

Ecumenical Ministries of Oregon's  
Interfaith Network for Earth Concerns

**Community Food Security Project**

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***Know thy Farmer – Stories of Local Farmers from  
The Willamette Valley***

Featuring Laura Masterson ▪ 47<sup>th</sup> Avenue Farm ▪ Portland, Oregon

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**INEC: Describe your farm operation: How big is your farm? What do you grow?  
How do you market your product? Are you conventional, organic, and or food alliance certified?**

Laura Masterson (LM): “We grow all the vegetable varieties we can possibly grow in this climate. We grow on 4-5 acres, and for the last 8 years we have been spread out over 5 different plots of land, some as small as 7000 sq ft (0.15 acres). Next year we will have access to 10 contiguous acres. We don't necessarily always have cash crops in all our fields. Our goal is to keep at least 1/4 of our land in cover crops throughout the year.

We sell most of our produce through our CSA (Community Supported Agriculture) program. Last year we sold 60 summer shares and 30 winter shares. One share feeds 2-4 people, so in the summer we are supplying vegetables to around 200 people. We have slowly grown to this number of shares over the last 8 years by adding 5-10 shares per season. Our extra produce is sold to a few local restaurants. These chefs really appreciate the fresh, quality produce we can provide. They want what is in season and they work their menu around the produce we are able to provide.

We think about the national organic standards as a minimum standard and we're always working to come up with better techniques to do the most environmentally responsible farming possible. We are not certified because we know everyone we are marketing too personally.”

**INEC: Why do you do what you are doing?**

LM: “Compulsion. I just can't imagine anything I'd rather be doing.”

**INEC: What is your vision or goal for your farm?**

LM: “I want my farm to be good for the environment, socially responsible and economically sustainable.

A. The Environment

i. Replenish, feed and continue to build the soil. I want my farmland to be in better shape every year. If we can absorb "waste" products from the surrounding area (i.e. city leaf compost or poultry manure) and use them to improve the soil, that's even better.

ii. Maintain or improve water quality on and around the farm

iii. Provide habitat

B. Social Responsibility

i. Grow good healthy food for people

ii. Do community outreach/Be a community resource. We already bring lots of folks to our farm, but I'd like to do more. We can teach urban kids about life on the farm, build community with our CSA members, and we can learn from sharing information with other farmers.

iii. Be a good employer. Not everyone wants to do the hard physically demanding work of farming, but most of the people who have come to work with me are excited about the work, determined, hard working and resourceful. My

goal is to create a work environment where people are inspired to grow, learn, teach, solve problems creatively and contribute to create a successful farm enterprise.

iv. Pay a living wage and provide my employees with good benefits, which leads us to....

#### C. Economic Viability

i. Maybe this should be first on the list. It isn't the most important one in my mind, but the rest is difficult if not impossible without it.

ii. I could use some help on how to make this one a reality. I like the security of the CSA, and the restaurants are a nice complement to that. Unfortunately these enterprises do not make us enough to 1) pay employees more than minimum wage 2) make capital investments in the farm or 3) save money. In my opinion if a business can't do this it is not going to last.

iii. The Farm Business Management program at Lane Community College has been an incredible resource for me. I thought I just needed to know how to grow vegetables to make my farm successful. In the class, I am learning the skills I need to evaluate the economic viability of my current operation, and investigate new options and enterprises to increase profitability.

I'd like to build a farm based on solid environmental and economic footing that would continue to be an integral part of the community long after I'm gone."

#### **INEC: What sustains your vision?**

**LM:** "I love the work, but I'd never have made it this far without encouragement from our dedicated CSA members, enthusiastic chefs, and the support of lots of other farmers."

#### **INEC: What would you want others to know about farming? What would you want people who purchase foods to know about farming?**

**LM:** "If you care about the environment, your community and/or the local economy then you should also care about how your food is grown. There are a lot of different kinds of farms and a lot of different labels. If you have to buy food from someone you don't know then you have to pay attention to those labels and what they mean. The better, easier solution is to buy as much food as you possibly can from as close to home as possible. You can buy local food from local folks at the farmers market or you can join a CSA. Get to know these folks who grow your food, ask them questions, and tell them your concerns. Ask the produce buyer or butcher at the store where you shop which products are local? Ask him if he knows the farmers. Ask him to tell you about the farmers. Ask him to invite the farmers to the store sometime so you can meet them.

If you met me, I'd want to talk to you about things I'm doing to realize my goals for my farm. I'd want to tell you about the things we do to reduce runoff and erosion, the cover crops we use to naturally increase soil fertility, and how we can provide habitat using reduced tillage techniques. I'd want you to know that the kids who came for a tour took home beets that they had helped harvest, cooked them for dinner and even said they liked them. Would I want you to know that I'm barely making a living? That's a harder question, but it needs to be addressed, because I don't think I'm the only one.

What are you going to learn from other farmers when you meet them? The same thing they are going to learn from you- How to work together to build a sustainable secure regional food system."

#### **INEC: What does regional food security mean to you? And what can farmers and people who purchase food do to insure all Oregonians have access to healthy foods?**

**LM:** "To me, regional food security means that all Oregonians have access to healthy local foods. In my (possibly biased) opinion, you don't have regional food security if the farmers in the region are all going out of business. So what can we do? Focus on local:

- Buy food from local farmers. Solicit donations to food banks from local farmers. Educate people about how to use fresh food. Whenever and wherever we can we need to tell people that fresh local food tastes better, and it makes people and our local economy healthier.
- Are you a teacher or a parent? Ask a farmer to come talk to your class, take your kids to a farm or farmers market. Do the same with your community group, church or book club. Where you spend your money matters. Local stores are more likely to support local farmers. More local farmers mean a better local economy and better regional food security. Make a point to sit down for a meal with your family or do a potluck with your friends and tell them how excited you are about the arugula, delicata squash, leeks, goat cheese, lamb chops, fresh eggs, salmon or whatever great local food has inspired you.
- We should work to create better policy at the national, state and local level that effect our regional food security, but I think what happens over the backyard fence and at the dinner table is going to make the real difference.
- And farmers, when those people come to visit your farm or market stand, take a moment to talk to them. If you can, offer them something to eat. Maybe the food will speak for itself, but it can't hurt for you to put in a few good words too. Tell folks about your farm and why you're proud of what you're doing. Write a letter to the newspaper, call your senator, donate to the food bank, and ask if you can give out samples in a store that sells your stuff. Ask consumers what they want, create a value added product, include some info about your farm on your packaging, link it to your website, write the history of your farm, include a photo of your family. And whenever you have a chance, remind folks that we don't have a sustainable, secure regional food system without the region's farmers."