

Getting to Know Farming, and Farmers, in Thurston County

As necessary, and pleasurable, as food and eating are in our lives, opportunities to become familiar with farming in Thurston County are rare. How much farmland remains? How many farmers? How many of our family, friends, or neighbors make their primary, or even more than 25 percent, of their income from farming? Is agricultural business activity healthy and expanding, or not? And what does the future hold? Will we remain, or are we even still, an agricultural county and region?

Developing a good understanding of farming is difficult, I know, because it has been my job for the past three years. In April 2016 I was hired as the Washington State University agriculture specialist for Thurston County, and my primary charge has been to have a positive impact on farmers – on sales, on land in agriculture, on productivity and crop losses to pests, on sustainability, and any issue most pressing to the farming population.

What this has translated into is a fair amount of prying and persistence in talking to farmers, lining up farm tours, putting together applied community research, and organizing field days, workshops, and networking opportunities.

As I have worked, a picture of agriculture has taken shape that I don't believe too many citizens of our county may be familiar with. That picture develops from a blend of statistics, farmers' stories and observations, opportunity for formal listening sessions, insight from working with community partners on farming issues, and many hours crisscrossing the county.

At a superficial level, the 2017 Census of Agriculture statistics tell us that Thurston County is host to some 1,200 farms (down from 1,336 in 2012) operating on 62,250 acres (down from 76,638 in 2012), generating approximately \$176 million sales. For geographic context, the most productive agricultural county in Western Washington (Whatcom County) generated \$372 million in sales, while Thurston ranks 5th overall behind Whatcom, Skagit, Snohomish, and Lewis Counties.

For context through time, in 1950 Thurston County was host to 2,022 farms operating on 170,640 acres. The average farm size then was 84 acres, while today it is 52 acres.

What is particularly compelling about Thurston County is the diversity of agricultural goods produced. Hills of rolling wheat and garbanzo beans we are not. Our agricultural diversity stems in part from our geographic diversity. The county rises from tidelands to nearly 4,000 ft, and spans five major watersheds that flow in every direction. Farmers produce shellfish, dairy products, poultry, eggs, Christmas trees, nursery stock, greenhouse crops, hay and forage, grains, poultry, beef and other livestock products, vegetables, fruit, and mushrooms, among other crops

Interestingly, very little of the product farmers raise is sold directly to consumers. While our farmers' markets are vigorous activity, and provide excellent opportunities to rub shoulders with our agrarian neighbors, they constitute a small proportion of market outlets for farms. Of the \$176 million in sales, only \$1.3 million are generated through consumer-direct channels such as farmers' markets and farm stands.

Nevertheless, many people are sustained on the county's bounty. In an average year, \$18 million in shellfish, \$22 million in poultry and eggs, \$21 million in milk from cows, and \$8 million in cattle and calves are sold, to say nothing of the non-food production that I look to discuss in future columns.

Product from the county, indeed, is circulated near and far. Few may know that eggs from Stiebrs are a mainstay in breakfast bars at PCC Natural Markets and Whole Foods in Seattle. Or that Manilla clams and oysters raised by Taylor shellfish are enjoyed at oyster bars in Hong Kong.

While productive and enterprising, however, farmers in the county face challenges. In 2017 a local needs assessment of farmers was completed, indicating topics from lacking infrastructure to land loss, loss of water rights, loss or stagnation of markets, and increasing regulatory burdens, as major impediments to agricultural viability. Folks at Helsing Junction Farm have been particularly vocal about the need to increase control of the local and regional food system. They lament wholesale prices that remain what they were twenty years ago.

Likewise, loss of a cannery buyer in 2018 in Southwest Washington eliminated a market for one to two thousand acres of crop production. Economic pressure mounting on farmers, in recent years, has become only more acute in contrast to the opportunity presented by selling land. In 2018, 290 acres of farmland were removed from the farmland taxation program in Thurston County, largely for development.

Thurston County is a fabulous place to live and to farm, but a growing community puts pressure on farmers and farmland. The first step to ensuring that this remains an agricultural region is to improve widespread understanding about farming. It isn't enough to shop local, although that helps tremendously. We all need to build and deepen our awareness of the agricultural aspects of our economy and community. From that, we will protect what we know.