

North Berkshire Food Bank Farm Project

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“It is with gratitude and humility that we acknowledge that we are learning, speaking and gathering on the ancestral homelands of the Mohican people, who are the indigenous peoples of this land. Despite tremendous hardship in being forced from here, today their community resides in Wisconsin and is known as the Stockbridge-Munsee Community. We pay honor and respect to their ancestors past and present as we commit to building a more inclusive and equitable space for all.” (Land acknowledgement from the Stockbridge-Munsee Community Band of Mohican Indians)

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Context

Food Insecurity in the Berkshires

We conducted our research in the midst of the coronavirus pandemic, which has magnified several existing challenges in the Berkshire region of Massachusetts that our project seeks to address. One of the most prominent of these challenges is food insecurity, defined as the inability to consistently access enough food. In an effort to identify the scale and causes of food insecurity in the Berkshires, the Berkshire County Community Food Assessment was conducted to accomplish this research and to outline policies and strategies to decrease barriers to accessing local, healthy food. As of its publication in 2019, the Community Food Assessment report found that 12% of Berkshire county residents (about 16,000 people out of 128,563 in total) experienced food insecurity.¹ While the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) provided some food relief by giving money to people who met its requirements, an estimated 32% of Berkshire county residents were eligible for, but not receiving, SNAP benefits, and about 29% of the food-insecure population in Berkshire county were above its threshold and so had to rely on emergency food sites.² Emergency food distribution sites therefore play a critical role in meeting nutritional needs for food insecure residents in the Berkshires.

The Food Bank of Western Massachusetts (FBWM) is a nonprofit that serves four counties in Western Massachusetts, including Berkshire county. The FBWM receives food from federal relief programs, various local donors, and a couple food bank farms, and then distributes the food through a large network of emergency and non-emergency food sites including food pantries, hot meal sites, shelters, and mobile food banks. In the 2019 fiscal year, the FBWM

¹ Ovitsky, Morgan and Amanda Chilson. *Berkshire County Community Food Assessment*.

² Ovitsky, Morgan and Amanda Chilson. *Berkshire County Community Food Assessment*.

distributed 2.5 million pounds of food (about 2 million meals), serving 37,729 individuals via 40 different partner agencies in Berkshire county alone.³

The coronavirus pandemic and resulting economic upheaval has caused huge increases in food insecurity nationwide, and the effects are readily visible in Berkshire county. The FBWM reports a 52% increase in food insecure individuals in the county, and thousands of people are visiting food access sites for the first time.⁴ With the trajectory of the pandemic unknown, and ability of the economy to fully recover soon uncertain, it is more important than ever that Berkshire county's food access network is as robust as possible. The FBWM is interested in meeting this increased demand by expanding their sources of local produce. In doing so they would be supporting local farmers, encouraging economic development in the region, decreasing the carbon footprint from transporting food, and creating a stronger food network in the North Berkshires.

Loss of Berkshire Farmland

According to the 2017 Massachusetts Agricultural Census, the number of farms in Berkshire county decreased from 525 in 2012 to 475 in 2017, corresponding to a 3,000-acre loss of farmland.⁵ Over the same time period, the per-acre average value of farmland in the region increased from \$7,024 to \$7,644. Small farms—which make up a majority of the farms in the Berkshires, with 51% of farms in 2017 under 50 acres—are particularly at risk of fragmentation and development. A similar trend in loss of farmland is seen across New England. The 2018 *Farms Under Threat: A New England Perspective* special report found that between 2001 and

³ *Berkshire County Impact*.

⁴ *Food Insecurity Climbing in Western Massachusetts*.

⁵ Fitzsimmons, J. *Massachusetts Agricultural Census Data, 2017*.

2016, 105,500 acres of farmland in New England were either irrevocably lost to development (37,300 acres) or severely impacted by the expansion of low-density residential development (68,200 acres).⁶ With development pressures continually increasing, and only 12.5% of farmland in New England conserved, the threat to existing farmland in the region is severe.⁷

Coupled with the threat to farmland is the challenge that current farmers face in making a living from agriculture. As it becomes increasingly difficult for farmers to sustain their operations from produce or livestock production alone, many farmers have moved towards economic diversification, incorporating additional facets such as agritourism into their business models in order to remain economically viable.⁸ Despite these obstacles, there remains hope for the farmland and farmers of New England. A report published in 2014 titled *A New England Food Vision* outlines the feasibility of achieving 50% local production of all New England food by 2060, a vision which is rooted in the vitality and potential of New England farms.⁹ Creative models for addressing multiple farmland- and food-related challenges simultaneously, such as the food bank farm model that will be discussed in the report that follows, have begun to emerge in this context of threatened New England farmland.

Project Purpose and Methods

The goal of our project is to connect North Berkshire food sources with those who are food insecure. In particular, we explore the possibility of creating a food bank farm in the North Berkshires, which would produce vegetables specifically for the Food Bank of Western

⁶ Pottern and Barley. *Farms Under Threat*.

