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TO: Bill Vetter, Pierce County Council Performance Audit Committee
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FROM: Globalwise Inc.
CC: ARL Project Team
DATE: June 7, 2016 - Revised
SUBJECT: A Fresh Look at Pierce County Agriculture
Technical Memorandum #4 – Success Factors for Pierce County Agriculture

Introduction

A multi-disciplinary team led by Barney & Worth, Inc. is taking *A Fresh Look at Pierce County Agriculture*. Members of the team bring extensive agricultural, scientific, legal, and economic expertise to the project.

The Washington State Growth Management Act (GMA) requires counties to designate Agricultural Resource Lands (ARL), which "have long-term significance for the commercial production of food or other agricultural products". Pierce County places a high priority on protecting commercially viable agricultural lands, and has established these criteria for ARL parcels:

- Located in rural area of County (outside UGA)
- Five acres or greater
- Contain at least 50% "prime farmland" soils
- Grass/legume production yield of 3.5 tons per acre or greater
- 50% of abutting parcels larger than 1 acre
- Landowner may request the designation

The consultant team is analyzing the current condition of Pierce County's agriculture sector and evaluating the effectiveness of the County's zoning regulations for protecting agricultural lands. The County's current ARL criteria will be revisited, with consideration given to alternatives. A series of technical memoranda are being prepared to illuminate different aspects of farmland protections.

This technical memorandum reviews factors that contribute to the success of farmers and ranchers in Pierce County. The analysis focuses attention on the reasons that growers have been successful in the past and whether those same elements can keep the agriculture sector on a growth path or if new factors may be needed to propel the industry.

Highlights

The key highlights of this analysis:

- Farming will continue to change in response to market forces and as Pierce County's population continues to grow.
- Newer, small-scale farmers expect to be compatible with urban neighbors. However, these farms are too small and not arriving fast enough to replace the larger farms that are leaving.
- Farmers further from urban centers are also feeling pressure of development on their operations. Even in the south end of the county, where livestock production (mainly beef cattle) is the primary agricultural activity, residential growth is challenging to farmers and ranchers.
- The major need for Pierce County farmers is larger and more profitable market outlets. That is the best stimulus to maintain their presence.
- ARL zoning protections alone are not sufficient to keep agriculture at its current level of output and economic contributions to the county.

Success Starts with Management Skill and Knowledge

An agricultural producer's knowledge and business management ability are crucial for success. Young farmers who are from a multi-generation farm family gain a great deal of knowledge from being "inside" the business. For others, this knowledge must be acquired from study and practical experience. Many decisions made in the first year or two of the business have a great impact on success or failure:

- Are the farm soils well suited to produce the volume and quality of crops or livestock to be grown?
- Will the selected markets provide reasonable prices and sufficient income?
- Is there sufficient operating capital to sustain the business, after purchasing land and equipment and making building upgrades and other improvements?
- Especially in a small business, are all the needed skills in place, from knowledge of to produce and handle the products, manage hired labor and other operational aspects of the business and execute the right marketing decisions?
- Agriculture is full of uncertainty and risk – from weather that can result in large crop losses to wide price fluctuations within one season or year-to-year. Does the operator have the financial reserves and fortitude to withstand such unforeseen circumstances?

Many start-up farmers in Pierce County start as interns on existing farms to gain knowledge and experience. Those who remain committed to farming can proceed to establish their own operations.

Another source of new farmers is immigrants and refugees, who were often farmers in their homeland. They may need to learn about growing conditions in Pierce County, but have transferable knowledge

about many aspects of production. Their greater challenges might be with language or cultural differences.

External Factors that Support Farming

Many factors outside the control of farmers have a great influence on their success. These are briefly mentioned here and discussed in more detail later in this memorandum.

Land Use Planning & Zoning

Planning and zoning have the role of identifying the land most suitable for agriculture and separating the agricultural land from other incompatible land uses. Soils are a leading factor in identifying land suitability for agriculture, but topography and climate also affect the practical and profitable aspects of farming the land.

Local and State Regulations

Government regulations can unintentionally place an unnecessary or unfair burden on agricultural producers (nuisance protection, health codes, etc.). State and local agencies must remain vigilant to avoid these circumstances and also recognize and value the broader set of ecosystem and societal benefits that agriculture provides to a region (groundwater recharge and floodwater protection, wildlife corridors, etc.).

