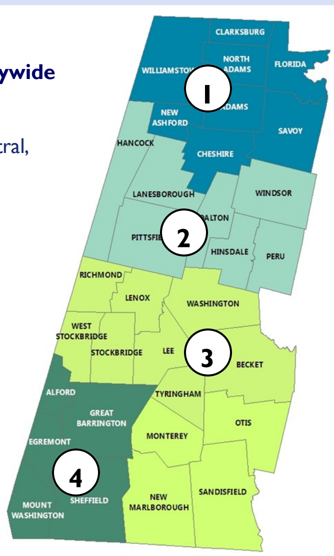
Local Food and Agriculture

SUSTAINABLE BERKSHIRES
Community Strategies For A Sustainable Future

Key Trends

- The region added 20 new vegetable farms between 1997 and 2007, although the total acreage in production actually decreased by 82 acres illustrating a countywide trend toward more, but smaller, farms.
- There has been growth in organic farms in the Berkshires. Since 2002 the number of acres has grown to over 1,300 acres on 20 farms.
- The Berkshire region saw a 35% decline in the number of dairy cows between 1992 and 2007. However, there was an increase in other animals for meat and fiber—including sheep, ducks, rabbit and pigeon.
- There has been an increase in the number of residents signed up for SNAP benefits between 2001 and 2009, and an increase in the number of school-aged children signed up for free or reduced lunch between 2007 and 2011.
- Between 2000 and 2011, there has been an increase in acres permanently protected via the Massachusetts Agricultural Preservation Restriction (APR) Program, from 4,871 acres to 21,164 acres.

Four Working Groups Countywide
(1) North,
(2) Central,
(3) South Central,
(4) Southwest



Keep Berkshires Farming

From 2011-2013 volunteers across the region worked on an initiative - Keep Berkshires Farming - to develop local and regional strategies for building a robust and equitable local food system. Berkshire Regional Planning Commission and Glynwood helped organize support the working teams as they worked their way through a process of inventory and goal setting: The initiative was rooted in three main components:

1. Original Food System Data

Teams of community volunteers were organized into in four subareas across the county (bottom left) to conduct survey work, research strategies, and develop policy to support improved food access and strong local agricultural economics. Volunteers surveyed:

Supply:
- Farmers

Demand:
- Consumers
- Restaurants
- Schools and institutions
- Supermarkets/markets and distributors

Food Insecurity:
- Community meal sites

2. Community Engagement

Volunteers and staff from Glynwood and BRPC also helped plan and hold public events in each of the sub-regions, including:
- Community forums
- Planning sessions
- Spring 2013 Panel Series

Attendees at the kickoff meeting for the Southwest region in Great Barrington.

3. Farmer Involvement

KBF placed a strong emphasis on farmer involvement from farmer volunteers to farmer forum events and farmer pot-luck dinners.

Key Findings

Data gathered supports initial stakeholder and community interest in:
- Improving school-age nutrition
- Slaughter and food processing facilities
- Sustainable agriculture practice
- Succession planning and new farmer land matches
- Meeting emergency food need for vulnerable populations
- Growing new or stronger farmers markets
- Continued networking and learning opportunities for farmers

From Planning to Implementation

As Keep Berkshires farming progressed, implementation was ongoing through:
- Educational panels of experts open to farmers and other food system stakeholders
- Expanded market opportunities, such as Berkshire Grown's Holiday Markets

Though the survey work is completed, Keep Berkshires Farming will continue to be a presence in regional food and agriculture efforts, and has already helped inform the strategic plan of Berkshire Grown. Two upcoming initiatives born out of Keep Berkshires Farming include a livestock slaughter/meat processing feasibility study, and a Berkshire Farmland Access and Transition Network.

SUPPLY

Keep Berkshires Farming: Farmer Survey

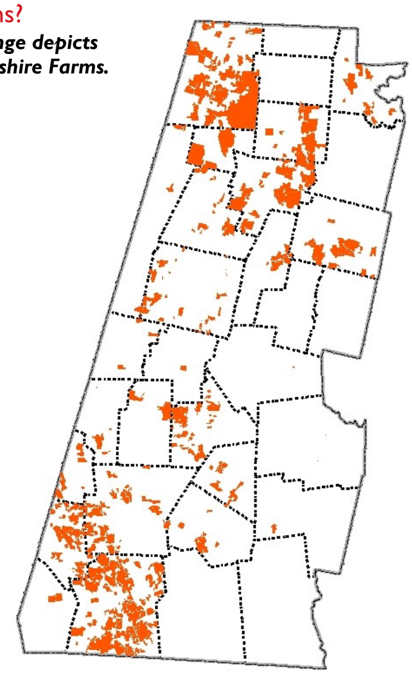
Through Keep Berkshires Farming, 106 Berkshire farmers were interviewed and/or surveyed to better understand the production component of the Berkshire food system. From 2007 Agricultural Census data, we already knew that the number of farms has increased over time, that more farmers are part-time versus full-time, that most farms are family farms, that average annual income has declined, and that farm land and farm product value have increased time. Given that Agricultural Census data is now five years old, the data gathered through Keep Berkshires Farming provides an up-to-date snapshot of existing conditions, challenges and opportunities.

