



HEALTH & SUSTAINABLE AGRICULTURE

Like most systems in place in the US, our outdated agricultural system prioritizes quantity over quality and profit over people, perpetuating vulnerabilities to the environment and health and well-being (The Navigating Impact Project, 2024).

How we grow our food directly impacts our health - from the quality of the air we breathe and water we drink, to the nutrients in our food and the economic vitality of our farming communities. Health and agriculture interact simultaneously and in both directions; health influences agriculture and agriculture influences health (Hawkes, Ruel, 2006). For example, healthier farmers produce higher quantities of food while mitigation of livestock waste reduces water-borne illnesses.

Transforming our agricultural system is achievable, despite the hurdles in the way. Learn more below.

WHY IT MATTERS

Economic Barriers

For both newly burgeoning and well-versed farmers, the path to sustainable agriculture is littered with obstacles. Financial pressures on available and affordable farmland continues to be an issue, especially for new farmers with no network to lean on to locate cropland (Carlisle, et al, 2019). Without a steady stream of viable land going on the market, some farmers have turned to tenant farming. As renting farmers, there is little incentive to invest in expensive resource-saving sustainable practices, since any capital improvements would benefit the owner long-term (Carlisle, et al, 2019).

Our unique rural community boasts a myriad of farms, both in northwest Connecticut and the Greater Harlem Valley of New York, that are not immune to the economic barriers of acquiring farmland. In the past several years, Litchfield County experienced a 10.5% loss in agricultural acreage. The pandemic exacerbated barriers to farmland, forcing farm workers to meet inflated pricing of farm goods and land (Plett, 2024).



Government action in the agricultural sector also poses insufficient support for low-input, sustainable farmers, especially farmers of color. Latine farmers and farm workers are rising in number steadily in the US, and if without legal status, are unable to access federal beginning farmer supports (Carlisle, et al, 2019). A class-action lawsuit also exposed numerous non-white farmers being denied USDA loans with the reasoning in some way tied to their race (Carlisle, et al, 2019). As far as subsidies go, federal crop insurance subsidies favor large stable farms, with the top 10 percent of crop sales receiving much of the federal support (Carlisle, et al, 2019). In short, government incentivized opportunities offer little encouragement to shift away from high-yield environmentally taxing farming.

Infrastructure Gaps

When it comes to the produce and livestock market, many farmers lack the capital and ability to expand production scale to meet grocery store demand and large supply chain networks. While farmstands and CSA are certainly an option, research has shown these models offer significantly less profit compared to the indirect market (Carlisle, et al, 2019). As small farmers already struggle to earn from their production, there is no real opportunity in their financial interest to turn to eco-centric methods.

WHAT WORKS

Employing a sustainable agriculture framework reveals a hopeful future where contemporary agronomy (the science of soil management and crop production!) and supportive legislation can work together to improve outcomes for our community.

Health-Centered Farming

Investing in regenerative practices mitigates the negative effects of climate change, specifically in soil, air, and water quality. Sustainable farming habits could lessen dependence and use of chemicals, lower rates of diseases from exploitative farming, and improve the amount and variety of food available to our community (The Navigating Impact Project, 2024).

Community Health Solutions

Building and maintaining relationships between local farms and small distribution sites pose a thoughtful opportunity to improve the lives of farmers and their neighbors. While this smaller scale does not offer the same bounty as engaging with a commercial supermarket chain, CSA, acts as a backbone for farmers with less resources as their larger competitors, offering an increase to cash flow, a relatively stable income source, and the chance to shift some production risk from farmer to consumers (County Health Rankings, 2019).



CSA benefits more than our resident farm workers; low-income households can lean on CSA to strengthen their diet through higher volumes of affordable produce. Additionally, there has been a wave of CSA vendors accepting SNAP as a payment form, expanding community access to fresh food (County Health Rankings, 2019).



COMMUNITY SPOTLIGHT



Sky High Farm began 2024 with the exciting announcement of the purchase of their new farming home in Ancram, Columbia County. As they make the move, the organization will carefully transition the conventionally managed cropland into thriving sustainable farmland. Photo by Walter Hergt.



Committed to exemplifying sustainable agriculture since 2012, Columbia County's own [Sky High Farm](#) focuses on ecological farming practices and an environmentally holistic, equity-focused approach to promoting food sovereignty.

Regenerative farming is at the heart of their work. The organization is committed to improving soil health and promoting pasture diversity through no-till vegetable production and intensive rotational grazing of their herd of beef cattle. Sky High's production is focused on culturally relevant foods and routine dialogue with their food access partners, which means that their crop plans change annually based on changing needs. In terms of pasture health, Co-Director Josh Bardfield acknowledges how "observation plays an important part in running a regenerative farm and thinking about the pastures and the movements of animals..."

Sky High Farm's efforts to further their food sovereignty mission are reflected in their paid fellowship program. Supplying the next generation of farmers with land stewardship knowledge through a formal curriculum focused on sustainable vegetable production and livestock management.

The current agricultural system is fractured, Josh Bardfield shared an “understanding that everything is interconnected. You can grow food using synthetic pesticides and fertilizers. But it has an impact on climate, water quality, the people who live in the area...” Photo by Walter Hergt.

With the firm understanding that funding is essential to promote sustainable practices, Sky High Farm provides grants to mission-aligned projects worldwide. Just last year, the organization supported a food cooperative, urban chicken coop construction, community fridges, and more. Considering their grantmaking, Josh Bardfield explained “one of the most important things was a recognition that in many ways, philanthropy favors organizations that already have resources... And, especially in the agricultural community, many farmers do not have the time or capacity to pursue funding opportunities.”

And their outputs speak for themselves. In 2023 alone, Sky High Farm reported 19,306 total pounds of produce and 12,898 total pounds of animal products. Programmatic metrics show the nonprofit organized, co-facilitated, and presented at 23 events, spanning from educational programs to public volunteer days.

COMING UP

Stay tuned for our next issue in this series where we consider the affect schools have on our community members' health and well-being, for both students and residents. Check back in coming months.



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