Technical & Financial Support Programs

Government agencies, universities and other organizations assist farmers in a variety of ways, from helping with nutrient management planning, to assisting in the development of a business or marketing plan, or the implementation of technological solutions on farm.

Growing Demand for Local Food/Access to Markets

Pierce County farmers are focusing their marketing efforts on buyers and consumers within the county and Puget Sound region.

Pierce County Agriculture: Case Studies

This section presents typical conditions for three common types of farms in Pierce County. These case studies are based on interviews of farmers, and they examine the reasons for the success of these types of farms and the general outlook for the future. The information presented is drawn from an aggregation of agricultural enterprises to explore a wider range of success factors.

Well-Established Farmers in the Puyallup Valley

Overview

There are five larger, multi-generation row crop farms left in the Puyallup Valley. These are operations of 100 to 350 acres owned and operated by third or fourth generation farmers. These farmers own and lease farmland, and primarily grow vegetable and fruit crops requiring irrigation and intensive management. Crops include cabbage, head and leafy green lettuce, peppers, cucumbers, strawberries and rhubarb. The fertile, deep soils of Puyallup Valley are well suited for a wide range of high-value row

crops, so the farmers are able to adapt their crop mix to meet market demand. Leased farmland is usually contracted on a short-term basis, so the production strategy on leased acres relies on intensive, field production of annual crops. High tunnels[1] and greenhouses are used by some farmers in the county to extend the growing season of certain high-value crops and for starting seedlings for transplant into the field. They are not currently being utilized as intensively as in other counties, such as berry production in Skagit and Whatcom Counties.

Over time these farms have sold a portion of their land for development, but retain a portion of their original land in the ARL zone. They tend to lease farmland in the Puyallup Valley, the Orting area, Sumner-Buckley area, or other areas to increase their scale of production, or to extend their season. Typically these growers raise a number of vegetable and fruit crops for fresh market sales using conventional (non-organic) growing practices.

These farmers have specialized in large volume sales to larger retail markets, including grocery store chains, produce wholesalers and specialty food service distributors. They do their own washing and fresh-packing, and then deliver to distribution centers or have the buyers pick up the products directly from their farms. While the per unit profits may be higher from sales to other types of local markets – such as farmers markets or CSAs – these farmers deal with volumes that are too large to make these market channels feasible. Because of larger production, their distribution range is more extensive than the smaller, direct-market farms. Still, some of their products end up in groceries and restaurants in Pierce County.

These farms are generally profitable, although they suffer from low-profit years due to inclement weather or highly competitive supplies from other production areas. The farmers indicate that their cost of production is rising due to new labor laws and more extensive government and vendor reporting requirements. The most recent added cost factor is new federal Food Safety Modernization Act requiring reporting and traceability that is not mandated for small-scale producers.

Success Factors

These farms have a number of advantages that contribute to their success:

- Large economies of scale and established relationships with buyers and bankers allow for the use of efficient and reliable technologies for field operations, product washing and packing, marketing and distribution.
- Efficiencies are also gained from vertical integration and volume growth, and in some cases from aggregating product from multiple farms in the packaging or distribution business. Some also operate farm stands that afford added profit margins.
- Relationships with researchers and private agronomists as well as knowledge of best practices accumulated over the generations which provide an advantage in achieving optimal crop yields

[1] According to the USDA, a seasonal high tunnel is a polyethylene-covered structure with or without electricity, heating, or mechanical ventilation systems. High tunnels modify the climate to create more favorable growing conditions for vegetable and other specialty crops. They are sometimes called hoop houses.

and quality given improved crop types and varieties, weather fluctuations, pest control requirements, packaging systems and supply chain management.

- There is little to no mortgage debt on farmland and many of the other capital improvements held by families for multiple generations.
- These farms have more managerial time and resources to advocate for legislative action and policies that directly impact their business.

Primary Challenges

The loss of farmland has made it more difficult for larger farmers to access enough farmland within a short travel distance to remain viable. Larger farmers typically operate on multiple properties, which either requires moving farm equipment on heavily-trafficked roads or purchasing additional equipment for different properties. This adds to the liability and/or cost of the enterprise, and results in nuisance complaints from neighbors who dislike the transport and operation of farm equipment. Also, with fewer farmers operating in the region there has been a loss of important agricultural services that support farming viability in numerous ways, such as tractor and equipment dealers, repair services, and seed and input suppliers.

