

The LIFE Project,

What it is, How it works

by Change Unite Parker

For many years, as the USDA Census of Agriculture of 1980 reveals, local community food self reliance was practiced in almost every corner of New York. In succeeding years, the food system which supplied New York consumers gradually expanded until it became the responsibility of the whole nation. Locally abundant and cheap energy sources; vast areas of flat, fertile land with ideal growing climates; favorable federal water, energy and transportation subsidy policies; and the meteoric growth in food production, processing, and distribution technology all combined to make the West, Midwest and South the primary food basket of the United States and the world.

As a steady and relatively inexpensive flow of diversified and quality foods and food products has been produced in these regions and transported to other states, local agriculture in those states importing food, in New York, and in most of the Northeast, has declined. The rate of loss of prime agricultural soils and active farmers has become so serious in the Northeast that many states have initiated food policies and policy processes to develop guidelines for a revitalization of small scale and commercially efficient food production units during the next ten years. The purpose of this revitalization is to insure local sources of fresh and nutritious food at lower costs for consumers hit hard by rising food prices; to save prime, unique and locally important farms with their productive soils, open spaces and cultural heritage; and to prepare a cushion for a future that will be marked by foods with higher inflation-related prices, increased population demands for food, consumer environmental quality pressures, higher energy, labor and marketing costs, and much more.

According to 1974 statistics, which are considered still appropriate for 1979, New York farmers produced six percent of New York's consumer demands for meat products, 91 percent of the dairy products demand, 38 percent of fruit and vegetables, six percent of bakery and grain products, and 25 percent of poultry and egg demand. Thus, New York farmers produce approximately 26 percent of total food demanded by consumers. And, depending on the season, between 75 to 90 percent of all food bought by New York consumers is now imported from other areas of the United States and the world. It is possible that this indicator of consumer dependency could reach higher levels in the immediate future. In either case, this type of food system, both present and in the future, has severe weaknesses.

Currently, one estimate is that California and Florida provide 40 to 60 percent of all New York winter produce and specialty fruits and nuts.

The University of California recently released a report, titled, "Agricultural Policy Challenges for California in the 1980's," which underlined several areas, such as energy and transportation costs, irrigation water competition and fewer processing plants, which could significantly raise the cost of California commodities and quite possibly reduce supplies by the year 2000.

Likewise, Florida produce growers are suing Mexican farmers for allegedly selling their products at below production prices. If they win their Treasury Department case, and many expect them to do so, this will significantly raise the cost of winter vegetables. Another result of this finding would be that the United States would be supporting increased agricultural production on Florida land that requires seven times as much petroleum-based fertilizer as the national average.

These events will induce many changes in our present food supply system. At best, this gives us, in New York, 20 years to develop new sources of food. To do so, it appears likely that New York, before the year 2000, will need to grow more of its own food and encourage diversified, local agricultural production and long-term and regional food processing, marketing and consumption patterns.



DIRECT MARKETING. Doug Jones of Birdsfoot Farm, Canton, shown picking cucumbers for the Cranberry Lake Food Buying Club as part of the Natural Farmers Association of the St. Lawrence Valley's pilot group cooperative marketing project.

