

When misfortune strikes, local farmers unite

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The entrance to Natural Roots in Conway with the river and fields in the background. STAFF PHOTO/CAROL LOLLIS

In many ways, farming is an act of faith. Faith that nature will provide for a harvest, and a farmer's faith in themselves to figure out whatever challenges arise. Some years bring bumper crops, others disappointment, but with climate change fueling more volatile and extreme weather, losses are becoming bigger, more common, and harder to predict.

Inflation, supply disruptions, and rising costs to access land don't help. Many farmers are adapting well, yet many also say today's safety nets don't acknowledge how risky farming has become.

After this year's flooding, Massachusetts residents and lawmakers stepped up and set a new precedent for supporting farms in crises. Still, bureaucratic change moves slowly. When farmers need help in the moment, it's often other farmers who rise to the occasion. After catastrophic flooding last July at Natural Roots Farm in Conway, the support of fellow farmers saved their season, and maybe their farm.

Natural Roots is a small, diverse farm on the banks of the South River. They grow veggies, fruit, and herbs, raise chickens for eggs, and farm with horses instead of tractors. Through their CSA (community supported agriculture) program, they feed over 240 families who pay upfront for regular shares of the harvest throughout the season. A small on-site farm store open to the public also carries their produce and eggs, along with meat, bread, dairy and staples from other local farms.

Owner David Fisher always wanted to connect more deeply with nature and people while exploring how the two could exist in harmony.

“I’ve found some of that through farming,” he says, “and I want to share that. To invite people to the farm to connect with the earth and each other, and (through the CSA) to take some degree of responsibility for the farm.”

It’s been a hard but rewarding life. With a few longtime employees and a rotating cast of apprentices, they made it work. They survived serious flooding from Tropical Storm Irene in 2011. But even that didn’t compare to July 10, 2023.

Flooding and a flood of support

For days, persistent rain saturated the soil of the South River watershed. That day’s forecast didn’t call for much more precipitation, but the ground could not absorb it. Instead, it flowed into the river, which built into a raging torrent.

“We didn’t realize how little rain it would take to dramatically flood,” Fisher says. “Before we knew what was happening, machinery was getting washed down the river. Chickens were floating by, and we were catching them and wading to higher ground, arms full of chickens. We just rescued anything we could.”

Thanks to a quick response by farmers and draft horses, most of their chickens and critical equipment were saved. Yet the receding water unveiled severe damage. Roads were washed out. Many plants were completely uprooted by floodwater blasting by. Anything edible left standing was ruled unsafe to sell or eat due to contaminants in the water — a devastating blow so close to harvest time. In all, Fisher estimates they lost over 95% of their crops.

Looking over a revised budget post-flooding, the outlook was grim. They had limited cash on hand and no vegetables to distribute. Anything they planted would not be ready for weeks. No veggies meant no CSA pickups, and a big drop in farm store sales.

“We were five weeks into a 22-week summer CSA,” Fisher says. “Our customers sign up to stick with us through thick and thin, but offering our customers nothing from then on would be extreme, and we weren’t in a position to refund everyone.”

“We weren’t expecting much,” he relates, “but we asked neighboring farms if anyone had extra produce we could glean from their fields to feed our customers. The response was ... incredible.” They had more offers from neighboring farms than they could handle. As news spread, support poured in from farms as far away as Boston and the Hudson Valley.

“The generosity was staggering,” Fisher says. “And it was a little hard too, asking for help. Would we keep asking every week through November? Initially that felt uncomfortable. But over time, we realized many farmers seemed genuinely fulfilled to offer something. It was a positive experience for them, too.”

One of those farmers was Ray Young, owner of Next Barn Over Farm in Hadley, who made produce available to Natural Roots Farm throughout the summer and fall.

Says Young, “Our season was challenging — we were mostly spared from flooding, but wetness led to disease that damaged several of our crops. That said, those that made it through were quite beautiful, and we were grateful to be able to pass on so much to Natural Roots as well as the organizations we typically donate to.”

Adds Fisher, “Max and Kerry Taylor at Brookfield Farm in Amherst also gave us so much. Gideon Porth and his crew at Atlas Farm in South Deerfield offered acres for gleaning. Old Friends Farm in Amherst gave us salad mix. Stone Soup Farm in Amherst, Riverland Farm and Kitchen Garden Farm in Sunderland, and Red Fire Farm in Montague and Granby have all helped us out, and so many others, too.”

The culture of farmers helping farmers is already strong in western Massachusetts. For example, some farmers share specialized equipment so neighboring farms don’t need to buy their own. Other farms share or lease land to each other in different configurations each season. Most are willing to share advice and techniques to help their neighbors succeed.

