

Farming's fate in Thurston County hinges on transitioning to value-added agriculture

Many residents in this region are familiar with the changes that have impacted agriculture, including increased land prices, regulations, and changing market opportunity. What we may be less familiar with, however, are how continued pressures from urban expansion and other issues are still impacting (and shrinking) farming communities, and how farmers and farm advocates are responding.

In Thurston County, and southwest Washington generally, changes are afoot. Though it is supporting farms that have historically produced both commodity crops and specialty crops for urban markets, this region is increasingly unable to compete as a low-cost, commodity production center.

As state House Republican Leader J.T. Wilcox recently noted at a meeting of regional economic development leaders, “We have immense acreages under the management of an aging population averse to risk and change. These are people who grew up in commodity production, which doesn’t work any longer because we’re no longer a low-cost production center.”

Though the decline in competitive advantage in commodity production (such as milk, berries and cannery crops) is not new, this reality is neither widely recognized nor understood. Evidence of this is apparent in the lack of a strategic plan to help farmers through what likely will need to be a major transition requiring new markets, infrastructure, equipment, and collaborations.

If such action is not taken, it seems likely that thousands of acres of farmland will be converted to non-farm uses, or be lost to mere dereliction, due largely to the fact that farmers don’t have sufficiently valuable (or in some cases any) market options to sell goods.

So what to do? In general terms, a big part of the answer is value-added agriculture. Specifically, this means adding value through processing; marketing the origins of farm products; forming commitment-purchasing models (“if you grow it, we’ll buy it”) with new buyers such as schools, hospitals, correctional facilities, and state cafeterias; investing in new infrastructure and equipment; and exerting control over pricing through personal relationships, even with large-volume buyers.

While challenging and new in many ways, success is possible and has been demonstrated elsewhere.

In the Chehalis Basin, a group of producers recently solicited help from the Northwest Agriculture Business Center (NABC), WSU Extension, and the Port of Chehalis to support development of a grain storage facility on port property. The initiative would re-establish grain storage capacity, and in doing so unlock diversified market access to a mix of large- and small-scale specialty markets, including for malting barley and bread flour.

Recently the effort was awarded \$800,000 to extend a rail spur and prepared the site for grain silos, and it is approaching additional funders to install a malting barley receiving silo at the Tumwater Craft District to link farmers to local breweries.

What is encouraging about this strategy is its successful application elsewhere, namely the Skagit Valley. There, potato producers approached local Ports, NABC and WSU several years ago seeking investment in grain marketing infrastructure. What resulted was an astonishing renaissance in the processing sector, including a malting facility, a world-renowned Bread Lab, and a flour mill.

Another example are efforts in Thurston and Lewis counties to establish a local value-added food processing facility, linked to large and small buyers.

In recent months, the Thurston EDC, NABC and WSU Extension teamed up to evaluate the potential expansion of the Puget Sound Food Hub, or a replicated version, to southwest Washington. A Food Hub would provide an aggregated purchase and delivery platform for one-stop ordering, invoicing and distribution that is so critical to reaching large-volume buyers beyond farmers' markets and farm stands.

This effort has been complimented by a feasibility assessment for a value-added processing facility funded by the Port of Olympia in 2018 and 2019. Such a facility would create the capacity to efficiently clean, peel, cube, dice, slice, package, and in some cases blanch and freeze produce. This would put local raw produce in a form that food service buyers could readily handle.



The Olympian

August 22, 2019

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Other regions have proved the concept of aggregated marketing and local processing. For example, the Mission Mountain Food Processing Center in Ronan, Montana, partners with Linc Foods in Spokane to process Northeast Washington-grown winter squash for sale to Gonzaga and Washington State University cafeterias.

Making a region-wide, strategic transition from commodity agriculture to value-added agriculture will be audacious and challenging. However, this community needs to understand that it is critical. As when Rosie the Riveter compelled us to action, it is time to roll up our sleeves, prepare to invest real dollars and effort, and build the systems we need for a new regional agriculture.

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