

Sustainable Farming in Amherst

Leading a New England “Home-Grown” Food Revolution

Lets look fifty years into the future and ask, if New England were to do about as well as we can imagine at providing its own food through sustainable farming, what might we best grow here? Let us say that we were to triple the amount of farmland in New England to 6 million acres—close to where it stood in 1945. That would return about 15% of New England to agriculture. If we assume 'smart growth,' that could be done while leaving 70% of New England still covered in sustainably harvested woodlands and wild reserves. Given 15 or 16 million New Englanders to feed (and presuming they were eating more healthily), we could envision five major building blocks of a sustainable New England food system:

1. **New England could produce the great bulk of its own vegetables** and a substantial part of its fruit, and from that fruit a significant portion of its own beverages. This might require on the order of 1 million acres: about 250,000 acres devoted to fresh and storage vegetables; 250,000 acres devoted to fruit (notably apples, cranberries, blueberries, and grapes); and 500,000 acres devoted to dry beans, which would replace some meat in the diet. While much of this produce might be intensively grown on small acreages near cities, some vegetable crops such as potatoes and other root crops, winter squash, and beans might be grown in rotation with hay and grain on more diversified rural farms.
2. **New England could once again produce the great bulk of its own dairy products**, and alongside that most of its own beef, almost entirely on grass (with some supplemental grain). This assumes dairy consumption about as it is today, but red meat consumption cut in half. Most of the farmland reclaimed from New England forest would be devoted to pasture and hay, for which our soils and climate are well suited. This defining element of our pastoral landscape might require as much as 4 million acres: about 1.5 million for dairy cows and 2.5 million for beef, along with some sheep and goats.
3. **That would leave on the order of 1 million acres of cropland** that could be devoted to some combination of grain for direct human consumption, grain for livestock feed, or oil crops (such as canola, sunflower, or soy) which could provide protein meal for stock feed as well. If most of that million acres were to grow grain for human consumption (flour, pasta, beer, and so forth), for example, we could about cover those needs; but that would not leave much for feed or oil. Grain and oil crops could be grown mostly in rotation with hay.
4. **New England could produce the great bulk of its own pork, chicken, turkey, and eggs.** These animals could be integrated into grazing systems without requiring much additional pasture acreage, as most of their feed doesn't really come from grass. However, their feed grain requirements would amount to more than a million additional acres, which is probably far more than New England could supply. But importing grain is not a bad thing (presuming the grain were to come from sustainable farms elsewhere)—it is one very effective way to import fertility into intensive grazing systems.
5. **A restored and thriving regional fishery** would be another crucial building block of a sustainable New England food system.