



Farm Hub production staff harvest broccoli.

Mystery of the empty fields on 209 solved: Farm Hub quietly cultivating the future

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For about as long as any local can remember, come summer the stretch of 209 just past when you can legally gun it to 55 mph and before the first Kingston exit has been a sea of corn as far as the eye could see. One of the area's oldest and well-known family farms, Gill Farm was a sweet corn institution. So, when the land sold five years ago for reportedly big money connected to none of other than a Buffett family member (via the NoVo Foundation) and dubbed Hudson Valley Farm Hub, curiosity couldn't have been higher. Initially, the Farm Hub opened its doors to the public via a farmstand, giving nosy neighbors to a chance to pepper employees with questions and peer ever so slightly behind the scenes of the operation. When the farmstand closed seemingly out of the blue in 2016 it felt a little bit like Willie Wonka closing the doors to his chocolate factory - what was "the hub" up to? Why were the fields that once held the endless green ripple of green corn stalks jutting to the blue skies of summer standing empty?

The short answer is ground cover. The long answer involves the larger story of an organization that is farming for the future. The strength of the mission is often the strength of the funding party, and to that end, Farm Hub's primary funder NoVo sets the tone. NoVo has a mission to invest in "the development of capacities in people - individually and collectively - to help create a more caring and balanced world. As one of our core values, we believe in Radical Hope: We are deeply optimistic that we can contribute to systemic progress that addresses the root causes of injustice." (Novofoundation.org.) As a foundation, resources are pointed toward advancing social and emotional learning in school systems, advancing adolescent girls' rights, ending violence against women and girls, and creating sustainable communities.

In 2013 the stars would align. Just as the NoVo Foundation, which has strong ties to the Hudson Valley, was zeroing in on philanthropy that would foster resilient local food systems, third-generation farmer John Gill was beginning to think about selling the over a thousand acre family farm that now includes 1,500 acres of Farm Hub land. Of the early days, Farm Hub director Brooke Pickering-Cole (whom many may remember as former Marletown town supervisor) says, "The Farm Hub was created as a nonprofit education and demonstration farm with the idea to create a land base from which to support a resilient food system in the



Farm Hub's current farmer trainees Jesus Gonzalez Jr., Jayne Henson, Nailah Marie Ellis, Jess Clancy, and Andrew Casner are members of the Hudson Valley Farm Hub's ProFarmer Program.

Hudson Valley. In the first few years we focused our immediate attention on transitioning the land from what was primarily a sweet corn operation (the Gill Farm) to a varied rotation of vegetables, grains and cover crops. We moved to organic production across the entire farm, and began experimenting with a variety of innovative practices to reduce tillage, encourage biodiversity, and promote soil health."

Riding through the fields in the company of Pickering-Cole, Eddie Clevenger (farm manager) and Jay Goldmark (field crops manager), the magnitude of exactly what the Farm Hub is working to achieve is astounding within the parameters of a large-scale working farm. The vibe is very much agrarian-utopia; a lot of very heady, idealistic and at times seemingly quixotic ideas expressed through farming. Of the 1,500 acres, 400 acres are dedicated to field crops, which are categorized by corn, soy and small grains. The majority of the corn and soy is used as transitional feed for Farm Hub's partners at the Stone Barns Center in Westchester County, and the grains are an example of one of the larger goals that the Farm Hub is working toward, says field crops production manager Goldmark. The plots, which are a mix of small grains, make up a good example of a project that is still in its experimental phase in conjunction with the Land Institute in Kansas. The Farm Hub provides a 20-acre plot of land to the Land Institute, which is developing this perennial wheat, looking futuristically at how we can produce wheat in the U.S. in a way that's more environmentally sound.

Further on down the farm road, wildflower plots have been planted with

three different mixes of "native meadow," in conjunction with the Farm Ecology Program at the Farm Hub. The aim, says farm manager Clevenger, is to determine whether - if farmers dedicate plots of the farm that they are not currently using to native meadow plots - there is any benefit to the crops. The idea is to track what bugs show up due to the three meadows (along with a "control meadow," which is simply meadow as it would naturally grow here in Ulster County) and see if it's possible to more naturally control pests and attract the right kinds of bugs with a certain meadow mix.

Edging the lush meadow plots are trailing squash plants, which are being monitored to see how the squash thrives, depending on the meadow mix. This Native Meadow Project is an experiment many farmers do not have the luxury of trying - as the Farm Hub does - when every farmable acre can equate to income. The much talked about "empty" stretch of Route 209 is actually quite full - of cover crop, that is. A cover crop is a technique to not only protect the soil from natural elements but also add fertility and naturally increase the health in the soil for the next crop. The Farm Hub uses a three-year rotation for all of its fields - hence the "empty" fields of recent years along the highway.

Goldmark talks excitedly about the cover crop on the fields. In regard to the stretch along 209 he says, "We're experimenting with creating a diverse multi-species mix out there in the field, trying to imitate what naturally happens out in a native pasture. Our assumption is that the corn will do a lot better following the

multi-species mix than after a monoculture crop like red clover, but we really won't know until we see next year's crop come out of the field." Like so much of the Hub, cover crops are a highly experimental process that will continue to be honed until the Hub can conclude on the best practice and share it with the farming community.