Farms and Farmland

Farms in the Berkshire region are largely concentrated in the northwest and southwest corners, and descend the length of the county along the Hoosic and Housatonic River Valleys. Farms range in size from very small (1 to 9 acres) to very large (1,000 + acres). There are 12,420.8 acres of prime agricultural soils being farmed, and only 5.7% of these prime agricultural soils are in permanent APR protection. The majority of Berkshire farming takes place on 56,577.0 acres of non-prime soils. The Massachusetts APR program is not the only form of land conservation or preservation: 42,364.4 acres are protected via the Chapter 61/61A program. Farmers reported farming 18,109 acres while owning 12,185.5 acres, indicating that farmers lease additional land. The average number of acres farmed per farmer is 169.8 acres, with the average number of acres owned is 103.1 acres.

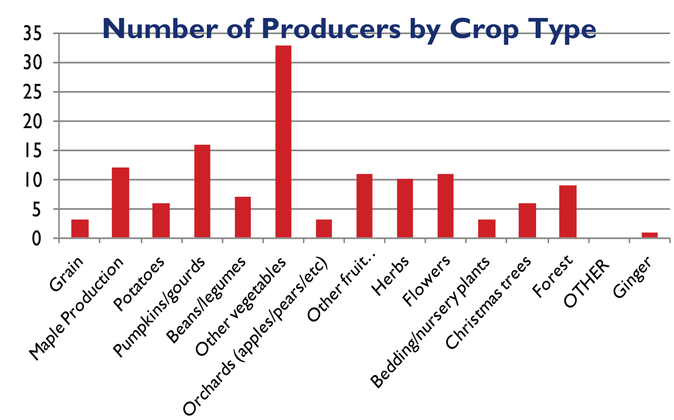
Where are the farms?

Orange depicts Berkshire Farms.



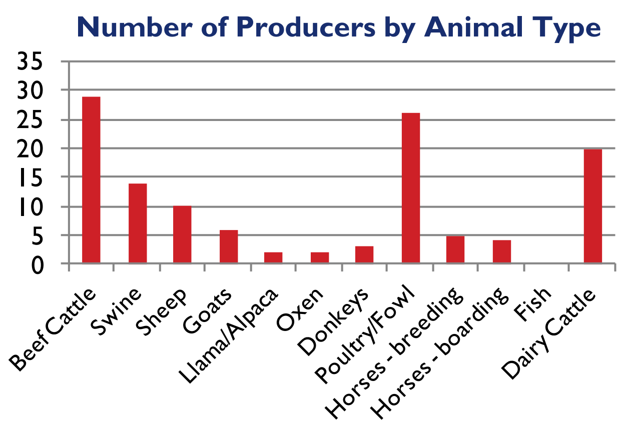
Farmers

Berkshire farmers tend to be older, and the majority of surveyed farmers reported being between 40 years old and 60 years old. The average length of time farming is 53.95 years, and the average length of time the farm has been in the family is 92.4 years. More farmers identified as part-time farmers than full-time farmers. The 106 farmers surveyed reported spending $539,350 dollars in Berkshire county, or $5,088.20 per farmer. This results in an estimated $2,116,691.2 being spent in the Berkshire region. Farmers identified a range of agricultural practices, including crop rotation, winter cover crops, season extension, low or no till, organic and integrated pest management (IPM). They indicated that burgeoning interest in local food has had positive impacts on their farm operation,



Farm Products

Most farmers surveyed sell between 80% to 100% of their product within the Berkshire region; those who sold less indicated that they would like to sell more product locally. Twenty-two (22) farmers indicated annual farm sales of $20,000 or less, while eleven (11) reported annual farm sales of $100,000 or more. If the land supports it, Berkshire farmers grow it.

