

*Oregon's Willamette Valley ... a celebrated agriculture region,  
sometimes hailed as the most fertile on earth*

*Edible, A Celebration of Local Food*

## WHY LOCAL? CENTRAL WILLAMETTE VALLEY AGRICULTURE

### INTRODUCTION

October 2013 units of the League of Women Voters of Lane County (LWVLC) will focus narrowly on agriculture systems of Lane County and the surrounding areas. The LWVLC board has tentatively decided that in November and December, 2013, units will look at state wide issues affecting agriculture (land use/potential conflicts and economic issues). The League of Women Voters of the US (LWVUS) has proposed discussion and consensus for the national Agriculture Update to be held February and March, 2014. The national update will deal with: "(1) current technology issues in agriculture including genetically modified organisms (GMOs), herbicides, pesticides, agriculture water pollution, aquifer depletion, antibiotics in livestock, and accurate food labeling; and (2) current agriculture finance issues, including consolidation in agriculture industries, crop subsidies, and the federal regulatory process."

Some of these issues have created discord between industrial agricultural and the smaller local farmers, particularly those farmers who have chosen more sustainable methods, either organically or naturally grown production.

The LWVUS position (1988) emphasizes that Federal policy should encourage a system of sustainable, regenerative agriculture production that promotes an environmentally sound agricultural sector. This includes stewardship to preserve and protect the country's human and natural resources.

### BACKGROUND

The mixed-stock-and-grain farms of the 19<sup>th</sup> & 20<sup>th</sup> centuries are rare today. Trends have been toward larger, one-crop-only industrial operations, relegating more and more people to the role not of food producers but food consumers. Often that food is grown in other countries, prepared and shipped to commercial franchises and supermarket chains, sold, often processed with preservatives. The link between food producers and food consumers has become distant.

According to a 2013 US Department of Agriculture (USDA) report, both the number of people working and living on farms and agriculture's share of gross domestic product (GDP) has decreased during the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. Reasons for these changes are numerous: urbanization and industrialization have moved more people to urban areas; mechanization of the workplace has changed the way farms are run and financed as well as the size of farms and the number of workers needed. Further blurring the view of agriculture: over this same time, average farm income has risen. In the 1920s, farm households made about half the national median income; today, the income level of those involved in agriculture is about 13 % above the national average. (Note: non-farm income, including wages earned off-farm and retirement income, is included in USDA figures, as well as income for larger, often more profitable industrial agriculture.)

It's hard to classify farms and farming. Most industrial farms show net profits, while smaller farms often struggle with higher operating costs, lower productivity, and lower sales. Local and regional variations are the norm, however, not the exception. It should be pointed out that more family farmers are older and facing the challenge of retirement, while those who want to begin careers as farmers face an uphill struggle in putting together the capital needed to get started. For example, the cost for farmland and equipment needed is in the tens of thousands of dollars. Farms, smaller family or larger industrial, are businesses and staying in business usually means making a profit. Nationwide, 10 % of farms are large and industrial, making up 83 % of sales, while small family farms with annual sales less than \$250,000 make up the other 90 %.

Over the past sixty years the goal of industrial farms has been to generate as much of product as possible. Industrial farming employs synthetic fertilizers, industrial scale equipment, pesticides, and continuous growth of the same crop. Despite high productivity and profits, industrial agriculture has degraded air, water, and soil, polluted fish and wildlife habitat, and depleted natural resources.

Agro-ecological agriculture, emerging as an alternative, relies on recycling, restoring, and sustaining natural resources. Many small farms are already cultivating diverse crops, using natural and organic composts, cover and rotation crops, and biodiverse methods of controlling pests and diseases. These practices benefit farmers, consumers and the environment. However, they are labor intensive.

For small farms to be viable there must be a market. Because of transportation costs, storage facilities and related expenses, the most available market is the nearby local urban area. There has been a gradual increase in local sales in many areas throughout the United States.

## AGRICULTURE AND FOOD SYSTEMS IN THE CENTRAL WILLAMETTE VALLEY

Through the years, timber products and grass seeds have been the Willamette Valley's primary commercial agricultural commodity, but as family farms flourished, crops of wheat, barley, vegetables and fruit and nut orchards developed. Today greenhouse and nursery products dominate agricultural sales. Yet according to USDA agriculture census, the number of area farms growing food crops is increasing, accounting for 54 % of total agricultural sales. Recently vineyards have become a fast-growing component of the Willamette Valley agricultural output.

While the food industry is consolidating into a system made up of a limited number of major producers, both smaller family farms and consumers are eager for a more personal and local system of agriculture even when the produce costs more. Because demand for local produce exists, and because small farms are not able to compete with larger industrial farms, local growers are turning to alternative marketing strategies.

Oregon (particularly Lane and surrounding counties) has made significant strides in what is called the "Slow Grow" and "Eat Local" movements, scoring positive points in what some list as negatives. For example, Oregon, among the four states of the Pacific region, has about the same number of farmers as do Idaho and Washington,

yet Oregon's farm income is about half that of those states. (California, with its Central Valley, is not included in this comparison). Yet Oregon has more farmers involved in direct sales marketing (farmers' markets, CSAs and online marketing); Oregon leads California, Washington and Idaho in this category. The number of Oregon farmers' markets has increased nearly four-fold in the past two decades, according to 2013 Oregon Department of Agriculture (ODA) report. In other words, Oregon has smaller farms with a greater variety of crops, which often do not record the sorts of high volume sales that larger one-crop-only industrial farms produce.

