

Erie County Agriculture and Our Climate: The New Normal

Community Resiliency Summit
April 1, 2017
Tom Ridge Environmental Center

Summary

On April 1, 2017 agricultural professionals and county residents met for the fourth annual community resiliency summit at the Tom Ridge Environmental Center. Previous summits considered the overall impacts of a changing climate on Erie County, the implications for emergency response and preparedness, and how anticipated changes will impact the local tourism industry. This year's summit focused on the impact of changing weather patterns on local agriculture and initiatives within our region to enhance and diversify local food production. This fourth annual event is part of a broader effort to build hazard resiliency in the city of Erie and the surrounding region and was designed to engage elements of the community in a long term effort to institutionalize resiliency planning in the region.

The summit was presented by CRANE, the Community Resilience Action Network of Erie, a coalition of groups seeking to enhance our regions' ability to anticipate and respond to local changes associated with climate change. CRANE is a collaboration of four local organizations, Environment Erie, PA Sea Grant, Erie County's Planning Office, and the NW Pennsylvania Green Economy Task Force.

The morning began with a panel of local farmers and agriculture experts discussing both long term changes in weather patterns and some of the responses farmers and their advocates have advanced to promote sustainable agricultural practices. The opening panel was followed by breakout sessions on: efforts to amend City of Erie zoning rules to allow urban farming in certain residential areas of the city; pest and disease management in home gardens; seasonal eating and food preservation; and how gardeners can address hunger and food security. Attendees were provided a goodie bag of seeds and materials for home gardening as well as a wealth of resources on local farm stands and markets, community shared agriculture opportunities, and how to preserve locally grown foods. The event ended with a drawing to award a CSA share for this growing season.

Session Summary: The Breakfast Panel

The opening panel began with Andy Muza of the Penn State University Extension Service, who noted that climate related changes are real and already affecting local farmers. He highlighted the PA Vines program that has identified a self-assessment tool and a series of best practices specifically for grape farmers to both reduce any negative watershed impacts of their operations and ensure the long term sustainability of the sector. The tool specifically identifies how growers can improve the economic performance of their operations by adopting improved management practices. Wendy Elliot, owner/operator of Earth and Vine Farm in North East, described her efforts to identify specific varieties that are seasonally appropriate and adapted to the changing conditions in our region. She operates a CSA where members buy a subscription and receive seasonal produce on a weekly basis. In addition, Ms. Elliot is passionate about educating people as to what she had learned about seasonal agriculture and how they can maximize their own garden production and preserve it for year-round enjoyment.

The panel continued with presentations from two long-time multi-generational farmers – Roberta Dudas of Fairview and Tim Burch of North East. Ms. Dudas, who remembers first helping her father in the family fields at the age of 2 or 3, recounted how she had tracked daily weather conditions for decades. She has noticed changes including more extreme weather events. For example, a two week period last summer of over 80 degrees interfered with her staged plantings of sweet corn and caused her to lose over an acre and a half of corn. Tim Burch’s family has farmed in North East for six generations and he too has noticed changes – including the 20 below zero temperatures several years ago – that his family had never seen. Those low temps wiped out many of his peach trees. He noted that North East which has long been famous for its cherry harvest is now down to only 4 cherry growers – again due in part to the extreme cold spells in recent years. He also discussed the difficulty of supplying local grocery chains in part due to consolidation in the industry, less reliance on local suppliers and competition from distant suppliers. A question and answer session followed the panelists presentations.

Session Summary: Breakout sessions

Wendy Elliot: Seasonal Eating and Preserving the Harvest. Wendy took participants through a “year on her farm”. She bought her property in 2008, reinvigorated the soil using sustainable practices, and now uses the property to experiment to see which crops grow best in our area. Wendy ran through all the seasons showing participants which kinds of produce grow best during the different times of year. Much of the seasonal timing depends on daylight hours and the amount of hours of daylight required for the plant to go to fruit. She also went over five different preservation techniques and what kinds of produce might do best being preserved by that method, including: blanching and freezing, dehydration, canning, fermenting, and root cellaring.

Dave Brennan and Carrie Sachse: Urban Agriculture and Zoning in Erie. Dave and Carrie provided an overview and update on efforts to amend the City of Erie zoning regulations to allow urban farming in certain residential areas of the city. Although allowed under some zoning classifications it is not in residential areas. Urban farming can provide a number of benefits: helping to return blighted property to productive use and the tax rolls, create entrepreneurial opportunities, beautify and revitalize neighborhoods, provide educational opportunities, and provide better access to food. A public hearing on the proposed zoning changes is scheduled for May 3, 2017 at 9:30am in City Council chambers.

Ellen Diplacido and Mike Bailey: Pest and Disease Management for Home Gardens. Ellen and Mike reviewed the many initiatives that the Master Gardeners are supporting in Erie to create food gardens and turned to the challenge of keeping a healthy garden without pesticides and synthetic fertilizer. The good news is that good garden practices can minimize the problems posed by pests and disease. Some of the essential elements are: choosing the right location, building healthy soil, choosing the right seeds or plants, planning the garden (including companion planting), proper watering, and mulching. There is no substitute for constant monitoring of the garden and catching problems early. They also shared a number of resources, including the master gardener hotline at 814 825-0985. You can also visit the Emmaus Grove Urban Garden (214 E 11th St.) on the 3rd Saturday of each month between 9 and 11am.

Andrew Wolfe and Shasta Mullenax: Hunger and Food Security in Erie and a Gardner’s Role. Andrew and Shasta are Americorps VISTA members, each tasked with working the issue of food security in Erie. One-third of Erie residents don’t have easy access to fresh produce within one mile. Andrew oversees the Gannon Goodwill Garden which grows food and donates to local food pantries to assist people in poverty. They discussed how growing food reduces your carbon dioxide footprint, while increasing

access to healthy food and saving money. There are many ways to get involved in Erie including Community Gardens, Gannon Goodwill Gardens, and the Erie Community Garden Coalition which gives information on how to start your first garden, nutritional resources for gardens and finding food gardens in Erie. They also showed a GIS map that maps out community gardens in the area, identifies food desserts, and identifies who those gardens are open to. Gannon has raised beds available to rent for \$15.00 to help folks start their own gardens. Contact Andrew or Shasta for more information.

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