⁷ Pottern and Barley. *Farms Under Threat*.

⁸ Pottern and Barley. *Farms Under Threat*.

⁹ Anderson et al. *A New England Food Vision*.

Massachusetts (FBWM) and its associated emergency food access centers in North Berkshire communities. By expanding North Berkshire vegetable production and tying it directly to emergency food relief efforts, the project aims to create a cycle of fresh food access that provides community members with healthy food resources while supporting farmers and the local farm economy. The FBWM, located in Hatfield, MA, is a key resource and stakeholder in this project, and existing food bank farms that partner with the FBWM are helpful models.

This report intends to serve as a feasibility study for the creation of a North Berkshire food bank farm, demonstrating how this could be achieved in an economically, environmentally, and socially sustainable way. In addition to assessing the feasibility of a North Berkshire food bank farm, this report may also serve to guide other food banks in establishing their own food bank farms. To conduct our research, we completed a series of interviews with knowledgeable individuals in the Western Massachusetts region. This included the director of the FBWM, individuals involved in land conservation and food production in the North Berkshires, land owners, and farmers. The interviews were semi-structured, and they varied in length and content depending on the individual. Most interviews were conducted over Zoom or the phone, but we were able to make a few site visits in order to see the land parcels firsthand and to meet some of the land owners, after we gained permission to do so in a COVID-safe manner from the Williams College administration. These interviews informed the two major components of our research: studying the existing food bank farm model and identifying potential properties for a North Berkshire food bank farm. For the latter, we eventually narrowed down our list of possible properties to the four most promising parcels. Finally, we learned about the key details necessary to establish a successful arrangement with a future food bank farmer, and we identified databases and listservs for new farmers on which a food bank farmer position could be advertised.

Overview of Completed Work

Clients & Interviews

Our clients are Amanda Chilson, who is the Health and Wellness Coordinator at the Northern Berkshire Community Coalition, and Megan Bantle, who owns Full Well Farm. Over the course of our project, we had 6 client meetings and interviewed 18 people:

Name	Position/organization	Type of contact	Date(s)
David McGowan	<i>Executive Director</i> Williamstown Rural Lands Foundation	Zoom call	October 16, 2020
Andrew Morehouse	<i>Executive Director</i> Food Bank of Western Massachusetts	Class presentation Zoom call Follow-up emails	October 15, 2020 October 20, 2020 October 17, 2020 October 25, 2020 November 12, 2020
Jenny Hansell Mackenzie Greer Adam Galambos	<i>President</i> <i>Director of Public Programs</i> <i>Conservation Associate</i> Berkshire Natural Resources Council	Zoom call Follow-up emails	October 22, 2020 November 13, 2020
Margaret Moulton	<i>Executive Director</i> Berkshire Grown	Zoom call	October 27, 2020
Owner C	<i>Property owner</i>	Phone call In-person visit Follow-up emails	October 29, 2020 November 8, 2020 November 15, 2020
Brian Cole	<i>Farmer</i> Big Foot Farm	Zoom call	November 2, 2020
Keegan Schelling	<i>General Manager</i> Green River Farm	Zoom call	November 3, 2020
Dan Tighe	<i>Soil Conservationist</i> Natural Resources Conservation Service	Zoom call	November 3, 2020

Owner B	<i>Property owner</i>	In-person visit	November 6, 2020
Don Zasada	<i>Farmer</i> Caretaker Farm	Zoom call Follow-up emails	November 6, 2020 November 19, 2020
Brian Young	<i>Farmer</i> Reynolds Property	Phone call	November 6, 2020
Ben Perrault	<i>Farmer</i> Mountain View Farm CSA	Phone call	November 16, 2020
Gideon Porth	<i>Farmer</i> Atlas Farm	Phone call	November 17, 2020
Joe Czajkowski	<i>Farmer</i> Lakeside Organic of Hadley LLC	Phone call	November 17, 2020
Michael Docter	<i>Farmer</i> Winter Moon Farm	Zoom call	November 30, 2020
Sharon Wyrrick	<i>Farmer</i> Many Forks Farm LLC	Zoom call	December 1, 2020

Case Studies

Our case studies consist of the two food bank farms in Hadley, MA and the three farmers who farm them. The first food bank farm was purchased by the FBWM in 1992, and is 59 acres, 34 of which are tillable. For the past seven years the FBWM has partnered with Ben Perrault at Mountain View Farm CSA, who farms the land. The second food bank farm was purchased by the FBWM in 2020. It is 142 acres, with 41 tillable acres. Roughly half of the acres are farmed by Joe Czajkowski of Lakeside Organic of Hadley LLC, and the other half are farmed by Gideon Porth of Atlas Farm. We studied the food bank farm model from the perspective of the FBWM through an interview and email correspondences with Director Andrew Morehouse,¹⁰ and we

