Local Food Production: Talking with Small and Mid-Sized Farmers

Farmland is plentiful in Oregon, though in decline. In the last 15 years, Oregon farmland has decreased by 4%. At the same time, the number of farmers relying on outside sources of income, such as a second job, has increased. In Linn, Benton and Polk Counties, edible crops are in decline as grass seed production increases. Consider:

- The average food item in America travels over 1,500 miles from farm to table.
- Oregon loses over 11,000 acres of farmland every year to development.
- The average age of Oregon farmers is 55 and only five percent are under the age of 35.

Community food security requires that we have farmers and farmland. Therefore, one of the goals of this CFA was to learn more about the challenges and aspirations of growers in our region. We visited 15 farmers on their land and interviewed them to better understand their circumstances. We also incorporated findings of a 2005 survey that gauged farmers' interest in a farm-to-school program.

Overall, Local Growers Want Local Opportunities

"The public needs to undergo a change in attitude so that farmers and farm workers make a good living." Local farmer

Despite challenges, farmers expressed a strong interest in increasing local marketing opportunities. Over half of the 15 farmers we interviewed expressed a strong interest in having a community food processing facility and developing more local markets, especially within institutions (schools, university, hospital, retirement homes, etc.). In another survey of 27 farmers, 70% said yes or maybe to having extra capacity for a farm-to-school program.

"We would like another local marketing opportunity so that we do not have to go to Portland." ~Local farmer

Of the four farms we examined in depth, all were involved in local marketing through farmer's markets, farm stands, community supported agriculture and buying groups. These farms also contributed to food banks and gleaning groups.

"Our customers see the farming practices we use. We're going beyond the organic certification standards." ~Local farmer

Recommendations: Supporting Local Farmers

- On an individual level, make a commitment to purchase more of your food directly from local growers; read labels in the grocery store and choose locally grown products.
- Encourage institutions to purchase locally grown food. Schools' cafeterias, university dining halls, the hospital and corporate offices represent potential markets for local growers.
- Conduct a feasibility study for a food processing facility that emphasizes growing, processing and eating local food.
Food System Recommendations: Building Urban-Rural Partnerships within Faith Communities

- Organize a farm stand, harvest festival or local food dinner at your congregation; invite a farmer to share her story or plan a field trip to a farm.
- Start a garden on church property or teach food literacy in your kitchen.
- Incorporate local food into food pantries/boxes, fundraisers, youth projects and celebrations; buy flowers from a local farmer.

For More Information

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