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Putting “Community” Back in the Food System: A Dispatch from King County, Washington

By Jennifer Lamson

When Seattle’s last independent milk bottler closed in August 2003, it could have spelled disaster for a small family dairy in the city’s urban fringe of King County, Washington. But the foundation for a community food system was being laid there, and that network produced connections that became not only a safety net for Eric and Marie Nelson’s Cherry Valley Dairy but a springboard for an expanded community food movement as well.

Today, most of the milk from Cherry Valley’s herd of 170 cows travels about twenty-five miles to Beecher’s Handmade Cheese, where artisanal cheeses are made at the nearly century-old Pike Place Market, in the heart of downtown Seattle. The cheese maker receives a fresh supply of just the kind of high-quality milk it needs and first-person knowledge of how the dairy is managed. The dairy farmer has a stable local market for much of his milk and the added satisfaction of seeing what happens to it after it leaves the farm. And the big winners are the people of greater Seattle who get to enjoy Beecher’s gourmet cheese and actually see it being made at the storefront operation. They can even visit the dairy, which dates back to the 1800s, and see its operations.

A community food movement is taking shape in the Puget Sound, and in the way that all great movements are born, people are putting their heads together and pouring their hearts and souls into hundreds of enterprises designed to provide the continued abundance of fresh, healthy local food to community residents.

More than two dozen CSA farms make weekly deliveries to urban and suburban neighborhoods. King County residents can also buy locally grown produce direct from growers at twenty-two farmers markets, including one on nearly every day of the week in Seattle. In addition, citizen volunteers and seasoned farm advocates are spearheading innovative efforts to bring local produce into school lunch programs, and match up retiring farmers with “wanna-be” farmers, giving them the training they need to be

successful. This movement is also supporting a community of Hmong farmers and helping them form a cooperative way to market their produce. There's a push to establish the nation's first organic farming "major" at Washington State University, and advocates are fighting to get more research funding for sustainable farming techniques. Having established and promoted a Puget Sound Fresh marketing program for local produce, farm advocates are organizing leadership summits to meet with farmers and identify key issues and opportunities and learn how to effectively fight for family farms.

All of this is taking place against the backdrop of serious pressures from a rapidly growing population and massive urbanization in the region. Between 1970 and 2000, King County's population increased by 45 percent, to 1.7 million, making it the twelfth most populous county in the nation. King County acreage in farmland decreased from 165,635 acres in 1945 to just over 40,000 acres today. Farmland in the Puget Sound region has been named among the most endangered in the nation. Meanwhile, Washington State ranks tenth in the nation for hunger. In 2000, more than two million visits were paid to King County food banks, more than a quarter of them to feed hungry children.

Harsh realities like these could threaten to drown out the energy of those working to build a community food system grounded in the vitality of local family farms. Yet, farmers and farm advocates in King County are tackling these challenges head on. One key effort underway is the campaign to create a Seattle–King County food policy council (FPC). A diverse group, including local agriculture, hunger, and urban-planning experts, have launched a campaign to establish and obtain funding for a council that will bring together farmers, food retailers and wholesalers, government officials, consumers, land-use experts, and other food system stakeholders. The public-private partnership envisioned could take a comprehensive view of the region's food systems and address challenges with innovative solutions born of previously unlikely partnerships.

Across the region, small and midsize farmers are finding new and creative ways to work together to meet demands for quantity, variety, and a longer growing season that can help get them into important local markets like restaurants, schools, and grocery stores. In the late 1990s, midsize organic farmer Andrew Stout of Full Circle Farm received some seed money from King County to determine how local farmers could work

together to market and distribute its products. Now he fills his CSA basket with produce from his own farm as well as other organic farms from King County and Washington State. He employed a similar distribution system in a recent farm-to-college pilot project that provided produce to the University of Washington. And he also serves as a broker for farm supplies, helping small-scale farmers save money by purchasing for them in bulk.

Since most of the farms in King County are small, there are other cooperative efforts under way: The Sno Valley Gals are a fledgling co-op of women growers on small farms who previously marketed their produce individually to restaurants, farmers markets, and their own CSAs, and found that they couldn't offer the quantities needed to approach schools, grocery stores, and additional restaurants. Now, by joining together to market and distribute their products, these doors will likely remain open to them.

Small poultry farmers in the Puget Sound region found themselves up against some unfriendly regulations and a serious lack of processing facilities. By banding together to form a small co-op, Puget Poultry, they are working with legislators as well as state and county officials toward opening a new USDA certified poultry-processing plant that will enable Seattle-area consumers to buy fresh local, organic, pastured poultry at the grocery store.

In September 2004, Seattle-area farms and farm advocates got a big boost when Farm Aid came to town and shined a bright spotlight on the area's community food movement. Two weeks of public activities with local organizations followed by a sold-out concert energized activists and farmers while spreading the word about good food grown locally to many thousands more local citizens. The events spurred the *Seattle Post-Intelligencer* to publish a series of four editorials examining various aspects of the region's food system and calling on consumers to "buy local" when it comes to food.

Energy is bubbling up across the region. A movement is taking shape. If successful, farmers and their advocates will find they have built not only a community food system but, indeed, a *community*.