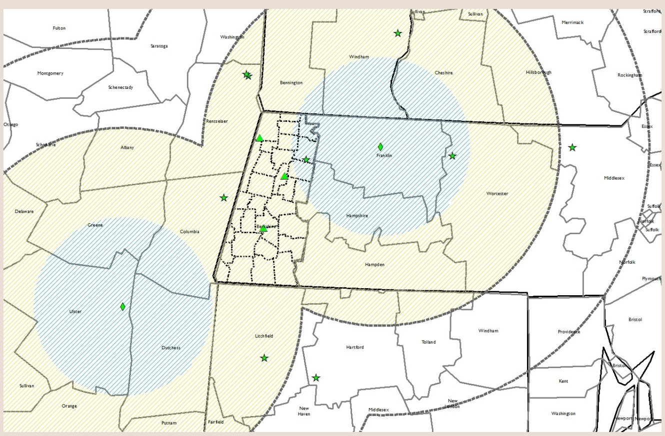


Farm Markets

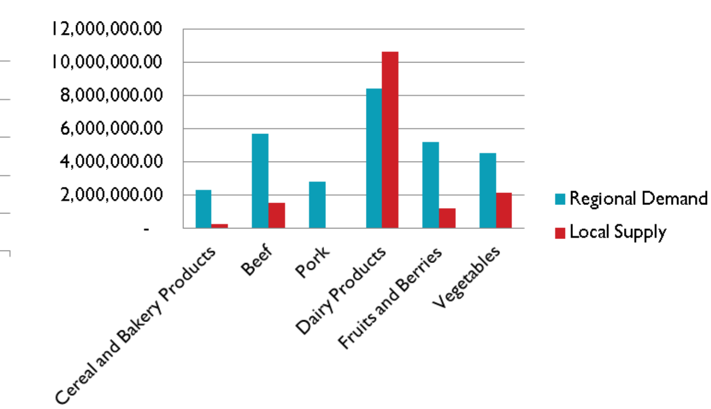
Berkshire farmers rely on a variety of market outlets to distribute their product. Some sell to larger processors, such as AgriMark, Dairy-Lee and Chobani; others rely on farm stands and word of mouth. Other outlets include: wholesale distributors, regional coop markets, farmers' markets, restaurants, caterers, CSAs, PYO operations, schools and other institutions.

Infrastructure

There are no USDA certified commercial slaughter and meat processing facilities in the Berkshire region. Farmers must travel to Vermont, New York, Connecticut or Central Massachusetts to slaughter livestock for wholesale or retail sale and consumption. The county has some custom slaughter capacity, but the sale and consumption of these custom jobs is very restricted. The county is also underserved in terms of fruit or vegetable processing. The two large, commercial processing kitchens farmers indicated using are in the Hudson Valley and the Pioneer Valley. A small portion of the county is within twenty-five miles of the Greenfield facility, even though most of the farms are beyond the twenty-five mile range of both facilities. In terms of compost facilities, the region has three operations: one in Dalton, one in Williamstown and one in Lee. The location and capacity of these facilities is important to consider as the Massachusetts's Department of Environmental Protection's new commercial food waste ban will go into affect in June 2014, and larger producers of food waste will need to find ways to compost.



Green stars depict slaughter facilities; green diamonds fruit and vegetable processing facilities; green triangles represent composting facilities. The only slaughter facility in Berkshire county is a custom butcher, which does not allow for wholesale or retail sale of meat products. The yellow striped area represents a 50 mile buffer from the processing facility to the Berkshire region.



Source: 2012 Consumer Expenditure Survey

DEMAND

Keep Berkshires Farming: Consumer Surveys

Through Keep Berkshires Farming, 694 residents, 66 restaurants, twenty-one (21) institutions, seventeen (17) community meal sites, and twenty-five (25) food processors and /or food distributors were surveyed to better understand current and potential regional demand for local food. The key finding from these surveys: everybody wants more local food, but face different obstacles in readily accessing and enjoying it local food.

Residents

If a Berkshire farmer is growing it, than a Berkshire resident is buying it. Seventy-seven percent of the 694 residents surveyed indicated that they would purchase more local food if they could, and about a quarter of those surveyed indicated they check to see where their food is from when they grocery shop. There is a gap in supply and demand. Residents want more meat, more grain and more dairy products than are currently being produced. They also want year-round availability of local vegetables.

Food Processors and/or Food Distributors

These included small, specialty dairy processors or butcher shops as well as wholesale distributors such as Ginsbergs, and large super stores such as Wal-Mart. The most commonly cited challenge to using more any or more local food were concerns over food safety and liability; volume and dependability; price; communication gap; lack o local decision-making and the regional lack of processing facilities. They also expressed interest in contract growing, enhanced communication, a local food hub and enhanced processing facilities along with enhanced farmer assistance programs.

