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Working Paper

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Staff Paper, No. SP 82-11

Provided in Cooperation with:

Charles H. Dyson School of Applied Economics and Management, Cornell University

Suggested Citation: Conklin, Howard E. (1982) : Utilization of the Resource Base New York's Rural Areas in Transition, Staff Paper, No. SP 82-11, Cornell University, Charles H. Dyson School of Applied Economics and Management, Ithaca, NY, <https://doi.org/10.22004/ag.econ.183936>

This Version is available at:

<https://hdl.handle.net/10419/276629>

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Utilization of the Resource Base
New York's Rural Areas in Transition

by

Howard E. Conklin

May, 1982

No. 82-11

Utilization of the Resource Base -- New York's Rural Areas in Transition

There are 30 million acres in New York, give or take a few. Our new agricultural census says 10 million of these are in farms. When we look a little closer this shrinks to eight million acres that are used by serious food producers. The other two million are used principally for subsistence and personal enjoyment.

Actually, when we really get down to the bare bones of what produces most of the food we turn out in this state, it is our four million acres of harvested cropland. Pasture is still of some significance but increasing herd sizes make effective pasture use difficult.

This four million acres of cropland is operated by a tiny handful of farmers. It can be estimated from the census that there are about 20,000 full time farms in the state. There is more than one farmer on some of these (partnerships) and the census says there are about 25,000 people who consider farming to be their principal occupation. These 25,000 people turn out more food than their grandfathers did back in the days when the breadbasket of the nation was in the Genesee Valley and practically all the land in the state outside the Adirondacks and Catskills was in farms.

Actually the agriculture of New York looks on the surface to be in good shape today. The number of serious farmers stayed about steady in the past five years, and both the total acreage they hold and the acreage they use for crops increased a bit.

But farmers today share the land of rural New York with a large and rapidly growing group of nonfarm folks. It is very difficult to get an accurate count, or even an approximation to an accurate count, of rural nonfarm people. The census of agriculture counted nearly as many farmers who said they were not really farmers, as it did of those for whom food production is truly a major business. Some of these have a small farm, like I do, as a substitute for golf. But I suspect that an increasing number have a farm to reduce their grocery or heating bill or to supplement cash income. (It is a form of moonlighting that IRS has more problems tracking down.)

Even, however, if we include all people who by any stretch of the imagination are farmers -- about 50,000 -- they still are a small group compared to all who live in rural houses.

The census of population counts as rural all who live in places of less than 2,500. But the suburban areas around most cities are broken into such small governmental units that many suburbanites are counted by the census as rural. If we adjust this by including only what the census calls "Standard Metropolitan Statistical Area" (SMSA) counties, we really cut the number too far because one SMSA extends to the middle of the Adirondacks and others include a lot of distinctly open country. If, on the other hand we take everything, rural and urban, outside SMSAs, and thus get a nonmetro population, we include some cities like Olean and Watertown that are not rural at all.

Another approach would be to ride the rural roads of the state and count farm and nonfarm houses. I have found lots of rural areas where there are at least 10 nonfarm houses for every farmhouse. I do, however, tend to put the part-timers in the nonfarm group and count as farmers only those with activity enough to occupy the full time of at least one person.

After looking at all the numbers, remembering what I have seen in thousands of miles of rural driving and a good many miles of air travel in the state, I think a figure of one million is a conservative estimate of the number of people who live intermingled with the farmers of this state. (Remember, there are wives and children in the farm families, so this million compares to about 100,000 people on full time farms.) And our studies of rural land ownership indicate to us that these nonfarm people own about as much of the state of New York as do the farmers, though individually, of course, most of their holdings are quite small. Most of their holdings, too, are in brush and woods.

If we throw the roads, airports, parks, game refuges, commercial and state forests, suburbs, and cities together, they occupy what is roughly the remaining one-third of the state. So in summary, about one-third of the state is in farms of all kinds and descriptions, of which 40 percent produces most of our farm products. About one-third is owned by rural residents (plus a few city speculators, I suppose.) And the other third is in the hands of government, is in cities, or is owned by large forest interests. The land in serious food production is increasing slightly and the farmers who use it are holding steady in numbers. Part-time farmers are increasing sharply and so are rural residents.

From here on I want to focus on the people who live on or near the land they use in the rural areas of the state. These are the people who will pass the local laws governing land use. They include, of course, the people who do the farming and they include the other million who are the farmers' immediate neighbors.

Never before have we had so many nonfarm people in rural areas. Before World War II some six or eight million acres went out of farming in this state but in those days the people moved away when they stopped farming. Rural areas were not happy places to live in: no electricity, no running water, poor roads, poor cars, one room schools, and no buses even to high school. (I walked five miles each way to high school in winter.)