In keeping with NoVo's core value of investing and empowering people, the Farm Hub has been developing some programming surrounding the community and their employees.

"Twilight Talks" are meetings in the field regarding farming topics harking back to gatherings that were typically held at twilight by and for the farming community once the work day was done. These talks are open to the public and geared not to the backyard gardener (although all are welcome to attend) but to the farming community. The next "Twilight Talk" is scheduled for Sept. 17 and will center around the Native Meadows. This project, along with the small grains project, is an example, says Pickering-Cole, of one of the ways their clearly privileged endeavors, which at first glance might appear unrealistic to the unfunded farmer, can benefit all (especially local) farmers.

"Our efforts include taking on some of the risks associated with trying new methods," Pickering-Cole says. "We think it is actually a more realistic approach than expecting all farmers to be able to that. Our Native Meadow trial is an example; in creating these test plots (in which we are looking at insect activity in different wildflower mixes and how these plantings might not only protect flood-prone areas of a farm but also benefit adjacent crops), we are able to narrow down possible best practices. Similarly, our small grains trial is geared toward identifying the most successful heritage varieties of small grains ... Which varieties do best in this climate? Which do best when tested by bakers, brewers? That project came about in part as a result of interest on the part of farmers in meeting a market demand."

The Farm Hub has partnered with Cornell Cooperative Extension and Cornell University and hosted a number of research trials and that have examined pests and disease in vegetable crops and have happily seen other farmers utilizing the practical application of the research. It's slow work, season to season, a shuffling dance of trial and error, and there's no expectation that these methods will be adopted across the board overnight nor intended to undermine farmers who are using more traditional methods,

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says Pickering-Cole. "Regarding farmers as stewards of the earth - no one has a deeper, more intimate relationship with the land than a farmer - we respect all of them as stewards of the land and as people engaged with soil and in the act of growing food. The conversations of how to best serve the local community are continual and nuanced. Currently the Farm Hub folks are in discussion as to the best use of the old farmstand building. ("Maybe the best use isn't a place where we sell something!" exclaims Pickering-Cole before going on to disclose that they are speaking to UlsterCorps - about possibility using the space for processing emergency food donations). The decision to close the farmstand was two-fold; mainly, says Pickering-Cole, the Farm Hub's focus is on researching and educating best farming practices, however, they were also conscious of taking business away from "farmstand" farmers, of which Pickering-Cole says there are many of do-

ing well in the area. While the Farm Hub has sold produce at market rate to one or two restaurants a handful of times, Pickering-Cole is quick to point out, "Our plan has never been to compete aggressively in the marketplace against local farmers."

Of the 40 acres of vegetables grown on the farm in conjunction with their ProFarmer training program - a multiyear, salaried training program for up to five farmers a - 75% is donated to emergency food systems.

"Over the past couple of years, thanks to an impressive network of local organizations working in the emergency food system, we have strengthened our food donation program - in 2018 we donated well over 100,000 pounds of vegetables. We're increasingly looking at issues related to food access in communities near the Farm Hub, and our planning for the next phase of development lands very much in this realm," says Pickering-Cole. She is aware that the Farm Hub is in a unique, rarefied position. "It's sad that there is so much food insecurity, even hunger, in this county," she says. "We feel fortunate to be able to contribute to the efforts of all the amazing people in the local community

who are working on food access issues."

Another project linked to social justice issues and cultural conservation issues is the Native American Seed Sanctuary. The Seed Sanctuary, which is in partnership with Akwesasne Mohawk Tribe of northern New York and supported by Seedshed, focuses on growing Native American varieties of corn, squash, beans and sunflowers for seed saving purposes, therefore preserving the agricultural heritage of Native American communities. All of the seeds and food harvested are directly put back into Native American communities.

Throughout the conversation, Pickering-Cole returns several times to the link to sustainability in the land and the sustainability of community and people. All of the Farm Hub's employees are year-round - including the field worker positions that would typically be seasonal. The choice to make every employee year-round was so that seasonal workers could have continuity of employment and so that their kids could stay in school all year. Tied into the initiative is the Farm Hub's recent Language Justice program, which was born out the desire to build community and equalize participation amount

English- and Spanish-speaking staff. Every staff meeting now includes an interpreter, and both Spanish and English lessons are provided to employees.

At the end of the tour, it's hard to believe that the Farm Hub has only been around for five years. Looking toward the future, Pickering-Cole envisions expansion for the land, the community and the people.

"As the Farm Hub continues to mature, we are adjusting our on-farm infrastructure to suit our production and ecology goals, as well as our commitment to education and community," says Pickering-Cole. "One example of this was the addition of new hoop houses this past year. We were also able to bring our production staff on year-round, and these two developments allowed us to grow greens in the winter months. We partnered with the YMCA Farm Project to create a well-received winter farmstand at the Y in Kingston. We are enthusiastic about the future, about forging new partnerships, and we look forward to sharing key developments as we continue to grow!"

For more information on the events or volunteer opportunities, visit <http://hv-farmhub.org/events/> 