



Single Case Study: Laguna Farm
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Laguna Farm and the CSA System

Laguna Farm is located in Sebastopol, California about 6 miles southwest of the city of Santa Rosa. The site of the farm is adjacent to the Laguna de Santa Rosa creek, which floods the farm every winter, adding nutrients to the soil. The farm was

established in 1984 by Scott Mathieson on 50 acres of family land passed down to him (he still pays mortgage on it though). His wife, Leslie Gardner- an herbalist teacher at the California School of Herbal Studies in Forestville- also contributes to the farm (Dines, 2004). Initially this farm operated purely as a



Satellite image of Farm: Laguna de Santa Rosa on the right

for profit farm, selling produce to local stores, farmer's markets, and restaurants.

However, since 1993 eighty five percent of the farm has been funded through a membership system known as Community Supported Agriculture or CSA. The CSA



Laguna Farm

system allows members to invest in the farm before the start of upcoming seasons, giving the farm operator, Scott, a foundational funding source. The payment systems for these types of

farms vary farm to farm, but at Laguna they offer weekly boxes full of mixed vegetables and fruits with payments expected for 3-month intervals.

The roots of CSA farms originated in Japan- first known as “Teikei,” which means “putting the farmer’s face on food” (Peterson, 2003). This method then caught on

in Europe before eventually entering the U.S. in 1986. In 1990 there were 60 CSA farms in

the U.S. As of 2005 the number of CSA farms in the U.S.

had climbed to 1,150- in California there are around 75

(“Newsletter,” 2005). Some reasons why farmers are

beginning to implement CSA’s are because they help



Flooded Laguna de Santa Rosa

diffuse the investment risk amongst members, they protect small farms from undercutting

prices offered by industrialized agricultural systems, and they complement an organic and

diversified farm system. Additionally, it is also good for the consumer because they get

local-fresh produce from a supplier that they know and appreciate. They are able to pick

up their food at the farm or local drop-off sites, and sometimes even have it delivered to

their doorstep. This system benefits communities and nature as it shortens the distance

between consumer and producer, and lessens the

carbon monoxide that would usually be pumped

out in transporting food from exotic sources.

In speaking with Scott Mathieson I found out that

the farm also sells produce at farmer’s markets and

to a couple of restaurants in nearby cities. They

sell excess produce to only two restaurants,



Sonoma County

Millennium and Chez Panisse, located in Berkeley and San Francisco. When

transporting produce for members, they have a deliverer who works at the farm.

However, to transport to the Berkeley and San Francisco locations they go through a



Veritable Vegetables en route to San Francisco

distributor, Veritable Vegetables- located in San Francisco on Cesar Chavez Avenue, the peripheral-industrial area of the city. This distributor serves mostly organic farms (97% of their clientele) and travels mostly in California, but does serve areas in New Mexico, Arizona, and Colorado as well.

At the farmer's market in Sebastopol I stopped to speak with Jared, the deliverer for Laguna Farm. He mentioned that he is the one and only deliverer for members of the CSA. He also manages the stands at farmers markets, which they attend mostly in Sebastopol. He told me that they also travel to Petaluma, Fairfax, and Oakmont for their farmer's markets. All of these markets are located in the central downtown areas of the towns. Rarely do they ever come across other CSA farm stands. Scott mentioned that CSA's are progressing, but at a "crawling" pace. However, he is confident that they are a positive farming method in the fight to popularize healthy living.

With regard to government support, the farm doesn't get much. Scott explained his disappointment after being overlooked for a USDA farm grant. They were deemed ineligible due to their non-rural federal status. Because of its population of over 7000 people and close proximity to the over 100,000 population of Santa Rosa, Sebastopol is not considered by the USDA to be a rural area (USDA, 2003). For a town to be considered rural they must have less than 2500 people. In fact, most of Sonoma County would be considered ineligible by the USDA because even towns that meet the rural population standard would be considered non-rural if nearby a city like Santa Rosa where there is potential interdependence (USDA, 2003).

Most of the members of the farm live in Sebastopol or western Sonoma County, but the farm does serve other areas like Santa Rosa, Petaluma, and Cotati. Drop off sites vary, and are often hosted at CSA member residences. There is a strong sense of community within the CSA framework. Scott sends weekly newsletters to members via the “Box”- which contains the food, and on their website (www.lagunafarm.com). These newsletters allow him to communicate the activities of the farm, the food that is offered for given weeks, recipe ideas, and general discussions about environmental science, food, and life. Also, since some of the produce offered to members does not come from Laguna Farm itself, Scott takes it upon himself to explain where he gets the supplemental food.



