



Synopsis of Statewide Listening Sessions

Portland, Central Point, Corvallis and La Grande

January-June, 2008

Background

Friends of Family Farmers (FOFF) is an Oregon-based statewide non-profit working to educate, organize, and advocate for socially responsible agriculture and healthy rural communities in Oregon.

We promote programs and policies that foster the profitable growing, processing, and local sales of safe, nutritious food by Oregon farmers and we support citizens having a voice in shaping their communities.

In early 2008, FOFF staff traveled the state to speak with farmers, rural residents, and local food advocates in an attempt to gain a better understanding of the on-the-ground issues farmers face as they attempt to run an economically-viable and socially responsible, yet environmentally-friendly agricultural business in Oregon. In our listening sessions, we also discussed barriers to re-building a local food economy, which is becoming increasingly necessary as energy prices sky-rocket and industrial food safety concerns are encouraging consumers look for alternative food choices closer to home.

Below is a collection of the feedback FOFF staff received during the four listening sessions held across the state. This is not an exhaustive list; rather it is our attempt to find areas of common ground around issues faced by farmers, and other participants in Oregon's food system.

If you have questions regarding the below content, please contact FOFF grassroots organizer Megan Fehrman at 503-622-0161.

Benefits to farming in Oregon

In Oregon, we have a climate and natural environment that are very conducive to farming. The Willamette Valley enjoys fertile soil and a mild growing climate, while the East side of the Cascade mountain range offers opportunities for dry-land farming and pasture-raised animal products. Southwest Oregon offers an array of agricultural products as well, ranging from fruit orchards and herb farms to small grains and livestock production.

Unlike other place in the country, the majority of Oregon farms are still small to medium sized, family- owned enterprises. We have room for growth and a need for more farmers to meet consumer demand, especially in the niche and off-season markets.

There is potential for a very vibrant statewide agricultural economy with many direct marketing opportunities, and an interested consumer base that is providing demand for local products. Regional location gives growers around the state access to Portland, Seattle, Spokane, Boise, San Francisco and many smaller, local markets like Salem, Corvallis, Eugene, Medford, Ashland, Hood River, Bend/Redmond, Pendleton, the Tri-Cities and La Grande.

Oregon state agencies provide some money, support, motivation and technical assistance for conservation programs, small farms and organic agriculture. However, there is a need for an agricultural organization to speak for this segment of Oregon agriculture; up until now, this population has not had a voice with the legislature, the media or the public.

Challenges farmers face

Land and Capital

As the average age of farmers in Oregon is 55 years old, there is an increasing threat of losing 25%-50% of the state's farmland as it changes hands over the next 10 years. Currently, Oregon has no systems in place to transfer this land to the next generation of farmers to ensure the land remain in agricultural production.

Secondly, despite strong land-use planning and EFU or "exclusive farm-use" designation, valuable farmland is being lost in this state as prices of land skyrocket due to pressure from development and trophy homes. This makes it virtually impossible for young or beginning farmers to access land.

Young and new farmers are also finding a lack of educational opportunities and access to technical knowledge. Partnerships, mentor opportunities, and connections between the old and the young are often difficult to come by. In addition, farmers lack access to capital from lending institutions for start-up costs and innovation strategies.

Regulations

Food safety regulations put a stranglehold on small agricultural business enterprises. Regulations meant for large industrial operations are not always a good fit for smaller operators. As a result, small meat and dairy operations are forced to comply with one-size-fits-all regulations that are costly, time-intensive, difficult to navigate, and may not be relevant to their specific situation. The same is true for processed, value-added products. This either shuts producers out of market opportunities or requires largely unrealistic capital investments and extensive knowledge of the bureaucratic and regulatory systems to comply.

Inputs & Processing

As the food system has become industrialized and streamlined, local/regional infrastructure and services have deteriorated. Farmers have a need for small-scale meat and vegetable processors, access to locally-produced organic animal feed, organic seed supplies, local processing supplies, and certified kitchens.

Labor & Energy

Farmers are experiencing labor shortages in the sheer number of workers needed to produce and harvest crops and in a reliable and skilled workforce. Moreover, the increase in energy costs have put a squeeze on small farmers as they are finding that the costs and time associated with traveling to farmers markets and other distribution points are increasing.

Challenges to meet consumer demand

Distribution

There is a need for more small distributors and an increased number of local food outlets to ensure the distribution of clean, local food at a fair price, providing farmers with a living wage and ensuring access to healthy, local food to the a larger percentage of the buying public.

Direct Marketing

The move beyond direct marketing or into accessing more markets presents its own set of challenges for producers and buyers. Local food purchasers, such as restaurants and co-ops, struggle with being

able to count on a consistent, reliable, adequate supply of local food from smaller farms. Marketing of products takes time, money, skills, and access to buyers –putting additional strain come on small family-owned and operated farms.

Market Prioritization

In Oregon, despite strong consumer demand for local products and the need for more farmers and infrastructure to meet this demand, most of our agricultural products still leave the state. The Oregon Department of Agriculture devotes a tremendous amount of energy to ensuring that Oregon agricultural products reach markets outside our state, region and country rather than committing resources in-state and ensuring a sound infrastructure for family farmers to access local markets.

Solutions

In addition to outlining specific issues farmers and local food advocates face, participants in the listening sessions outlined a variety of ways for Friends of Family Farmers to facilitate overcoming some of these challenges. Suggestions include:

Networking

FOFF could act as a statewide clearinghouse for information and research on effective farming or distribution methods/models, current sustainable agriculture-related events, educational opportunities, legislative or policy updates and producer-consumer networking.

Education

By developing educational campaigns that highlight the need for food sovereignty and fair prices for Oregon farmers, FOFF would be able to help change consumer values and perceptions of the true costs of cheap, industrialized food.

Grassroots Organizing

The empowerment of farmers, consumers and rural residents through FOFF grassroots organizing assistance would foster cooperation around food and agriculture in communities.

Capacity Building

FOFF can build a statewide coalition between the various regionally-based, small farm organizations and other organizations working to re-localize the food system. With coordination, FOFF would be in position to effectively represent this group to local and state officials.

Growing Our Own

The creation of a “Next Generation Farming” Program that links new and beginning farmers to resources that are available, such as land, capital, education and markets, would allow FOFF to provide the next generation of farmers with the tools necessary to successfully enter into socially responsible agricultural production.