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Life after irene, we're never giving up

by Abby Luby

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Great floods mark history. Indelible, they cling to personal memory, passed down through generations, each account replaying the devastation--extreme water levels, uprooted forests and orchards, deluged swamps, fields becoming lakes, roads turning into rivers--and the lives of families, communities and businesses drastically changed.

Late last summer, Hurricane Irene claimed its place as one of the most destructive storms in this century or the last. On its heels, Irene was quickly chased by the torrential rains of Tropical Storm Lee. The storms dealt a one-two punch to the Hudson Valley, hitting farmers hardest because they swept through at the peak of the harvest. Sprawling fields of ripe vegetables disappeared under vast stretches of water, access roads and culverts became torrents, and picturesque brooks and rivulets became raging, boulder-rolling rivers. Vegetables and fruits were either saturated or drowned--most of those that could be rescued suffered from rot. Farmers, poised for the busiest time of year, found their lives at a standstill.

Now, months later and looking back, Hudson Valley farmers and the communities they serve have rallied, dealt with the crisis and persevered. But it wasn't easy. Amy Hepworth, along with her sisters Gail Hepworth and Gerry Greco, are the seventh generation owning farmland on each side of Route 9W and bordering on the Hudson River. In the wake of Irene, Hepworth's farm roads flooded for three weeks, cutting off access to the fields.

Just before Irene hit, Amy Hepworth was getting ready to pick the 117 varieties of tomatoes she planted on her 50 acres. Cumulatively, the rows of tomatoes added up to roughly 50 miles. "Tomatoes have an 80- to 90-day plant time before harvest," Hepworth says. "With 27 inches of rain in 17 days, the end of the season came up one month short."

"We lost over one month's worth of income and could only keep 20 of our 40 laborers," Hepworth recalls. "But in our recovery effort, you just get up, determined that it's not going to bring you down."

Because of massive flooding, Hepworth's staff plodded through the fields in the rain, pulling up the tomato plants one by one, attempting to salvage what they could. "We tried to rescue the tomatoes--especially the cherry tomatoes--before they cracked."

In New Paltz, north of Hepworth's farm, Pete Taliaferro watched as 17 acres were swept away and dissolved into the Walkkill River.

In the spirit

"It was trying for me," Taliaferro says. "I'm here to grow food to support my farm and my family and I couldn't do anything. It was depressing. You'd try to work but it was an uphill battle against the weather and you just gave up."

Feeding fido

Honey, I shrunk the farm

Taliaferro believes Hudson Valley farmers are a tough bunch. "You have to be rugged to be a farmer--you have to have a thick hide. Most of us are going to wiggle through this, but it does pay to have people patting you on the back while you're going through something like this. You can't do this alone."

Health food goes mainstream

Farm (to processor) to table

Chefs in shape

Farmers get fracked

One of the things that saved Taliaferro and other farmers who suffered severe losses was the outpouring of moral and financial support from their communities, patrons of farmers' markets, dedicated CSA members and those frequenting road side stands. Groups quickly organized fundraisers and concerts expressly to help Hudson Valley farmers. Several thousand dollars were collected at the Hastings Farmers' Market. One initial fundraiser at the New Paltz Water Street Market brought in \$11,000; a day-long concert in October brought in triple that amount.

Branding the region

Bringing it all back home

Catering's grande dame

In the Pine Island black dirt region, the Warwick Valley Farm Aid Benefit, a community-wide effort included various businesses, artists and performers. "A Facebook page about needing farm aid went up in a day and a website in two days," says Cheryl Rogowski of W. Rogowski Farms in Pine Island. "The tag line was 'Feeding Those Who Feed Us.'"

Beer gone bookish

A Tour de France in the Hudson Valley

Rogowski suffered 80 acres of crop loss, including 15 acres of pumpkins, squashes, potatoes, sweet corn, peppers and tomatoes. "We also lost all kinds of greens and 1,500 gladiola bulbs just starting to bloom. It was like going through a death, then mourning and grieving. Now we get to rebuild."

A short history of wheat

A worthy princess

The Warwick benefit raised \$25,000, which was divided among 43 black dirt farmers. The effort, in turn, helped local businesses. Rogowski says special T-shirts made by a local store were fully sponsored by businesses and completely sold out, raising \$20,000. "The connectivity between the land and the people--it just makes you realize the wealth that is here and how it resonates in the land," she concludes.

A boulangerie on the hudson

Farmers were also there for each other; if one lost fruits or pumpkins, others who could salvage part of their harvest sold them part of the crop, mostly at a discount. "Farmers are very quick to help one another because we work toward a common goal," says Tom Hahn, of Hahn Farms in Salt Point. The Hahn family has owned their farm for over 200 years. "We all understand each other's plight," Hahn stresses, "and we all know where we are coming from."

