



Where growers go to harvest information

Glynwood Center fights to keep valley farming alive

By Craig Wolf

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Farming, a founding industry of the Hudson Valley but a faded one, is not forgotten here.

At the Glynwood Center, it could hardly be missed. The nonprofit organization is housed in the middle of what used to be the Perkins farm a few miles east of Cold Spring. It's still a farm. And the group has made the survival and revival of agriculture one of its principal missions.

The rising productivity of mass-scale farming and agribusiness has left smaller, more traditional farms -- like the ones in the Hudson Valley -- in a shrinking state. Meanwhile, demand for housing construction tempts farmers to sell their land.

Farming's revival requires some parts, like fixing an old tractor, in Glynwood's strategy.

"It's those pieces of the infrastructure that are missing that used to be here," said Jayne Daly, Glynwood's director of programs. "If we are going to have a viable regional food system, we've got to bring all those pieces back."

There are kindred projects active in the valley, including numerous farmers markets and Hudson Valley Fresh, a new group devoted to promoting local products for local people. There are some statewide farmers groups or agencies and county-based organizations, including agricultural societies and Cornell Cooperative Extension.

But regionalism is another level, and that's where Glynwood's "Regional Food Systems" initiative comes in.

Specifically, Glynwood runs programs to help link regional farmers to regional markets, help communities recognize the importance farms have and could have, honor outstanding achievements and develop more leaders for the movement.

Its Regional Food System project "connects food production, processing, distribution and consumption in ways that enhance the economic viability of the region's farmers while promoting the region's quality of life and the health of all its residents," according to the group's Web site.

Daly is working on another project now. Glynwood is conducting extensive interviews and gathering data on who grows what in the region, a sort of agricultural census.

Daly said the survey involves interviewing about 100 people. She's aiming for a public release of the findings near the end of September.

Part of the work includes reviewing the U.S. Department of Agriculture's most recent data tables, the first put out in several years, and applying a reality check, what Daly called a "ground truthing," a term borrowed from the military to describe the stories soldiers bring back from the field.

Accuracy questioned

The USDA data was gathered in 2002 but not released until June 2004. Daly said she wondered about the accuracy of some of it.

"At the regional level, it said we've lost about five farms," she said. That's very low, she added.

Such an understatement of reality doesn't bode well for public policy making, and that's an element of the Glynwood strategy.

"We want to really create an accurate picture," Daly said. The goal is to argue "that agriculture is still a viable piece of the Hudson Valley and therefore important for both the state and federal governments to support it."

"We thought it was important to go out and talk to farmers," Daly said.

One of them is Peter Barton. He runs Barton Orchards in Poughquag, a 122-acre spread that runs as a pick-your-own operation with a farm stand for retail sales.

The orchard exemplifies the conversions many local farms have gone through. In the early 1990s, the farm was commercial, selling bulk crops to a few large buyers. It has also sold to restaurants. Since 1993, when the Town of Beekman began a surge of housing development, the farm has been retail, selling to local people and to tourists.

"It's all for retail and for this concept of the public participating, and that's our niche," Barton said.

The old ways weren't carrying the farm's debt load, Barton said. "The bottom line was to get more for our product."

"We've been busier than other years this time," Barton said. "It's finally settling into people to buy more fresh produce and support local agriculture."

Now Barton is growing grapes for picking and perhaps for a winery someday. More diversification is the key. And fewer middlemen.

Judith LaBelle, president of Glynwood, explained a key point of the economic underpinnings of the local food movement in Glynwood's publication, *Gleanings*.

"When the number of middlemen between the consumer and the farmer is reduced, the farmer receives more of each 'food dollar' spent. Therefore, structures such as farmers markets and community-supported agriculture that encourage direct contact between consumers and farmers are of special importance. Web sites are beginning to serve this purpose as well," she wrote.

Barton is also part of the Glynwood Grange, a new initiative that involves 17 leaders with community-based projects. Land preservation is his.

Farms are not always lost; new ones do start up. Ramon Rueda began an alpaca ranch in Bullville, Orange County, in 2000 after buying a 150-acre property while still holding a full-time job. He now has 20 head of the South American animals prized for their wool.

He'd like to expand his herd and add a fiber mill for processing wool, which could be a tourist magnet and could be shared by others who raise woolly animals.

Entrepreneurs like him need a support structure, Rueda said. "New York state has a system of support. It's not well coordinated and connected," Rueda said. "Farmers have a difficult time locating and finding these resources."

A clearinghouse is needed, Rueda said. He's hoping Glynwood could grow into that or bring one about.

"The initiatives they're trying to put out, they're great ideas," Rueda said. "But there needs to be a lot more background support systems."

"I think they are identifying the issues. They have some pretty smart people that are involved there. But it's at the grass-roots level that we need to inject the proper nutrients so we can grow, and it's not getting to us," he said.

"We farmers really need an institution like Glynwood to help put things together," he said.

Despite the sprouts of change visible in recent years, the vast majority of consumers remain in their habit of buying the output of agribusiness located far away through interstate distribution systems, and increasingly, international ones, that bring non-local foods to local stores and restaurants.

Daly said there's progress. There's also the rising issue of food security in an age of terrorism. There's aesthetics, freshness and economics to bolster the case for regional food systems.

"There is clearly a growing interest. There's a growing number of farmers markets," as well as community-supported agriculture in which people join a farm as members, she said. "The public is starting to appreciate and gain a little bit more understanding about the importance of local foods."

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Glynwood Center

Glynwood Center is a multipurpose facility based on a 225-acre farm. Under Farm Manager Whitey Williams, the center raises sheep, poultry, cattle and horses plus the corn and hay they eat. An organic garden and orchard provide table foods served at events there. The property contains offices for the staff, which numbers about 17. It has facilities to house overnight guests, and another building serves as a conference center. Glynwood Center Inc. is a nonprofit, tax-exempt organization that develops the programs and manages the facility. It took over the property in the fall of 1995.

Glynwood Center plays host to community leaders who come for information, training, support and "time out for reflection." Another major program is the Countryside Exchange, which provides intensive, on-site assistance to local communities. Glynwood also has sponsored workshops on land-use planning.

Farm initiatives

Glynwood Center in Cold Spring, a nonprofit founded in 1995, has several programs carrying out its overall mission, "helping communities take charge of their future." One of them is "Agricultural Initiatives," which has four elements:

- Regional Food Systems -- Aims to develop a regional food network linking local farmers with local customers to help the Hudson Valley's farmers sustain themselves.
- Harvest Awards -- Recognizes "ingenuity and resilience" of those involved in the food system. Second annual round will be presented in October in New York City.
- Keep Farming -- Helps communities see how agriculture contributes to well-being, generate support for local farmers, and develop action strategies. A pilot program is under way in Pennsylvania.
- Glynwood Grange -- Brings together a group of 17 leaders, each of whom takes on a project in his or her own area.