

# The Changing Face of Agriculture in R.I.

Kenneth D. Ayars

The face of agriculture is changing in Rhode Island, driven by global, regional and local influences. Among those changes is a dramatic increase in small farmers and fast developing local food economy which is surging despite the general economic downturn in R.I.. The sustainable food community is also now beginning to include local fisheries. Recently, a coalition of farmers, agencies and NGOs with funding from the van Beuren Charitable Foundation, formed the R.I. Agricultural Partnership and published the first ever Rhode Island Agriculture: Five Year Strategic Plan, which was released on R.I. Agricultural Day, May 11th, 2011 at the State House. The rest of this article are excerpts taken directly from various sections of the Plan which best describe the current trends and influences on Rhode Island agriculture (the entire plan and citations is at [www.rhodyag.com](http://www.rhodyag.com)). The van Beuren Foundation has also provided funding to a separate coalition headed by the Southside Community Land Trust to conduct the first complete food assessment for Rhode Island. The partners have formed a R.I. Food Policy Council and will release the results of the food assessment and information on the Council on R.I. Food Day, October 24th, 2011, at the State House.

## History of R.I. Agriculture

Subsistence farming was the primary occupation of many early colonial Rhode Islanders, and the vast majority of the land area of Rhode Island was once farmed. As population levels increased and society and economies developed, so did the market for various agricultural products within R.I., New England, other parts of colonial America and beyond. Rhode Island was well situated to take advantage of market opportunities given its proximity to Narragansett Bay, the ocean, and trade routes, combined with the moderating climatic effect of the ocean and substantial coastal farmlands. Commercial agriculture became an integral and important part of the early R.I. economy. Rhode Island was also the birthplace of the industrial revolution, and the ascendance of a manufacturing based economy, and later, intense real estate development, contributed to a dramatic decline in agriculture, particularly in the 20th century. Farmland decreased by approximately 80 percent from the beginning to the end of century.

After World War II, R.I. and New England became less and less dependent upon local agriculture for food production. Most of the area's food came from other regions of the United States and world. Rhode Island also became unique within New England in the very high percentage of its agricultural economy attributed to nursery plants, ornamentals, and turf (the "green industry") reflecting the state's suburban development and strong housing market. As people no longer depended on local farming for their food, the state began to lose its understanding of the economic value of farmland. Much of the state's development post World War II was on former farmland. Once developed, the farmland was permanently lost.

## Agriculture Today

Rhode Island's one million consumers now rely on an increasingly global food system. New England produces less than 10 percent of the fruits and vegetables consumed in the region and barely half of its milk and cheese. Like the rest of the region, R.I. has a food supply that is increasingly vulnerable to short and long term supply and price disruptions. Natural disasters, weather events, terrorist acts, food safety scares, transportation disruptions, and energy shocks can cut off food supplies in a short period of time, especially perishable items like fruits, vegetables and milk. Declining global oil reserves, rising energy prices and changes in weather patterns are generating increased public support for efforts to improve food system resiliency and grow local food production capacity.

The first decade of the 21st century saw a market shift in American attitudes toward food. Until recently, most Americans shopped solely in supermarkets for their foods and were generally unaware of, and uninterested in, their food's origins. However, a rise in incidences of food contamination, both domestic and foreign, has heightened awareness of food safety issues and of American dependence on imported foods. Concern about the sharp increase in obesity has focused public attention on nutritional health. And a growing interest in cooking has sparked demand for fresh foods, ethnic cuisines and new products. This shift in attitudes has been clearly evident in R.I.. Even the recent recession did not slow rising consumer demand for locally grown farm products.

In a remarkable turn around from the prior century, R.I. is now growing new farms and farmers. According to the U.S. Census of Agriculture, the number of farms in the state swelled from 858 to 1,219 between 2002 and 2007—an increase of 42 percent that is the highest in New England and 10 times the national average. Much of this growth has been in the state's smallest farms. Farms with less than \$5,000 in annual sales now constitute more than half of the farms in the state. These



A sod farm in southern Rhode Island. Photo: R.I. Department of Environmental Management.

farms, however, produce less than 1 percent of the value of the state's agricultural products. The majority of the state's agricultural market value is produced by 167 farms with annual sales of between \$50,000 and \$1 million. Thirteen farms have annual sales of more than \$1 million and account for 35 percent of market share, while the 419 farms with sales between \$5,000 and \$50,000 constitute the remainder.