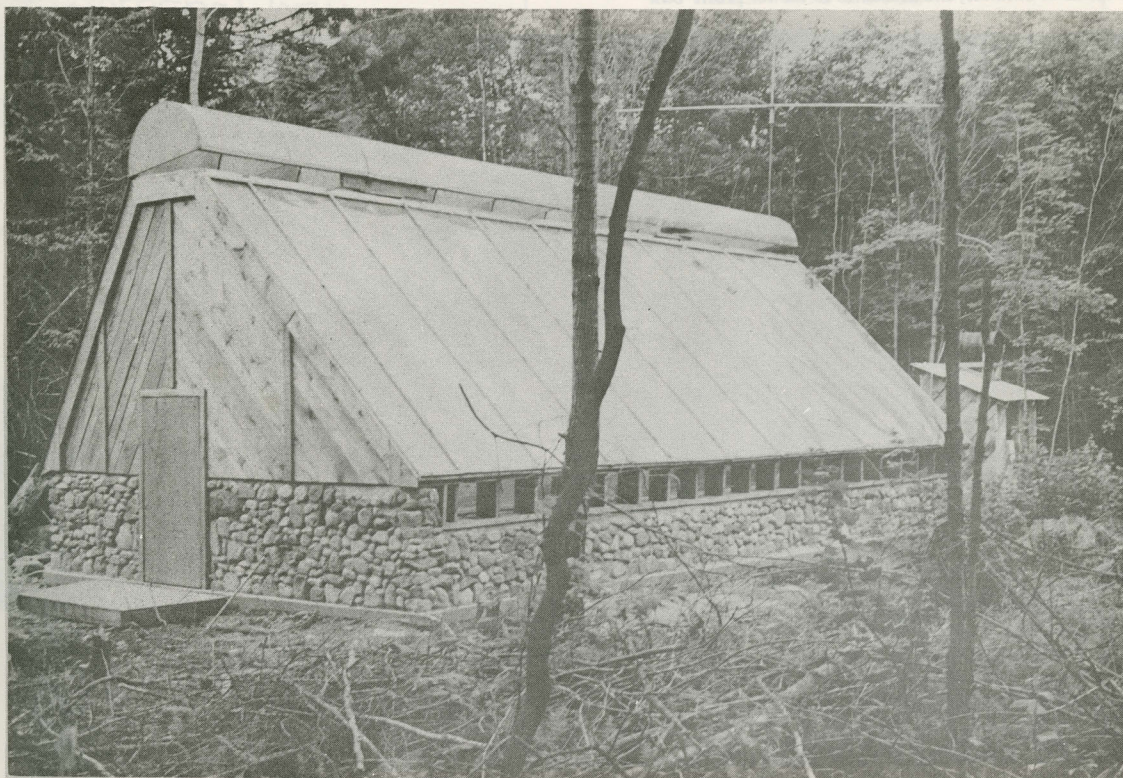
A second and more immediate crisis situation has already begun to appear. This crisis will be caused by higher food prices in relation to real consumer dollars of net family income. While the food prices will be felt most sharply by landless people without community garden and food coop organizations and without direct access to farmers markets, higher food prices will also significantly hurt those with limited resources. In this case, food price inflation will continue to be caused by any one of several factors: a substantial raise in nonrenewable energy prices, labor and processing costs in the food system, reasonable profits for farmers, development pressures on prime farmland, increased demands for environmental and nutritional quality, and global competition for American food and feed products in other countries.

A third potential crisis situation exists in relation to emergency food shortage supplies in New York. This reality has become more apparent in recent years with a series of weather disasters, truck and labor strikes and foreign energy blockades. Presently, the primary food storage facilities in most communities are supermarkets and food stores. In relation to the population, these stores carry about a seven day supply. This situation is most critical for those families in rural and urban areas without home storage facilities. Many families will, at a minimum, be faced with the loss of basic nutritional, traditional and/or luxury food items if the national transportation network is halted for one week or longer.

While my own experiences, knowledge and contacts with other food system participants have convinced me that these three crises could occur under present conditions, it is also my opinion and feeling that these crises can be prevented or lessened in intensity. Accomplishing these latter results will require a concerted and cooperative effort on the part of New York residents, communities, public officials, private interest groups, university research and extension educators, and appropriate state and federal agencies concerned with the production and distribution of food.

Now is the time felt to be opportune for choices about the future of the New York food system; choices which may not be available in five years. Now is a time when individuals, families and communities can take more responsibility for the local food system and the needs of residents for native agricultural products. Now is a time when experiments can be tried, mistakes made and lessons learned from them which will result in success, without the emotional pressures of an immediate crisis. Now is a time when models of community food self reliance can be developed for other New York towns and communities.

For the whole community that is the food system; the challenge in the 1980's will be to share local policy-making power with other groups representing evolving economic and ethnic interests, while trying to create broader understanding



SOLAR GREENHOUSE AT ALPHA RESEARCH. The 20' x 40' commercial size solar greenhouse at Alpha Research, situated in the Adirondack Foothills outside of Russell,

New York. Also pictured in the far right of the photo is an under-construction solar shower (note 55 gallon drum on the roof of the shower).

of their own individual interests and to use common sense in developing appropriately-scaled and mutually supportive regional food policy goals and objectives.

For these reasons, I propose that a locally integrated food economy (LIFE) be developed among several towns in St. Lawrence County, New York, with the support, participation and direction of local food system participants and residents. Preliminary research indicates that several communities have the initial interest and the local human and technological resources necessary to insure long-term carry-through success of the LIFE project.

