

POTENTIALS FOR GROWTH OF RHODE ISLAND'S FOOD SELF-RELIANCE

by

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Thesis

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FARMING?...IN RHODE ISLAND?!

Lush fields of waving wheat are hardly the predominant image that Rhode Island evokes, especially to Rhode Islanders. Farming in the state has a low profile, not surprising since 60% of the population is concentrated in the Providence-Pawtucket urban area. Situated right in the path of the Washington-New York-Boston megapolis, Rhode Island is one of the most industrialized states in the nation. Policy leaders seem bent on promoting this image, trying to attract new industry into the state as the primary strategy for reviving the sagging economy. And yet only 130 years ago, 80% of Rhode Island's acreage was in farms and the state produced all of its own food. As large scale agriculture, based on enormous quantities of once cheap fossil fuels, took the dominant role in food production, New England farming wasted away quietly.

Today we are at the tail end of a food system that stretches not only coast to coast, but far beyond American borders. Rhode Island imports 91.5% of its food, higher even than the New England average of 85%. Our food supply is dependent on the uninterrupted delivery of 587 truckloads of food each week.¹ A break in this flow of traffic would have rapid and severe consequences since there is only a 3 day supply of most foodstuffs in all of New England at any

¹ Total consumption equals 947,154 people (1980 Census) x 1408 retail pounds per person (from Food Consumption, Prices and Expenditures 1960-80) = 1,333,600,000 pounds. Total imports are 92% of consumption or 1,220,200,000 pounds. Each truck carries 40,000 pounds, resulting in 30,506 truckloads of food entering the state each year or 587 per week.

one time. Disruptions of this crucial transportation network are far from unheard of--it took over 5 days to clear the road for deliveries after the Blizzard of 1978. A large New York City supermarket estimates that if all deliveries stopped, for any reason, their supply of canned goods would last only 4 days, and perishables only 2 days.²

Looking beyond these emergency scenarios, there is a growing and widespread concern about the sustainability of the entire United States agricultural system. This concern is no longer confined to the writings of idealistic radicals, but is also beginning to surface in document from the most conservative federal agencies. The initial burst of activity surrounding the technological miracles of the Green Revolution has slowed. While we may invent new technological fixes to overcome current limitations on growth, the first round has made it clear that there are heavy tolls in environmental degradation and energy consumption connected with our technology. Particularly now that energy costs have skyrocketed, the farming practices and lengthy transportation systems that we have come to take for granted may no longer continue to make economic sense.

In this light, interest in reviving New England agriculture has been on the upswing. The aim is not to make the region self-sufficient, for it is clear that that is not a feasible goal. The concern is that it is possible to make the New England food system more self-reliant, striving to provide for ourselves those food-

² Gary Clark, Manager Daitch Shopwell, in The New York State Food System: Growing Closer to Home (Emmaus, PA: Rodale Press, 1981), p. 25.

stuffs which can most appropriately be raised in this region.

Efforts are already underway on the state level to support our farmers and provide incentives to protect agricultural land from development pressures. So far these policies have been established without a clear idea of just how self-reliant Rhode Island food production could become. This report attempts to fill this information gap by analysing the potential for increased food self-reliance based on our current diet and the land available for agriculture in Rhode Island. This is not intended to be an economic analysis of the state's complete food situation--it is based on the premise that events and trends on the national level will occur to make local food production a commercially attractive activity. Part I examines problems endemic to the nation's agricultural system, documenting the need for New England as a region to bolster up its food producing capabilities. Part II then focuses on the state of Rhode Island farming, the potential land base that could be used for food production, current consumption and production levels of foods that could be grown locally, and the prospects for increased self-reliance. It is hoped that the information gathered here will be useful in future policy decisions.