

Clifford Scholz: Hello, this is the Farms for Tomorrow podcast and I am your host Cliff Scholz. I'm here today with organic no-till farmer Eric Kampe. Eric started the Ann Arbor Seed Company in 2012 and in 2020 helped launch the Green Things Farm Collective with four other farmers here in Southeast Michigan.

We'll be talking today about what it takes to break into farming and the changes he's made along the way to be able to keep farming.

Welcome Eric! So, if someone is thinking about setting up a farm, what are the most important considerations?

Eric Kampe: I was trying to organize in my mind some of the components that go into setting up a new farm and some of the things that people get taken by surprise.

It came into these four areas. They're different and all important. One is access to land.

That seems pretty obvious. But it comes with all of its challenges. And then the other would be actually rehabilitating that land. And they seem like maybe they're the same. But they're really quite different.

Because when you're accessing land, you're looking for something you could afford. You're looking for something close to your market. You're looking for something that's going to fit with your plans for your farm and your life. And then it's almost a certainty that the land that you end up with will be marginal, for whatever reason.

It'll be marginal because it's been damaged by irresponsible farming or conventional extraction-based agriculture. Or it'll be damaged because it was maybe never suitable for farmland in the first place.

These kinds of land is what's available. I would be pretty surprised to learn of a new farmer with the resources to get something that's just really high-quality land. All the good stuff's being used. And high-quality land is in terms of soil quality and ecosystem quality, but it's also closeness to your market and accessibility.

And so, that's two things, both of them are very central to the land that you're farming. The other two would be all the things that people think of when they think of farming, which is all the techniques of farming.

How do you grow your crop? How you grow that crop or raise that animal? And that's infinitely complicated and varied. And then the last piece, which may be the most important of them, is marketing.

If you're a commodity crop grower, maybe you're just taking grain to the mill. But the small farms, the small farms that I interact with, they're making their own markets. And they have to for price and viability reasons. You need to distinguish yourself as unique. You need to show why your produce is of a high quality, why it's worth paying someone a living wage to produce it. While your competitors, maybe competitors isn't even the right term other farm activities, are producing produce-like items without paying their workers a living wage and without caring for the land.

Just the pursuit of farming and marketing is vastly complicated. That's been my experience as a new farmer here in Washtenaw County and a lot of my peers they throw their whole heart, soul, and effort into growing crops and marketing crops.

And that's all you got. And then you're blindsided when years down the line you realize, "You know what? Everything's just been an uphill battle because the ecosystem of the soil is of a poor quality." And it needs

investment. It needs significant not only financial investment but time investment and investment of knowledge. It's not something that a beginner may know. Like we know how to go from Point A to Point B. How do you improve the soil? And it's not a one-size-fits-all solution. It's going to depend on your conditions. And all of this is impossible if you don't have access to land in the first place. And being able to afford land or to find land that you can rent can be really challenging for folks.

Clifford Scholz: Given the fact that many new farmers have access to damaged soils and damaged land, land that either never was good for farming or wasn't very good for farming or land that has been damaged by what you call irresponsible farming, what are some of the things that you see working for people in your farming community to pull that level up so that they don't have as much work to do?

Eric Kampe: I think it always has to be informed by your location and your space. What I'm seeing in our community is heavy clay soil that's either been mismanaged by conventional agriculture or was such a heavy clay that conventional agriculture wasn't touching it.

For us, our challenge is water. It rains a lot here and the water table can be high. And you can do a lot of tricks to help your crops grow, but if their roots are drowning, if it's in an anaerobic soil condition, they're not going to thrive.

The things that have helped us are building permanent raised beds, having a lot of forethought about the way water interacts with the land and how we can guide it from where it'll do harm to where it won't. And before that's achieved, you're really just resetting it. You're not getting anywhere.

But once the water is mostly manageable, I've been really excited about

the no-till farming philosophies. And our clay soil reacts very poorly to routine disruption from mechanical tillage. I think the soil organic matter is already low. But also it's just such a heavy soil, and it's so prone to compaction, which is related to how it interacts with water, which is back to that problem again.