¹⁰ Morehouse, Class Presentation Oct. 15, Emails Oct. 17 & 25, Zoom call Oct. 20

also gained insight into the farmers’ perspectives on the model via phone interviews with Ben Perrault,¹¹ Joe Czajkowski,¹² and Gideon Porth.¹³

Findings

The Food Bank Farm Model

The foundational principle for the FBWM food bank farm model is “produce in lieu of cash rent.” The FBWM owns the farmland, and the farmers who cultivate the land allocate a percentage of their annual produce yield, equivalent to the value of cash rent, to the FBWM. It is the success of this model in particular that has motivated the FBWM to seek property in the North Berkshires on which to establish a third food bank farm. The full ownership of the properties by the FBWM is a critical component of this model. By committing to the purchase of the land, the FBWM is making a long-term investment into the land and the farm. This helps to ensure the longevity of the food bank farm, encourages the FBWM to make improvements to the land, and gives the food bank farmer the assurance that the land is unlikely to change hands. Furthermore, the ownership of the farmland by a nonprofit organization such as the FBWM keeps property taxes minimal and insurance costs low.

The economic structure of the food bank farm model has two main components: the acquisition and ownership of the farmland, and the annual contract with the farmers. While the land for the first food bank farm was purchased outright by the FBWM, the more expensive property for the second food bank farm was acquired through several partnerships.¹⁴ This

¹¹ Perrault, Phone Call Nov. 16

¹² Czajkowski, Phone Call Nov. 17

¹³ Porth, Phone Call Nov. 17

¹⁴ “Food Bank Farm”

property was initially purchased by the Kestrel Land Trust (with a bridge loan from The Conservation Fund), which held the property until the FBWM could raise sufficient funds to purchase it. The municipality of Hadley and the Massachusetts Department of Agricultural Resources (MDAR) helped secure an Agricultural Preservation Restriction (APR), valued at \$240,000, for the property. The ability of the FBWM to purchase the property depended heavily on foundations and individual donors; the concept of a food bank farm is viewed favorably by donors as a positive social investment, and it tends to be more motivating to donors to support a one-time purchase than a yearly farm lease, maintenance and operation expenses. For example, the Henry P. Kendall Foundation and the 1772 Foundation contributed to the purchase of the second food bank farm, as did anonymous local donors.

The three farmers with which the FBWM partners on the food bank farms had well-established operations in the Pioneer Valley before they began to cultivate the food bank farm land. The total acreage farmed by each of these farmers, although small relative to US industrial organic agriculture, is large-scale compared to the very small farms in the Berkshires. Ben Perrault of Mountain View Farm CSA owns 17 acres, leases over 60 acres, and now farms an additional 34 acres on the first food bank farm. Gideon Porth of Atlas Farm cultivates 100 acres, 15 of which are part of the second food bank farm. Joe Czajkowski of Lakeside Organic farms 440 acres in total, 20 of which are on the second food bank farm. Because of the size of their respective organic produce operations, these farmers have equipment for high volume production that they can easily transport from their preexisting properties to the nearby food bank farm properties for the necessary cultivation and harvesting. Therefore, the proximity of the food bank farm properties to the pre-established farms negates the need for equipment- or produce-storage

infrastructure on the food bank farm properties. The farmers also hire upwards of 20 immigrant or migrant employees for the harvest season.

The prevailing rent of agricultural land in the Pioneer Valley is about \$300-\$400 per acre per year. Based on this figure, the fraction of produce that the farmers are contracted to allocate to the food bank annually (an amount such that the value of the produce equals the value of cash rent) ranges from 1 to 12 percent of the harvest from their entire respective farming operations. Mountain View Farm grows about 117,000 pounds of vegetables for the FBWM annually (12% of Mountain View's total harvest), and donates an additional 200,000 pounds; Atlas Farm allocated 13,500 pounds to the FBWM in its first year of the partnership (>1% of Atlas Farm's total harvest); and Lakeside Organic allocated 12,800 pounds of produce (5% of Lakeside Organic's total harvest) and donated an additional quantity in its first year of the partnership. A sample of the produce in lieu of cash rent calculations used to determine these poundages is included in the Appendix. Other associated costs such as storage of the food bank crops, washing, and transportation to the food bank warehouse are factored into the true rent calculation, but do not appear in our sample calculation due to the case-dependent nature of these expenses. Because the fraction of the harvest allocated to the FBWM is a small percent of the total annual yield, there have not yet been any issues related to a poor harvest year, but if this occurred, there is an agreement in place requiring the farmers to make up for the insufficient production the following year.

