

● **BREAKING** UKRAINE ENVOY TESTIFIES THAT TRUMP LINKED MILITARY AID TO INVESTIGATIONS OF DEMOCRATS, LAWMAKER SAYS

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Hadley farmer's business is growing

Finds success with project that brings local produce to schools

By **Michael Prager** Globe Correspondent, November 2, 2011, 12:00 a.m.



Joe Czajkowski is a major player in the state's Farm to School Project, supplying fresh, locally grown produce from his Hadley farm to school cafeterias. One of his main products is butternut squash, which his workers skin, deseed, and cut before it is delivered. MATTHEW CAVANAUGH FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE/GLOBE FREELANCE

HADLEY - Everyone knows that going to school can help lay a path to prosperity. Joe Czajkowski, who grows organic and conventional produce in the shadow of the University of Massachusetts Amherst, is proving that maxim anew.

Czajkowski, 58, is one of the biggest players in the Massachusetts Farm to School Project

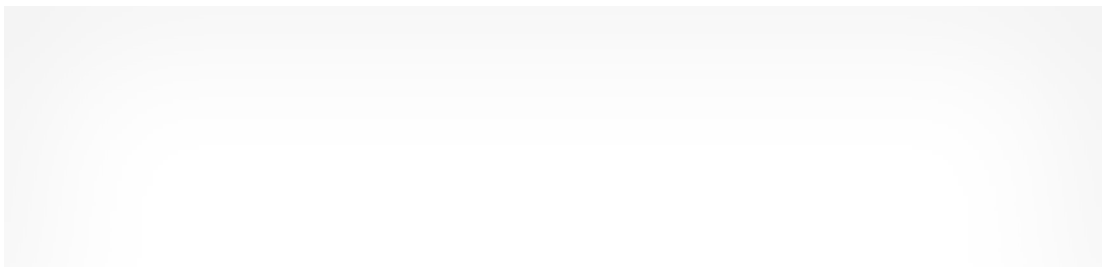
Czajkowski, 53, is one of the biggest players in the Massachusetts Farm to School Project, supplying locally grown squashes, sweet corn, carrots, and other produce to UMass Amherst, Boston public schools, and other institutions.


“Joe is probably the best example we have in the state right now of a farmer who has figured out how to make farm-to-institution sales really work for him and for his customers,” said Kelly Erwin, director of the program, which receives some funding from the state Department of Agricultural Resources.

The Farm to School Project began a decade ago with a handful of Massachusetts schools. Today, 217 school districts are working to incorporate fresh, local ingredients into their menus, partly motivated by tougher school-nutrition standards proposed in January by the federal government. Colleges and universities also are joining in - about 80 said they bought at least some local produce last year, more than quadruple the number in 2005-2006, according to the project.

What makes Czajkowski different from other farmers is that he does not just sell what he grows on 315 acres in Hadley - some of which was once farmed for tobacco by his grandfather and father - he also buys from about 30 other farmers in the Pioneer Valley. Czajkowski earns a modest profit by marking up the price of that produce, but more important, outside purchasing makes him a more attractive supplier because of the range of goods he can offer schools.

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“It’s been a blessing that we have someone like Joe to go through,” said Chris Howland, UMass Amherst’s purchasing manager of auxiliary enterprises. “He’s basically a one-stop shop [for local produce]. It can get kind of confusing if you’re talking with 120 or 125 farms, working on their schedules.”

UMass Amherst buys 25 percent of its produce locally each year - about \$500,000 worth - helping to boost the area’s economy while reducing the school’s carbon footprint, Howland said. He said that a cost comparison survey it conducted last year found Czajkowski’s prices were pretty favorable.

Rich Bonanno, a Methuen farmer who is president of the Massachusetts Farm Bureau Federation, said schools can benefit by cutting out middle men and dealing directly with farmers such as Czajkowski.

Czajkowski also adds value by lightly processing his produce, such as through skinning, deseeding, and sectioning butternut squash. Eight of his 18 workers were engaged in that task on a cool morning recently when the ground was too wet for harvesting. Two men skewered squashes onto rotating spindles so blades scraped away the skin, building a plush layer of yellow-orange on the nearby wall. When done, the butternuts were halved by a knife-wielding worker, touched up with a couple of hand peelers, and separated from their seed pods by super-sharp scoopers. Whatever does not make it to the mechanical chopper is sold as animal feed.

From the time he was attending UMass in the 1970s so that he could also work at the farm, Czajkowski saw that “the margins were a little better a little higher on the food chain, so I always wanted to go one step further. That’s the best step to take because you can track the value you added in that [processing] room.”

Butternuts are one of Czajkowski’s biggest crops, filling 130 acres.

“I try to store a million or a million and a half pounds of squash a year, mostly butternut because it keeps the best, by far,” he said.

Czajkowski did not start organic farming until six years ago, and now about half of the land he farms - 162 acres - is certified organic. He had plenty of reasons for switching, beyond that fact that he thinks it is better food, better for the land, and better for the farmer who otherwise would be exposed to more chemicals. It also keeps him from competing with his brother, with whom he used to partner but who now farms on his own - using conventional growing methods.

But he is also a businessman, driven by the market. Organically grown food is “what the customer wants,” Czajkowski said. “Fifteen years ago, they wanted organic until they got to the cash register, but now I think they really do want it.”

Sales of his farm's organic produce are increasing at an annual rate of 30 percent, compared with about a 15 percent rate for the farm overall, Czajkowski said. He acknowledged that the impressive numbers can partly be attributed to his purchase of a nearby property, which increased output.

Associates describe him as honest, decent, humble, and cautious, and though he volunteers that “bookkeeping isn't my forte” he is able to keep many particulars of his business in his head. For instance, when a customer looking for produce called on a recent Friday, he responded, “I have a truck going past your place on Sunday. Will that be soon enough?”

Czajkowski blends his acumen with a love of literature and streak of sentimentality that runs both past and future: He hopes his three young children will be the fourth

generation to work the family land, and brings them along when he visits customers.

“Selling's a sport and I like them to see that,” he said.

He has another vision, too, which he expressed by referencing the philosopher Voltaire's

“Candide.” After a series of disillusioning events, Czajkowski said, the main character

Candidate. After a series of disillusioning events, Czajkowski said, the main character decides his purpose in life is to rebuild the Garden of Eden. “And I think, why not here, why not now?” he said. “We have an opportunity to do some wonderful things in the valley.”

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