With increased development has come an increase in the impervious surface area within and just outside of the Puyallup Valley. This has complicated surface water management for farmers and non-farmers alike, and connected fish and wildlife habitat management in the floodplain. This is a watershed-scale challenge, yet some farmers feel that they are unfairly burdened in having to restrict or change their farming practices to address problems partly caused by urban development. Large and small-scale farmers favor systemic, community-wide solutions to surface water and connected fish and wildlife habitat management challenges.

The larger, multi-generation farmers don't advocate for converting prime farmland to other uses, but they feel restricted by an inability to sell their ARL designated land at a fair value in order to retire or move to a different agricultural region. This has created a feeling of unfairness for some multi-generation farmers whose land is designated as ARL, while farmland with different zoning has been sold for much higher prices. Some large farmers would consider selling their development rights but have concerns about being fully compensated. Others point out that, even without development rights, these agricultural parcels are prohibitively expensive for new farmers.

Small-Scale, Direct Market Growers

Overview

Small-scale commercial farms are found in several areas of Pierce County. The prime soils of the Puyallup and Orting Valleys are most attractive. These farms range in size from under an acre to 20 acres or more, with a 20-acre farm considered large in this category. According to the USDA Census of Agriculture, 38 percent of Pierce County farms that harvested cropland in 2012 were 1-9 acres in size, and they collectively accounted for just five percent of total harvested cropland that year. The newer farms tend to be operated by young farmers who have one to three years of experience interning on other farms in the Puget Sound region prior to operating their own farm. Small farms often start "bare bones" on leased land or with USDA-backed low interest loans, and they typically rely on only operator labor or perhaps intern labor.

As any farmers market shopper can attest, there is a diversity of food, flower, fiber and medicinal agricultural products produced by small farmers in the county. Many of these farms rely on direct-to-consumer sales through farmers markets, Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) programs, and farm stands, so they typically grow a number of different vegetable crops, and sometimes produce fruit, meat, eggs or other specialized items such as vegetable starts or lavender. These farms favor high tunnels to start seedlings for transplanting into the field, or to extend the production season for certain high-value crops (e.g., tomatoes or strawberries). High tunnels, also known as hoop houses, modify the climate to create more favorable growing conditions for vegetable and other specialty crops grown beneath them either in the natural soil, or in pots or trays. Some of the favored vegetable crops grown are tomatoes, peppers, salad greens, cucumbers and broccoli.

Fresh, free-range eggs are gaining in popularity. Poultry, lamb, pork and other small meat animals are also raised on some farms. Most of the successful farms try to gain an advantage with one of two signature items to distinguish themselves and gain loyalty from repeat customers.

Small farms are also finding agri-tourism as a compatible source of added revenue. CSA farms already have customers visit their farms to pick-up food. Hayrides, pumpkin patches, corn mazes, and school visits are among the ways these farms increase visitors and sales. Weddings, on-farm dinners and other events are also services that some local farms offer.

Success Factors

The successful small-scale, direct market farms tend to have these characteristics:

- The farmers gained prior farming experience through on-farm jobs or internships before starting their independent operations.
- The farmers emphasize producing high-value crops and livestock/livestock products for direct-to-consumer market outlets. Sometimes they add value by creating processed products such as jams, jerky, sauerkraut or teas. The successful farms demonstrate premium quality plus offer some products outside the standard range. These are often varieties or types of vegetables or fruits that are difficult to find at grocery stores or through common wholesalers. For instance, green zebra or black roma varieties of tomato, kiwi berries, or edible flowers. This helps the grower point out their own marketing story and gives them more opportunity to sell in specialty markets at premium prices.
- They take advantage of financial and technical support programs that reduce costs, and/or add product value. Many of the growers who have added high tunnels have done so with the financial and technical assistance of the USDA Natural Resource Conservation Service. Many poultry producers have relied on the Pierce Conservation District's mobile poultry processing unit. There are also USDA micro loan programs with attractive finance rates, and government grant programs that support the development of new marketing approaches and value-added products. WSU Extension and the Conservation District provide various agricultural education programs and offer other assistance to help promote best practices, introduce new production techniques and crops, and protect the environment.