After the allocation of the appropriate amount of produce to the FBWM, the remaining harvest is the farmer's private share, and the farmers each have stable customer bases for this produce. Mountain View Farm is a CSA program with a long-standing community of members who purchase the private share of the produce. Ben Perrault explained that his farm's partnership

with the FBWM is rooted in the shared mission of making organic produce affordable and accessible, rather than economic motivation. Atlas Farm sells about 30% of its private share of produce at retail prices, with the other 70% sold wholesale to processors, produce distributors, and grocery stores such as Whole Foods. Lakeside Organics sells 50% of its private share to Trader Joes, and the other 50% is sold to Springfield Public School district (this arrangement with the schools was stipulated by one of the donors who made the purchase of the second food bank farmland possible). Much of Lakeside Organic's produce sales include value-added processing and slicing.

The existing food bank farm model accounts for the selection, preparation, and transportation of the produce grown for the FBWM. Each year, the farmers and the FBWM come to an agreement about the crops that will be grown for the food bank. This includes a wide range of produce, including greens, broccoli, kale, beets, green beans, peppers, yellow squash in the spring and summer, to butternut, potatoes, onions, carrots, cabbage, and apples in the fall. As part of the contract, the food bank farm farmers temporarily store food bank produce (usually only for a few days), and then transport it to the FBWM Pioneer Valley warehouse in Hatfield. Some of the farmers wash the produce before delivery to the food bank; however, processing is usually minimal in order to maintain the shelf-life of the vegetables. The main improvements needed for the existing farms are investments in field irrigation and drainage, which would enable higher produce yields. The FBWM is currently seeking grant funding for these infrastructure projects.

In our interviews with Ben Perrault, Gideon Porth, and Joe Czajkowski, the farmers each expressed general satisfaction with the current food bank farm model. The particular finances work out differently in each farmer's case, due to the respective sizes of their operations and

fraction of total harvest allocated to the FBWM annually; for some of the farmers, the contracts with the FBWM are a definitive advantage economically, while for others the arrangement is not necessarily an economic advantage but fits well with the values of their farm. An important and continually-evolving component of the model is the length of the lease from the FBWM, which the farmers unanimously indicated should be upwards of 3-5 years to ensure stability for the farmer. This said, the permanency of each of the farmer's independent operations in the Pioneer Valley lend a significant degree of stability to the model as it currently exists.

Criteria for Feasible Food Bank Farm Property

To begin searching for and identifying potential food bank farm properties in the North Berkshires, we created a list of criteria that we could use to assess and compare them. These criteria are:

Number of tillable acres: The FBWM ideally would like to establish a food bank farm with a minimum of 20-25 acres of tillable land.¹⁵ Using the National Resource Conservation Service's (NRCS) Web Soil Survey mapping tool, we mapped each parcel to determine the number of tillable acres within the total acreage of a given property.¹⁶ Soils classified as "prime farmland" or "farmland of statewide importance" were considered tillable acres, as further described in the next section.

Soil quality: The NRCS maps are labeled with soil codes that correspond to specific soil types, rockiness, and slope. Some soil classes are deemed "prime farmland"; for the properties in our analysis, these include Armenia silt loam with 3-8% slope (500B), Pittsfield loam with 3-8% slope (510B), Stockbridge gravelly silt loam with 3-8% slope (515B). Prime farmland soils are

¹⁵ Morehouse, Zoom call Oct. 20.

¹⁶ Soil Survey Staff. *Web Soil Survey*.

very conducive to vegetable farming. A slightly lower-quality class of soils is deemed “soils of statewide importance”; these include Armenia silt loam with 8-15% slope (500C), Pittsfield loam with 8-15% slope (510C), and Fullam-Lanesboro association, rolling, very stony (930 C). The soils of statewide importance may be feasible for vegetable farming, but the soil composition or increased slope of the terrain make these soils less ideal than the prime farmland soils.

Water availability: A consistent water source is very advantageous for vegetable farming. The Northeast region frequently experiences so-called flash droughts, during which conditions are extremely dry for a 2 to 4-month period.¹⁷ Without water available for irrigation, these drought conditions can greatly damage a crop. The types of water sources available at the different properties we analyzed vary from wells to gravity systems.

Cost of property: The total cost of each property reflects both the acreage of the parcel and the per-acre value of the land. While a lower total cost is of course advantageous for purchase by the FBWM, the size and quality of each parcel should also be taken into account along with its total price. The costs listed for each property are the asking prices listed by the respective current owners.

Willingness of owner to sell: Moving forward from a feasibility study to the actualization of a North Berkshire food bank farm requires a successful transaction between the FBWM and the current property owner. In the description of each property, we indicate the willingness of each current owner to sell their property to the FBWM for a food bank farm.

Impact on existing farmers: One goal of our project is to support the farming economy in the North Berkshires, so the creation of a North Berkshire food bank farm should have a net positive impact on the local farming community. We assessed the current use to determine

¹⁷ “About the Northeast DEWS.” *U.S. Drought Portal*.

whether the sale of the property to the FBWM and subsequent conversion of the land to a food bank farm would displace or negatively impact existing farmers.