Today people can live as conveniently in rural areas as in town. Today, in fact, it has become the cities that are unhappy places in which to live for all except the well-to-do and the well paid professionals and managers who can live in expensive apartments and condominiums or escape to the suburbs. (Even some of these feel almost as if they live under a state of siege. A friend of mine who lives in an expensive apartment in Manhattan says they pay the doorman well to be sure he is on their side and keep extra food and water on hand in case the lights go out like they did a few years ago.) Something over a half million jobs and people have left New York State in recent years and most metro areas (cities plus their suburbs) are currently losing population.

Our rural population, on the other hand, is increasing significantly. We do not know for sure, but it seems clear that this increase is mostly a homegrown one. Our data say most who leave the cities in New York go to cities in the South or West. A few modest income escapees from just outside the expanding perimeters of the ghettos in major cities have been identified among rural in-migrants but their numbers are small. A larger group is urban retirees who must subsist on Social Security or other modest pensions.

Many newspaper articles would have us believe that most new rural residents are Harvard graduates who got tired of being stockbrokers, decided to chuck the rat race, and bought a little country store. Maybe so over in New England, but I haven't located very many in New York.

Most of the additions to our rural nonfarm population, I believe, are the children of rural nonfarm people, many of whom in earlier years would have gone to the city in quest of a better life. In those days they might have had to live in apartments for a time but could hope realistically for a pleasant home in the suburbs before long.

Today the suburban dream has faded. Declining employment, inflation, and the scarcity of mortgage money combine with high crime rates to make urban prospects poorer than rural ones. In a rural area young people can buy an inexpensive lot, or get a piece of land from their parents, and are legally permitted to build their own home or buy a trailer. There are hundreds of thousands of young people today who cannot hope to own their own home anywhere except in the country.

The country offers the further advantages of an opportunity to grow some of one's own food and fuel, moonlight at home, enjoy less expensive recreational pursuits, and repair one's own car without disturbing the zoning officer. The children, too, can set up a little bicycle repair business, merchandize some garden produce, or have some other economic activity without running afoul of the zoning ordinance.

If this picture is correct, it seems likely that truly heroic programs would be needed to prevent further large increases in rural nonfarm residents. And the programs, for the most part, would need to be operated at the state level. Police power controls on settlement today rest principally with local governments. Rural nonfarm people control most rural local governments or will take control the first time they get mad. And nonfarmers are not likely to make themselves nonconforming users under a zoning ordinance or prohibit their children from locating nearby.

The idea of statewide controls strong enough to keep nonfarm people out of farming areas was urgently proposed by the New York State Office of Planning Coordination in the early 1970s but summarily rejected by the legislature. The legislature did accept such controls for the Adirondacks, but their acceptance in that instance seems not to foreshadow their general acceptance. (They have even been rejected for the Catskills.)

What will a continuously increasing number of nonfarm neighbors mean to farmers in this state? What does the present large number of nonfarm neighbors mean already?

Nonfarmers everywhere it seems are asking for more public services and because farmers must own a lot of real estate the growing tax burden falls heavily on them. Nonfarmers also are asking for regulations on farm machinery transport, pesticides, manure spreading, and farm noises and odors. They are riding their snowmobiles and horses across farm meadows, hunting without permission, and discarding bottles where field choppers pick them up and make cow feed laced with ground glass.

The critical point for the retention of farm land is when a farmer must decide if he will build a new barn, install more tile drainage, or plant a new orchard. If he is being hassled too much by nonfarm neighbors he will decide to ride his present farm improvements down and hope he can sell the rundown unit for house lots when he is finished with it.

This worked out reasonably well for some farmers near expanding suburbs in the '50s and '60s. But today the suburbs are not expanding in this part of the country. Nonfarm rural people do not have the money that affluent suburbanites could put on the line for a new house and lot. Besides, while nonfarmers are increasing in numbers there is so much land in New York that it will be a thousand years before all of the state actually is in demand for house lots.

The problem we face today in trying to maintain a vigorous agriculture in this state is one of facilitating the peaceable and productive coexistence of farm and nonfarm people in rural areas. There needs to be mutual respect and trust between farm and nonfarm people. And there needs to be a few new rules for getting along.

There is no chance we can chase the nonfarm people out of farming areas nor even prevent them from multiplying. But we very much need arrangements that will give farmers enough confidence in the future so they will keep our farms from becoming debilitated years before they are needed for house lots, or even for part-time farms.