



Puget Sound Fresh

A Case Study

Prepared for the North Central Initiative
for Small Farm Profitability

By The University of Wisconsin Center for Cooperatives
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of the U.S. Department of Agriculture

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Context

Stretching from Puget Sound to the crest of the Cascade Mountain range, King County, home of the city of Seattle, Washington, is a beautiful and vibrant place. Habitats range from the urban canyons of the inner city to the wilds of the Mt Baker-Snoqualmie National Forest. With 29% of the state's population, and 43% of the jobs, a huge population resides within the county's borders. Many more commute in every day from homes in surrounding counties. Between 1970 and 2000, King County had a population increase of 45%, to a total of 1,685,600.

The relatively fertile soils and temperate climate of the Western Washington Puget Sound basin has long been a significant food producing area for the state. Western Washington has in the past been a national leader in production of strawberries, raspberries and rhubarb. However, agricultural production is becoming a lost art in the area, as the geographical borders of the Sound and mountain range focus the pressures of population growth. Taxes and land prices have leapt up in the past twenty years, challenging the ability of farmers to compete with devel-



The Puget Sound Area

opers for open space. A 1996 report states that sales of agricultural production land ranged from a low of \$3,500 per acre to \$17,000 or even over \$100,000 per acre within designated APDs (Agricultural Production Districts) within King County. (Farm and Forest Report)

The population of the area, in general well-educated and wealthy, has not, however, let

the trend of declining agricultural area go unnoticed. As early as 1979, voters in King County approved a \$50 million bond fund to establish the Farmland Preservation Program, which has preserved more than 13,000 acres to date through the buy-out of development rights. In 1995 the King County Agriculture Commission was established to make recommendations on how to use funds generated by another small bond initiative to further support agriculture and forestry in the county. This

Commission, made up of 8 farmers and 7 people in agricultural related positions, met and drafted a four point priority plan, titled the King County Farm and Forest Initiative, which focused on preserving and promoting local agriculture. Out of this plan, the Puget Sound Fresh marketing program was created.

Introduction and Background

The stated goal of the Puget Sound Fresh marketing program is to “encourage consumers, retailers and restaurants to purchase locally grown products”. Although the program was initiated and funded by King County, any farm products grown, raised or harvested from one of the 12 counties that border Puget Sound may be identified as “Puget Sound Fresh”.

Using the byline “Puget Sound Fresh - good for all of us”, the program targets promotions to consumers and produces educational materials that identify specific farms within the Puget Sound area. The broad goal is to increase the income and viability of local farms by expanding markets.

In October 1997, Steve Evans was hired by the King County Department of Natural Resources to work with farmers. Though not hired specifically to work on this project, Steve was asked to design and implement the program under the guidance of the County Agriculture Commission, which designated \$400,000 from the bond fund to finance the project startup.

Working with advertising consultants, a logo and advertising campaign was designed for Puget Sound Fresh. Steve designed the farm side of the program, and recruited farms to participate. A saturation ad campaign using radio spots, newspapers and bus billboards was launched in 1999. Information about the program was sent to retail stores, but organizers note that it took custom-

ers walking into retail stores, asking “What is this Puget Sound Fresh?,” to provoke the stores to seek out details about the program. A few of the smaller grocery retailers in the area agreed to try the promotional program, and found it was quite successful. These early successes piqued the interest of some of the larger grocery chains.

At this juncture Ron Sims, the King County Executive, played a major role. He called a meeting of several large retailers to explain the program, discuss the intended impact on the county and field questions. Several people mentioned this meeting as a pivotal piece in the program’s early success.

2. Sustaining Agriculture and Farming

King County has made a significant investment in preserving farmland for agriculture and open space uses. The next step is to help existing and future farmers maintain and operate their farms and inform consumers and businesses, such as restaurants, of the benefits of locally grown foods. In order to further maintain and enhance commercial farming on small farmland parcels, farmers and prospective farmers must have access to information on marketing and production strategies for small acreages, the potential for specialty crops and ecological farming techniques.

R-549 ((RL-306)) King County ((should)) shall work with and provide support to the work of Washington State University Cooperative Extension for technical and marketing assistance for small-scale commercial farmers.

R-550 King County shall continue to support innovative initiatives, such as the Puget Sound Fresh and Farm Link Programs, to promote and enhance agriculture in King County.

