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CROSSROADS OF AGRICULTURE ; A PHILANTHROPIC FOUNDATION'S VISION OF PRESERVING OPEN SPACE WHILE CREATING A THRIVING INCUBATOR FOR CUTTING-EDGE FARMING TECHNIQUES IS BEGINNING TO YIELD RESULTS.

July 25, 2004
Portland Press Herald

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Agriculture faces an uncertain future in fast-growing Cumberland County, where the number of farms and amount of cultivated acreage are falling to suburban sprawl and rural house lots. But in the rolling fields and forest between Portland and Lewiston-Auburn, agriculture is undergoing an unexpected revival. Among the developments: Workers at Gillespie Farms are tending pumpkins, corn, strawberries, peas and tomatoes, on 106 acres of prime farmland eyed last year by home builders.

Cows are grazing in the grass at Collyer Brook Farm, on pasture that will expand next year to support hundreds of head of cattle raised for natural beef.

University interns are assisting in an innovative embryo transplant venture with black angus beef cattle at Wilsendale Farm, a venture that holds the potential for a lucrative return on investment.

Rows of tomatoes are hanging from vines that reach to the ceiling of a 140-foot-long hydroponic greenhouse, fed by computer-controlled drip tubes of nutrient-rich water.

Add to these activities a research project to create a better strain of sheep, a planned cheese factory and a new farmstand selling \$800 a week in local produce.

All these ventures are owned by Pineland Farm Inc., a subsidiary of the nonprofit Libra Foundation.

Portland-based Libra uses its wealth to spur economic development. The foundation is perhaps best known for helping to re-energize downtown Portland in the 1990s. And over the past five years, Libra has been transforming the former state-owned Pineland Center into a growing business campus.

The original Pineland complex contained two working farms, and Libra has made them into a dairy, sheep and organic egg operation. But now the city slickers from Portland are getting their dress shoes dusty in the surrounding countryside. They are expanding their vision of farming to boost Maine's rural economy and preserve open space, on the doorstep of the state's largest city.

In the past three years, Libra has purchased eight other farms and assembled a total of 3,000 acres of land in New Gloucester, Gray and Pownal. While much of the land is wooded, roughly 1,000 of the total acres are in some form of agricultural production, making Pineland Farms among the largest farms in southern Maine. More than 50 people are employed in the farm operations, and another 50 or so do work through

subcontractors.

QUALITY EVIDENT

Backed by a large endowment, Libra doesn't scrimp on its ventures, and the transformation of Pineland hasn't been done on the cheap. The foundation has invested more than \$60 million in the overall project, although it won't say how much of that is farm-related.

A visit to Pineland Farms makes clear, however, that Libra has pursued its farming ventures with the idea of making them national models. No question, Pineland Farms is a showcase.

Miles of white-plastic fencing and manicured fields make the properties look more like a country club than a farm. The \$750,000 hydroponic greenhouse can produce 2,500 pounds of tomatoes each week. The numerous animal barns appear more comfortable than the structures many rural Mainers call home.

The scope of Libra's agriculture initiative has apparently generated some buzz in Maine's farming community, prompting comments about the rich foundation that's buying up the countryside to make fussy hobby farms. But farmers who are benefiting from Libra's golden touch say that's the wrong point of view.

"There may be some people who feel that way, but they're shortsighted," said Erick Jensen, manager at Wolfe's Neck Farm in Freeport. "The fact is, they have the resources to do this. The state can't do it. (The cooperative) extension can't do it. The farming community should embrace this, because this is terrific."

BEEF VENTURE AT WOLFE'S NECK

Wolfe's Neck Farm is a case in point.

Two years ago, the farm expanded its natural-beef production to meet growing consumer demand. The pesticide- and hormone-free beef is sold at Hannaford supermarkets and other outlets. The farm is now selling 140,000 pounds a week and grossing \$7 million a year. The meat has become so popular that Wolfe's Neck can't get enough from Maine cattle farmers, and must go as far as Pennsylvania and New York for its supply.