Primary Challenges

Local small farmers report their business model is marginally profitable yet many also have an optimistic view of the future.[2] Since larger farms are in decline, this segment of agriculture is often viewed as the future of Pierce County farming. As evidenced by the USDA Census of Agriculture, the one to nine acre size farm is quite common in the county. Pierce County's small farms commonly achieve low annual gross incomes ranging from $10,000 to $30,000, which can result in a slight to no net income. This is typical of the region, as a recent study by Patzek et al. of fruit and vegetable farmers in Thurston, Mason and Lewis Counties found that 43 percent of farmers earn less than $10,000 in cash receipts per year, and 44 percent earn no more than a quarter of their total household income from the farm.[3] Economic studies from outside of Pierce County report a wide range of net incomes generated by small farms, even if they produce similar crops. A 2012 study from Iowa State University reports a net income of $30,000 is attainable from a three-acre CSA farm.[4] A Wisconsin study of the economics of small farms selling fresh organic vegetables shows the most successful farms can earn net cash income of about $7,000 per acre on 12 or more acres, suggesting that a 12-acre farm could generate a net income of about $84,000.[5]

The upper size category of small farms – farms with 15 to 20 acres or more – have the best chance to earn sufficient net income to ensure their long term success. At present there are few small-scale local farmers that rely primarily or entirely on farm income (i.e., full-time farmers). One concern for the small farm segment of Pierce County agriculture is that they are challenged in gaining the financial ability to expand and acquire more farmland. Leasing or renting land is possible, but this often is on a short-term basis and is an obstacle to making improvements, to buildings, irrigation systems and other infrastructure.

In addition to working the land, small-scale farmers in Pierce County and across the nation find that an increasing amount of time must be spent meeting regulatory requirements. Some examples are: 1) building codes and permitting – completing applications/meeting inspection requirements and timely final approval, 2) floodplain structures – special regulations and moratoriums, 3) water quality – monitoring and compliance, 4) food safety regulations and audits – paper work and compliance issues, and 5) state labor laws – meeting changing reporting requirements.

Smaller farmers must also be concerned about access to local markets for their products, and growth in market demand which can help ensure their ongoing profitability. Lack of profit is an obstacle to sustaining or expanding farming operations for the long-term. This also leads to a short supply of farmers that have the skills and financial backing to purchase larger farmland parcels owned by older farmers who may wish to retire. If the larger parcels of farmland can't be sold to the next generation of farmers, the owners may rent or lease land to other farmers, but there is a strong financial incentive to seek rezoning and conversion of the land to non-farm use. If large tracts of farmland become idle, other

[2] Agriculture Infrastructure: Pierce County 2015, page 22.
[3] See Produce Farm-To-Market Trends: A Case Study of South Puget Sound
[4] See https://www.extension.iastate.edu/agdm/wholefarm/html/c3-65.html.
[5] See Grower to grower: Creating a livelihood on a fresh market vegetable farm", page 13.

challenges to local communities will emerge, such as increased noxious weed pressure and reduced local food availability.

Small-Scale Livestock Producers

Pierce County has relatively few livestock operations and this segment of agriculture is trending down. Cattle and calves are the dominant form of livestock agriculture in the county. In 2012, the Census of Agriculture reported producers in the county owned a total of 11,555 cattle and calves, 1,863 sheep and lambs, and 435 hogs and pigs. Beef cows outnumber dairy cows by over 3 to 1, and most of the beef operations are small in size. The census also recorded 309 farms selling 1-9 head of cattle, 32 farms selling 10-19, 17 farms selling 20-49, with a further decreasing ranch count trend as herd size increases. The county's small beef producers primarily rely on grazing their own or nearby pastures, and purchasing small quantities of hay and feed grain. It is these two factors which limit their annual production level. Most pastures are non-irrigated and are relatively small in size due to an upland ecology dominated by woodland.