Hahn's biggest loss was in hay, which needs long days of sunshine to grow. The days preceding Irene (in fact, much of the summer) was uncommonly rainy and cloudy and slowed crop growth. Hahn estimates he lost about \$20,000 worth of hay sales.

"We've been hurt, but haven't been staggered. You keep on working every day. Our best customers keep coming to the farm. We're not waiting for handouts."

Handouts materialized in the form of government monies. State aid for disaster relief was quickly dispersed to county agriculture departments who were inundated with requests and applications, many from farmers who rarely sought help otherwise. Some applications were straightforward; others more complicated. In the end, some farmers found they were ineligible for the aid. "The money was exclusively for land repairs, washed-out roads and debris removal from fields," explains Kevin Sumner, district manager of the Orange County Soil and Water District. "It didn't involve reimbursement payments for crop losses."

Crop reimbursement would have helped Jack Schoonmaker who, with his two sons David and Daniel, owns the historic Saunderskill Farm in Accord. Schoonmaker says his farm's crop loss amounted to about one-third of their annual income.

"We're guessing we lost about 50 percent of our normal crop that grew on 130 acres which included sweet corn, pumpkins and tomatoes," Schoonmaker explains. "The investment in the crops is much more expensive than it was years ago because of products like fertilizers. Then there's labor and insurance."

David Schoonmaker quickly went online after the hurricane and applied to the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), hoping for disaster relief funds. "The FEMA guy called the very next day and said he would meet with us immediately. We were very hopeful. But when I told him we were a business, he said we wouldn't qualify--the federal money was only for homeowners."

The Schoonmakers already had harvested some of their crops before Irene. "What would have been left of the harvest was ours, what we live on," David Schoonmaker says. "All

bills were paid. Now we have to borrow to buy materials for next year, which means refinancing our mortgage so we can spread the loss over a five-year period."

In late October, a bill passed in the Senate asking for \$40 million to help farmers recover from Irene and Lee. The bill passed in the Senate, but a different version passed in the House, delaying the bill from becoming a law. Also, the New York State Energy Research and Development Authority set up a \$5 million fund for farmers who lost equipment or other infrastructure.

Steven Bates, co-manager of the Cold Spring Farmer's Market, says after Irene and Lee, shoppers were anxious to talk to the farmers to see how they were doing. "When you listened to people talk to the farmers, it was like they were speaking to their aunt. People were much more accepting of any irregularities--it reflects their awareness of how heroic our farmers are in many ways."

Bates said the Saturday morning market was open on the day Irene hit. "We adjusted the shopping time around the weather and we opened the following Saturday. We never closed."

Other farmers juggled their CSA supplies by staggering deliveries to ensure everyone got some food, even if it was limited. Rogowski put her more affluent CSAs on hold while she made sure the low-income CSAs in the Bronx and Brooklyn got a minimum of essential foods. "We tried to supply foods that had substance and that they could cook with," she says, "like onions, beans and greens." Rogowski added that everyone they dealt with was encouraging and supportive. "My sister delivered produce in the Bronx and a woman who wasn't a member of the CSA handed her a \$20 bill and said 'Use this for gas.'"

Rogowski also purchased vegetables from other farmers to sell at the green markets as did the Schoonmakers, who bought plums and pumpkins to sell in their roadside market and eatery. "We also extended our greenhouse season which helped," David Schoonmaker notes. "We have 15 greenhouses, equal to about one-and-a-half acres."

While farmers attempted to cope with the recovery, local news sensationalized their reports early on with "gloom and doom," a constant theme many farmers criticized. Some farmers were especially incensed when newspapers printed the amounts awarded by the state to specific farms. Others feared the same stories would scare away customers.

"There was one picture of me standing in my pumpkin fields with floating pumpkins," Hahn says. He was able to retrieve many pumpkins and sell them at his roadside stand. "The word went around that we didn't have pumpkins--that we were wiped out--and people stayed away for two or three weeks. Now, we've rebounded and are running about the same as this time last year."

When the waters receded and the land began to dry, farmers tackled the debris in their fields. Taliaferro had a reserve of seeds that he planted directly in the ground for late fall crops to have by September. In his October letter to his CSA members, Taliaferro was emphatic with thanks for their support and patience. "We put our backsides on the line every season to grow food and it is great to know that [the community] has our back. God bless you all."

Rogowski planted greens in her high tunnels. The greens were harvested 30 days after planting. She sees Hurricane Irene as a catalyst for innovative farming methods. "The timing seems right to explore farming practices like bio-dynamic and permaculture farming. It's really very exciting."

Generally, farmers didn't miss a beat preparing for the 2012 season: Fields were cleared; seeds and equipment were ordered; carrots, spinach and onions were planted for overwintering. "A key factor to farming--there's always next year," Hepworth says. "The earth has the ability to heal and it inherently comes back. You learn how to adapt. Once we're in it, we're never giving up."

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