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# Farming in the Headwaters Area

*Allen Rybicky*

The land where Schoharie, Delaware, and Greene counties meet are headwater lands—very hilly and crossed by a network of streams and gullies. And, true to the geographic adage “dirt to the valleys, stone and clay to the hillsides, and rock to the mountain tops,” this area abounds in clay and stony soil.

Adjacent land farther down the rivers (for example, Middleburgh in the Schoharie valley) have wide flat areas with rich soils many feet deep that are ideal for foodstuffs such as vegetables and corn. Our area, on the other hand, is not well suited for produce and so agriculture here relies on the breeding and use of animals, mainly dairy cows, that can navigate hilly terrain, leaving the flatter areas of the farm for hay and feed corn.

We have all heard of stagnant farm prices and increasing farm expenses in energy, equipment, and labor. This squeeze, and the continual demand on the farmer’s time, puts stress on both the farmer’s wallet and psyche. While political solutions have not had much impact locally, the increase in feed costs have depressed milk production and local dairies will therefore enjoy higher prices for the near future.

Nationally, agricultural land will be shifted into production of corn and grains to meet the the country’s need for ethanol. This and the costs of transportation will result in higher food costs— a family’s food budget is estimated to increase significantly over the next couple of years.

A magnificent local resource in agriculture is the traditional farm family where each successive generation is brought up in the farming tradition (Barbers, Hagers, Lamports, Posts, Wyckoffs, etc.). This resource is continually endangered by the carrot of the rising sale price of land and the stick of the demanding lifestyle of the farm. It would take only a single generation to go for the cash, break the tradition, and erase these farms from our future. I hope that these farm families grow and prosper so that the remaining farms survive.

A new type of farmer is also moving into the area. These are small farms run by a family for lifestyle gratification. These farms sell to niche markets and provide a quality product locally with a slightly higher price. The end product might be organic milk; range-fed beef, goats, and chickens; wool from alpacas and llamas; breeding and training of Lippizaner and thoroughbred horses. Personally, I feel that the local alpaca blanket I have is a dream; the home grown chicken from Bill Parker’s farm is better than any roast chicken I have ever eaten; and locally grown, corn-finished beef from Bob Avery’s and Al Weinman’s farm is more flavorful and tender than any tenderloin on the market. These farms and others like them in the area are truly FFA (future farms of this area)!

The population of this area has always been diverse. In the heyday of boarding houses and hotels, huge numbers of people invaded the area during the summer and lived on the farms. Vern Pickett's family farm in Gilboa had over 50 guests at one point, and Vern's two neighbors also had a full summer complement of boarders. In this same tradition, people are again swarming to the Northern Catskills. Some are moving into the area for retirement, while others are starting a second home as an escape from the city. These second-home owners and their friends come up for long weekends to live in the country; hunt, fish, or ski in the area; and to breath fresh air and eat good food.

The small farms that we were discussing serve all of us. Locals, full-timers, and part-timers can all enjoy the meats and produce of the area's farms. Moreover, each of us can help protect the Northern Catskills by promoting, supporting, and enjoying the products of our local farms.

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Allen Rybicky is one of the third generation raised on the farm that was run by his brother Dale. Allen is the General Manager of the Stamford Farmer's Cooperative.

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