financial help to purchase technologies.
- The RISBOC at Johnson & Wales is an enthusiastic and willing partner in the development of comprehensive business sources program/plan for both start-up and existing agricultural enterprises.
- In the definition of agriculture operations your scope of inclusion is very large—yet the discussion is primarily on food production which is wonderful, but there is so much more under this umbrella. Where is the Dept of Resource Economics in all of this—there seems to be a lot of missing data—do they have, seek this kind of info?
- Energy—on farm renewable. Training on renewable resources and availability of alternative energy sources
- USDA is not mentioned as a partner in lending for ag-related businesses. Recently money in the form of grants and loans were recently returned to National office because no applications were made by the Ag community.
- Include “agriculture” in name of college at URI
- Lots of support for the Division of Agriculture—important to understand budget cuts. In terms of staff: approx 30 in 1980’s; 21 staff 2 years ago and currently 15.
- Look at other institutions in RI—not just URI—but also Brown and others
- I don't think that it is important for there to be a focus on marketing, with the lack of food producers, and a large population of people excited to buy locally grown food, I at least have never had trouble selling my food, and don't need any help with marketing.
- Many farmers could benefit from access to affordable health insurance.
- Consider a means by which the farm motor vehicle plate could be utilized (as in MA) on a temporary basis for tractors and other equipment.

Agricultural Land Availability, Protection and Regulations

- Is there any room within all of this discussion and ideology for the farmer who owns their own equipment, does their own fiscal-economic management responsibly without expecting money hand-outs, works 3 years worth of hours in 1 year to keep their family business an independent family enterprise?
- Ease start up for new generation farmers. Advisory board for new farmers?

- Bio-security! Education of farmers of about on-farm security. Informing the public about farms so they don't view them as a threat.

- I.D. make sure protection does not equal regulations/laws. No new/more regulations. Goal 1.C is a disaster! Doesn't account for other factors. Can not require. Change the goal wording. "No net loss" has dangerous land/property right implications.

- How would you bring down land values? Land affordability.

- Right to Farm provides stronger protections in other states such as Massachusetts; need to strengthen in RI.

- Affordability—not devaluing farmland—look at voluntary mechanisms

- Move inheritance tax issues to the business section of the goals and strategies. It is important to emphasize these issues in the framework of business planning, not land protection and purchase of development rights.

- How to sell this to government? First, public perception; Second, tell the government about the importance of agriculture. The cost of business is very expensive in RI. Rates of taxes, etc. How to stay in business? Need support from state government—representatives, etc.

- "No net loss" goal is terrific, but make sure we have an accurate baseline number of state's agricultural areas to measure against. Must establish effective monitoring system in the state so we know when farmland is lost to development, etc. Under the "no net loss" goal there needs to be a strategy about educating the public about the importance of permanently protecting more of the state's farmland as we will need broad based public support to create more funding for land trusts, state agricultural land protection programs, etc.

- Add a strategy where the state will actively work to strengthen the land trusts in Rhode Island (eg providing grants to local land trusts so they can attend the national land trust conference and other education opportunities) as the state will need strong land trusts in order to successfully protect 10,000 acres of farmland and steward all this protected farmland.

- Integrate the forthcoming policies into the State Guide Plan. This will create a requirement (if properly written) for compliance and inclusion in each Municipal Comprehensive Plan. Although some Comprehensive Plans may not be due for a complete re-write; they are required to update every five years. This would hopefully allow for prompt modification. Every community is required to have this document available for public review and comment through a public hearing process. It is essential that farmers are made aware of this important opportunity. It would be advisable to

have an meeting with planners after the Strategic Plan has been completed, to encourage greater understanding and support for RI Ag issues. The next step would be accurate follow up within the zoning ordinance; this is crucial so that the spirit and intent of the Comprehensive Plan goals and policies are **accurately** reflected in the Zoning Ordinance. The Zoning Ordinance amendments would also require a public hearing, again public support would be important. Encourage members of the farming community to remain involved in town planning and policy issues- perhaps through an Agricultural commission, planning, zoning or council positions.

- Continue to educate other town officials, such as tax assessors on issues of taxation and cost to the community. Consider an additional release of the AFT cost of community services studies that were compiled many years ago. However, many of those studies related to residential growth, business and open space values. It would more accurately reflect farming benefits to a community with working farms as a separate category. Thus, the initial cost of the land (as in the open space model) would not be calculated. Of course, the municipal services expense portion would be far less than residential/retail/industrial use categories. (Even open space requires some degree of maintenance.) Use this updated model in policy discussions with local and State policymakers.

- Promote the Strategic Plan and it's development process. If a quality Powerpoint presentation were to be developed, it could serve as a positive model that would be an effective forum topic at both RI APA meetings and the APA National Conference (will be in Boston 2011).