

Sustainable Agriculture and the Island's Food System

A Public Symposium

Duffy Science Centre Amphitheatre, UPEI Campus

Monday, November 14, 2016, 7-9 p.m.

Rapporteur's report by Erin Kielly

Sustainable agriculture and the Island's food system was the topic of a Public Symposium hosted by the Institute of Island Studies and UPEI's Research Office on November 14th. Dr. Mark Lapping from the University of Southern Maine served as the keynote speaker, sharing his extensive knowledge of food systems and the benefits of using a holistic (or systems-based) approach to better understand our food system. I served as the rapporteur for the session, summarizing the ideas and the discussion from the event.

Agriculture has changed significantly over time, resulting in many positive effects. However, some changes have had detrimental impacts on land and water resources. Sustainable agriculture not only considers environmental stewardship but also social justice, and community and consumer health.

Dr. Lapping suggests that small realistic steps, resulting in tangible change, can be taken to move towards sustainability. However, this must be a collaborative effort – policymakers, consumers, and retailers need to work with and for farmers to realise sustainability.

The evening's panellists, Barry Cudmore and Mark Bernard (two Island farmers), and Dr. Colleen Walton (a UPEI researcher in public health nutrition), had the opportunity to respond to Dr. Lapping's address and to share with the audience their experiences and insights related to agriculture and the Island food system. In the talks and the subsequent discussion with the audience, there was overwhelming consensus that the food system must be viewed holistically using a systems approach. Only by integrating the environmental, economic, and social components will we be able to understand and cope with the challenges we face in our food system today.

Public interest in food is growing. This is reflected in increased concern about where our food comes from and how it is produced. Community-supported agriculture and farmers markets are surging in popularity and consumers are more aware of the social issues within our food system. By making food choices, consumers play an important role in advocating for changes. Unfortunately, many individuals do not have the means to exercise such choices. Food insecurity is a major issue on PEI. While education plays a role in improving our understanding of food (literacy and skills), consideration must also be given to the root causes: poverty and social well-being. Food insecurity impacts learning, productivity and mental health with children being especially vulnerable.

We must continue to seek understanding of the links between our food system and our health, environment and economy. The food system is complex and change within complex systems can seem

daunting. But all systems will change to cope with environmental, economic and social pressures. There are opportunities to approach change in our food system with foresight and vision – perhaps resulting in change that is more palatable and gradual, and which builds resilience.

The symposium was an opportunity to gain an understanding of our food system and to share perspectives and ideas about sustainable agriculture. Such constructive conversation is necessary to identify barriers and opportunities within our Island's food system. This represented just one small step forward in exploring our food system of today and imagining the food system for future generations of Islanders. For more information contact the Institute of Island Studies at iis@upei.ca.

Erin Kielly

Member, Executive Committee, Institute of Island Studies