The "Slow Food" movement adheres to the tenets that food should taste good, that it should be produced in a clean way that causes no harm to the environment, health or animal welfare, and that food producers should earn fair compensation. The members of this movement consider themselves to be co-partners with producers by being supportive and informed.

A network that strives to inform and connect all participants, growers, producers and consumers is the Willamette Farm and Food Coalition (WFFC). The coalition aspires to develop in Lane County a strong local food and agriculture system that is economically and environmentally sustainable. The coalition promotes the purchase and production of local foods to keep agricultural land in production and to help keep local farms economically viable. The organization sponsors many programs and serves as the facilitator for those programs.

In 2009 the Eugene Water and Electric Board partnered with WFFC and Ecotrust to make use of the Governor's Oregon Solutions process to initiate the Lane County Food Distribution Project. The purpose of the project was to increase the amount of locally grown food purchased by Lane County institutions, particularly public schools, institutions of higher education, and hospitals. One program coordinated by WFFC is the Farm to School Program, which works closely with the Bethel, Eugene 4J, Springfield, and Oakridge public schools, and the Village Charter School to develop new markets for local farms by incorporating locally grown produce into school lunches and snacks. Since schools prefer to work with a distributor, WFFC coordinates with Emerald Fruit and Produce, Organically Grown Company, Eugene Local Foods and Hummingbird Wholesale. The total value of all Lane County grown and processed products purchased by Lane County schools in 2012 was \$314,041. Farm to School also provides a comprehensive education program of curriculum, field trips and school garden sessions for third through fifth grades. Bethel School District is one of two Oregon school districts that received part of the \$200,000 that was appropriated by House Bill 2800, the Farm to School and School Garden Bill. More information on the WFFC and Farm to School is available by calling 541-341-1216 or at [www.lanefood.org](http://www.lanefood.org).

Eugene Local Foods, [www.eugenelocalfoods.com](http://www.eugenelocalfoods.com), an online farmer's market, is now under the management of WFFC. Each week 45 local farmers post their fresh, seasonal produce. Buyers place orders for Tuesday evening pickup. Home delivery for a fee is also available.

Another collaborator with WFFC is the Southern Willamette Valley Bean and Grain Project which is working to encourage cultivation and local marketing of sustainably produced grains, dry beans and edible seeds. The farms have converted from grass

seed to grains and beans with the goal of providing year-round local staple crops for the region.

Hummingbird Wholesale contributes significantly to the local food movement. It participates in Distributor Supported Agriculture (DSA), a system in which the distributor pays some upfront cost in exchange for the farmer producing a certain product that the wholesaler will purchase at harvest. In some cases, Hummingbird even pays for the seeds. In Lane County, Hummingbird is using the DSA model on over 100 acres, which provided over \$300,000 of revenue to local farmers in 2010.

According to the WFFC, buying directly from farmers is the best way to impact the local food economy. In Lane County there are 14 Farmers Markets, 9 located in Eugene and Springfield. Farmers markets provide sales opportunities for small scale farmers, since many cannot produce enough to compete in wholesale markets. To participate in the farmers market, the produce must have been grown and/or produced by the farmer. The popularity is increasing as consumers are more conscientious about purchasing fresher food directly. Another direct market is through CSAs (community supported agriculture). CSAs are partnerships between local farmers and consumers, in which the patrons pay in early spring for fresh produce to be delivered throughout the growing season, thus giving fiscal support for the crops the farmer will grow in return. Produce may be picked up at the farm or at designated drop-off sites or home-delivered. There are more than 30 CSAs in Lane County.

#### SUSTAINABILITY

According to a policy brief from the Union of Concerned Scientists, consumers play a critical role in creating a sustainable food system, desiring higher nutritional quality and freshness. The trend is for greater demand of organically and naturally grown fruits, vegetables, grain, dairy, meat and poultry. Consumer driven demand is changing the marketplace.

Even though many farms in Lane County are not certified organic, they employ practices that are ecologically beneficial and sustainable. These include organic soil amendments, fertilizers, seeds, and organically approved pesticides. These also include the use of diverse crop rotations and cover crops, but exclude all genetically modified organisms (GMOs). Such practices not only restore and sustain the land, but also provide for the production of healthy food, healthier workers and communities.

To further promote sustainability there should be sufficient infrastructure for storage, production and distribution. Adequate financial aid for new farmers and those farmers converting to more sustainable methods should be available. Federal and state grants as well as direct payments to farmers need to be continued. Programs such as Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), Women, Infants, and Children (WIC), and Farm Direct Nutrition Program (FDNP) are essential for food security. Lastly, a system-wide network to link farmers, distributors, institutions, local markets, and individual consumers is required to maintain and grow a more healthy and sustainable food system.

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What are the strengths and weakness of alternative farming practices?
2. What opportunities are available to increase the overall economic impact of local agriculture in Lane County and the surrounding area?
3. If farming is to continue to be a viable economic enterprise in Lane and surrounding counties, how can we as consumers participate? What barriers impede local farmers from remaining viable and benefiting the local economy?
4. How can local governments (city and county) address and/or support efforts toward a more sustainable food system?

## SOURCES

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