

“Understanding the Relationship Between Multifunctional Agriculture, Community Resilience, and Rural Development”

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Born and raised in Taiwan, Kathleen Liang is a professor of entrepreneurship and applied economics at the University of Vermont, where she designed and implemented a successful entrepreneurship program in the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences. Liang received her MS and PhD from the Department of Agricultural Economics at Purdue University. Between 1996 and 1998, she worked for the Panhandle Research and Extension Center of the University of Nebraska in Scottsbluff, focusing on economic analyses of small grains, sunflower, dry edible beans, turf grass, and “prairie dogs town” management. She is well known for her innovative research topics and experiential learning oriented teaching programs, which integrate the concepts of agritourism, multifunctional agriculture, regional food network, and community entrepreneurship. Since joining the University of Vermont in 1998, Liang has obtained over \$3 million from 25 research projects in funding as a principal or coprincipal investigator. She has also presented 85 papers in national and international conferences, conducted more than 40 workshops and symposiums, served as an invited speaker in over 30 meetings, authored four books, published over 20 refereed journal articles and 10 technical reports, and authored or coauthored over 50 refereed proceedings.

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Summary and Findings: Funded by the U.S. Department of Agriculture’s Agriculture and Food Research Initiative (AFRI) program, two rounds of farm surveys in New England were collected in 2011 and 2012 to study multifunctional agriculture and its policy implications. The survey results showed significant increasing involvement in agritourism since 2007, and the most popular activities offered by farmers included farm tours, special events, and outdoor recreational activities. The number of farmers who participated in direct sales and value-added production declined since 2007. Popular direct sales were farm stands and farmers market. The most popular value-added farm products were syrups, jams and jellies, pickled products, and wool products. The top reasons for farmers to participate in multifunctional operations were to increase farm revenue, improve the family’s financial situation, promote farmers’ connections with customers, and promote locally made products and local farm scenery. Many farmers rely on jobs off the farm to receive employer-provided health care benefits. There are a variety of risks and challenges for farmers to engage in multifunctional operations. Our results showed that some major challenges and barriers for farmers to practice multifunctional operations involved access to skilled labor, financing and capital, and market and customers.

Implications for Policy and Practice: This study has strong policy implications when considering the integration and connection between farms, community entrepreneurship, and rural economic development. The outmigration of youth has been a problem in many rural areas. Lacking opportunities and educational services, young people seek employment and training beyond their hometowns. There is a need for developing knowledgeable and skilled farm labor to sustain high-quality farming practices. Many rural areas rely on immigrant farm labor, and there are issues associated with inconsistent performance and social disengagement. Financing and capital are common problems for all entrepreneurs, not just farmers. Small farmers have less borrowing power and lower cash reserves, which makes them more vulnerable when competing against large producers. Small farmers often do not plan for long-term investment, which leads to lack of leverage. Given the locations of many small farms in New England and other rural areas, it is not easy for customers to find farmers even if they are interested in visiting local farms or want to purchase locally produced farm products.

Lack of sufficient and effective infrastructure to support transportation and distribution also presents major issues for farmers to connect with customers.