Inland Northwest Community Food System Assessment Task Force Formed

Situation
Agriculture in the Inland Northwest is a combination of large and small farms growing a variety of food and fiber crops. The population of the region is becoming more urbanized, and it is losing its connection with the farm. Urban and suburban dwellers may seek wholesome food, but they do not necessarily identify the purchase of that food with the local agricultural economy.

Through value-added enterprises, existing and future small farms, niche farms, and market gardeners can add to the local economy, and preserve the quality of life in the region. Local farmers market associations wish to attract more producers. To do this, they need to also attract more customers. They need to increase their marketing skills, and provide production information to potential and new members. Local communities are starting to recognize farmers markets as a potential “draw” to their downtown areas.

A community food systems (CFS) program would help community members support safe and nutritious food that is grown, sold and consumed closer to home; advocate the protection of land, and encourage public policies and planning that foster economic viability, ecological health and social justice.

Our Response
In partnership with Palouse-Clearwater Environmental Institute, Moscow, we developed a small farm tour in Kootenai/Spokane counties, and a workshop in Coeur d’Alene to introduce the concept of a CFS, and to illustrate area small farm/market garden production and marketing practices. We invited producers, potential producers, economic development agencies, educators, retail food marketers, policy makers, religious leaders, and social service agencies from eastern Washington, northern Idaho, and western Montana. We wrote and received a mini-grant from the Univ. of Idaho Sustainable Ag. Team to help us initiate the workshop and preliminary regional analysis related to developing an Inland Northwest CFS Assessment project. Our keynote speaker at the workshop was Gail Feenstra, U.C. Davis, who has developed assessment tools for CFS’s in California. The goals of the tour and workshop were to identify people who would be interested in working on a regional task force, and identify and prioritize information and educational needs to enhance the success of the regional CFS.

Achievements
Forty people from Idaho, Washington, and British Columbia, attended the day-long tour. For 77%, this was their first small farm tour. Participants indicated a better understanding of the
opportunities and challenges of local production and direct marketing, economic development potential of local agriculture, and what a CFS entails. Participants comments about the tour included, “I liked the diversity of places visited; emphasis on various marketing/outreach strategies,” “I liked being in the fields, hearing specifics from growers of their growing, marketing experiences,” “I liked interaction with others in the group, getting a flavor of local production activities, hearing about Huckleberry’s [Fresh Produce, Veradale WA].” Participants indicated they would very likely increase their consumption of local products and buy organic products. Thirty-five percent of the participants wanted to become a member of a local or regional CFS assessment task force.

Fifteen people from eastern Washington, northern Idaho, and western Montana attended the CFS assessment workshop the following day. Participants developed an ideal Inland Northwest CFS, and identified gaps in information or education that needed to be filled to bring the current food system in line with the ideal system. These areas include direct marketing, consumer awareness, and production practices.

Participants’ evaluations indicated they had a much better understanding of CFS’s, social and economic values of strengthening local food systems, value of regionally grown food, weaknesses and strengths of the current food system, and the need for developing a task force. They also were highly likely to share what they learned with others, participate as a collaborator on a CFS assessment project, and organize a similar workshop or project. Comments included “Gail was great and hearing about other CFS programs is very useful. But visioning, etc. is important too.” Five participants committed to being a major participant or cooperator in future CFS assessment projects.

Cooperators and Co-Sponsors
Palouse-Clearwater Environmental Institute
WSU Center for Sustaining Agriculture and Natural Resources
Patagonia, Inc.
Jessie Smith Noyes Foundation

The Future
Grant proposals are currently being written to continue developing and implementing the Inland Northwest CFS Assessment Project. The areas of focus for the next three years will include 1) the economic and quality of life values of a farmers’ market to a community, 2) the economics of small-acreage sustainable and organic production systems, and the development of appropriate enterprise budgeting systems, and 3) a farmer survey on marketing methods and the economic advantages of local/sustainable/organic produce.

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