

THE FOOD COMMUNITY

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The Food Community

We are interested in the Food Community because it represents a high proportion of land use within Suffolk and accounts for a disproportionately large amount of employment within the county.

Arguably, the food community is already starting to feel the effects of disruptive climate change and is about to start to feel the impact of peak oil.

And yet, food is one of those key resources that are likely to become more scarce as we move into the next decade.

This will result in an unusual situation where there are great threats to the food community at the same time as great opportunities presenting themselves.



Climate Change

Arguably, we are starting to see the first manifestations of disruptive climate change in a combination of drought, intense storms, and flash flooding. These could worsen out to 2030.

Current land use patterns are based upon the continued weather patterns that were evident in the middle of the 20th Century.

It could be argued that we are in a transition period from one climate to another and that our land use patterns have yet to reflect this new reality.

‘Business as usual’ is not really an option because it presumes that water is more readily available than it is and that soil erosion rates will be lower than the potentially could be.

Bio-tech may provide some answers to these problems, but it is likely that farming will see some radical changes in the next 20 years.



Peak Oil

Current farming methods are heavily dependent upon oil for the twin inputs of fertilisers derived from oil products and as a source of power on the modern mechanised farm.

It is quite likely that the price of oil will be significantly higher than it is today over the course of the next twenty years.

This calls into question the sustainability of modern farming methods as we currently know them.

It is quite likely that we shall see the reduction of food supply chains and the elimination of much of complexity within the supply chain as the cost of transportation for low value, high bulk, items rises substantially.

Arguably, we are seeing the early stages of this development today as the haulage business is affected by the rising cost of diesel.



Rising Population

Against a backdrop of rising global population, the population of Suffolk is set to increase relative to national population in the coming twenty years.

Much of this increase in population originates from inward migration into the county from other areas of the UK – predominantly from London and South East England.

If the farming model in Suffolk were to become less mechanised and more labour intensive, then there is the prospect for even greater inward migration into the county, mainly from the A8 nations.

In both cases, not only the size but also the composition of the population of Suffolk is likely to change considerably.

Feeding a larger and more diverse population in Suffolk could become a major challenge out to 2030.



Changing Expectations

Broadly speaking, and with notable exceptions, we can expect the continued rise in living standards in Suffolk over the next twenty years.

This normally has an impact upon what we expect to eat. As prosperity increases, diets move away from grains to meat, and from the more mundane to the more exotic.

We are likely to see the desire for a greater choice of foods, available to purchase at unseasonable times of year, and available on demand.

We can question the ability of the food supply chain to be able to satisfy this demand.

It is more likely that we shall see the shortening and simplification of supply chains, leading to the narrowing of choice and increasing the cost of foods. 'Luxury' foods are likely to command a very high premium.



The Threats

The principal threat to the food community is through the disruption of the food supply chain emanating from three sources.

1. Disruptive climate change has the potential to lower crop yields so that the amount of food extracted per acre falls.
2. The rising cost of oil associated with its production peak will increase the cost of farming, leading to the bankruptcy of the more marginal producers.
3. The rising cost of oil associated with its production peak will act to shorten and simplify the food distribution chain, reducing choice and increasing the cost to the consumer.

The threats are likely to manifest themselves in rising food costs, falling crop production, and increased food poverty.



The Opportunities

Whilst we would not want to underplay the threats to food security, we also have to acknowledge a number of opportunities likely to arise:

1. Suffolk is very well placed to capitalise upon a renewed bio-tech revolution that could be associated with food shortages.
2. Rising food prices are likely to increase the incomes of the food producers and processors in Suffolk, particularly if rising prices lead to the capacity to increase yields per acre.
3. Any disruption to the global food supply chain is likely to enhance the value of food that is locally sourced within the county.

The opportunities revolve around the potential income effect of increasing yields of crops that command increasing prices.



A Synthesis

It is difficult to foresee exactly where the balance of advantage will fall. On the one hand, the cost of food production and distribution is likely to rise, but then so are the potential yields and crop prices.

There is a question of equity tucked into this view. All producers of food are consumers of food, but not all consumers are producers. There is the potential for a wealth transfer away from consumers of food to its producers.

There is a financial incentive for the number of producers of food to increase through the greater use of urban land resources (allotments, open sources food production, vertical farming, and so on).

This is one area in which policy makers could take the lead – in fostering a greater deal of food resilience.



Where Next For The Project?

