Tioga County
Our Farms; Our Stories

The Challenge
Momentum is building for agriculture in Tioga County. After years of corporate downsizing and the loss of manufacturing, residents of the county understand that agriculture holds at least part of the key to economic recovery and sustained growth. Interest in local agriculture is growing steadily and initiatives like the local foods in the schools hold great promise for our farmers. The Southern Tier region was chosen as a recipient of $500M in grants as part of the state’s Upstate Revitalization Initiative, and investment in agriculture — from improving access to markets and food processing facilities, to research in promising new agricultural ventures such as controlled environment agriculture — was a key part of the winning proposal. Even closer to home, the Tioga County legislature recently increased funding to support an agriculture development resource educator who will focus solely on helping county farmers establish and build on their farming ventures. The increase in funding is to implement the newly adopted Agriculture and Farmland Protection Plan for the county.

The data we have on the size and breadth of agriculture in Tioga County comes from the 2012 Agriculture Census. We know that we have 536 farms that completed the census, and that the largest sector of agriculture is in dairy and that the total agricultural market value of products in the county tops $36M. What we do not know much about are the smaller producers: the farmers who grow vegetables for market, the folks who have a small herd of beef cattle in their pasture, the very small-scale homestead farmers who augment their off-farm incomes with sales from their farm.

We at CCE Tioga feel that the larger dairy farms are well served by our local extension dairy team, but we know that the low price for milk has severely challenged dairy farmers to remain solvent — and some are even contemplating getting out of farming. This project would help give voice to the struggles of our county’s dairy farmers.

We at CCE Tioga would also like to identify and learn more about small scale, diversified farms and beginning farmers. We know little about their lives — why they chose to farm; how they balance farm chores, family life, and work; what their needs are and why they do what they do. The more we know about our farms, our farmers, and their stories, the more we at CCE Tioga can tailor programs to meet their needs.

The Response
Our Farms; Our Stories was conceived of to learn more about our county farms and farmers. Rather than a strict census of farms, production levels, and the like, we hope to gather a greater understanding of the folks who produce our food and fiber in Tioga County.

We envision a team of three Cornell University students:
- an agriculture/agronomy student who will be adept at assessing the physical resources of each farm as well as the farmers’ production methods;
- a human ecology/sociology student who is familiar with rural communities and rural development; and
• a communication/labor relations student who has experience in compiling data and information into engaging and informative presentations.

The student team will work with the agriculture and horticulture educators at CCE Tioga and the educators will be the primary points of contact for the team. The project will span eight weeks over the summer, tentatively from June through the end of July.

The Plan
The first week, the students will review relevant agriculture data for the county and get acquainted with CCE staff. They will visit the offices of Tioga County Soil and Water Conservation Service, Tioga County Economic Development and Planning, and contact staff on the CCE regional dairy team to begin building an overview of farms and farmers for the county. From this initial data review, they will construct a matrix of different farms and production methods so that as they decide who to visit and interview that they encompass the range of farming in the county. For example, they will want to visit a commercial dairy farm, an organic dairy farm, a conventional vegetable production farm, a Community Supported Agriculture farm, and a small-scale homestead farm, to name just a few. The team will also learn about the Community Capitals Framework, which is an approach to analyze how communities work. The team will devise a series of questions that will delve into several of these “capitals” (Flora and Flora, 2008):

• Natural Capital: what are the physical resources (soil, infrastructure, equipment, labor) available to the farmer
• Cultural Capital: how the farmer sees him or herself and how they interact with the greater community
• Human Capital: how did they become farmers, learn about farming, improve on their production practices, and do they hire off-farm employees
• Social Capital: what groups or organizations the farmer relies on to support their farming; how CCE can best support farmers with technical or other educational support
• Political Capital: how they work to influence farming regulations and land use zoning
• Financial Capital: farming as a profit-making venture; future capital investments; the need for an off-farm income

For six weeks, they will visit at least two farms per day, spending about an hour with each farmer, getting a tour of their farm and hearing and recording some of the farmers’ stories. The final week of the team’s engagement will be to produce a written document of their findings as well as a multi-media presentation that illuminates farming in Tioga County. The presentation will be shown to leaders of the Tioga County — legislators, Farm Bureau members, the board of Tioga County Agriculture Resource Group, Economic Development and Planning, and Tioga County Tourism.

In May of 2015, the Tioga County Legislature adopted the Agriculture and Farmland Protection Plan, which outlines a series of goals, strategies and recommended actions to strengthen and enhance agriculture in Tioga County. Our Farms; Our Stories directly aids the implementation of the plan’s goals by providing insight into the needs of the county’s farmers. Specifically, this project will help with three goals:
• support new and beginning farmers in the agriculture sector
• develop and support agriculture education and technical assistance programming and to provide technical assistance
• improve communications between farmers, rural landowners, and public agencies

The more we at CCE Tioga know about our farms, our farmers and their needs, the better we can tailor educational programming. The more our community leaders understand about the struggles of farmers, the better able they are to address their needs. Our Farms; Our Stories will also enrich the students’ understanding of rural life and the struggles and triumphs of small-scale farming. They will end the summer with a greater appreciation of the people who work daily at producing our food and fiber and of our local food system.

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