Existing infrastructure: Barns, sheds, houses, and other structures are considered existing infrastructure in our analysis of the properties. While a barn or shed in good condition could be helpful for a future food bank farmer, the inclusion of a house as part of the property is generally viewed negatively in terms of feasibility for the establishment of a food bank farm. As explained by Andrew Morehouse in an email, the FBWM wants to avoid negotiating a rental agreement for a house, due to issues of depreciation and upkeep.¹⁸

APR status & conservation: Some of the properties analyzed in our report are already protected by an Agricultural Preservation Restriction (APR). An APR establishes a contract in which the state pays the owner the difference in the fair market value and the agricultural value of the land, in exchange for protecting the property from development for posterity.¹⁹ A property with an APR restriction already in place is therefore less expensive than a parcel with valuable development potential. For properties without APR protection, the arrangement of an APR for the property may be possible as part of the purchase negotiation with the FBWM, simultaneously lowering the cost of the property for the FBWM and ensuring that the future of the parcel as conserved farmland is secure. In this case, the adjacency of the property of interest to other conserved farmland (APR or other conservation restrictions) is taken into consideration, as the property will be viewed more favorably in an APR application if it abuts protected farmland.

¹⁸ Morehouse, Email Nov. 12

¹⁹ “Agricultural Preservation Restriction (APR) Program Details.”

Potential Properties in the North Berkshires

To find properties suitable in size and quality for growing vegetables, we began by reaching out to contacts in the North Berkshire area to identify possible partnerships and resources. We spoke to members of the board at the Williamstown Rural Lands Foundation (WRLF) and at the Berkshire Natural Resources Council (BNRC), and both land trusts are interested in this project and have expressed willingness to help establish a food bank farm in the North Berkshires. Using this starting point, we identified seven land parcels that may be available to be used or purchased for this food bank farm project, five of which we were able to visit. After the site visits, along with conversations with three property owners and further research, we narrowed down our list to four properties.

The four most promising land parcels for growing vegetables are listed in the table below, with the properties labeled discreetly so as to maintain the confidentiality of our conversations. Detailed descriptions of each property follow the overview table, and there is a second table summarizing all relevant details for each property after the descriptions.

Property Name	Current Ownership	Location	Acreage
Property A	WRLF	Williamstown	22 acres; 16 tillable
Property B	Private	Williamstown	16 acres, with a few adjacent acres for sale; 12.2 plus adjacent 2.1 tillable
Property C	Private	Adams	208 acres; 69.3 tillable
Property D	Private; real estate listing	Cheshire	28 acres; 8.9 tillable

Property A:

The Reynolds Farm property in Williamstown is currently owned by the Williamstown Rural Lands Foundation. It is already conserved under an APR, and it abuts other Trustees of

Reservations conserved land. It is 22 acres in size, about 16 of which are tillable. On the NRCS Web Soil Survey, 5.7 acres are classified as Amenia silt loam with 3 to 8 percent slopes, and 10.3 acres are classified as Stockbridge gravelly silt loam, 3 to 8 percent slopes. There is an additional half acre that is designated as farmland of statewide importance, but its soil is classified as Fullam-Lanesboro association, rolling, very stony, which would not be conducive to growing vegetables. The land parcel has no water source, infrastructure, or housing. Currently the farmer who hays the land leases it on a yearly basis from the WRLF, and he told us during our interview that the hay he harvests on the property is very important for his cattle operation.²⁰ Although the WRLF likely would not sell the land to the FBWM, they are interested in the project and could lease it to the Food Bank at a nominal rate.²¹ The FBWM could then enter a contract with a farmer modeled after the ones for the Hadley farms where the farmer pays the FBWM in produce instead of cash for leasing the land.

Property B:

This property in Williamstown is 16 acres, entirely protected under an APR. While it is on the smaller side, there is a plot of a few acres for sale adjacent to the land, so the possibility of expansion exists. For the main property, the NRCS soil survey designates 3 acres as prime farmland with soil classified as Amenia silt loam, 3 to 8 percent slopes. Another 9.2 acres are farmland of statewide importance, with the classification of Amenia silt loam, 8 to 15 percent slopes. This adds up to 12.2 tillable acres, but the 8-15% slopes could create challenges for growing vegetables. The adjacent plot has 2.1 acres of tillable soil classified as Amenia silt loam, 8 to 15 percent slopes. There is no infrastructure on Property B, nor is there a current water supply; however, the property owner showed us the location of a well that was used in the past,

²⁰ Brian Young, Phone Call Nov. 6

²¹ McGowan, Zoom Call Oct. 16

indicating that it may be feasible to re-dig the well for a private water supply. The owner of Property B has expressed interest in selling the land to make it into a food bank farm.²² The land has been appraised at around \$3,000 per acre, which would be \$48,000 for the entire parcel. Currently, the land is leased to a nearby farmer who grazes cattle on the fields in the summer, and both the cows and the land seem quite content with this arrangement.

