

Opportunity abounds for investment in Thurston County agriculture

I tend to believe that if you don't know where you're going, someone or something else is likely to make the decision for you. Such is the case for agriculture in Thurston County and the broader region.

As the farming industry navigates strong currents of development, regulation, and active divestment in favor of low-cost regions elsewhere, we need to take stock of our strengths and weaknesses, prioritize areas of opportunity, and coordinate action effectively.

Here are a few things that may help us envision, and pursue, a good future for agriculture.

There is some, but not enough, investment in local and regional agriculture. Nationally and internationally, industry and investors are channeling considerable resources into such ventures as overseas food processing, innovations in meatless protein, soil-less farming under LED lights, robots to replace human labor, and to a lesser extent regenerative agriculture in response to soil loss and climate change. This at a time when growth rates in public research and development in the United States have been generally slow.

At the local level, investment has been spurred by the [Thurston Economic Development Council's local investment \(THiNK\) network](#), Slow Money, the ports of Olympia and Chehalis, and recent state investment in the [Tenino Ag Business Park](#). This bodes well; however, a review of agriculture and food system needs indicates that those investments are a start, but more is needed.

Assuming a goal of vibrant local agriculture, the region needs more investment to support not only culinary talent among local business, but also the raw production and value-added processing needs of local farmers. One opportunity to actualize this vision would be investment in a USDA-certified slaughter facility to support regional livestock production. Thurston County alone boasts tens of thousands of acres of non-irrigated, productive forage land ideal for extensive, grass-based livestock production.



Trucking animals to and from Sandy, Oregon (and other distant locations) for processing is neither free of trauma to animals nor cost to farmers. A regional USDA-certified facility could connect farmers with such varied buyers as restaurants, school cafeterias, hospitals, correctional facilities, and even Joint Base Lewis McChord. A good deal of grass-based livestock production occurs on prairie soils in the region, and continuing operations at JBLM depend to a degree upon the perpetuation of land uses such as prairie grazing that offset base impacts to prairies they manage.

Another opportunity for regional investment is capacity for aggregation, storage, value-added processing, and distribution. Whether meat, grains, milk, shellfish, or vegetables, farmers are most successful when they can sell finished raw or processed products direct to the consumer. Examples are regional food hubs such as Kitsap Fresh, Linc Foods, and the Puget Sound Food Hub, which aggregate product from multiple farms to reach larger markets. The latter pulls product from 54 farmers and 12 non-farm vendors, and increased sales from \$16,000 in 2012 to \$2.1 million in 2018.

The value in these operations, similar to that of a slaughter facility, is in creating new sales opportunities for local farms. Consider that over 30,000 meals daily are served across only 13 institutions (hospitals, schools, correctional facilities) recently surveyed in South Puget Sound. Similarly, in a 2018 assessment, 79 percent of Olympia Farmers' Market shoppers indicated it was important to very important that locally processed products use locally grown ingredients, with 64 percent of shoppers indicating they would be willing to pay over a 30 percent price premium for these products.

The potential? Locally-grown cubed squash roasted with butter and brown sugar in school lunchrooms, and local stir-fry veggie mix sold from farmer ice chests in February at the Farmers' Market or local grocery store. The missing key? According to the state Department of Agriculture, "a high need and demand for specialized, mechanized facilities and equipment for processing, product storage, and transportation at small and medium scales and oriented to local regional markets," as noted in their report, [Value Chain Strategies for Source-Identified Minimally Processed Produce for the School Market](#).

Other opportunities for investment include the need for an expanded farm equipment loan program, the next phase of funding for a grain storage facility at the Port of Chehalis, a malt receiving silo (or malting capacity) at or near the Tumwater Craft District to connect grain growers to brewers and distillers, and a youth apprenticeship program.



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The key to realizing these investments will be maintaining a clear idea of where we want go, finding, enticing and mobilizing our community resources, and then just being bold and doing it.

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