

### To Farm or Not To Farm: *Farmland Viability in Northern Michigan*



*“There’s something interesting going on up here!” said **Dr. Rob Serrine**, Director of the Michigan State University Extension office in Leelanau County. “Our region is a ‘foodie’ hub, both for growers and consumers. So I’m pretty confident about the future of agriculture here.”*

With over 1,800 farms in the Northwest Michigan five-county area and increasing interest in local foods, our region could be moving toward a more self-reliant food system. Antrim, Benzie, Grand Traverse, Kalkaska, and Leelanau Counties contain 230,212 acres of farmland that yield more than \$91 million of fresh produce annually. Several area farmers report that during the height of the summer growing and tourist season it is possible to earn in excess of \$1,000 per day selling produce at local farm markets, which serve as vital niche outlets for small-scale farmers. Additionally, innovations such as “hoop houses” extend the growing season so food production can take place almost year-round. As Dr. Serrine said, “These are exciting trends.”



Photo by Michael Senger

**Dr. Rob Serrine**, Director, Leelanau County Michigan State University Extension Office

On the other hand, there are significant challenges facing Northwest Michigan farmers, especially for those with mid-sized farms. Although the numbers of both small farms (up to 50 acres) and large farms (2,000 acres or more) increased in the decade prior to 2007 the number of mid-sized farms (180-499 acres) declined by 32% (from 9,606 to 7,275). “We call them the “death zone” farms,” said Serrine, “because they are too big to handle without significant equipment costs, yet too small to be conglomerates.” In order to survive, Serrine believes mid-sized farms need to either band together or target niche markets. “A farmer could focus on selling hops to local micro-breweries,” he suggested, “or organic crops at farmers’ markets.”

New farmers face challenges too. For instance, not only is acquiring land expensive, but start-up costs can be \$15,000 to \$50,000. There are few grant and loan programs available; so, new farmers often put these costs onto personal credit cards.

### Starting Small Grows Success

**Reid Johnston** of Second Spring Farm (in Leelanau County) held down costs by starting small, farming just two acres of rented land. “History tells us that debt has destroyed farmers,” said Johnston. “That’s why I’m being frugal.” Using this approach, he saved enough money over two years to purchase two tractors, a box truck, and a cooler.

This year, Johnston is growing more than 30 organic crops to be sold at local farmers’ markets. And his *Isa Brown* chickens produce two dozen organic eggs per week, some of which the **Fresh Food Partnership** purchased for donation to the **Empire Food Pantry** last winter. The timing was particularly helpful to Johnston since much of his clientele goes south for the winter.

Another challenge for new farmers is acquiring land, which can cost \$5,000 to \$10,000 per acre in Leelanau County. Oftentimes, too, land is priced to attract developers rather than farmers. According to Johnston, “More people need to be aware that land should not sit idle. It should be used for growing crops.”

Despite the challenges, there are many joys associated with farming. Reid Johnston loves being self-sufficient, serving as his own boss, and figuring out problems. “It’s just like ‘Pa’ said in the Laura Ingalls Wilder books: ‘When you’re farming, you’re free.’”

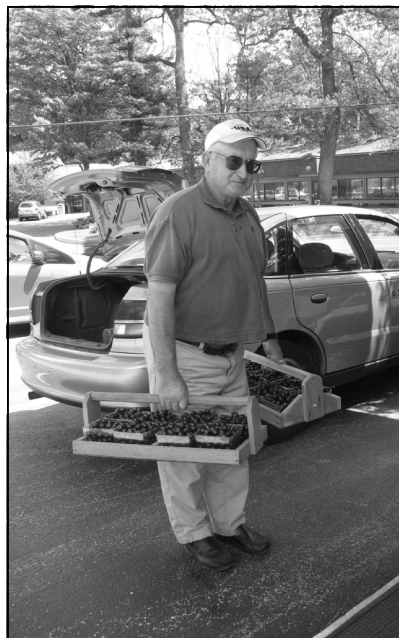


photo by Michael Senger

**Farmer Reid Johnston**

## Making a Difference in the Local Agricultural Economy

*Fresh Food Partnership Assists Mid-Sized Farm in Finding a Market.*



**Farmer Tom Korson**  
delivering strawberries

Tom Korson of the **Picked Today Freshness** farm is a third generation farmer from Leelanau County. Tom has been supplying the **Fresh Food Partnership** with his strawberries, cherries, apples and potatoes that he is able to store through the winter. While his brother Martin runs the original family farm, Tom has been running a farm that he purchased from a neighbor in 1965. His 400-acre farm is one of the endangered “mid-sized” farms that have experienced a 32% decline in Michigan during the past decade.

Korson describes his biggest challenge as marketing. “We can grow it. Selling it is the big thing. Area grocery stores want big quantities. It’s more of a burden for a grocery store produce manager to have to call several farmers instead of making one call.” When asked what one of his biggest markets is, he replies, “the **Fresh Food Partnership** with my potatoes.” Does either of his two sons who currently work as an engineer and insurance agency employee want to take over the family farm? “Maybe,” he says, “I keep telling them they have cheated me out of another year of retirement.”