Scott and his “Beyond Organic” vegetables

Through an informal networking process, Scott gets to know other organic or “beyond organic” farms in California and has produce shipped in to Laguna Farm. This allows him to diversify selection. In speaking to a couple of X-members, Brian and Cybil,

I was told that selection was a reason for them exiting the CSA (However, the bigger reason was their feelings of guilt when they weren’t able to finish the box of food that they were receiving weekly). Scott says that it is sometimes difficult to meet the needs of all of their members because they have 500 of them! Offering food from other farms helps them keep the menu more interesting. At the same time, it allows them to offer food during the winter months. This is imperative because their land floods during this

time, making them unable to produce anything. But, this flooding is a blessing because it replenishes the soil.

From the weekly newsletters dating back to December of 2006 I was able to learn not only the vegetables and fruits that Laguna Farm had to offer, but also the other organic farm locations where they obtained their supplemental produce. Some of the food that Laguna Farm offered during this time was baby spinach, arugula, radishes, cauliflower, beets, potatoes, cucumbers, bell peppers, basil, fennel, spinach, and cilantro. Some of the farm locations where they obtained produce included the towns of Madera, Gilroy, Hollister, Yuba City, Chico, Auburn, Fresno, Bakersfield, Salinas, and Pescadero. Towns from all over California had taken part in supplying the CSA members of Laguna Farm. These farms were a great benefit to the CSA while Laguna Farm was also

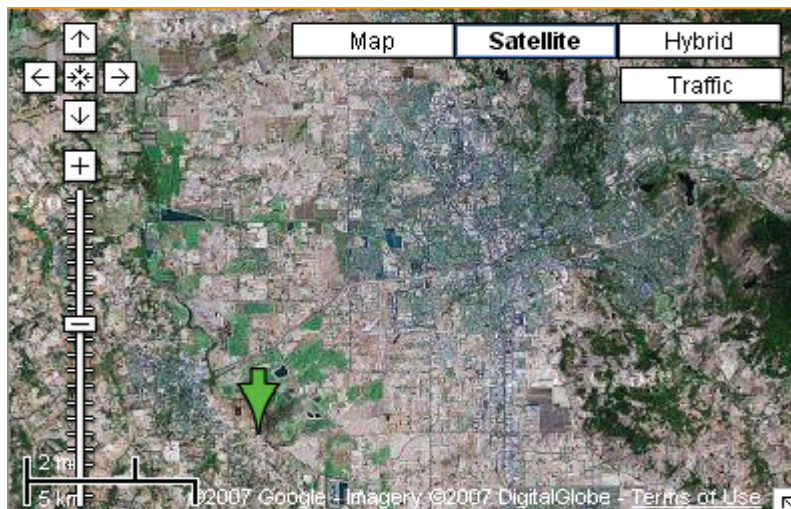


California map of all the farms where Laguna Farm receives fruits and vegi's for their members

giving these other small-organic farms business.

Laguna Farm's Place in the Urban Geographic Context

The rural-urban dynamic is a complicated relationship that is often magnified when they exist in a close geographic area. However, defining the two concepts, rural and urban, is also difficult. The USDA does not consider Laguna Farm's land space to be a rural area, yet it is threatened by urban sprawl just like many other agricultural areas. According to Merlo (2007) between 1992 and 1997 the U.S. paved over 6 million acres of farmland. In California thousands of acres of agricultural land are urbanized on a yearly basis (Sokolow, 2004). Sokolow (2004) notes that the rural-urban issues go both ways especially in "urban edge" areas- where urban and rural lands meet. In these areas urban residents complain of dust, noise, odor, health effects, and pests. While rural residents complain of reduced productivity and income, regulatory constraints, vandalism, and legal liability.

