

Regional Food Policy Council.....

at Work

Forum on Farmland Access

September 29, 2017

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Attendees

Melissa Borsting, SnoValley Tilth | Melissa Campbell, PCC Farmland Trust | Richard Conlin, Co-Chair | Robin Crowder, 21 Acres | Derrick Edens, UFCW 367 | Leif Fixen, American Farmland Trust | Bobbi Lindemulder, Snohomish Conservation District | Michael Lufkin, King County | Kate Nagle, Tilth Alliance | Courtney Naumann, King Conservation District | Linda Neunzig, Snohomish County | Dana Nunnely, Leadership Eastside | Phyllis Shulman | Heidi Siegelbaum, Washington Stormwater Center | Sean Stratman, SnoValley Tilth | Councilmember Nancy Tosta, City of Burien | Gwen Vernon, Puyallup Watershed Initiative

PSRC Staff: Rebecca Maskin, PSRC | Liz Underwood-Bultmann, PSRC | Kristin Mitchell, PSRC

Welcome and Introductions, Public Comment

Richard Conlin, Co-Chair called the meeting to order at 10:00 am. There was no public comment. There were around the room introductions.

Session Overview

Farming in the central Puget Sound region provides opportunities to access urban markets, but the high cost of land and operations creates challenges for keeping farmland in production and ensuring opportunities for the next generation of farmers. The forum presented a panel to discuss barriers to keeping farmland in production, opportunities for new farmers to access farmland, and innovative approaches to keep farmland in farming use. Panelists included:

- Melissa Campbell, PCC Farmland Trust
- Kate Nagle-Caraluzzo, Tilth Alliance
- Sean Stratman, Sno-Valley Tilth - Experience Farming Project
- Mary Ann Swain, South of the Sound Community Farm Land Trust

Panel Discussion

Richard Conlin moderated a discussion between the four panelists, focusing on the various means by which their different organizations work to keep farmland in active use, and what additional methods they were aware of or exploring to further protect farmland and keep it in production.

Tools Being Used to Keep Farmland in Farm Use

- Conservation easements play an important role in affordability and are generally sponsored by counties and conservation organizations.
- In farmland preservation programs, there is a distinction between making land affordable to purchase vs. affordable to lease. Not all farmers feel the need to own the land, but need security where they feel like they can invest equity long term.
- Farmland trusts: trust owns the land and the farmers lease. These leases can be adapted to fit the specific needs of the farmer and organization. Trusts can provide retirees the ability to sell their land and continue to live on it, while earning income. Upon their decision to sell or death, the land passes ownership to the trust.
- Policy-wise, panelists discussed how zoning can be tuned to protect farmland, including by limiting the size of residential structures (example, Marin County, CA), or including affirmative clause in agricultural zones (used in Oregon).
- American Farmland Trust is starting a GIS update on their national assessment of farmland using USDA data. The study looks at every ¼ acre of farmland across the U.S. and was last done 10 to 15 years ago. The county-

by-county scorecard that shows the status of farmland preservation should be done by April 2018 [[complete report now available](#)].

Programs that Can Make an Impact

- Participants noted that farmland conservation is a funded conservation goal, but less focus is spent on stabilizing farm viability. As an example of an organization knitting the two together, the Vermont Housing and Conservation Board has a viability program, Farm and Forest Viability Program, that is funded using real estate excise taxes.
- In Traverse City, Michigan, there is a program that provides funding to farmers enrolled in term limited conservation easement.
- Co-op farming and combined resources spread costs and increase buying power for individual farmers.
- Transfer development rights is underutilized, and struggles to remain competitive. TDR at a regional level (versus county-level) would increase its effectiveness by expanding the purchaser pool.
- Participants discussed an emerging investor model to fund sustainable farm businesses and protect land. Instead of landowners selling directly to a farmer or land trust, instead they sell to an investor and farmers create a corporation and pay into shares of the corporation. The investor owns around 51% and farmers or a land trust owns the remaining share, or buildings/resources, as equity.

Open Discussion

A question and answer period followed the panel discussion, focusing on the themes of funding/financing of farmland preservation and communication and sharing among farmers and policy shapers. Panelists answered queries on how best to prioritize land or development rights for purchase, while counties are also mapping and prioritizing land similarly. The panel discussed successes and considerations with requiring secondary easements, such as those requiring organic farming, or active farm use on conserved land, noting that enforcement could particularly be a challenge, and that providing incentives for desired behaviours were effective. TDR programs were mentioned as a policy area that could be tweaked for effectiveness. In general, diversifying the funding sources for farmland preservation and development rights purchase

Forum participants noted an ad hoc group meeting quarterly to discuss farmland preservation issues in the Puget Sound area. The group is currently facilitated by the Office of Farmland Preservation, and collaboratively works to problem solve based on collective experience and informal networks.

Technical assistance on water rights and availability were identified as need, with water banks proposed as a solution.

Other needs identified in the discussion included fortifying the link between urban areas and farmland, including urban ag as a pipeline for connection, interest, and awareness of rural and farmlands; and growing philanthropic connections and marketing muscle amidst the region's growth boom.

Additional food policy forums will be scheduled in the upcoming months on other topics. For more information, contact Rebecca Maskin at RMaskin@psrc.org or Liz Underwood-Bultmann at LUnderwood-Bultmann@psrc.org