Property C:

This 208-acre property, located in Adams, has 69.3 tillable acres. Of those tillable acres, the NRCS designated 51.7 acres as prime farmland classified as Amenia silt loam, 3 to 8 percent slopes, 3.2 acres as prime farmland but classified as Pittsfield loam, 3 to 8 percent slopes, and 14.4 acres as farmland of statewide importance with a classification of Pittsfield loam, 8 to 15 percent slopes. The property is zoned for Industry (I) and there are multiple barns on the land, some newer than others, and an old farmhouse. The eastern half of the property is wooded slope, which extends from near the top of a mountain ridge down to a natural terrace in the mountainside. This terrace makes up the flat western section of the property, which is cleared and consists of the farmland soils described above. The property has its own gravity-fed water system, with a 512-cubic-foot holding tank on the mountainside above the farmland, and there is also a sewer system. The current owner grew up on the land and still lives in the farm house.²³ The farm most recently functioned as a dairy, but when the owner was younger, the family also grew a variety of vegetables that were sold at a farm stand on the property. Today, the land is mostly used for hay, with a few animals on the land as well. The owner expressed interest in the idea of creating a food bank farm, as they have already started thinking about retiring and

²² Owner B, In-person Visit Nov. 6

²³ Owner C, Phone Call Oct. 29

downsizing at some point in the near future.²⁴ Ideally, the owner would like to build a smaller house on the property so as to remain on the land even if it were sold to the FBWM. Although the property abuts a large APR parcel, there are no conservation restrictions on the property at present, making it vulnerable to development. The owner hopes that the land will stay as farmland, and they expressed hesitant interest in arranging an APR contract, stating that they would only be willing to do so if there was a serious agricultural buyer in place.²⁵ The owner's asking price for the property is \$895,000, which takes into account improvements that the owner has made to the barns and fencing.²⁶ It is important to note that this asking price reflects the fair market value of the land and its development potential; an APR arrangement would significantly lower the cost of the land for the FBWM, while ensuring that the owner was paid the full value.

Property D:

The fourth property is acreage that is for sale in Cheshire, listed by Gilcrest Properties²⁷ as well as on Alton and Westall Realtors.²⁸ It has fields and forests covering 28 acres, 8.9 of which are tillable and designated by NRCS as prime farmland with a soil classification of Amenia silt loam, 3 to 8 percent slopes. There is private water access, and three structures that would need some renovation in order to be used. It is not under an APR and therefore vulnerable to development, although it can be used for agricultural or residential uses. While the property is nearby a state-owned wildlife management area, the immediately adjacent parcels are privately owned lots consisting of a mix of farmland and woodland. The property is currently for sale for \$249,000. Due to the limited information we were able to obtain about this property, and its

²⁴ Owner C, Phone Call Oct. 29

²⁵ Owner C, Email Nov. 15

²⁶ Owner C, Email Nov. 15

²⁷ <https://search.gilcrestproperties.com/idx/details/listing/a368/132522/764-Wells-Road-Cheshire-MA-01225>

²⁸ <https://www.altonwestall.com/listing/231138/764-wells-cheshire-ma-01225/>

small size in terms of tillable acres, it is not the most ideal candidate for a food bank farm property. However, this parcel was still among the top four properties options we found in our research, and thus its inclusion in our report helps to put in perspective the challenge of finding farmland of suitable quality and size for vegetable farming in the North Berkshires.

Evaluation & Comparison of Properties

Criteria	Property A (Reynolds)	Property B (Private)	Property C (Private)	Property D (Cheshire)
Number of tillable acres	22 acres 16 tillable	16 acres with a few adjacent acres for sale 12.2 plus 2.1 tillable	208 acres 69.3 tillable	28 acres 8.9 tillable
Soil and slope	16 acres prime farmland 0.5 acres farmland of statewide importance	3 acres prime farmland 9.2 acres farmland of statewide importance	54.9 acres prime farmland 14.4 acres farmland of statewide importance	8.9 acres prime farmland
Water availability	None	None (potential well)	Private water supply	Private water access
Total cost of property	\$0 WRLF	\$48,000 (16x\$3000/acre according to owner)	\$895,000 (owner's asking price; less if an APR is placed on land)	\$249,000 (listed real estate price)
Willingness of owner to sell	Very interested in a partnership but not in selling the land	Definitely interested, could happen soon	Definitely interested, maybe in a couple years	For sale already
Impact on existing farmers	Brian Young hay operation	Cattle from nearby farm	Owner's cows	No impact
Existing infrastructure	Nothing	Nothing	Multiple barns and an old	Three structures that need

			farmhouse	renovation
APR status & conservation	Already under APR Next to Trustees of the Reservation land	Already under APR	Not under APR (zoned for Industry) Next to APR land	For sale now (Can be used for agricultural and residential uses)