From the King County Comprehensive Plan

Program Description

The Puget Sound Fresh program consists of three major elements. The first element is the farm community. Area farmers are invited to participate in the program by supplying products to local retail stores and wholesalers, and by advertising their "local" production when they direct market. An invitation letter is sent early each season to a mailing list of about 1500 individuals who own agricultural land throughout the region. Currently about 200 farms participate by filling out an availability survey and farm description to be used in PSF materials. The only cost to farm participants is a small fee for stickers to put on their packaging and signage. Benefits include a comprehensive listing on the PSF website, the ability to use the PSF logo on packaging and advertising, grocery bags with logos, other support items and banners to use at farm markets.

The next element involves retailers, restaurants and wholesalers. These companies are recruited and invited to participate in the program by buying and promoting products from the region. For little or no cost,



Bumper Sticker

they are provided in-store signs, banners and access to logos to use in advertising. They also gain access to farms and information about product availability through the PSF office. PSF asks that the retailers and distributors use PSF materials as frequently as possible to identify and highlight products grown within the region. A fact sheet listing product availability by farm is created and distributed to retailers, wholesales and restaurants every two weeks between June and September to inform them of who has what when.

The last element is the consumers. Consumers are informed of the program through the PSF website, bus billboards and media advertising. They are asked to support local farms by buying items with the PSF logo.

It should also be mentioned that farmers markets are a recipient of PSF services. Small markets are invited to do cooperative advertising with PSF, which will contribute small amounts of money toward an ad in a local paper for a farm market.

Newspaper Advertisement

GET FRESH THIS SUMMER!

The "Puget Sound Fresh" label is your way of knowing the product was grown, raised or harvested on a farm right here in our local region. Buying and preparing these products is a great way to enjoy the freshest possible flavor, while helping keep our environment healthy and our farmers farming.

Here's What's FRESH from Our Local Farms Right Now!

Blueberries	Blackberries	Beans	Beets
Cabbage	Carrots	Cauliflower	Cucumbers
Dill	Eggs	Eggplant	Greens
Herbs	Honey	Lettuces	Mushrooms
Onions	Potatoes	Spinach	Sprouts
Squashes	Zucchini	Dairy Products	Flowers

Pick Up A Copy of the Puget Sound Farm Fresh Guide at Your Local Library
Ask for Puget Sound Fresh products at the following stores:
 Larry's Markets, Safeway Stores, Thriftway, Haggens/Top Foods, PCC

Find Puget Sound Fresh at local Farmers Markets:

Seattle Area: Columbia City, Fremont, Pike Place, University District, West Seattle

King County: Enumclaw, Issaquah, North Bend, Redmond, Vashon, Woodinville

Snohomish County: Bothell, Edmonds, Everett, Snohomish, Stanwood

For specific dates & times of Farmers Markets or more information on Puget Sound Fresh, visit: www.metrokc.gov/farms

Sponsored by the King and Snohomish County Agriculture Commissions

The majority of funding for the program has been supplied by the King County Council, which contributes about 2/3 of the annual \$100,000 budget. Other funds have come from area counties (\$5,000 from neighboring Kitsap County last year, and another approximately \$30,000 from Snohomish County). The half time project manager (Steve Evans) is paid by the county above and beyond the \$100,000 annual budget.

Impact

Currently 200 farms participate in the Puget Sound Fresh program. 11 Farm Markets are involved, and five major store chains representing approximately 165 storefronts.

Retail Stores

Interviews with retail store produce managers indicated that they feel the program is successful in heightening awareness of locally produced foods among their customers. One of the chains has used the program quite heavily, to the extent of having staff aprons and t-shirts printed with the program logo, and using extensive signing in the stores. The local multi-store food co-op hasn't used the program much, since their mission already dictates a strong emphasis on locally produced food and they have already developed their own local labeling program. Several stores have participated in promotional advertising campaigns, such as full-page ads emphasizing local products. One store reported that the promotions of PSF lettuce doubled sales of the labeled product. Another retailer indicated a benefit of the program in helping to connect the store with farms large enough to provide consistent supply. Several retailers participate only occasionally, utilizing the display advertising in newspapers but not significant ongoing in-store sign-

Full Page Newspaper Ad

age. Managers of some of the bigger chains indicated that national oversight on internal signage made it difficult to do ongoing local signing.

