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New York agricultural agencies and researchers release
a State-wide Food System Vision for 2050

ONEONTA, N.Y. – On July 28, 2022, the Center for Agricultural Development and Entrepreneurship (CADE) and its research partners Cornell University’s Dyson School of Economics and Management, Cornell Small Farms Program, Hartwick College, SUNY Cobleskill’s Institute for Rural Vitality, and faculty of Columbia University are launching the culmination of a 3-year research project, “Vision 2050: A New York State Vision for a Profitable, Regenerative, Equitable, Healthy Food System Future by 2050”.

CADE Executive Director Phoebe Schreiner states, “This is a historic moment for New York State. Vision 2050 is a culmination of a 3 year research project engaging stakeholders across New York to put forward an integrated, comprehensive Food System Vision by 2050—one that is profitable, regenerative, equitable, and healthy. It is intended to educate political leaders on what food system stakeholders want to see for the future and act as a compass for getting us there, including overcoming barriers. We hope the Vision can guide our leaders in developing a long term State strategic plan that is holistic and integrated.”

New York’s leaders are currently considering priorities for a 2023 NYS Farm Bill in the areas of agriculture, nutrition, and the environment.

“We worked with renowned researchers to develop participatory research methods, such as focus groups and surveys, ensuring we had inclusive representation from stakeholders both across the food system and the State of New York”, she said.

The research effort engaged a total of 417 producers, agricultural agencies and associations, fishery experts, funders and investors, supply chain entrepreneurs, buyers, nutritionists, climate experts, equity and racial justice leaders, political leaders, food policy experts, economists, land trust representatives, labor experts, and teenagers–urban and rural–aspiring to become future food system leaders and agribusiness entrepreneurs.

“We intentionally organized focus groups to spark dialogue among these stakeholders who don’t normally talk to each other. We were amazed at how participants were delighted to hear
perspectives they hadn’t heard before, despite their being in the same food system family”, said
Schreiner.

One of the research partners on the project, Carlena Ficano, PhD, a Professor of Economics at
Hartwick College, asserts: “the Vision represents a first step towards a roadmap for accelerating
sustainable agricultural economic development, creating green jobs throughout the farm and food
sector, increasing food security and healthy food access, advancing equity, and mitigating climate
change. We can fundamentally transform our food system to deliver on so much more if we treat it as
the integrated and interdependent whole that it is, and if we build structures and engage leadership to
grow it in a way that delivers better for everyone—farmers, food businesses, consumers, alike”.

According to Kristen Park, Extension Associate of the Dyson School of Applied Economics and
Management at Cornell University, “New York has much to be proud of—it plays a large regional food
role that is second only to Pennsylvania in terms of production value. New York, however, has a
disproportionately larger population compared to its farmland resources and food manufacturing
facilities that constrains food self-sufficiency. In light of the growing population and the concurrent
pressures on agriculture—narrow profit margins, competing land use demands, and climate change—
research demonstrates New York’s need for a strategy to increase its agricultural food production to
feed in-state consumers, export foods or commodities that it produces competitively, and import those
in which it does not produce competitively.”

Focus group participants highlighted stark concerns about New York’s current food system.
Summarized by Ficano: “they painted a bleak picture of a current food system that they perceive to be
financially strained, ecologically unsustainable, discriminatory and exploitive with many products
characterized as being sourced elsewhere, unhealthy, over-processed, subsidized ‘cheap’ food. We
heard repeatedly that healthy, local food is a luxury for the privileged. Participants also lamented the
experiences of farmers of color who encounter explicit and implicit discrimination, and commented
that much current farm production relies on the exploitation of cheap labor of farm workers.”

Schreiner noted, “the time for change is now. California and the Midwest, which represent America’s
current foodsheds, are drying up and can’t sustain current food production, nor feed a growing
national population that is projected to increase by 110 million in the next three decades. We need to
think holistically to re-imagine our food system, and then take action to get there,” said Schreiner, who
gave a Tedx Talk on the topic in 2019.