Once driven almost exclusively by wholesale market, today's agricultural industry is more diverse, with greater emphasis on direct-to-consumer sales. While many farmers continue to sell through wholesale markets, more than 27 percent of farms in the state are selling a least some of their product directly to consumers. In 2002, direct-to-consumer sales of agricultural products for human consumption totaled \$3.7 million. By 2007, it had grown to \$6.3 million, or nearly 10 percent of all agricultural market sales in R.I. Similarly, from 1998 to 2009, the number of horticultural operations with over \$10,000 in annual sales marketing directly to consumers rose from 77 to 88, with retail sales rising from \$6.12 million to \$7.2 million. In fact, R.I. now leads the country in the percentage of agricultural market sales derived from direct marketing. Eliminating the middle man helps improve farm profits. According to the 2007 Census of Agriculture, the 281 farms that are marketing raw foods directly to consumers had, on average, more that double the annual net cash farm income in 2007 than farms that were not involved in these types of ventures.

The retail oriented focus of R.I. farms includes an emphasis on diversification and value-added products and venues, and initiatives such as farmers markets, roadside stands, and cooperative marketing. The changes in the marketplace combined with state, local and non-governmental support for farmers have contributed to the resurgence in farming. The resurgence has also been bolstered of late by the local food movement, which has its origins in the increasing recognition of vulnerabilities in the current global food system and the need to recreate a more sustainable, healthy and locally based food system.

Farmers markets are growing, bringing local farm products to new urban and rural communities. There are now more than 40 markets statewide, and at least three—in Pawtucket, North Kingstown, and South Kingstown, operate year round. Consumers are also flocking to farm stands, pick-your-own operations and Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) farms. Many farms and nurseries with direct-to-consumer sales are adding additional attractions like corn mazes, hayrides and butterfly houses, to improve profitability.

Farms and farmers are important small businesses, generating jobs, taxes and revenues. A rough and very conservative estimate of the sector's contribution to the state's economy is \$100 million. Two recent studies indicate that this figure is likely far higher. A 2010 study by the University of Connecticut of the economic contribution of agriculture in CT found that agriculture is as \$3.5 billion industry that generates more than 20,000 jobs. Especially relevant to R.I. is the study's finding that each dollar in sales generated by the agricultural industry creates up to an additional dollars worth of economic activity statewide. Thus, R.I.'s \$66 million in agricultural sales may generate an additional \$66 million in economic activity, not including any additional economic activity associated with agricultural processing. A 2009 economic survey conducted by the New England Nursery Association found that the horticultural and landscaping industry contributes \$354 million to the R.I. economy. While landscaping is not considered agricultural, the horticulture industry that supplies the landscaping industry is considered agricultural and may itself generate more than \$100 million in economic impact. A formal analysis of the R.I.'s agricultural sector and its impact on the state's economy is currently underway and will be completed in 2011. The project is a cooperative effort between URI, RIDEM Division of Agriculture, R.I. Economic Development Corporation, The R.I. Nursery and Landscape Association, R.I. Turfgrass Foundation, and the R.I. Agricultural Partnership.

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## **A Smart Growth Perspective on Sustainable Agriculture**

**Sheila Brush**

Grow Smart Rhode Island is one of a growing number of entities that have joined with the farming community to ensure that agriculture will be a viable and expanding sector of the Rhode Island economy and make an enduring contribution to the landscape and to the social and physical health of Rhode Islanders.

A statewide non-profit organization established in 1998, Grow Smart leads a diverse alliance of interests—including the business, labor, academic, environmental, housing, agricultural and historic preservation sectors—in calling for sustainable economic growth. Sustainable economic growth means development that avoids consuming or damaging the resources and community livability that future generations will need for their own economic prosperity and quality of life. Sustainable economic growth requires that we provide

sufficient space for new and expanding businesses, housing and economic activity but that at the same time we avoid developing land that is critical to natural resource protection and to our quality of place.

