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Hurd Farm LLC: Resilience through Redefined Production

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SUSTAINABILITY briefing

University of New Hampshire
The Sustainability Institute

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Hurd Farm is a 160-acre property in Hampton, NH. About 150 acres are under conservation easement

The Farmers

The Hurd family has owned and operated the farm since 1923. Steve Hurd has been farming his entire life, and inherited the property from his parents.

Production

Hurd Farm was originally a dairy operation, but in 2009 it shifted production to meat and poultry. This year they have about 60 heritage breed pigs, 6 beef cattle, 150 chickens (mainly laying hens), and 350 turkeys.

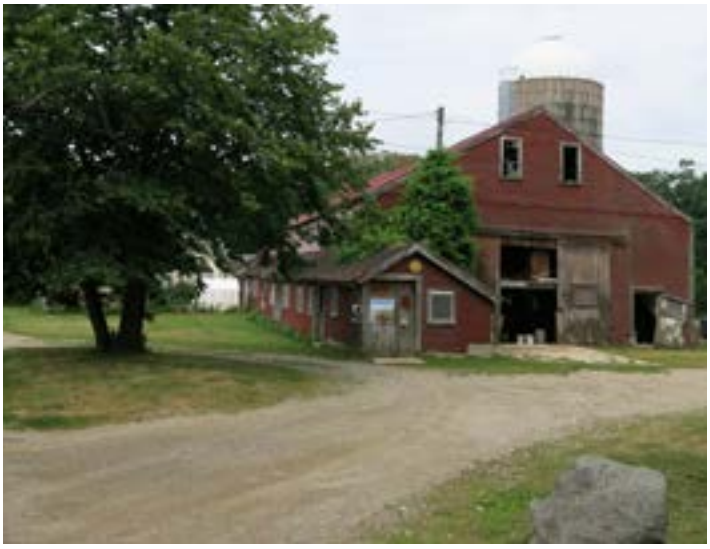
The Hurd family sells at several farmers markets, and runs a shop out of the house. They currently have 23 Community Supported Agriculture shares. Though the farm has capacity for more shares, fewer people signed up this year than in previous years. The turkeys are sold locally for Thanksgiving.

Practices

The cows are all grass-fed. The pigs get commercial grain (usually from BlueSeal), and occasionally go on pasture. The poultry are all free range

Climate Impacts Seen

The way Steve sees it, weather in New Hampshire has always been erratic and challenging. As a lifelong farmer, he is used to working with variable weather conditions. This is just one of the many risks and challenges that farmers manage daily.



Steve and his family are the third generation to live and work on the farm

One impact that Steve does note in the summer is more heat stress with the chickens. “When they get hot, they just don’t grow. They don’t eat.” Poultry seem to be more susceptible to heat stress than other livestock. Several studies have shown that chickens under heat stress exhibit reduced feed intake. Chronic heat stress causes lower body weight, which is problematic for broiler hens, and means more feeding costs for farmers. Layer hens show decreased production and diminished egg quality.[1]

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Steve also notices that prices of animal feed have gone up. While it is impossible to attribute this solely to changes in climate, it has been predicted that the price and availability of animal feed will fluctuate more as an indirect effect of climate change.[2] This is because climate related forces such as drought, flood, pests, and changes in growing season will affect the production of crops used as feed.[2] As Steve already operates with a small profit margin, this price increase makes it more difficult to cover costs of production. However, he is hopeful that prices will soon go down; there have been reports that the soy and corn crops are better than were expected for 2014.

Business Challenges

The main difficulties that Steve faces relate to the business and economics of making farming a viable livelihood. Covering costs is his biggest challenge. "With dairy, it was mostly manual labor. Here it's a mix." The Hurds work with a business development advisor at a local bank, but Steve says that financial constraints remain one of his biggest hurdles. He would like to invest in some equipment and repairs to improve his infrastructure, but without the milking cows as collateral, it is difficult for Steve to obtain loans.

The Hurds breed and raise their pigs on the farm.

Due to the challenges of making farming a viable business, many in the sector struggle to have personal savings and maintain an economic safety net. Health insurance in particular is a big issue for Steve and other farmers. Steve and his wife have always had health insurance, but used to pay $2,000 a month; an almost unmanageable cost for a small family business. They now pay significantly less with ObamaCare, but note that high health insurance costs remain a major problem for many farmers.

Response

Steve says that the heat stress is difficult for family farms like his to manage. "A commercial operation can have air flow; they'll have fans blowing on the chickens, and control the climate." The Hurds don't have the infrastructure to do that, so there isn't much they can do. As for finances? "Well, you just have to watch every penny." The Hurd family also placed almost the entire farm under conservation easement 10 years ago in order to protect it from being built on or split up. They didn't want to see the land developed, and now it is protected from pressures to do so.