The Vision 2050 publication provides a number of solutions.

According to Ken Jaffe, MD, a member of the research team, a CADE Board member, and grass fed
beef food business owner, “one of the most universal and important themes that emerged from our
research, regardless of where someone sat on the political spectrum, was the need to shift consumer
values and behaviors. We heard loud and clear that if we as a society had greater food system literacy,
understanding the value of local food production and regenerative production practices, it would have
a ripple effect on consumer demand. We heard lots of ideas on how to do that, all listed in the
According to the publication, shifting consumer behavior was also a key theme—recognizing that when values change, consumption patterns change. “According to stakeholders who participated, they want to see local food purchasing as the norm in New York, and be affordable to everyone, not just the privileged”, said Anu Rangarajan, PhD, Director of the Cornell Small Farms Program and one of the researchers on the project.

Cutis Ogden, Senior Associate of the Interaction Institute for Social Change, who led the research focus groups in New York and co-facilitated the development of the Food Solutions New England network—a similar effort in six New England states involved in the development of the New England Food Vision—noted a consistent point of tension: “many participants commented that they want to see farmers and fishers thrive and increase profitability, rather than scraping by—as many do now. But they also noted they wanted food to be affordable to people of all income levels, including low income communities affected by food apartheid. How to simultaneously increase business profitability while increasing affordability to eaters became a question by many.” Food apartheid refers to a geographic area that lacks access to healthy, affordable food resulting from systemic injustice, particularly impacting Black and Brown communities.

“The answer to that question came down to this—we need eaters of all income levels to buy more local as a matter of normalcy, and not just occasionally at farmers markets. It needs to be widely available at grocery stores, speciality retail outlets, and in public institutions that can offer it free or at reduced prices, like food pantries, public schools, the SUNY system, hospitals, correctional facilities, and other public run institutions, and through SNAP/WIC benefits”, said Ogden.

According to one of the farmer focus group participants, “New York State regulates New York farmers unlike any other state, yet the New York City schools buy cheap applesauce from Virginia. If New York growers are burdened by NYS regulations, New York institutions should be required to buy New York produced and processed food.”

Another focus group participant reflected, “How do we normalize local food buying? We could go past 30% and create even more incentives. Let’s bring SUNY universities and hospitals into the picture. We guarantee a price for corn bushels across New York State, so why can’t we create a fixed marketplace that farmers can rely on?”

“It would help small farms if institutions and restaurants who have a commitment to buying local food go beyond small token purchases from local farms. Perhaps a program where they commit to buying a certain percentage from farms within a certain radius and can then advertise that, or be on lists that show they are doing more than a token purchase,” said another participant.

One of the research focus groups was centered solely on youth voices, and brought together teens affiliated with Future Farmers of America Cobleskill Chapter; Vines, a community-based food justice
organization in Binghamton that runs a “Grow Binghamton Youth Program”; and Community Food Advocates “Youth Food Advocates” program based in New York City. Ashley Yang, a teen member of the Youth Food Advocates program who participated in the youth focus group said, “I’m a youth advocate from New York City who is advocating for healthy, affordable, equity-based, and culturally appropriate meals. I’d love to see universal free school lunch [across New York State], and reduced stigma around it. We currently have ‘New York Thursdays’, where we get local farm apples and milk for school districts. I would love to see more of this as a new normal, so it’s not just once a week, but every meal. We need politicians to support this end goal.” One of her peers in the program, Eliza Porsella, said, “The biggest barrier is getting politicians committed to reconstructing how money is spent at the city or state level. We spend a lot of money on policing.”

Anna Lilia Araiza, Director of Youth Leadership at Community Food Advocates, commented on why engagement of youth is so important for reshaping our future food system: “it’s critical that we center youth voices in this process, since our decisions today will shape the food system that they’ll one day inherit. We’re delighted that our young leaders played a strategic role in the Vision 2050 process. They are not only savvy food consumers, but they are also deeply concerned about the environmental and social impacts of our food system. We are proud to see them leading the way for the next generation of food justice organizers.”

