The CVNP Countryside Initiative

Cuyahoga Valley National Park (CVNP) was established in 1974 near Cleveland, Ohio, for the purpose of “preserving and protecting for public use and enjoyment the historic, scenic, natural, and recreational values of the Cuyahoga River and adjacent lands of the Cuyahoga Valley”. The park’s founders intended the park “to prevent the disappearance of the rural landscape and rural character of the Valley”. Yet there existed no tradition within the National Park Service of ascribing worth or value to things agricultural in the same manner as, say, wilderness, seascapes, or battlefields – and, hence, relatively little was accomplished during CVNP’s first 25 years to actually preserve and protect the Valley’s agricultural heritage and resources.

In 1999, Cuyahoga Valley Countryside Conservancy (CVCC) was created as a private, nonprofit partner to help CVNP conceptualize and manage a program for rehabilitating and revitalizing the old farms surviving within park boundaries. The remains of approximately 85 farms were assessed, and 20+ were designated for stabilization and rehabilitation. In 2009, eleven farms will be operational once again, and a 12th will be offered for long term lease. Funding to rehabilitate at least two additional farms is also in place.

This program, known as the Countryside Initiative, has confronted a variety of complex and sometimes controversial issues. Among them are the common (American) perception that people do not live, work, or farm in parks; modern agribusiness’ disdain for “little old farms”; and some environmentalists’ view that modern agriculture is inherently harmful, and inappropriate in a National Park. Many activities in National Parks are constrained by elaborate historic preservation and environmental compliance regulations. Short term tenure mechanisms discourage private capital investment as well as long-term stewardship. And, the placing of public lands in private hands “for profit” raises other potential red flags.

Such challenges have been addressed through a program of competitive proposals for long-term leases of up to 60 years, fair market value rent, carefully stipulated responsibilities for both lessor and lessee, and a clear conceptual framework for appropriate types of farming. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, the Countryside Initiative relies on innovative three fold partnerships which draw on the distinctive strengths and resources of government (CVNP), the business sector (farmers), and the cultural sector (CVCC).