Finding a Farmer

Although finding a specific farmer was not within the scope of our project, we did speak to eight farmers to gain their feedback, insight, and suggestions on this project. Four of these farmers are based in the Pioneer Valley, and they each have relatively large operations and ties with the existing food bank farms; the four other farmers we interviewed are based in the Berkshires and farm on a much smaller scale. In our calls with these farmers, they stressed the importance of scale for a food bank farm, because the produce in lieu of cash rent model works much better for larger farming operations than for small ones.²⁹ Farms in the North Berkshires tend to be very small, often only a few acres in size, which is a function of the hilly terrain and extremely rocky soil that is pervasive throughout the region. Many of the farmers expressed skepticism that the food bank farm model used in the Pioneer Valley—where the food bank farms take advantage of flat, fertile, river-bottom soil—could be successfully implemented in the North Berkshires due to a lack of suitable land. However, as reported above, we were able to find several properties in the North Berkshires that we believe could be conducive to growing produce at the scale desired by the FBWM.

²⁹ Cole, Zoom Call Nov. 2; Zasada, Zoom Call Nov. 6; Young, Phone Call Nov. 6; Perrault, Phone Call Nov. 16; Porth, Phone Call Nov. 17; Czajkowski, Phone Call Nov. 17; Docter, Zoom Call Nov. 30; Wyrriick, Zoom Call Dec. 1

Related to the issue of size in the North Berkshires is the reality that large-scale farming operations from which an established farmer could easily expand onto food bank farm property, such as those pre-existing in the Pioneer Valley, are not available. While there may not be current farmers in the Berkshires who could take on a project like this, Don Zasada, the farmer of Caretaker Farm, expressed that it would not be that challenging to find a farmer from elsewhere who would want to expand or to start up a farm. He suggested a few different job pages and resources that could be useful in advertising a food bank farmer position and finding someone interested in it.³⁰ These suggestions include Good Food Jobs,³¹ a job search tool where food-related jobs can be found or posted; CRAFT listservs,³² which usually require you to be a farmer in a CRAFT training program to use the listserv except for the eastern MA program for which anyone can sign up; and a farmer listserv in Vermont through UVM,³³ for which you need to be part of the Vermont Vegetable and Berry group. Although it is somewhat of a deviation from the existing food bank farm model, the chance for the FBWM to provide farmland to a farmer *without* existing farmland could become an opportunity to work towards land- and food-based justice. Recognizing that the current United States food system is built on stolen land and stolen labor, the FBWM is encouraged to consider finding a farmer of Black, indigenous, or another historically oppressed identity for the food bank farm position. Along the same lines, once the food bank farm and farmer are established, the FBWM could look into having the food bank farmer partner with a farmer incubator program to help those without land access to learn and develop farming skills.

³⁰ Zasada, Email Nov. 19

³¹ <https://www.goodfoodjobs.com/>

³² <https://easternmasscraft.wordpress.com>

³³ <https://www.uvm.edu/extension/horticulture/commercial>

There were also other suggestions that emerged in our interviews with farmers related to the economic stability of the food bank farm position. Several farmers stated that the precise details of the lease arrangement, such as its length and early-termination policies, would need to be made clear during the search processes. Another consideration is the available market for the private share of the farmer's harvest. For the food bank farm model to be economically viable, the farmer must have a consistent customer base for the private share. With the abundance of small CSA-oriented farms in the North Berkshires, the supply of CSA produce at times exceeds demand in the region; although demand increased dramatically due to the pandemic, it is unclear whether demand will remain high once the pandemic ends.³⁴ This uncertainty indicates that the customer base for the private share of the food bank farm farmer's produce may need to include buyers other than CSA customers. One opportunity in this regard is the North Adams public school district. Although efforts have been made to incorporate local vegetables in school lunches, there are currently no vegetable operations large enough in the North Berkshires to supply a school district the size of North Adams. This presents an exciting opportunity for the school district to purchase the food bank farmer's private share of produce, perhaps with the assistance of state grants, which would benefit both the local schools and help to make the North Berkshire food bank farm economically stable.

Challenges

The best-case scenario for this project is to establish a food bank farm in the North Berkshires, following the same model as the existing farms in the Pioneer Valley. The FBWM is very supportive of this idea and believes that they will be able to raise sufficient funds to

³⁴ Wyrwick, Zoom Call. Dec. 1

establish such a farm. However, one notable challenge to implementing the Pioneer Valley model in the North Berkshires is finding suitable farmland. Land parcels in the North Berkshires tend to be much smaller than the minimum 20-25 acres that the FBWM requires, and the land tends to be hilly with soil that is rocky and much less fertile than the Pioneer Valley, which has some of the best farmland on the east coast.

