

Buying local trend isn't translating into farm industry success in Thurston County

Urbanizing regions present challenges, and opportunities, for agriculture. In the rapidly developing Puget Sound region, interest in farm-raised goods, health, and cuisine has fueled double-digit farmers' market sales, supported thousands of food and agriculture businesses, put farmers on restaurant payrolls, and propelled local farm products onto high-end menus.

In urban centers, farming and food has arguably never been more chic. Yet despite this welcome enthusiasm, how much do we know about the actual economic, social and cultural viability of agriculture? Does it translate more broadly to agricultural health in Thurston County?

While the picture is not all bad, generally the answer is "no." In fact, to put it in medical terms, I believe we eventually will be held negligent if we do not act.

Thurston County has lost and is still losing key elements required for agricultural health. These include sufficient markets, affordable inputs, marketing infrastructure, compatible regulations, access to productive resources such as land and water, living wages, and a vibrant producer network, among others.

Several examples illustrate the loss of these necessities, but also call attention to important nuances. I'll provide an overview here, and take up some examples in depth in subsequent columns.

Look at access to land. According to data compiled by the South Sound Community Farmland trust, only 21 percent of agricultural land in Thurston County is designated (and thereby better restricted from development) as Long-term Agriculture. This can be compared with Skagit County (83 percent), and even Pierce County (46 percent).

As a result, the American Farmland Trust gives Thurston County a low grade for farmland conservation. In 2018, 290 acres of farmland were removed from what is called the "current use" tax program, an indication of farmland being sold for development or other non-farming use.

Another threat to farm health are regulations that are implemented without adequate compensation to or input from farmers.

We know we have to pay for carrots, but the value of clean water, endangered species protection, and other environmental services are largely not included in the cost of food. What if, for example, rather than farmland losing value as a result of detecting an endangered species on the land, such as the Mazama pocket gopher, it was a boon, as farmers were recruited as key and fairly compensated partners in conservation?

Thurston County's Habitat Conservation Plan, for example, could be a mechanism to direct millions of dollars to farm businesses for conservation that is compatible with agriculture.

The program could use local taxpayer funding, but also mobilize federal and other grant dollars, to pay farmers for farming in a way that creates habitat for endangered species. For those interested in learning more about this, the Center for Natural Lands Management and Washington State University are in the second of a three-year study evaluating the contributions of working grazing land to species protection on south Puget Sound prairies. The next field day discussing the topic will be July 16 at Riverbend Ranch.

Farm health also is critically dependent on market access, and retaining the necessary infrastructure to reach those markets. In recent years, low milk prices and trade disputes have contributed to the decline in dairies in Thurston County from 62 in 1992 to seven in 2017. Sales declined roughly \$2.4 million from 2012 to 2017.

Dairy operations that use value-added enterprises have fared somewhat better. Among these are Frisia Dairy's Tunawerth Creamery, and the collaboration between Fagerness Dairy and Flying Cow Creamery, which provide branded milk and yogurt to local retailers. Another example are those dairies selling into Organic Valley, a farmer cooperative that levels out the worst market swings.

Specialty and niche markets, such as value-added processing, direct-to-consumer or retailer sales, and organic production are important for farm viability. In fact, these are likely to be among the best strategy for most producers going forward, based on who is surviving now. Examples are to be found in the region's poultry and shellfish industries, both of which posted gains between 2012 and 2017.

The challenge, but also the opportunity in this region, will be making strategic transitions that address the key components of farm viability. Higher-value markets require new infrastructure and relationships. Protecting farmland that farmers need requires new relationships between the farming, conservation, regulatory and, development communities.



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Success going forward will require that we pro-actively build programs to not only protect farmland, but also the health of a whole social, economic and cultural system that farm businesses need to survive.

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