In the last decade, New England has lost almost a third of its dairy farms due to rising production costs and low milk prices.[5] Rather than go out of business, Hurd Farm converted production to livestock. Now they are one of the bigger pork producers in the state of New Hampshire, being among only five other farms that raise pigs at a similar scale.[6] With 160 acres, Hurd Farm joins over two hundred New Hampshire farms of a similar size.[6]

The chickens on the farm are free range. This makes it challenging to control the climate and help them cool off on hot summer days.

Recommendations

"Be flexible," says Steve. "Always be willing to try new things. You can't just do the same thing you did last year." The Hurds are certainly an example of flexible adaptation to challenges. In 2009 Steve had to give up the dairy business because of the extreme drop in milk prices. "I was losing $1,000 a week milking cows," says Steve. Dairy farms are unique in that it is difficult to quickly lower production in response to changes in price; dairy cows need to be milked every day. In 2009, on-farm milk prices plummeted, while animal feed and operation costs were high, forcing many dairies out of business.[4] Steve managed to keep the farm by switching to livestock, where there are less labor costs to cover. He misses the dairy operation though. "It was between save the cows or save the farm." With his willingness and ability to adapt the business, Steve has been able to keep farming.

Diversifying farm income also helps in making a more viable business. Even before he switched to meat and poultry, Steve began diversifying with compost production as an additional source of income. He notes that this part of New Hampshire is a good market for compost. He has considered adding a corn maze as well, which has proven very profitable for many similar farms. The main drawback to a corn maze is the influx of tourists it would bring to the property, which could disrupt the rest of the operation.

Competition from other family farms is increasing, but despite the economic challenges, the Hurd farm has proven to be very resilient and managed to survive. "I love what I do," says Steve. "It's not a hobby for me. I need to make a living out of it."

Resources:

• National Conservation Easement Database: http://conservationeasement.us/about/resources

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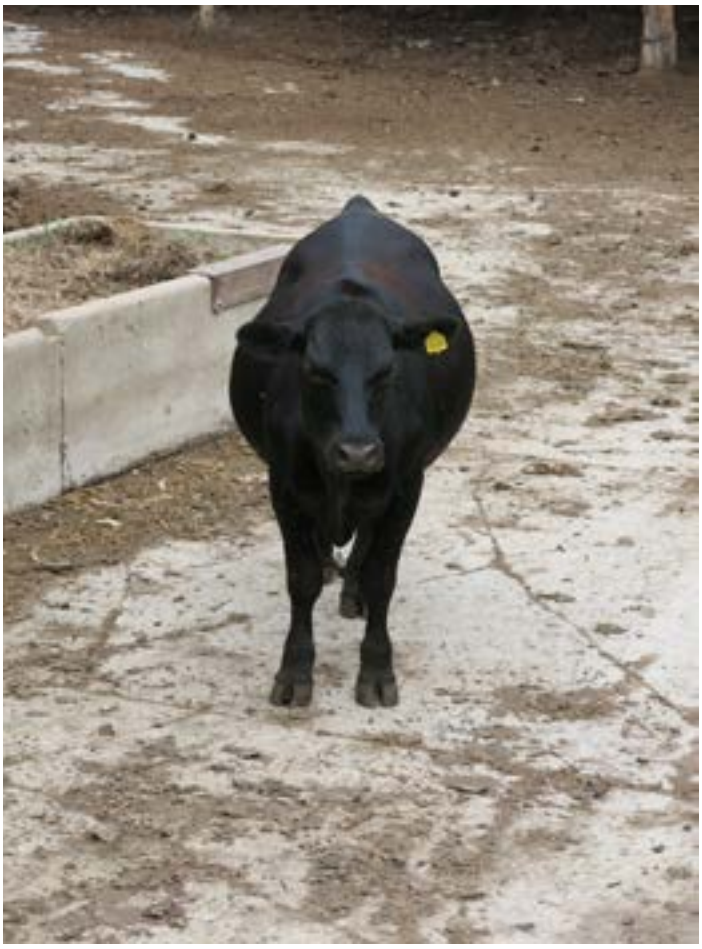

Steve uses rotational grazing with the cattle, which helps maintain a mix of forage in the pastures.

Climate Change and the New England Food System Case Study Series

This case study was researched and written by UNHSI's 2014 Thomas W. Haas Climate Fellow, Ruby Woodside. Ruby's fellowship focused on documenting and communicating climate impacts and adaptation strategies for New England farmers and fishermen. Ruby is currently working on a Masters of Environmental Science and Policy as well as an MBA in Sustainability at Clark University. The fellowship is based at the UNH Sustainability Institute, and hosted in collaboration with Food Solutions New England (FSNE). FSNE is a regional, collaborative network organized around a single goal: to transform the New England food system into a resilient driver of healthy food, sustainable farming and fishing, and thriving communities. Learn more at www.foodsolutionsne.org.

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