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Food for thought: ideas on local and organic agriculture

by Ginny Lamere

“Food for Thought,” the second in the seminar series, “Life in the Balance,” took place at the Trinitarian Congregational Church in Concord last month. The keynote speaker and panelists talked about preserving forests, farming locally, getting more nutritious food into school cafeterias and educating the public on the real meaning of “organic” in supermarkets. The mission of the evening was to have the crowd walk away with tangible actions they could do.

Keynote speaker Brian Donahue gave an overview of the changing amount of forest and farmland in New England over the last 300 years. He advocated for massive open space protection, the need to get more people involved in agriculture locally and the need for good “Farm to School” programs.

Donahue said that local farming techniques were sustainable, but constrained, in 1775. Donahue defined it as “adequate, but uninspiring.” People ate corn and rye bread, salted beef and pork, squash, cider, butter and cheese. He said 30 to 40% of the Concord area was forest. By the mid-1800s, forests were being cut down rapidly as New England industrialized. “In older towns like Concord, 90% was cleared by 1860.” Wheat was already being imported from the mid-west by train. By the late 1800s, there was a large urban population. “Meat

was rolling in from the mid-west.” Grain was cheap and farmers fed it to their dairy cows. Dairy farming was the leading industry.

Concord was at its peak agriculturally in 1910. Donahue said, “Concord was eighth in the state in agricultural production.” Coal-fired greenhouses were pioneered at the Wheeler Farm in Concord. Donahue noted that the working class ate poorly in the late 1800s. Their diets improved in the early 1900s because there were more milk and vegetables available.

“The 1920s brought a rise in industrial agriculture which exploded after World War II,” said Donahue. This was driven by cheap oil, chemical pesticides, hybrid seeding, tractor cultivation and irrigation. These factors caused the collapse of agriculture in New England. As the 20th century continued, rural populations decreased, farmers were under stress, dependence on fertilizers increased and as a result “there was massive water pollution” due to the run-off of those fertilizers. “New England dairy farming went downhill,” said Donahue. He added that diets became unhealthier as people consumed more products with corn syrup.

Since then, as local farming has decreased, forests have rebounded. For example, 40% of Vermont’s land was cleared, now it is only 20% cleared. Donahue said, “Concord now has half of its landscape back to forest.” The number of area farms has dropped.

While he would protect some forest land, Donahue’s message is to return some of New England’s forests back to agriculture. He would increase the land used for crops and pasture and use pigs and poultry to fertilize the land. In doing so, there would be increased production of local meat. He advocates shipping in grain. He said, “There’s a huge market for local fruits and vegetables.”

He thinks it is important to have farms producing food locally because “it makes the places we live in more beautiful and vital to live in. It educates future farmers and consumers.” He says, “It’s the recognition that farming is not about producing food as cheaply as possible. It’s

about producing healthy food in a beautiful and sustainable way.”

Donahue advocates getting as many people as possible into farming, increasing the number of community and educational farms. He also supports “Farm to School” programs. According to the website www.farmtoschool.org, “Farm to School programs connect schools and local farms with the objectives of serving healthy meals in school cafeterias, improving student nutrition, providing agriculture, health and nutrition education opportunities, and supporting local and regional farmers.” Donahue says the program needs to involve the community, the school cafeterias and the classrooms.

Donahue is an associate professor of American Environmental Studies at Brandeis University. He is also on the Harvard Forest staff. Harvard Forest is a research and education group that explores conservation and environmental change to land-use, particularly in New England forests. He’s the author of “The Great Meadow: Farmers and the Land in Colonial Concord,” published in 2004.

Jennifer Hashley, an instructor at Tufts University, described the New Entry Sustainable Farming Project, which she

directs. According to the web site nesfp.org, a broad goal of the organization is “to support the sustainability of the region’s agriculture and build long-term economic self-reliance and food security among participants and their communities.” A second goal is to “expand access to high-quality, culturally appropriate foods in underserved areas through production of locally-grown foods.”

The program focuses on immigrants with farming experience who want to get started in small-scale commercial agriculture in Massachusetts. “We bring them in, educate them and graduate them,” said Hashley. “The goal is we want new farmers every year.” These farmers learn practical skills and make a production plan. “We help them with pests, marketing and transitions to their own farms.” Students can go to a Livestock Field School as well. There are outreach programs, farm tours and conferences. There is a farmland location and matching

service which assists qualified beginning farmers and experienced growers to locate suitable land for farming. Hashley pointed out that affordable housing is a serious problem. “Where can they live?”

Eating locally grown food

Panelist Willow of Slow Food Boston spoke of the difficulties of eating locally grown food all year. Slow Food Boston is a non-profit all-volunteer organization that promotes the consumption of seasonal and local foods. “It requires a lot of time and effort. How many of us have time for drying, canning and pickling?” She recommends doing what we can to eat seasonally. She noted that our tastes and our lifestyles have changed in the last century. We like Italian olive oil, Alaskan salmon and wine from France.

As a percent of income, Americans pay less for food than people in other nations. Blish noted that as Americans raise more food locally, “That food will cost more. It costs more in dollars but it costs less because we are not causing as much harm to the environment.” She said we will need to spend more to support our local farmers and our local communities.

Improving food

in school cafeterias

Blish agreed with the need for schools to provide good food and explained the challenges of changing the food in the school cafeteria. She said part of the problem is that there is a lack of funding for food for school. Blish also questioned, “What do children expect to eat today? What are they eating at home?” She reasoned that children eating diets high in fats and salts will expect that in schools. Similarly, as children eat more healthfully at home, they will want better food in the school cafeteria.

Blish asked, “Are there good farm-to-school programs? Are there successful kitchen gardens going on at schools?” This issue was

discussed in one of the break-out sessions, where it was suggested that the new Environmental Club at Concord-Carlisle High School might be become involved in growing food and making others more aware.

Find the “USDA Organic” label

Charlotte Vallaeys, a farm and food policy analyst, gave advice on shopping at supermarkets. She said to “look for the organic label.” But she warned of its many meanings. Since the organic label regulation in 1991, corporations have realized there are profits to be made by advertising “natural” foods, but not all comply with organic food standards. “Local or organic? Which is better?” questioned Vallaeys. She gave the example of Garelick milk. It is represented as a local provider, but it is owned by the number one agriculture corporation in America, Dean Foods. She cautioned about labels on the containers. Labels may say “organic ingredients” when only 70% of the ingredients have to be organic, leaving 30% that are not. Other labels say “No antibiotics” which is not the same as organic. She encouraged people to look for the seal of “USDA Organic.” Δ

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