While identifying a specific farmer is beyond the scope of our project as noted above, another related challenge that the FBWM may come up against is finding a farmer interested in running the food bank farm and producing food for the FBWM under the produce in lieu of cash rent model. As a result of the more challenging topography for farming, most vegetable farms in the North Berkshires are small in size, on the order of about 5 acres. The vegetable farmers that cultivate land at this scale do not own the equipment and infrastructure for large-scale production and harvest; this contrasts with the Pioneer Valley, where numerous existing farmers with large operations were eager to expand onto additional acreage provided by the food bank farm properties. It might be more possible to find a beginning farmer who wants to start up an operation, although this would be a riskier strategy, and the farmer could struggle to find a consistent market for the private share of their produce.

Alternative Recommendations

Because of the obstacles to establishing a food bank farm of the scale that the FBWM desires (>20-25 acres) in the North Berkshires, and the difficulties related to finding a farmer, our feasibility study includes several alternative models that may be more suitable to the region:

1. One of the land trusts in the Berkshires could buy a land parcel and then lease it at a nominal rate to the FBWM, which could then enter into an agreement with a farmer. This

is essentially how the agreement would work with Property A, but the model could also involve a land trust buying a new piece of land.

2. Instead of identifying one large land parcel that could be a food bank farm, the FBWM could buy two or more smaller parcels in the vicinity of each other and have a farmer, or farmers, lease them in exchange for produce. This is a similar model to the one in the Pioneer Valley, but would be more complicated for the farmer and for the FBWM to arrange the lease agreement.
3. The FBWM could purchase excess produce from farmers and distribute this produce to its emergency food sites. The FBWM could partner with local organizations that already do this and expand the practice. This model helps existing farmers because they can make money off produce that they might not usually be able to sell, and it increases the amount of fresh, local produce going to food pantries in the area.
4. Some existing programs in the North Berkshires currently purchase CSA shares from local farmers and donate the shares to food pantries and other sites. This program could be further expanded to increase support for local farmers and food security in the region, or the FBWM could replicate this model and buy CSA shares in the North Berkshires.
5. If the preceding options do not fit with the FBWM's goals, an alternative model is the creation of a system where local farmers contract directly with food pantries in the North Berkshires. The food pantries would purchase the farmers' produce, potentially at a slightly discounted price, and then that produce could be distributed to emergency food sites in the area. Although this does not directly involve the FBWM, it does support local farmers and provides local produce to emergency food sites in the area.

Next Steps

As our fall semester comes to a close, we are excited to pass along this project to those who may be able to bring the goals outlined here to fruition. This final report will go to Sarah Gardner and Andrew Morehouse, who will be key in moving this project forward. Included in the report will be a Property Key document with details about each property and the owners. This will include contact information for the owners so that if the FBWM needs more details about the properties and eventually decides to buy or enter an agreement on one of them, then they can reach out to the owners directly. We will also pass along contact information for those at the WRLF and at BNRC who have expressed interest in partnering or supporting the FBWM in establishing a farm in the Berkshires. Finally, if a property is purchased for a food bank farm, then the FBWM can use the listservs and other farmer contacts in our report to search for a farmer. This is the last step in the establishment of a North Berkshire food bank farm, as it is best to advertise a position for a farmer once most of the lease agreement details have been worked out, so that farmers understand exactly what kind of contract they will be entering into. Although there are challenges in making this project a reality in the North Berkshires, the enthusiasm, support and advice that those whom we interviewed shared indicates that there is a great deal of potential for the project's success. We hope that one day, perhaps in the not-too-distant future, a North Berkshire food bank farm will be established to increase local produce production and food security in the area.

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Appendix

Sample Calculation: Produce in Lieu of Cash Rent

Does not convey the actual, confidential finances of any existing food bank farm contract

Sample: Food Bank Farm Annual Finances										
<i>Sample modeled after Food Bank of Western Mass bookkeeping</i>										
Rent/Acre	300									
Total Rent	\$3,000									
	Acres	% of Total Acres	Organic Vegetable	Price/lb.	lbs./Acre	Total Yield (lbs.)	Total Revenue	Food Bank Harvest Share Contribution to Rent (\$)	Farmer's Share Contribution to Rent (lbs)	Private (lbs.)
	3	30%	Butternut squash	\$0.40	20,000	60,000	\$ 24,000	\$ 900	2,250	57,750
	4	40%	Sweet corn	\$0.50	8,000	32,000	\$ 16,000	\$ 1,200	2,400	29,600
	3	30%	Squash (Zucchini)	\$0.70	9,000	27,000	\$ 18,900	\$ 900	1,286	25,714
Total	10	100%			Total	119,000	\$ 58,900	\$ 3,000	5,936	113,064
					Avg. per Acre	11,900	\$ 5,890.00		594	11,306
							Percent of Total:	5.1%	5.0%	95.0%