And many folks incorrectly assume that tillage is helpful for compaction. You might take something that's very compact and till it to make it something that's very fluffy and not compact. But what you're doing is breaking up all the soil aggregates and you're exposing any organic matter in the soil to oxygen, which releases it.

And so, after that initial fluffing of the soil, it settles down harder than ever. That was my experience coming into this ground: "Well, obviously, you have to till it." And you till it and it looks great. And then it dries and hardens into these cinderblocks or just this sheet of heavier than before. And so, "Well, you better till again. You got to keep doing it." And it becomes this frustrating treadmill. It could take a little while to get our heads around all this.

But there's a whole alternative technique that either vastly reduces or eliminates your need for that mechanical tillage. And it mostly involves keeping the soil protected, keeping the soil under mulch or under living plant material.

And without trying to go through the whole technique, we're replacing the necessity of tillage with these creative management techniques. And so, if you had to till to get rid of the weeds, you can get rid of the weeds through smothering them with a dark tarp, or through crimping a cover crop when it will naturally terminate, or through a winter kill process.

Or if you were going to till because you need to reduce compaction there are ways to simulate that in a less destructive manner like using a broad fork, which is a slower way to break up and lift the ground. Or hopefully in a longer term, that's not even necessary. Because you're preserving that soil structure and life.

And then all throughout, the soil is always kept covered. And it's either covered through a mulch that could be straw or leaf or really any plant-based material. Or it could be compost. And that coverage protects the soil. It keeps it from becoming compacted for many different reasons. But it also keeps the weeds from germinating. And it's a material that will decompose and become more soil.

Clifford Scholz: So, how does this affect both your time budget and your economics, your basic, bottom-line farm economics? Because cover cropping, that's basically seed that you're throwing down that you're not harvesting from. So, there's a cost there. I can see the benefits from that. But I also am sure that farmers are going, "Well, why should I plant something that I'm not going to even harvest?"

Eric Kampe: Absolutely. And for that reason, we're not able to do as much cover cropping as we'd really like to. You know, like some kind of dream farm we'd have something like two to three times the space that we need for production so that we're in a cover crop rotation constantly.

But that's not where we're at. We're using every square inch of our suitable production space, because we have a fair amount of acreage, but we have a very limited amount of land that because of the interaction with the water and where we can drain properly. We have a very limited amount of land that we've put in that effort to make productive for produce.

So yeah, we're very tight. And any time we could plant at least a long season cover crop, we could have planted a cash crop. You know, if I could plant an overwinter rye and vetch, I could plant garlic same season. If I can plant a spring oats and peas, I can plant lettuce or any cool weather green.

Clifford Scholz: Do those work as cover crops? As long there's something on the soil does it help with some of those problems?

Eric Kampe: I think it absolutely does. Cover crops are not magic or special. They're simply crops that we choose for the primary use of benefiting our soil rather than the primary use of an economic harvest. And so, lettuce is a plant, and rye is a plant. And if I was trying to grow a plant to use its natural ability to harvest energy from the sun and build soil, they're both doing that.

But rye is such a champion of biomass and it's such a builder. And lettuce is kind of flimsy. But they're both doing it, absolutely. And so, what you're saying about timing and economics is at the absolute heart of a farm trying to build itself as profitable operation.

And at a small scale — I think cover crops deserve a lot of attention — but at a small scale, it makes more economic sense to import carbon in the form of compost or mulch and to have these quicker turnovers so that you can get two or three cash crops out of a single plantable bed space rather than having a longer-term cover crop rotation. And then maybe the longer-term goal is to have enough space for that rotation. I think it just has to match your operation.

Clifford Scholz: You're a long-time seed grower. Is there any possibility for reducing your costs by growing out cover crops to the point where you

can actually harvest and replant in areas where you want to have them?

Eric Kampe: Yes. That's complicated, too. Seed is often cheap. And so, your ability to grow your own seed for your own use. A lot of cover crop seed, if you've got a good small combine handy and you can grow your own cover crop and manage that, there's not going to be any complicated technique needed. You're going to combine that. And then it's ready for use. You don't have to clean it that well. You're just throwing it back in as cover crop seed. But as often as not, you might as well just buy it. And that's something that frustrates me to say as a seed grower.