Many of the cattle operations exist in the upland areas of the county, and some do not realize much or any net return from their production. Most of the producers inherited their land, and these cattle operations are either a family tradition or a means of subsistence. While a few producers have been able to capitalize on farmers markets and bulk (whole, half, quarter carcass) sales directly to customers, many sell live animals at auction at a lower profit. In a review of the Puget Sound Meat Producers Cooperative it was found that many members did not have established markets and had difficulty getting started or ramping up their marketing programs, thus the mobile processing unit managed by the Cooperative was greatly under-utilized.[6]

The expansion of 5 to 10 acre rural residential properties is reducing the size of ranchland holdings. Investors are also purchasing larger parcels. To reduce holding costs and meet the requirements of agriculture current use taxation, the owners often rent the land to local residents who raise cattle on the pasture. It is typical for a renter to purchase a few head of feeder calves in the spring to graze them on pasture grass until early fall when the cattle go to auction. Other operators keep cattle over the winter and feed baled hay or grass silage (haylage). Haylage has the advantage of being a locally-produced protein feed source without the cost of transporting high quality feed over the Cascade Mountains. Haylage is wrapped in plastic and can be stored outdoors, which is another advantage over traditional dry baled hay.

Some grass fields are rented in the south county area for about $50 to $75 per acre per year. Two cuttings of haylage are desired but dry summer weather may dictate that the second cutting is dry-baled hay.

Success Factors

The successful small-scale cattle operations tend to have these characteristics:

[6] See http://articles.extension.org/pages/28436/puget-sound-meat-producers-cooperative

- These businesses tend to be second or third generation land-owners, who can operate without the cost of mortgage payments.
- Small-scale cattle ranches, whether feeder cattle or cow-calve operations, are viewed as a valuable and enjoyable part-time enterprise and a minor income source.
- Successful ranchers are low cost operators who use a variety of strategies to reduce costs: trade services with neighbors to eliminate unnecessary costs, maintain and repair their own equipment, and adapt to production techniques like haylage that save labor and promote efficient weight gain for feeder cattle.
- Cattle producers are rewarded with better prices when they quickly recognize changes in buyer preferences for cattle breeds and meat characteristics, but only if they are able to develop adequate local markets on their own or in cooperation with other producers or with a meat processor.
- The best ranchers also reduce the cost of feed, which is their number one cost factor, by adjusting to the need for forage as weather dictates. They also wisely and intensively manage their limited pastureland. If protracted periods of dry weather are expected, they must supplement existing feed supplies, by quickly finding new grass fields to rent or crop share.

Primary Challenges

Since ranchers often rely on rented land as a primary source for grass forage, they are having greater difficulty finding suitable property as more parcels are subdivided. In some cases land-owners want rent agreements for only one to two years, which require ranchers to regularly find new pastureland.

Many small-scale operators are satisfied with making just a small income or offsetting family food costs with their scale of cattle production, and they aren't driven to scale up and make this type of enterprise their primary source of family income. Still, while record high prices in conventional cattle markets in recent years have allowed producers to sell small numbers of live animals at auction for a very good return, these markets are volatile and go through long periods of low prices. Direct marketing offers potentially higher profits but is difficult, and many local small-scale cattle producers have not been able to develop special production practices and marketing approaches to sell outside of auction.

Farmland Protection

Need for Permanent Protection of Priority Land Resources

Many farmers and ranchers point to the diminishing base of working farmland as a primary challenge to the long-term viability of agriculture in Pierce County. In particular, the loss of large adjacent tracts of the most productive farmland is a major barrier. Agricultural productivity starts with native soil properties that are conducive to cropping, including soil water-holding capacity, infiltration rate, aggregation, organic matter content, and temperature. These prime soils are suitable for the production of a range of food crops, such as fruits and vegetables, as well as for various nursery plants. A wider range of soil types can be used for the production of small grains, hay and common forage crops.

The water rights attached to farmland is an increasingly important factor for agricultural viability. Without water rights, the farmer is restricted to non-irrigated crops which are of lower value than irrigated crops, or much lower yields of some high-value crops. Landowners without water rights can

buy them from other land-owners or they can apply to the Washington Department of Ecology, but applications for water rights are currently running at about a 20-year delay and have an uncertain outcome. There are some large parcels currently on the market that do not come with water rights, so they are of limited agricultural value.

ARL zoning offers a degree of protection for priority agricultural land. When faced with strong development pressure, ARL zoning does not alone prevent land use conversion, as is clearly demonstrated in the Puyallup Valley. Zoning works best in combination with other tools, in particular with a system for the purchase or transfer of development rights, which are a permanent restriction. Pierce County is using this tool and it will be further needed to protect other productive agricultural land that is vulnerable to urban conversion.