The research also found that enhancing supply chain efficiency is critical for increasing profitability, especially for New York’s majority small and mid-sized farms that cannot meet market demand for scale. “In a State where three quarters of our farms are small, and where that trend is increasing, we need efficient processing, aggregation and distribution systems, including in urban centers. There’s a lot New York State can do to address that, like holistic planning and investment in the supply chain—encouraging and incentivizing collaboration among food hubs and distributors for example. Today’s norm is competition and inefficiency, resulting in higher costs for those businesses, such that they either go under, cannibalize each other, or pass the buck to the consumer”, said Miguel Gomez, PhD, a member of the Vision 2050 research team, leading national researcher on supply chains, and Professor at the Dyson School of Applied Economics and Management at Cornell University.

Another area of tension that emerged during the research was the friction between livestock farmers and climate justice leaders. “Although we know that feedlot production of confined cattle produces greenhouse gasses that worsen climate change, there is research that indicates that grazing-based production can remove carbon from the atmosphere and sequester meaningful amounts of carbon in soil. This research indicates that grazed grassland can offset greenhouse gas emissions, especially in temperate climates with good rainfall like in New York. Since grasslands represent the largest fraction of New York ag land, and dairy is the largest economic sector in New York ag, research on this question has major implications for ‘climate smart’ dairy and beef production and for climate policy in New York and beyond. This research should be a priority in New York, and will help design New York’s climate policy for ag”, said Jaffe.

In one of the focus groups, a climate justice leader conveyed frustration at dairy farmers in the Finger Lakes where manure runoff causes the proliferation of algae blooms. “Why are dairy farmers so
indifferent?”, she posed. A dairy farmer in the same focus group conveyed his mutual concern, but acknowledged most dairy farms are just getting by, don’t know what to do, and can get defensive because their businesses are under pressure at every turn.

“It’s not easy for farmers to transition from conventional to, what is now referred to as, ‘regenerative practices’. It’s a complete change in operations, management, equipment, financing, certifications, and markets”, said Jeff Potent, member of the research team and Adjunct Professor of International and Public Affairs of Columbia University. “We need to provide financial incentives to farmers by investing in them and offering technical assistance to support a transition, not throw sticks that demonize or punish them. And at the end of the day, farmers will respond to market signals, so consumer buying patterns will also and ultimately make a difference”, he concluded.

According to the publication, increasing the number of farmers and farm workers is also critical for a profitable food system future. “The solution to increasing the number of farmers and farm workers is, first, for all of us to value farming and respect what they do. Who wants to work in a professional sector that’s perceived to be only for people who are uneducated or couldn’t get a job elsewhere? That’s how people think of us. The public narrative needs to shift, so that farming is honored, and farmers are considered public servants on par with other public servants, like veterans. Farmers feed and nourish our communities. A lot more people will want to farm when society sees it as a desirable profession”, said Carlos Valery, Jr., owner of Orinoco Cattle Products and Farms in Delaware County. The research also found that health insurance coverage was a top priority for farmers and farm workers.

According to Yang, one of the teen focus group participants, “if I were to start a farm, money would be a factor since not everyone has the privilege of being a multigeneration farmer. Perhaps there could be grants for aspiring farmers [who didn’t inherit land], to help them through the first few years of working a farm.”

The research also recognized the predominance of white farmers in New York, stemming from the long time discriminatory policies of USDA that continued through the 1970s. “If we want an equitable food system future, we need to invest in opportunities for farmers of color”, said Rangarajan. The publication reiterates the Diversity and Racial Equity Working Group Report1 findings, which called on New York State leaders to invest an initial $10M to execute the Report recommendations. “We need to see more action on the report’s recommendations, which centered Black Indigenous and People of Color (BIPOC) voices. We applaud NYSDAM for helping facilitate those conversations; now greater action is needed”, said Rangarajan.