The challenge for Rhode Island is that we have so little land with which to work—just over 1,000 square miles—far smaller than many counties in other states. Our small size gives us very little margin for error. We must use our land area and existing buildings carefully and creatively if we want to improve commercial and industrial growth, housing and transportation infrastructure, community and cultural facilities while at the same time ensuring that future generations will continue to enjoy the many benefits offered by working farmland and green, undeveloped spaces.

Smart growth is an approach to land use planning and

development that offers a way to develop sustainably within Rhode Island's limited land area. By giving balanced consideration to economic, social, health and environmental needs, it changes the terms of the development debate away from the traditional growth/no growth question to how and where should new development be accommodated?

What will a future Rhode Island look like if we follow smart growth principles? Commercial and residential development will be concentrated in and adjacent to our traditional urban, town and village centers and along already built-up corridors connecting those centers. We will have redeveloped properties that are currently vacant or underused. Our downtown centers will be a compact mix of residential, commercial and government uses. This compact mix will support public transit and enable people to walk and bike more and drive less, resulting in significant health and environmental benefits. Equally important, we will have preserved forests and coastal features in their natural state, and thereby ensured that our drinking water remains clean, that we have retained the wetland buffers and open spaces needed to help prevent flooding and that we have protected wildlife habitat.

Finally, and Grow Smart believes of critical importance for Rhode Island's future sustainability, we will see an increased amount of land in agricultural production. From a smart growth perspective, our agricultural lands—both the land that is currently in working farms and other land that is suitable for agriculture—have multiple values. They provide direct economic benefits. Indeed, Rhode Island's agricultural sector is a bright spot in the midst of Rhode Island's sluggish economy. From every perspective, the state's agricultural sector is growing—in numbers of farms, numbers of farmers, total acreage, revenue and product diversity. In urban and rural communities alike, farming provides a common bond for people of different social and economic backgrounds, and the beauty of agricultural landscapes enhances physical character of communities across the state. Farms also provide direct health benefits, providing communities with fresh local food. And farms provide direct environmental benefits by protecting natural resources and provide wildlife habitat.

If we want future generations to continue to enjoy the many benefits provided by local farms, we need to make sure that those farms survive. And to do so, we need to understand the risks and challenges inherent in the business of farming. Only then can we enact policies at the state and municipal levels to sustain Rhode Island's many family-owned farms. One of the biggest challenges is the high cost of land in Rhode Island. At \$12,000 per acre, the value of agricultural land in Rhode Island is the second highest in the country. This often makes it impossible for new farmers to acquire

land or for farm operations to expand. Rhode Island's high property taxes can also escalate farming costs.

Further economic hardship is incurred when farms pass from one generation to the next. High land values lead to high inheritance taxes, and frequently the only way for a farm family to raise the cash to pay the taxes is to sell land. The spread of residential development into previously agricultural areas often leads to tensions between farmers and neighboring homeowners. Even though Rhode Island has a strong right to farm law, objections to the noise, dust, and smells that are part of agriculture can cause problems for farmers. A larger issue is that while many municipalities want to maintain agriculture, they do not have strong farm-supportive language in their local comprehensive plans and have not enacted zoning ordinances that clearly spell out what agricultural activities are permitted by right or by special use. Zoning is particularly out of date when it comes to new entrepreneurial efforts by farmers to realize revenue from their farms ranging from expanded farmstands to agritourism.

Because Rhode Island's farms and working agricultural lands are so important to the state's future sustainability, Grow Smart as an organization has made agricultural viability a high priority. The increasing demand for locally raised food, the growth in farmers markets and CSAs, and polls showing strong support for agricultural land conservation demonstrate that agricultural viability is a high priority for Rhode Island citizens as well.

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Halloween can be a busy time for farm stands. People come to the farm to buy pumpkins and gourds and enjoy hayrides. Photo: R.I. Department of Environmental Management.