Most retailers purchased local product through two local wholesalers, and a few negotiated direct sales with farms. One store visited in late October had 10 signs promoting PSF items in a large produce section. Several popular Seattle restaurants feature PSF products in season. Project manager Steve Evans notes that "the PSF program must be working for the retailers, otherwise they wouldn't be doing it".

Farmers

Farmers interviewed feel the program is a good one, but for some it is hard to calculate the impact.

Anne Schwartz of Blue Heron Farm, berry and vegetable grower selling at the Pike Place Organic Farm Market, uses the PSF grocery bags and stickers but doesn't feel there is a noticeable impact on her business as a direct marketer.

Andrew Stout of Full Circle Farm, growing 60 acres of mixed vegetables and wholesaling as well as retailing, developed at least one significant direct account as a result of the program and several smaller restaurant and grocery connections.

Beverly Phillips of Port Madison Farm uses the PSF logo on her goat yogurt cups and cheese, and finds that the products with the logos tend to sell faster at the farmers market than the same products that don't have the PSF logo.

Steve Evans notes that farm



participants have told him that they have more shoppers coming to their farms because of the PSF website.

Bob Gregson, former chair of the King County Agriculture Commission, notes several positive impacts: the project has had a unifying effect on the local farmers and given them something to rally around. Also, he feels that the consciousness of the area supermarkets to the fact that food is actually available locally is significant. He further states that “in the past 5 years there has been a big mushrooming of small farms in the area.”

Publicity materials for the project state that “Several local farmers markets’ reported increased sales of 10% to 30%.” It is very likely PSF influenced this statistic, but it would be difficult to claim an exact correlation.

The Future

The PSF program is actively exploring the possibilities of developing a sustainable non-profit entity that can do its own fundraising, so that it will not be as reliant on the county line item, which has been particularly precarious due to recent budget shortfalls. As of late fall 2001, conversations were proceeding with an area non-profit that was interested in hosting the



Farm Event Promotional Brochure

project. Plans are being sketched out to achieve more financial sustainability for the project. Project administrator Steve Evans would like to see the project funding be 1/3 foundation/private, 1/3 memberships and items sales and 1/3 government funding. The current county ownership of the project presents some limitations: farmers can not become “members” of the project, it is challenging to do any outside fundraising, some farmers are suspicious of “county control” and county funds may be restricted in the future. On the other hand, the program has obviously signifi-

cantly benefited from county support. *(Ed update: in early spring 2002 the Cascade Harvest Coalition took over the administration of the PSF program.)*

At this point other major changes are not planned, beyond continuation of the existing program.

Observations and Issue Points

Funding, direction and political support from King County was and still is key. The \$400,000 funding in the first two years allowed the project an extremely strong start. \$100,000 has been designated annually in succeeding years. Commitment from the Ag Commission, in the form of the initial direction and ongoing political support, has allowed the project to succeed. Ron Sims, County Executive, was very proactive in bringing people together to understand the project. The Ag Commission still plays a role as the advisory board for the project.

Farmers appreciate the program, but in informal conversations reported mixed feelings about whether they would support it if they had to pay for the service.

One farmer interviewed, Andrew Stout of Full Circle Farm, is happy with the pro-

gram, but had ideas on how the program could more strongly support his type of operation. Andrew is one of the larger mixed vegetable growers in the region. With 60 acres of mixed vegetables, he was able to supply the quantities the retailers needed. He was selling to retail accounts before the program started, and picked up some new accounts directly as a result of the program. Andrew felt that there are three basic limitations inherent in the program: 1). the unwillingness to change by some retail buyers, 2). the large quantities retailers need to run promotions, which limit participation from smaller growers, and 3). the basic challenges in the distribution system. Andrew's relatively large farm allows him to consider working through wholesalers, who can more efficiently deliver quantities of his produce in a way the retailers like. But he finds that wholesale brokers in general are not motivated to push local products. He suggests the encouragement of things like local identity labels on order sheets, etc. Andrew recommends that others considering this model focus more strongly on the wholesalers.

It was noted that the project has had a positive effect in unifying farmers around a common label, and that the project allows the farmers access to the Council and


County Government, and a unified voice.