Because I really do think folks should save more of their own seed. And there is definitely value in having it from your own production. It becomes your baby. It becomes adapted to your techniques and your soil and your region. And it gives you that security.

No one can take that away from you. And that's all valuable. It's one of those things though. It's like, you've got to have the right tool-up. You've got to be able to do it at a scale that makes sense. And after you've paid for all that, you almost, you could just, get it from Albert Lea pretty affordably.

And we're even finding that with some of the seed crops that we grow for sale. Some of it's produced so cheaply on the national market that, like, yeah, I can grow my own seed for arugula, but man, I can't produce it as cheaply by the pound as I can buy it.

And that's crazy to me. That's just one example. Most of the seed that we grow, seed can be pretty explosively productive. And so, if you get a harvest, you usually have such an abundance that it very much is worth your while.

It's just one of those things of we exist in such a complicated agricultural economy. It'd be like a small market gardener growing their own onions. Like, please do. Onions are amazing. I love growing my own onions. Honestly, it's one of my favorite crops. And they're so cheap at the grocery store that sometimes you're just like, "Well, maybe I should just grow tomatoes and herbs and greens that are expensive and lower quality," at the store at least.

Clifford Scholz: This kind of circles us back around to the marketing aspect because local kind of became cachet in the last decade or so. Are you seeing people who will say, "Hey, these onions aren't from California. But I put a value on them specifically because they're from this local grower who I have a relationship with.

Or is there still some value from the customer's perspective that you're kind of sensing through your marketing efforts for crops that might not make as much economic sense just in the narrow sense of price?

Eric Kampe: There absolutely is. And it's all better. Like, an onion isn't an onion, you know. I've become a produce snob since I've been growing my own for so long now. And whenever I have to buy something at the store, even like the fancy stuff, I get so frustrated with it.

An onion is such a humble thing. Like, it's so ubiquitous. It's everywhere. It's a good storage crop. They're not expensive. But yeah, you can grow your own onion that's better. But because of that market reality or whatever, as a salesperson, which we talked about earlier.

That's one of the big pieces. That might be the most important part of a farm. It's a more uphill battle to convince. And we grow onions. And we sell them at market. And people buy them. And they really appreciate

them, maybe it's not the perfect example because it does work in our model. But it's harder to make that marketing pitch.

If we were to go to a fancy business school and take the first intro course lesson on small business, and I said, "Well, I want to grow onions and sell onions."

They would say, "Oh, well, that's great. So, onion is your product. And to come up with a price to market your product, you'll have to understand your inputs and your expenses and your labor and all of your costs to produce that onion. And then come up with a price. And then compare that to what the market will bear."

And what happens so often in agriculture, the "what the market will bear" is the only piece of the equation that anyone pays any attention to. Because, first of all, it's easier. And second of all, they're usually so vastly disconnected, that that's the one you come up with.

It's a goal to have really good records. So you know all of your cost to production. But most small farms haven't had the time to come up with those numbers, or at least really good numbers for that.

And so, when they're selling their onion, they're saying, "Well, you know, this is what we got at the farmer's market. And this is what an organic onion goes for at Whole Foods." With maybe little awareness of really the cost to grow it themselves.

So when I sell an onion am I losing money? It's possible. I don't know, I hope not. It's crazy from a business point of view. I don't want to be no heart and all dollar. But I also want to do this next year.

Because I do love the work of farming and bringing food to our

community. And to continue with that I have to know: am I able to make a living? And am I able to pay my crew enough to keep doing it?

Clifford Scholz: Is there some direction that you're seeing your efforts refocused? You've been doing this since 2012.

Eric Kampe: Hm Hmm. At least on my own.

Clifford Scholz: So, on your own and then recently were incorporated with the Green Things Farm Collective. Is there some trend that as you've followed the pattern of where your sales are going to actually make it possible for, as you say, to farm tomorrow? How have you migrated your business over the years in terms of the marketing aspect of what you're willing to grow and what makes sense to grow?