Maximize the Value of ARL Zoning

One of the most positive attributes of ARL zoning is the clustering of farmland parcels. Holding multiple properties in a contiguous block buffers agricultural land from other uses that may be in conflict with farming practices. Farmers prefer to be surrounded by other farmers because it allows for equipment, input and labor sharing, can promote market development, and enhances the transfer of skills and knowledge. By keeping development away, the immediate pressure to convert to non-farm use is diminished.

Buffer areas around ARL zones help to maximize the value of ARL zoning. Rivers, wetlands, wildlife habitat areas and other land features can help separate ARL zones from non-compatible uses.

Recognize the Exceptions

Some agricultural sectors, particularly the nursery, floriculture and mushroom sectors do not require prime agricultural soils or other environmental conditions (e.g., temperature, precipitation rates). However, there are a number of factors that are commonly beneficial to agriculture, including:

- Topography –flat ground is much preferred to sloped land. Moderate slopes are acceptable for some types of agriculture, including livestock grazing, forage production, vineyards and some food crops.
- Water availability – as seasonal water scarcity increases and urban and environmental uses require more of the total water supply, access to water rights becomes increasingly important to farmers for irrigation during the dominant growing season. Conversely, water inundation and inadequate drainage of surface water during the winter season becomes increasingly important as well. In other words, the right amount of water needs to be available during the right time of year for agriculture to be successful. Too much or too little water can have a devastating impact on the crops, animals, equipment, or infrastructure of a farm.
- Elevation, prevailing wind and surrounding land features – More Growing Degree Days are typical of lower elevations, so the season starts later and ends earlier at higher versus lower elevations. Thus, the intensity and type of agricultural production possible at higher elevations is restricted. Sometimes the features of a higher elevation production area are uniquely beneficial. For instance, the isolation distance can be important for producing genetically-pure seed crops. Certain types of wine grapes produce better in high elevation areas.

Replenish and Support New Farmers

Renewing the farmer population has become recognized as a critical aspect of the future of agriculture. The 2012 Agricultural Census reports that the average age of farmers is nearly 60 years old.[7] This means a large number of farmers will leave agriculture or at least start to cut back in the next 10 years. Some of the transition will come within the family as the younger generation takes over. But even among family farms, properties will be sold, leased or rented to new owners and operators. Without farmer replenishment, it is difficult to foresee this industry expanding in next 10 to 20 years.

Programs that extinguish development rights on farmland and bring new farmers to the land are occurring in Pierce County. The County's partnerships with land trusts and the State of Washington are valuable because farmers are recruited and placed on the properties that are protected for perpetuity. Agricultural support groups are planning to accelerate the protection of land and place farmers on the properties. Their success in this effort is a key element for the future of agriculture.

Another source of new farmers is the use of interns on farms to support the knowledge transfer needed so that the interns can take the next step and become independent farmers.

Other support programs are available for next generation farmers. Given the critical need, strengthening each of these efforts will help agriculture in the future:

- WSU beginning farmer courses, with integration of best farm practices developed at the WSU Puyallup Research and Extension Center
- Expanded ethnic farmer training in conjunction with WSU farming programs and internships to assist the growing number of immigrants who want to farm
- Conservation District programs to improve soil and water management, provide mobile meat processing equipment, and more.[8] The Conservation District reaches out to farmers throughout the county and has close working relationships with other agricultural organizations for coordination of resources and programs.
- Educational workshops such as the Farm Forum Workshop Series have been helpful for farmers in the Puyallup watershed.[9] This existing series is a good foundation for other educational programs.
- One-to-one mentor programs for small-scale farmers who want to expand as well as new farmers. Knowledge transfer from retiring farmers is a vital resource to harness.
- Expansion of military veterans farm training. The Veterans Farm in Orting (Vets Café) is training veterans to grow crops.[10] It is a positive way to integrate veterans in the agriculture industry.