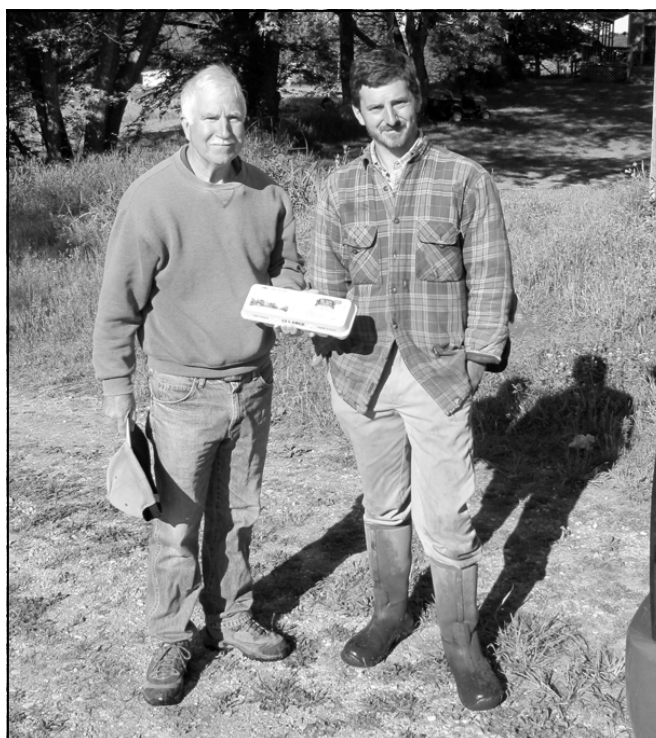
While Korson waits for one of his sons to hopefully take over the farm, Hansen Foods of Suttons Bay is one local grocery store that has been actively working to promote Korson and other local growers’ produce. “I try to buy as much locally grown produce as I can get. Weather, variety and availability are the challenges,” says Jim Smith, Hansen’s produce manager, but when it’s in season, people prefer the locally grown. The produce is picked when ripe and makes it to our store sometimes within an hour.” Hansen runs ads with farmer names and Hansen’s local food section displays photos of the farmers, including Tom Korson to promote name recognition and branding.

## Empire Pantry Eases Tough Times

When **Bill Meserve**, Food Manager of the **Empire Food Pantry**, removed his baseball cap and began talking about the work of the pantry, his eyes sparkled. “Before I retired, I never took a break from working to volunteer,” he said. Now, Bill volunteers several hours per week picking up and delivering cases of food, stocking pantry shelves, distributing food to clients, and maintaining pantry records.

The Empire Food Pantry serves 16-17 families per week during the summer and 20-24 per week during the winter. Because the economy is so tough, the pantry now serves two to three times as many clients as two years ago. “Younger clientele, too,” said Meserve.

Locally grown fresh food from the **Fresh Food Partnership** is a special treat. “At first, folks weren’t too sure what to do with the fresh food,” Bill said. “They were used to canned. But now all the fresh food that comes in goes out. And Reid Johnston’s organic eggs are snapped up as soon as they arrive. People love them! We distributed 25 dozen last month.” Bill paused to reflect, his eyes gleaming. “You can’t imagine how rewarding it is to do this work.”



**Bill Meserve of the Empire Food Pantry with Farmer Reid Johnston.**

**Five area churches support the Empire Pantry:** Empire United Methodist, St. Philip Neri, Bethlehem Lutheran, Glen Arbor First Church of Christ-Scientist, and Glen Lake Community Reformed Church. Four church volunteers staff the pantry each week, which is open Thursdays 5:00-6:30 pm.



## RETURN SERVICE REQUESTED



**Purchasing locally grown fresh foods to serve people in need.**

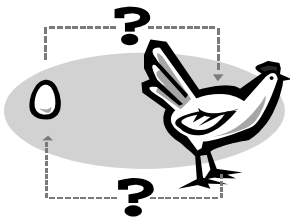
Send to:

**Partners:**

LIAA  
Michigan State University—Extension  
Northwest Michigan Community Action Agency  
Traverse City Area Chamber of Commerce  
United Way of Northwest Michigan

**Thank You to all of our donors and dedicated volunteers who help our communities by making this program possible**

### Food for Thought: *Conventionally Caged versus Pastured and Organic Eggs*



Studies show that it is better to consume eggs from pastured chickens than from conventionally caged birds. A 2005 Polish study concluded that free-roaming hens given organic

feed produced eggs that were significantly better in three respects: white index, yolk index and pH of yolk. In addition, 64% of eggs from hens raised organically, but only 38% of eggs from hens raised conventionally, met standards for Class A rating.

The *Mother Earth News Egg Testing Project* (2007) concluded that eggs produced by hens raised on pasture were superior to most eggs currently sold in supermarkets. Compared to conventional eggs, those from free-range hens had less of the “bad stuff”:

- 1/3 less cholesterol
- 1/4 less saturated fat

**One of Reid Johnston’s organic Isa Brown chickens**

These eggs also had more of the “good stuff”:

- 2/3 more vitamin A
- 2 times more omega-3 fatty acids
- 3 times more vitamin E
- 7 times more beta carotene

**Now that’s some food for thought!**



Photo by Michael Senger