Eric Kampe: There's a lot of ways to try and answer that question. We went through an exercise last fall that I thought was valuable and interesting, where we had record from all of the crops that we grew. We had gross sales data for them.

And so, we had a spreadsheet. And they were adjusted based on space they took up in the field. So we had dollars per bed. And for us a bed is 250 square feet of growing space. And just there, you've got kind of a ranking of which crop is more profitable per square footage than the others, which is more or less

But we also know that that's an incomplete picture. Some things took an enormous amount of work per square footage, and some things were almost no work at all. Some things were inside a hoop house with all the expenses that involves, and some were out in the field.

Some things take the entire growing season while other crops you could

crop three times during a growing season. And some things bring a great amount of joy to the farmer and some things are a pain. So, with that first economic number, we had five or six other categories that made an attempt at all those other things.

And as a crew we just went through and did a real quick one-to-five, best-to-worst on all of those. And then weighted those and came up with a value for everything. It took a day, which is maybe the right amount.

You know, we all kind of had a headache afterwards. And after doing that though, if it's done well, it should tell you things you already know. Like, if it's done well, you look at the top of the list and you're like, "Yeah, those are all crops that are all kind of slam dunks."

And you go look at the bottom of the list and you're like, "Wow, those are a bunch of stinkers. We knew that already." And so, if you already knew it, why do it? Well, it solidifies that knowledge. And there are a few surprises. And if you have the knowledge more solidified, it really helps you when you're doing your crop planning next year.

Instead of saying like, "Well, I thought that was a stinker." You're like, "Well, I know. And I know it's half as valuable as we thought it should be." And that really helps you say, "Okay, we're going to cut that in half, reduce its size next year." Or, "We're going to cut it entirely." And same with your good ones. You can say, "Oh, man, this is the gem. If our whole farm was this, we'd be great."

Clifford Scholz: Can you give an example of a crop that turned out to be at the top or maybe at the bottom or something that was kind of unexpectedly showed up as a winner that you didn't necessarily know?

Eric Kampe: Yeah. And so, at the top of the list, not a secret with small

produce growers, you have leafy greens. A lot of the summer fruits like tomatoes. Garlic can show up on there. And so, a lot of those were like, “Oh, yeah, we expected that there.”

But we had one that was just stupidly far and away our winner. And it was parsley. And we grew parsley as a cut-and-come-again, which means we planted it in the spring once. And it grew to a harvestable size. And we would cut it, but not kill the plant.

And then it would grow again. And then we’d cut it again. The bottleneck with parsley is we can’t sell as much as we would want to grow. But we grew one bed. And our whole farm is, for scale, our whole farm is something in the neighborhood of, like, 330 to 350 beds.

So, we did one bed of parsley. And a very good crop can get us about \$1,000 on a bed in a season. And we did five grand out of that single parsley bed. And so, we were like, “What the heck? Like, can we please do the whole farm in parsley?”

But that brings us back to marketing. And like, “No, maybe we can do two beds. And I don’t think we can sell ten grand in parsley.”

And so, then at the bottom of the pile, they tend to look like your crops that can get trucked in from bigger farms. And that’s where your onions are. But that’s also where your cabbage is and your potatoes; some of those crops that are easier for medium to medium-large farms to grow and ship around. They’re just less dense.

Like, we did cauliflower and broccoli, which people love. But the spacing of the crop means that we just can’t get as many dollars per square foot out of it. And we love those crops. But they just can’t economically compete with some of the others.

And so, we would reduce the bed space that we're committing to those. A surprise we saw from that was, field tomatoes did quite well. And tomatoes are known to be a profitable crop. But they can be finicky in the field.

Clifford Scholz: Is that unstaked tomatoes? Or how do you define a field tomato?

Eric Kampe: These are ones that were grown outside of the protection of our unheated hoop house. But they were trellised, they were staked and trellised. We did not put a lot of effort or any effort into pruning them. But we did do a Florida weave and we held them up off the ground.