Farms in our region also benefit from longstanding community support. Those connections are another resource farmers can tap when things get tough. In Natural Roots’ case, press coverage and strong ties to their customers and community helped them fundraise almost \$92,000 to rebuild.

“People have said and their actions have clearly shown that they want this farm to exist,” Fisher says. “But even with all this support, it’s still really hard to make it work.”

A piece of the puzzle

While their experience makes for a heartwarming story, as Fisher implies it’s not the whole solution. The support system woven by relationships between farmers and community members isn’t foolproof. There are holes, not everyone is connected equally, and there are limits to the kinds of help social networks and generosity can provide.

After 26 years of farming in Conway, Fisher is well networked among his peers. “But when I went to the event CISA (Community Involved in Sustaining Agriculture) put on for farmers to talk about disaster relief,” he says, “I looked out and thought, I don’t know most of these people.”

Bringing together farmers and supporting groups to network and collaborate is one way CISA helps strengthen the local farm support system. Other organizations help farmers market products together or advocate collectively for policy change. At a very grassroots level, many local farmers connect with their peers through a farmers-only email listserv — the one Natural Roots used to coordinate gleaning and food donations.

These networking opportunities are helpful, but also limited by technological barriers and whether everyone feels welcome. For example, a seventh-generation dairy farmer might be more comfortable speaking their mind in a group than a recently resettled refugee. Both may have difficulty with listservs and video calls.

A farm's business model also impacts its access to these relationship-based safety nets. "We are extremely privileged that our community feels so connected to us through our CSA," Fisher says. "Farms that sell wholesale and don't talk directly to customers are much more alone when they struggle. Not because they aren't worthy, they just operate differently."

The big picture

Neighborliness only goes so far, especially when extreme weather and other impacts of climate are increasing and becoming more widespread. Says Next Barn Over farmer Ray Young, "I'm a firm believer in mutual aid, but our local capacity is limited, especially since extreme weather tends to affect farms across entire regions. As we look forward facing climate change, we will need broader safety nets than our local networks."

When individual action can't support basic needs — like reliable access to food — that's often when collective action and governments step in to uphold the public good. In Massachusetts, this is already starting to happen.

Last summer, local officials heard farmers' need for grants to keep businesses afloat, not just loans options that would put them further into debt. Within weeks, the Natural Disaster Recovery Program for Agriculture was written into the state's supplemental budget, making \$20 million available to cover crop losses from both flooding and the freezes that decimated peaches in February and berries and early veggies in May.

Among those leading the charge were local politicians, Rep. Natalie Blais and Sen. Jo Comerford.

In contrast to Massachusetts' quick response, efforts to strengthen federal support programs are moving slowly. Most of these are funded by the Farm Bill, a sprawling piece of legislation typically revised and renewed by Congress every five years. Amid congressional disarray, a new bill was not finished on schedule this fall.

Instead, most 2018 Farm Bill programs were extended through September 2024 — a win for program continuity, but a missed opportunity to address new needs exposed by worsening climate change, COVID, and other recent events.

Advocates like the National Sustainable Agriculture Coalition, which represents mostly smaller and more diversified farms like those common in Massachusetts, are already lobbying for changes to the new bill. One change the coalition proposes is "fixing a flawed farm safety net and restoring fair competition" by reforming crop insurance programs to work better for new and smaller farms, not just large farms growing commodity crops. Other suggestions emphasize better support for farmers adapting growing practices for a changing climate.

Farming amid climate change and economic uncertainty is a tricky puzzle. At times, Fisher has felt quite alone trying to solve it.

“I used to think it was just me struggling, and I just needed to get smarter or work harder,” he says. “But I’m realizing that farmers are struggling all over the place. We’re facing some real challenges.”

While society organizes around big-picture solutions, local farmers have each other’s backs. By shopping locally, donating to relief funds, or with other acts of goodwill, the local community shows they stand beside them.

To learn more about supporting the local food system as it adapts to climate change, visit buylocalfood.org/climateaction.

Jacob Nelson is communications coordinator for CISA (Community Involved in Sustaining Agriculture). As a frontline supporter of local food and farms in western Massachusetts, CISA helps farmers get the help and funding they need to thrive, even amid challenges like climate change. Learn more at buylocalfood.org.



Rachel Foley and Isadora Harper, apprentices at Natural Roots Farm in Conway, harvest lettuce, arugula and other greens in October at Hart Farm, which donated crops to Natural Roots for CSA distribution after July flooding ruined Natural Roots' crops. STAFF PHOTO/CAROL LOLLIS



A bridge that crosses over the North River, which flooded the adjacent fields at Natural Roots in Conway in July. STAFF PHOTO/CAROL LOLLIS



Tim McVaugh of Deerfield and his son Liam, 4, pick up produce from the Natural Roots CSA on Saturday in Conway. STAFF PHOTO/DAN LITTLE



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