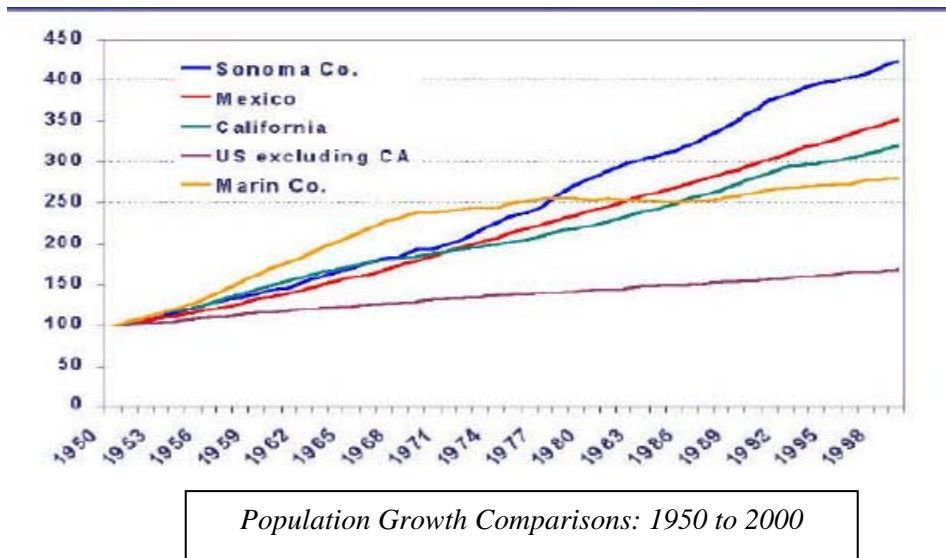


Arrow pointing out Sebastopol in relation to Santa Rosa's urban sprawl (NE corner)

The EPA defines urban sprawl as "Low density, automobile dependent development beyond the edge of service and employment areas" (EPA, 2006). Also, as urban sprawl takes place, the value of the land often increases. This phenomenon often

pressures struggling farmers to sell their prime agriculture land to developers for a big profit. However, Sokolow (2004) points out that smaller-diverse farms can fend off urban sprawl because they are less dependent on a single crop's success. They are freer to adjust to a changing market. Also, urban sprawl can be seen as a way for farms to create more direct marketing.

In the case of Laguna Farm- even though most members reside close by- a nearby urban environment actually would give them more of a population to supply. In fact, in the last year Laguna Farm was forced to cap their membership and not allow any more members for the time being. Would a truly rural environment in, say Nebraska, achieve such a large membership base with the CSA format? Probably not. A growing CSA depends on members who live close by.



The CSA distribution of food is much different than the conventional farm. It is highly based on local-community support. This creates less need for long-distance transportation of food. Laguna Farm distributes mostly to local communities and for the most part members pick up their food at the farm. If more CSA farms sprouted up around urban areas like Santa Rosa and San Francisco, this would change the way that

cities trade food. However, it would also demand a significant change in the way that people view food and their health for this to happen. Economically, unhealthy food is more attractive to the average urban resident.

Amidst the increasing popularity of CSA farms are new theories, addressing the way that cities and agriculture areas are planned and developed. Two emerging concepts that address the issues with the rural-urban dynamic are New Urbanism and New Ruralism. New urbanism stresses ten points: 1) walkable streets, 2) connectivity, 3) mixed use, 4) mixed housing, 5) quality architecture, 6) traditional neighborhood structures, 7) increase in density, 8) smart transportation, 9) sustainability, and 10) quality of life (“New Urbanism website, 2007). Not only does the concept of New Urbanism concern internal issues, it also deals with the way that cities expand. Sokolow (2004) brings up the need for less development on unincorporated and prime agricultural soil, and more internal development amongst cities.

According to the Sustainable Agriculture Education center (2007) New Ruralism offers a way to bridge the gap between sustainable agriculture and New Urbanism. This theory shows the similarity between industrialized agriculture and urban sprawl. New Ruralism promotes healthy agriculture land in a way that creates ecological balance and more of an attraction than a deterrent to city residents. This theory assumes that healthy agricultural systems and healthy urban systems go hand-in-hand. It also suggests that there should be more of a direct partnership between urban consumers and their rural neighbors (Moffat, 2006). Could the CSA farm system be the connection needed for New Ruralism and New Urbanism to work together?

General Findings and Conclusions

The future of the CSA system is uncertain. However, what I have found is that they are currently bringing consumers closer to their food while protecting small and organic farms from the expansion of industrialized agriculture and urban sprawl. From a geographical perspective important to think about is the way that Community Supported Agriculture creates a ripple in the usually strained relationship between agricultural and urban areas. Laguna Farm serves as an important example of how an urban and agricultural population can be *directly* served by a farm.

The most important finding that I realized through this investigative research is the importance of CSA's with regard to inter-farm relationship. At Laguna Farm they are able to connect consumers to organic farms all over California. At the same time this has created an informal, yet strong tie between these farms. They are able to learn more about each other and benefit through the business transaction.



If the CSA system continues to expand, this would make for drastic changes in the urban landscape as we know it. Food is shipped to cities from all around the world- providing a mostly unaware population with poor quality vegetables and fruits. The concept of Community Supported Agriculture completely contradicts the current status quo. At Laguna Farm they push for expansive and dramatic change by farming simply, so that more people can simply eat natural food.

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