Pineland Farms is helping out this summer by grazing 40 cattle. Next year, 200 to 300 cattle will be living at Collyer Brook Farm, 480 acres of pasture and woods adjacent to Pineland that Libra recently purchased. Libra also is supporting the beef project with a \$125,000 grant to help pay for staff and business equipment, as well as sharing two agricultural interns from the University of Maine and University of Michigan.

"They're really helping us succeed," Jensen said of Libra.

A few miles north on the Gray-New Gloucester town line, corn, pumpkins, tomatoes and other crops are spread out across 106 acres of flat, fertile farmland. A year ago, a developer approached the Gillespie family about selling the land for house lots. Libra became aware that the farm might go on the market and made an offer.

"We didn't want it to be house lots," said Greg Gillespie, the farm's manager. "And if we sold it to a developer, we wouldn't have a job. We sold it to Libra and we still have a job."

The farm now employs Gillespie and his father, along with another worker and eight Jamician laborers who live on the farm during the growing season. The farm has expanded its sales to the Libra-owned Portland Public Market, where it also has an all-organic stand. Gillespie also sells at a new farmstand in a barn on Route 231, at Pineland Farms. Libra's purchase also may help the farm extend its growing season, Gillespie said, by building a greenhouse to start cool-weather crops.

Libra's interest in farming has evolved over time, according to Owen Wells, the foundation's president.

DAIRY STRATEGY IN PLACE

The foundation has had an ongoing interest in land preservation. The purchase of Pineland made trustees increasingly aware that southern Maine still has large tracts of open space, and that one way to keep them

from being developed is to make them productive through agriculture. That's become increasingly difficult for farmers, Wells noted. One example is low milk prices that have pushed so many dairy farms out of business.

That's why Libra is moving ahead with plans to open a cheese factory next year that will use milk from Pineland Farms, and eventually, area herds. It's why the foundation agreed to build an innovative greenhouse to help a local farmer grow high-value tomatoes using hydroponic techniques. It's the motivation behind genetic research through embryo transplants to improve the prices for black angus beef cattle at Wilsondale Farm.

Farm economics is also behind another research effort at Wilsondale Farm, taking shape in a turnout occupied by cream-colored sheep that look like they've just been shorn. But these sheep don't grow a fleece. They're Northeast Katahdin Hair Sheep, a breed prized for its meat. Because lamb prices are rising and wool prices are down, the Katahdin breed could be more profitable to breeders.

Pineland Farms is working with the University of Maine and Bowdoin College on a cross-breeding project to improve the strain. The project, which also is under way with a flock in Buxton, is being financed in part by the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

"Pineland Farms sees it as a potential for other farmers," said Richard Brzozowski, an educator at the university's Cooperative Extension and a co-director of the Katahdin project.

In October, sheep and goat breeders in Maine are meeting at Pineland for a conference on better ways to sell their products. Pineland Farms is helping sponsor the event.

GETTING THE WORD OUT

Most Maine farmers probably don't realize what's happening at Pineland Farms, Brzozowski said, and he'd like more farmers to visit. He acknowledged that the state university, strapped with budget problems, can't match the facilities being developed at Pineland. A year ago, Brzozowski took university instructors and extension specialists on a tour around the farm to pique their interest in doing research there.

"Pineland's got the facilities, we've got the scientists," he said. "I'd like to see that partnership."

For all the activity under way or planned at Pineland Farms, the complex still has a relatively low public profile. That could change in the near future. Libra has hired a consultant to find more ways to promote tours, education, tenant farming and research at the farm.

In Vermont, Shelburne Farms is a 1,400-acre working farm with a dairy, cheddar-making plant and lakeside inn. The nonprofit center is supported by membership and revenues, and visited by more than 100,000 people a year.

Wells has toured and studied Shelburne Farms. He says Pineland Farms may have an even greater potential to attract tourists and local residents. It can become a destination that will promote Maine agriculture on many levels, he said, fulfilling a twin mission of land preservation and economic development in the growing shadows of the state's two largest urban areas.

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