And so, we don't know. Like, did we have just a good year for field tomatoes and it's a fluke? Or did we have kind of a mediocre year in our hoop and that's what evened them out? But it was really interesting to see that our field tomatoes were more profitable than we had guessed.

I think that's all any farm can do is to take some reasonable records and try to improve upon itself every year.

Clifford Scholz: Where is your produce going? Is it going to direct sales? Do you have farmer market stand? Do you have on-farm sales? Wholesaling to restaurants?

Eric Kampe: Yes. All of that. We attend the Ann Arbor Kerrytown Farmer's Market on Saturdays. We'd love to do Wednesdays. But we did not this year. And we didn't do as many Saturdays due to COVID. The farmer's market did a great job of managing it.

But it still was a year to play it safe. We leaned into our farm stand sales this year, which was wonderful. We had a third-party software,

Barn2Door, that was managing a website front end. We could list our products on the website.

Folks could purchase them. And then it was a twice-a-week thing. And we would package up their orders and set it out on the farm stand, which allowed for a safe contact-free exchange. I mean, it doesn't get better than that. It was only handled by our farm crew and set out for you for you to pick up on your own. And honestly, even outside of this COVID pandemic it's a great model for a farm. Because it's a very efficient manner.

And there's several similar packages that assist small farms I guess with the software side of that marketing.

Clifford Scholz: Did other farms in the area use that as well?

Eric Kampe: I'm not 100% sure. This has been an isolating year. And I don't get to have a beer with my neighbor farmers as much as I'd like to. Whether or not they use that exact platform, I know that other local farmers are moving towards online marketing.

And we also have our own CSA. So, it's similar, but it's subscription based. And folks, you know, pay in advance. And then they share in the harvest with us. We've got a few different programs for that. We do restaurant sales, which this was a lean year for that.

But we have some restaurants that have been great allies for a number of years that were able to stick with us. And we really appreciate them. And we are a part of the St. Joe Hospital's collaborative CSA program. And that means that the CSA is managed by The Farm at St. Joe at the hospital there.

But the produce is grown by maybe a dozen different farms. And that aggregation is really, really wonderful. It helps us all provide for a CSA that's bigger than any one single farm could manage.

We have a flower CSA. We have a small herd of beef cattle. It's mostly for soil improvement and managing the grass. But we do get a harvest. And then we have our seed sales, which are sold online and through some partner retailers. It's a big, complex farm.

Clifford Scholz: Yeah, that's a lotta different marketing channels. So, looking forward to 2021 is there anything going to be different that you're going to do this year? And I'm also kind of curious about the seed sales piece. Because my understanding was that in the spring of 2020 there was kind of a boost nationwide in seed sales for home gardeners, which is I am assuming a big chunk of what you're selling to.

Eric Kampe: Yeah. Yeah. So, for 2021, for our produce operation, we're trying to lean into the things that worked and try and streamline. 2020 was our first year as a collaborative operation. And so, we've had a lot to learn from that.

So, I'm really excited to see how our field plan unfolds for next year. We also have to find what is the right scale for our operation. Like, what's the right amount to earn a living for ourselves and our crew? And what's the right amount to balance the workload? And that can be tricky. I think we're going to need to grow a little bit.

And then you asked about seeds. 2020 was a very unique year for seed sales. Basically, right at the time when folks might be planning their gardens, we got a national lockdown order which almost seemed like, "Hey, everyone, stay home and order seeds."

The timing was perfect. Everyone was uncertain about the future. Reasonably, it was and continues to be a scary time. And an oddity, that uncertainty tends to be good for the seed market. And so, as a result of that, the seed companies were swamped.

And a great number of them had to close their stores temporarily to keep up with orders or were running out of stock. Seed sales are divided into seed company, which is the marketing, and a seed grower, which is the growing.

And so, the seed companies, the way they work, is every year they have a projection of like, “Well, this is how much tomato I’m going to sell. So, I’m either growing that myself or more likely from a larger seed company, I’m contracting it out with farmers that I trust.”

And so, these are all deals that are made a year, two years or more in advance. And obviously they would be based on historic sales. And so, when sales increase five-fold in one year, the whole system doesn’t work. And that’s a good problem for everyone selling seeds.