This LIFE project would initially be designed to last three years. During this time frame, one goal would be to develop quantitative goals for revitalizing and expanding local agriculture and aquaculture; food processing, storage and marketing; organic waste recycling; and to develop supportive consumer buying attitudes and patterns in the participating towns.

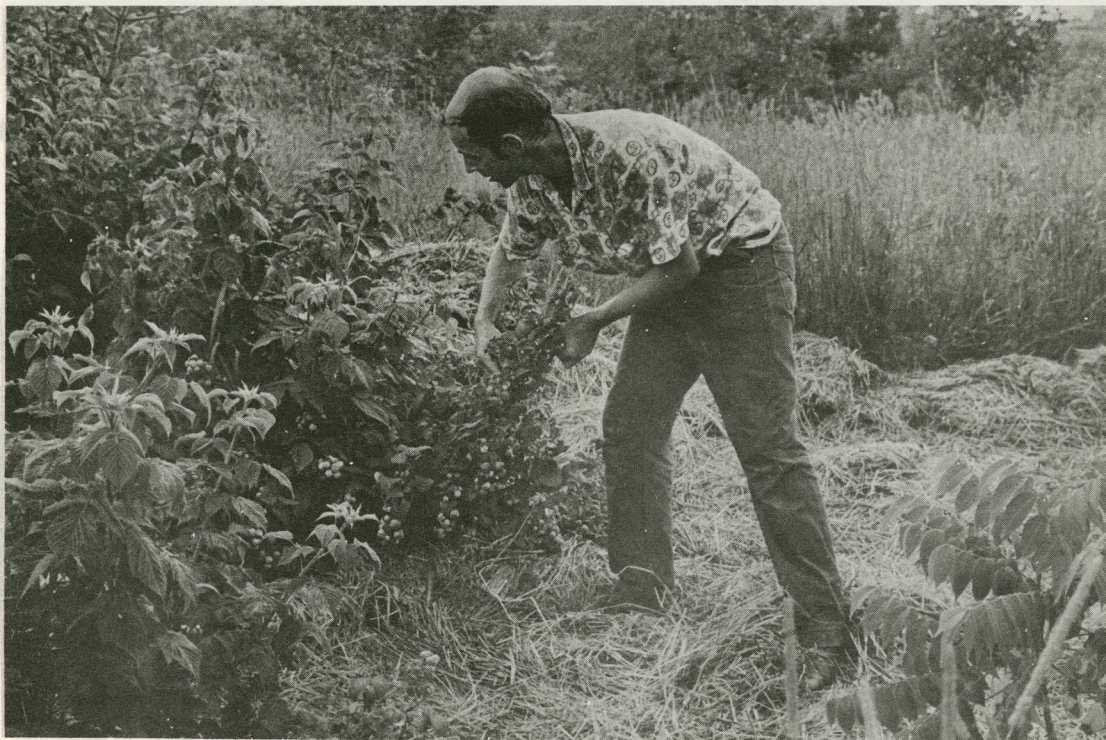
As such, the emphasis of the project will be on the development of more horizontal inter-relationships among food system participants; keeping more jobs and money in the local communities; encouraging greater family food self reliance and intercommunity responsibility for the quality of the community food system; use of state and regional resources for research, development, and education; support for cooperative forms of business; and assistance to the 'for profit' busi-

nesses necessary to insure a viable and efficient local farm community and processing, marketing and recycling system.

Since communities in St. Lawrence County are in a geographical region with a short growing season, and since the multi-town nature and scope of the LIFE Project will be appropriately scaled and humanly simple enough for a broad cross section of the public and private and business communities to participate, it is anticipated that the process and results will provide a model for other New York communities when they, too, feel the need to do something about their food system.

Ultimately, the success of the project will mean a continuing source of high quality local food at reasonable prices for residents and visitors to the area in the next ten years. It is also anticipated that the process and results will provide a model for other New York communities faced with high food costs, a declining local agriculture, and a depressed national economic situation.

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FRUIT AND NUT PRODUCTION. Bill MacKentley of St. Lawrence Nurseries shows off his season's raspberry crop. Bill is carrying on the work of the late Fred Ash-

worth and is currently developing stock of hardy fruit and nut trees for an expanded North Country production.