Restaurants

Restaurants represent the second largest market outlet as reported by farmers, and of the sixty-six surveyed for Keep Berkshires Farming, most would like to serve more local food. Some do not serve local food, or are not interested in serving more local food because of cost of local food for both the restaurant and customer. Restaurants identified purchasing local and non-local foods from twenty-three different distributors, some local or regional businesses, some national wholesale distributors. The most commonly frequently selected strategy to help expand farm to table opportunity for restaurants is a local food hub and direct purchasing frameworks with farmers.

Institutions

Twenty-one institutions were surveyed, including regional hospitals, school districts, private health/wellness retreats, retirement homes, private schools and institutions of higher education. Seventeen of the twenty-one institutions would purchase more local food if possible, and they all currently use at least some local food—identifying local food as between .5% and 30% of their menu. Budgets also ranged in institutions, and those with higher food budgets reported greater flexibility in from where they can source food.

The top three purchasing considerations were identified to be:

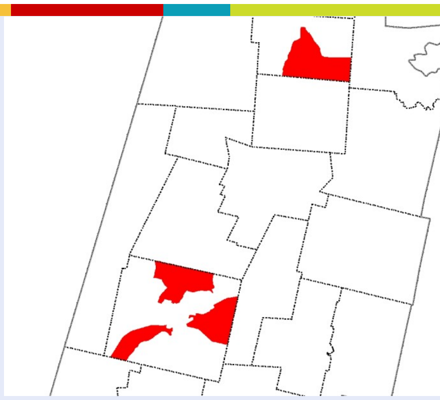
- Quality,
- Freshness, and
- Price/budget.

The top four challenges identified were:

- Budgetary constraints,
- Seasonality,
- Availability, and
- Timing/frequency of deliveries..

Food Insecurity

The region is home to four USDA food deserts, and has experienced a documented increase in food pantry meals and meals on wheels served, as well as increased enrollment in SNAP benefits and free or reduced lunches. Only two farmers' markets currently accept all forms of food assistance (SNAP, WIC, senior benefits), while four accept at least one form. BRPC mapped fifty-six meal sites, and KBF volunteers surveyed seventeen of these sites. They all indicated being able to meet demand, but struggling to do so, and not always having access to local or fresh foods. They indicated financial, staff and volunteer capacity as limiting factors in their ability to source and serve additional local food.



Where is the need?

Red depicts USDA food deserts in North Adams and Pittsfield.

Regional Goals and Policies

GoalFA1: Ensure agriculture and local food economic activities are prioritized within regional and local economic development strategies and investments.

Policy FA1.1: Highlight local food and agriculture as key economic sector of the region.
Policy FA1.2: Link economic development and infrastructure investments to agriculture economy.
Policy FA1.3: Link farms and food businesses to small farm and business supports.

GoalFA2: Facilitate more value-added products getting to market

Policy FA2.1: Investigate and advance slaughter facility planning and development.
Policy FA2.2: Investigate and advance value-added dairy capacity of the region.
Policy FA2.3: Explore feasibility of non-food processing needs, such as compost, fiber and wood product processing.

GoalFA3: Create better linkages between farmers and markets.

Policy FA3.1: Develop a countywide food hub at an appropriate scale for the region.
Policy FA3.2: Continue Farm-Buyer connections via Berkshire Grown.

GoalFA4: Improve access to land for current and new farmers

Policy FA4.1: Create Berkshire Farmland Access and Transition Network.
Policy FA4.2: Work within existing systems to improve access to farmland conservation and financial supports.

GoalFA5: Ensure farms have succession plans in place to support keeping farms in agricultural use.

Policy FA5.1: Promote farmer participation in succession and estate planning.

GoalFA6: Build a year-round local food system

Policy FA6.1: Explore the potential for expanding local value-added processing capacity for personal and group use for food use over winter.
Policy FA6.2: Support farms extending their seasons toward a year-round farming model.

GoalFA7: Expand access to healthy, local food in all Berkshire schools.

Policy FA7.1: Scale up farm-to-institution programs in all Berkshire schools.
Policy FA7.2: Work with parents and kids to improve nutrition literacy and cooking know-how.

GoalFA8: Expand access to locally grown foods for low-to-moderate income households.

Policy FA8.1: Maintain and expand programs that provide access to local, healthy foods for low-and-fixed-income households.

GoalFA9: Work together to ensure regional goals and policy priorities are reflected in state and federal planning and legislation.

Policy FA9.1: Continue and expand existing activism networks.
Policy FA9.2: Ensure region is well-represented in state food policy and planning.

GoalFA10: Municipalities that support agriculture and local food.

Policy FA10.1: Zoning and bylaw amendments to support agriculture.
Policy FA10.2: Support agricultural commissions in all communities.