But for a small seed company like mine that doesn’t have the marketing resources, or the history, people were looking for alternatives. And they were finding me. And so, sales were a real boom, which was really appreciated for us. But also since I’m growing 100% of the seeds that I’m selling, I’m not able to tailor my harvest to my expected sales in the same way. Generally, I either have a successful harvest, which is mostly decided by the size of the crop.

And I’m concerned with having a large healthy population for genetic health reasons. And so, when I get a harvest, it’s just vastly more than I need. And so, having just this explosive increase in sales it’s like, “Oh, I

got it.” And now all I have to do is mail it to these people. It was great.

Clifford Scholz: This year I’m wondering if it’s going to be more of the same because we’re still living in a kind of uncertain times. And people who started last year might want to continue this year. Others might want to expand.

Eric Kampe: So far, sales are real strong this year. It’s not going to be as, like, insane as last year. What happened last year is sales were kind of normal. And then we hit March. And it was just this wall. And sales came in like a floodgate was opened.

This year’s looking to be very, very good. Whether it’s going to be better or worse than last year, I couldn’t tell. But it’s going to be a little bit more over the course of the winter, rather than all at once.

Which is honestly very nice. A little bit more manageable. But I’m already hearing from friends of mine at other seed companies that they’re struggling to keep up or even having to temporary shut down. And also, the seed world can’t react quickly.

Because it is built on a foundation of growing seeds, which sometimes takes two years for a crop. And these contracts with farmers are arranged in advance. And so, if last year was crazy, even if that’s the new norm, this year’s going to be crazy because the whole industry’s going to take time to adjust.

And I expect the other seed companies had the same issue as I did when the fall of ‘20 rolled around and we were looking at our inventory and our planning we were like, “Jeez. Like, where is everything?” And it’s a good problem. But you know, you build this multi-year routine of keeping your seeds in stock. And you can’t just reproduce it all in one season real

quickly.

Clifford Scholz: Yeah, clear. The plants don't watch the news reports. And they don't know what we're responding to. So, one more question before we wrap it up for today. You know, community has been an important theme.

Given the situation, you've already mentioned that there have been some challenges in connecting with your fellow farmers. And you've had to overcome some issues in connecting with your customers, sounds like fairly successfully. Anything going forward about community and new approaches to building community that supports your farm?

Eric Kampe: Oh, man. We are missing our ability to easily connect with our neighbors. I mean, I'm sure I'm not alone in that sentiment. You know, in the past we had regular farmer beer nights, where we would get together casually and collaborate, commiserate, share.

You know, in the past we had the Local Food Summit, which was always a real treat. That was, like, one of the last things that happened before the lockdown. I've been getting pretty regular asks, I guess, from the other farmers in the area saying, "Hey, let's get the beer night going. Or can we do something? Can we do it over Zoom or whatever?"

And I've felt real kind of shy about that. I don't want to put my community at risk, with any face-to-face interaction. And I personally don't like this over the computer.

It's awkward for me. I don't know what to say or do. And so I'm kind of just waiting. But you're absolutely right. There's a lotta need. And I think there's need for organization beyond the go-it-alone, cowboy attitude.

We need more farmers. We need more gardeners. We need more seed savers. And if that means people striking off on their own path and starting their own organizations, I'm all for that. I love it. But I think there's this next level that is going to require organizing.

When folks ask me, "Oh, can the farmers in the area feed the community?" And the answer is, "Yes, but not as we are." We saw the slice of the food market that goes to local farms increase dramatically this past year, and interest increased dramatically.

And I couldn't guess just a number. But it feels to me like it went from half of a percent to one and a half percent. And so, the calorie needs of the community are not being fed by our small farms.

Because the system that's in place is just inadequate. There's just not enough of us. But there's also not a way for us to easily aggregate our product. There's not a way. There's a lotta just barriers between the tiny, tiny, which is our small local farms, and then mega, mega huge.

They're so different. This conversation could go in a million different directions, you know. Processing meat animals is impossible or very difficult. The economics of grain and storing, aggregating, you know.