The Vision 2050 publication also provides case studies on strengthening specific agricultural industries, like beef, dried beans, and apples, which also need support. “Beef production by New York farmers is limited by New York State’s small number of USDA licensed meat processors, and the lack

of any larger scale processor that could process meat at prices that would allow New York farmers to market beef that can compete nationally”, said Jaffe.

One of the Vision 2050 researchers, Ryan Maher, Extension Specialist at the Cornell Small Farms Program with Cornell University, conveyed that dry beans have greater production potential in New York. “New York has a rich legacy in dry bean production and was once a national leader, but it decreased over the years as farmers shifted to corn and soy, yet there continues to be tremendous potential for the crop. As a nutrient-dense, plant-based protein that is high in fiber, their nutritional benefits are clearly cited in US dietary guidelines. They are also a relatively affordable and shelf-stable protein source, making them a staple product in emergency food assistance and food relief programs.”

Based on his research reflected in the publication, “New York State can support farmers in growing dry bean types that are suitable to their scale, equipment, and management systems; build a visible identity for New York grown dry beans to support local and regional market opportunities; and develop strong leadership and strategic partnerships among stakeholders. The future position, or ‘edge’, of New York’s dry bean sector may depend on establishing an identity and pricing structure that puts greater value on NY produced and processed beans.” The publication makes the case for investment in production and processing.

New York is the second leading apple producer in the country, and the state’s apple industry consists of more than 600 commercial-sized growers who provide 8,000 direct rural jobs and 1.3 billion U.S. dollars in economic output.2 According to Park, “we decided to include a sector analysis and case study on apples because they are so important to New York’s agricultural economy, and they are a low-cost supplier of healthy food for consumers.” Apples are the second leading fresh fruit consumed in the U.S. behind bananas.

“Our research found that, to help the industry prosper, we need to address: the diminished labor pool and labor regulations, old and inefficient packaging lines, the impact of climate change on orchards, and technology needs like harvesting mechanization, pesticide and chemical reductions, assessing apple varieties that are in consumer demand, and processing. We need the apple industry to stay strong, and these are areas that need attention so it can thrive into the future”, said Park.

The publication also includes case studies on three New York counties including Otsego, Schoharie, and Delaware Counties, uplifting how the Vision can be implemented locally. “Right now, the approach to supporting food systems development is left with county governments and Regional Economic Development Councils who are well intentioned but can miss the mark. For example, a county or REDC might say, ‘we need a food hub to aggregate and distribute local farm products for markets’. But that can cannibalize a business next door, with existing capacity to expand into

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neighboring regions. So we need to think holistically about what needs to change. So we also set out to consider what thinking holistically and at macro Statewide needs means at the micro-level? The county case studies give recommendations on what counties can do, connected to Statewide needs”, said Schreiner.

Schreiner concluded that “there is no one silver bullet to strengthening the food system so that it can deliver healthy and accessible food to communities, or make farms profitable, or save the planet. Vision 2050 reflects the depth of change that is needed for New York to truly fulfill its potential. But that’s why we need to look holistically, work with our political leaders to develop a State strategic plan, and take ourselves out of industry silos and individual geographies. The most common comment we got from stakeholders about Vision 2050 was, ‘thank goodness someone is finally doing this and we need to continue these conversations!’ Our key recommendation to New York leaders is to sustain these discussions, bringing people together who don’t normally connect and strategize together. It would be great if NYS Agriculture and Markets could convene annual summits to do that”, she said.

For more information on VIsion 2050, visit cadefarms.org/vision-2050.

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The Center for Agricultural Development and Entrepreneurship (CADE) is a 501(c)3, not-for-profit organization whose mission is to increase the number and diversity of successful farm enterprises and related businesses in upstate New York. CADE seeks to build a vibrant food system in which locally owned agricultural businesses thrive and consumers are nourished by healthy, sustainably produced food. www.cadefarms.org

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