There is an existing farm promotion group, the Puget Sound Farm Market Association, which produces the Farm Fresh Guide, a printed and on-line map and guide locating farms for consumers. There is a fee to be listed in the guide, which has been around for several years. The PSF staff are very aware of the delicacy in not intruding into that group's territory with this project. There is close communication between the two groups.

Steve Evans has mixed feelings about whether he would recommend starting a project the way this one began. He mentions the challenges of selling a pre-made marketing project to farms, other times he concedes how difficult it would be to get farmers to reach consensus in a grass-roots effort to design

the program. This second option may create more buy-in, but could lead to a less powerful roll-out than PSF experienced.

The program was designed to include other counties, but has had limited success with that expansion so far. Steve Evans feels this broader support will continue to grow as the program develops over time.



“Puget Sound Fresh” is a program begun by the King County Agriculture Commission to encourage consumers, wholesalers, retailers and restaurants to seek out and purchase locally-grown products. Now, Snohomish, Skagit, Kitsap and other counties have joined the program to help keep our farmers farming.

Over a period of years, farmland has been protected throughout the Puget Sound area through various open space and farmland preservation programs.

Now it is vital that we maintain the viability of these farms by supporting purchase of locally-grown products. We want to send a message that farms are critical to the quality of life we cherish in this region.

This is the first regional program undertaken on behalf of farms in the Puget Sound area. Any farm product grown, raised or harvested within one of the 12 counties that border Puget Sound may be identified as “Puget Sound Fresh.”

Farmers, wholesalers, retailers and restaurants are urged to join the program to share the Puget Sound Fresh message. It's easy – and it makes good sense.

“Puget Sound Fresh”...good for all of us.

Become a “Puget Sound Fresh” participant today!
 Call Steve Evans (206) 296-7824
 Email: steve.evans.metrokc.gov

Puget Sound Farm Direct Marketing Association Farm Fresh Guide
 This guide is not to be used to promote or advertise any product other than those of the Puget Sound Farm Market Association members. The association endorses no one other than our farmer members.

Farm Fresh Guide
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Recyclable Paper

Newspaper Panel

PUGET SOUND FRESH



Conclusions

The support of the county government, in both setting up the Ag Commission to generate the idea, and having access to the \$400,000 interest income from the original bond drive were keys to this program's success.

Another important element in the success of the program is the leadership of the staff person, Steve Evans. With a strong history of working with farmers in the region, Steve was able to dive right into the project, get the marketing aspect contracted out, and know who to talk to for diverse input on designing the program. This leadership would be an important part of any similar project.

There was concern among some farmers and people on the council that the program was more supportive of larger farms than small. Though hard to measure the overall heightened awareness of local products, and possible increased sales at farmer's markets and through direct sales, it is true that the retailers preferred to work with large producers. Bob Gregson, King County Ag Commissioner, states: "In a way the farms most vulnerable may be the 100 acre farms, (mid to large sized in the area) so spending money to preserve them makes logical sense. The smaller farms have stronger direct markets in place.

When you get too big to direct market, and you are competing with the big boys, that is a very different kettle of fish."

The overall impact of this program is hard to assess without a comprehensive in-depth study. However, informal perception is that it has increased awareness of local agriculture in the region.

The translation of that increased awareness to strengthening farms is again a hard connection to verify. Combined with other programs, however, such as farmland preservation, it could have a strong impact. Presumably if consumers are made aware that food can and does grow in the region, battles fought at the zoning and taxation level could have stronger support from local residents. A study of farm incomes and start-ups would need to be made, further research of the multiple variables would be helpful.

Administrators and staff of the program welcome others to contact them and learn from what they have done. They offer to share the details of their project with anyone interested in starting a similar program in their communities.

Resources

Puget Sound Fresh <http://www.pugetsoundfresh.org>

Steve Evans (206) 296-7824 or Email: steve.evans@metrokc.gov

Mary Embleton, Executive Director, Cascade Harvest Coalition.
Email: mary@oz.net, (206)525-1098

King County Farm and Forest Report, 1996
Available for \$62.00 by calling Jack Foster (206) 292-9255

Puget Sound Farm Fresh Guide <http://dnr.metrokc.gov/wlr/farms/farmguide.htm>

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PSF Brochure