Clifford Scholz: You're talking about scale here. For an individual who's got five heads of cattle that they want to get to market, it's difficult.

Eric Kampe: Yeah.

Clifford Scholz: Yeah. I see.

Eric Kampe: I was just talking to a friend the other day. He goes to a local farmer's market. And he gets chicken. He really likes this honestly raised pastured chicken. And he asked them, "Oh, you know, you're a

small operation.”

And they’re like, “Oh, yeah. Oh, yeah.” And they’re like, “Well, how much, you know, what’s small?” And he’s like, “Oh, you know, we butcher 4,000 a day.” And that didn’t seem small to him. That sounds like a lot.

But, man, like, you just can’t make it economically at a small scale with broiler hens. I think it’s very challenging. And 4,000 a day is probably microscopic. Ask Tyson, what are they doing? It’s more than that.

So, that middle space, like, if we really wanted to make a serious endeavor out of small farms feeding the community, we need some organizational changing, not just small farms becoming bigger.

Clifford Scholz: Well, I know that work is being done in that area. The whole difficult problem of the two different scales that agriculture is operating at. Well, the aggregator you’re talking about at the farm at St. Joe’s, it’s like a small-scale example of how that can start to happen.

Eric Kampe: Yeah, that’s a great model. And what they’re doing it’s really showing the importance of marketing for small farms. Because the St. Joe CSA is able to tap into this community that is a hospital: the people that work there, and the people that live near it, and the people that are just part of that world.

Because a hospital is huge. It’s this whole thing. And since they can provide this really excellent market of folks that are there every day. So, it’s easy for them to pick up their produce. And they’re concerned about health and well-being. Because it’s related to their work.

Clifford Scholz: Which is a brilliant connection that is kind of novel that they are making. That they’re actually looking at the health side of health

instead of just the disease side of where health starts breaking down. That's a very forward-thinking thing that they're doing.

And they also have pretty extensive grounds where they can do some stuff of their own there, too. So, they've actually got some production going on as well there. That's an exciting thing. And maybe that's a model too that needs to be more closely looked at because you've got a big institution, a big organization, and a self-formed community that can aggregate demand on the demand side. And if you can aggregate demand, it seems like that would get us halfway towards the supply aggregation piece of the puzzle. Is that the way you understand the problem there?

Eric Kampe: Absolutely. That St. Joe CSA, it's providing a lot. One of the things it's providing for the farms is this ability to know that they've got a market for their product. And also, it takes a lot of the risk out of it.

If St. Joe wants to take a delivery of head lettuce from me once every other week for the whole season or some time limit, we agree upon something and I have some kind of crop failure, which happens.

If this was, like, a CSA that was entirely in-house, I now have to be like, "Oh, man, I've got to write an email to my CSA members. And I feel terrible. And I've got to explain it to them." I'm like, "Hey, this is really heartbreaking. We had a crop failure for whatever reason.

"And, you know, we appreciate you being there for us. But we've got nothing for you this week. We'll make it up to you later. Or we'll do our best." And that happens. But part of this aggregated CSA is then so, you know, as soon as we know something, we call the people at St. Joe's CSA and we're like, "Hey, you know, how we were going to do this thing.

It's not going to happen. I feel awful." And they're like, "Yeah. We get it. We're going to call the other farms. It's fine."

Clifford Scholz: So those baskets get filled.

Eric Kampe: Those baskets get filled. The customers are still happy. And I am honestly, you know, obviously I wanted to make that sale. And so, I'm bummed I didn't have the harvest. But I think to myself, "Oh, a friend of mine is going to go get paid instead. What a relief. I'm cool with that."

And I know when they have a problem, I'm going to get the call. These are the things that make that easier and just less stressful. And it makes it possible. To do a large CSA from your own farm, you really have to have a scale and an expertise at so many different crops. It's a lot.

Clifford Scholz: Yeah, it really is a lot. And from what you're saying it sounds like small farmers working together in their local communities may be one way forward. Thank you, Eric. I appreciate your time and look forward to talking again with you soon.