

Prison Farming Programs in Maine Harry DiPrinzio, 2018

My research this summer focused on the history and operation of farming programs in Maine correctional facilities. There are programs at a number of facilities across the state including the state's five primary prisons and I was interested in what these programs are and how, when and why they came to be. I was particularly interested in the ways in which the purpose and function of these programs been conceived, measured and assessed by prison and state officials over the courses of their operation. My research methods included interviews with corrections department staff, visits to the locations, as well as secondary and primary source written material, such as prison annual reports.

I focused the majority of my research on the Bolduc Correctional Facility, a minimum-security facility in Thomaston, Maine, which sits on a farm of more than ten acres and which has the oldest farming program in the Maine correctional system. Over the course of two visits to the facility I learned about the scope of their operations, which include many acres of cultivation, a fleet of rescue horses maintained for the Dept. of Agriculture, and a herd of Belted Galloway Cows.

The farm's operations have significantly decreased since its inception in 1930, when it comprised over 30 acres of land. Over the course of this history, the farm has variously had a chicken and turkey facility, a herd of pigs and a dairy barn, all of which are now gone. While the farm program at the Bolduc facility was started over 80 years ago, I found that the development of correctional farming programs is still in progress across the state. The Maine State Prison, (MSP) just up the road from the Bolduc facility, is in its second year of a garden program. The facility has torn up almost all of the grass within the confines of its fences to plant vegetables and is in the process of transitioning its robust flower program into a garden program as well as developing an extensive composting system to be used in conjunction with the gardens.

I found that the farming programs serve a multi-faceted purpose for the facilities and system within which they exist. Lacking any significant funding source, the programs serve a budgetary purpose, providing food for the inmates in the facilities at a savings to the facilities in addition to re-routing costly waste streams into increased agricultural yield. But the programs are not simply economically motivated. The programs are intended to be an engaging and rewarding learning experience for the few prisoners who get to work on them. At the MSP, they hope to employ 20 inmates (of 900 total). At the Bolduc facility 10-15 inmates per day work on the farm. These jobs are coveted in the prisons, because of the freedom they afford prisoners, because of the working conditions compare favorably to other jobs available. In addition, many prisoners enjoy working on the farm because they find the process of caring for crops and animals and cultivating food for their own and other prisoner's consumption inherently rewarding.

Upon seeing the operations of these programs up close, these programs appear to be a little-known good within a system that is widely regarded to be broken. As my research continues, I am interested in plotting the extent of similar programs across the nation. I am also interested in the ways in which these Maine programs could serve as an easily-implementable model for new programs elsewhere, as well as in understanding the conditions which would allow for such a development.

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