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Franklin County: *Agriculture as a “Sleeping Giant”*

by Tanya Swain

Some day skiers who visit Saddleback Mountain may be able to enjoy a pizza with flour from grain grown along the Sandy River, tomatoes and peppers from Franklin County greenhouses, cheese from one of the area’s creameries, and sausage produced from pigs raised in the foothills. That’s the dream of the Franklin County Ag Task Force, an ad hoc group of more than 25 farmers, municipal officials, business leaders, planners, and economic developers formed in April 2008. Facilitated by the Western Mountains Alliance (www.westernmountainsalliance.org), a community-development organization, the Franklin County Ag Task Force envisions a future for its region that includes a strong local agriculture sector with profitable farms of all sizes. The group is working towards this goal one project at a time.

Franklin County sits within Maine’s central-western region, bordering Canada on the north and Oxford and Somerset counties to the west and east. Within the community’s living memory are stories of successful corn shops and poultry operations. Farther back, ranchers had weekly cattle drives to Boston markets and herds of sheep grazed treeless hillsides in the Rangeley region. Many of the farmsteads that supported agriculture in the county still exist, and today new ones are being developed. Between 2002 and 2007, the county enjoyed a 41 percent increase in the value of farm products produced according to the 2007 U.S. Census of Agriculture.

While many activities both in and outside the county are contributing to these changes, the Ag Task Force is helping to focus attention on the significance of agriculture to the economy, health and quality of life. In 2009, the group released *The Changing Face of Agriculture in Franklin County* (found on their web site), which included stories on a dozen farms and recommendations for supporting the sector. The report identified familiar issues—limited storage, processing and distribution capacity—as barriers to a more vibrant local agriculture sector.

Over the last year, the Ag Task Force has supported the redevelopment of the West Farmington Grange to increase storage and commercial kitchen space in the county. The grange hopes to eventually serve as a distribution center for small farms and currently houses a weekly farmers’ market and pick-up site for the Western Maine Market, one of the first online farmers’ markets operating in the state. To address the challenges of an aging workforce, the Ag Task Force assisted the Foster Technology Center at the Mt. Blue Regional School District to pilot an agriculture tech program in 2010 that provides students with internship opportunities at area farms and training in relevant science and business courses.

Following the 2008 meeting that prompted the Task Force’s formation, long-time farmer and planning board member Herbert “Bussie” York wrote in a guest newspaper column: “I see agriculture as a sleeping giant. A giant who could—with planning—be one of the primary forces driving the county’s economic future.”

While York and other farmers in the area recognize the importance to the sector of community and business support, the Ag Task Force owes its success in part to the caliber, creativity, and leadership of the farmers themselves. York started the Sandy River Corn MAiZE two years ago and has attracted more than 10,000 visitors to the area. Other task-force members include the owners of King & I Angus, who employ state-of-the-art breeding technology to produce top-quality products and Marble Family Farms, which has greenhouse greens available in the community at least nine months of the year. 🐾