[7] 2012 Census of Agriculture Profile for Pierce County Washington. See at https://www.agcensus.usda.gov/Publications/2012/Online_Resources/County_Profiles/Washington/cp53053.pdf
[8] See the Pierce Conservation District Website at: www.piercecountycd.org
[9] See Puyallup Watershed Initiative by the Agricultural Community of Interest, pages 8-9.
[10] See http://www.dva.wa.gov/permaculture-classes-veterans-farm-orting

Need for Practical Regulations Pertaining to Farm Operations

One of the frequent complaints of farmers is that local regulations are more numerous and costly than in the past, a burden cited by all types of farmers.[11] In the Puyallup Valley surface water management and drainage are identified as main concerns of both large and small farmers. Building regulations are also considered a large burden for farmers and the cost of permits is a particular impediment for newer small-scale growers. Some local Health Department regulations over food safety are seen as onerous for small farmers. Most small-scale farmers believe they have good oversight and control over their food safety practices and believe the regulations are impractical for them. When combined with state regulations such as wage and hour laws, and federal regulation such as wetlands management, it is clear that the burden has increased over time. The combined weight of these regulations at the local/state/federal levels poses a special challenge as Pierce County agriculture is evolving toward smaller-scale farmers.

Enhance the Supply Chainfrom Farmer to Local Markets

Realizing higher prices by expanding opportunities to reach customers is another path toward success for Pierce County agricultural producers. Respondents to a recent infrastructure survey in Pierce County said they did not need more farmers markets established, but preferred to have the existing markets become more robust and attract more customers.[12]

Other key findings of the infrastructure study are: 1) there is a need for pre-washing and perhaps packing facilities and cold storage; 2) consider county or regional branding; 3) support farmer-buyer networking events, especially before the growing season; and 4) explore the feasibility of creating a centralized way for buyers to find, order, purchase and receive locally-produced products.

Larger scale food hubs do not appear to be a priority among local farmers. Pierce County already has a private sector food hub in place. Some small-scale farmers have built innovative, cost effective cold storage. Yet other small-scale growers are challenged in getting products to market while maintaining good quality. Some infrastructure would be helpful for a system of pre-packing vegetables and fruits. Success in this initiative likely will come from growers. The very supportive local organizations appear willing to join farmers to remove these types of infrastructure bottlenecks.

The advent of the Internet and social media enhances direct communication between farmers and customers. Many successful farmers have created very interactive websites that attract their current and prospective customers. Successful marketers realize they must help their customers with convenient access since consumers have many purchasing choices.

Running a profitable, diversified farm that is primarily reliant on direct marketing requires a workforce with a broad skill set and base of knowledge, from crop production to recordkeeping, food safety, and

[11] Agriculture Infrastructure: Pierce County 2015, pages 25-28.
[12] Ibid page 18.

customer service. It is difficult finding and retaining such a skilled workforce in a sector having highly seasonal work and limited salary and benefits.

Summary and Conclusions

As a large, growing urban county, Pierce County is challenged in making progress toward supporting its agricultural industry. As the County and cities contend with population growth, the land settlement pattern changes, and roads, sewers, schools and other public infrastructure are added. These all impact farmers, but not all farmers are impacted to the same degree.

Large farms close to the urban centers and in the midst of dense development and rapid change and growth are the most negatively impacted. Their size and multiple farm site operations are severely affected. They are specialized and keep the same general crops over time, but have limited opportunities to expand and are restricted in how they operate. They have operated for many generations in the valley but they see a limited future.

In contrast to the large farms, the smaller direct market farms have come to the Puyallup and Orting Valleys and want to be near their customers. Many of these farms were established recently. They operate on small acreage, with their farm in a contiguous block, which reduces negative effects of dense nearby development. Their neighbors like the open space of a small farm, and usually these small farms generate little noise, dust, spray or other causes for complaints.

Farms in the Buckley and Sumner areas face less intense development pressure and grow a wider range of crops. These farms are typically well-established, medium size and produce many types of field and berry crops. They are facing development pressure but at a lesser degree than valley farms.

The central county and south county upland areas have diversified, and generally small livestock-based farms and ranches. The main exception is a very large egg facility near Roy. The livestock ranches are dominated by cattle production, but a rise in rural residential development has contributed to a decline in agriculture.

The Key Peninsula is an area with generally very small vegetable crop and livestock-based agriculture. These are very small acreage businesses that sell their farm output very close by. These farms are slightly increasing in number in recent years.

The diversity of agriculture across the county leads to different views among farmers about ARL zoning. The larger farmers are the least favorable toward the ARL designation. Smaller, new famers usually have a more favorable view, because they see a long future in agriculture and they want protection and certainty for their business.

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