



Buying locally key to food production, speaker says

By Diane Urbani de la Paz, Peninsula Daily News
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BLYN — The keynote speaker sang the blues, but people perked him up again.

Ken Meter, a Minneapolis-based food economist, delivered a state-of-the-farms report for the North Olympic Peninsula during Friday's "Food for Our Future" summit at the Jamestown S'Klallam Tribal Center.

Clallam and Jefferson counties have 662 farming families, Meter began.

Three out of four of them work fewer than 50 acres.

But 21 percent of these growers sell their goods directly to consumers, at farmers markets or stands, "which is a bigger percentage than most places I've seen," said Meter, who's done reports on farming communities in the Midwest and California.

Farming doesn't pay

But farming here doesn't pay, Meter said.

Growers' costs exceed their crop and livestock sales, so most have to work other jobs.

The Peninsula's population eats \$278 million worth of food in a year, Meter said.

The trouble for local farmers is that people here are spending \$270 million on food from outside the region.

"That's the biggest drain on the economy of this region," Meter said.

"How long do you want to keep shipping your money off the Peninsula?"

Yet "we have the power to create different economic realities," Meter said.

Rural residents can promote health and wealth in their communities by buying local.

Small-scale solutions

Meter listed examples of creative problem solving among farmers and consumers.

A small-scale grower in Milan, Minn., sells fresh greens all winter long to farm shareholders who live within 30 miles of his greenhouses.

"If he can do this in Minnesota, you can do it anywhere," Meter said.

A farmer in north central Iowa found the cost of labor too high, so he now invites families onto his place to pick their own vegetables.

His farm has turned into a gathering spot for neighbors.

Ruby's Tacos in Waterloo, Iowa, spends some \$168,000 on locally grown chicken, beef and fixings.

"The owner told me he'll never go back," to buying ingredients from outside Iowa, Meter said.

"People are so happy they're supporting local farmers."

Also in Iowa, the Oneota Co-op is thriving, with \$400,000 in local product sales per year.

The store has grown to be the second-largest employer on Main Street.

Regional interest

Meter sees signs of spring on the Peninsula.

"We expected 40 people. We have 160," at the food summit, he said.

The resurgence of interest in local food and farming "is happening all over the United States."

Friday's event, cosponsored by Olympic Community Action Programs, and Washington State University's Jefferson County Extension, drew farmers, teachers, and planners from across the north Peninsula.

"One of the things I'm most impressed with is the average age of the organizers," said Katherine Baril, director of the WSU Community Learning Center in Port Townsend.

Among the coordinators of the summit was OlyCAP staffer Gabriel Bernier, 30.

Attendees included Lisa Argersinger, and her husband Joe Bridge, berry and grain farmers in their early 30s.

The ingredients to make a self-sufficient farming economy are water, earth and youth, Baril said.

"We have them all . . . Our solution's going to be homegrown."

But Robert Greenway, 75, injected a dose of reality.

"I've been trying to keep from bursting into tears, because what you've been saying [about the rise in farming costs] is what we've been saying for years," Greenway told Meter.

Greenway, an owner of the Corona farm in Jefferson County, added that now land prices are going out of sight.

Perhaps the county should set aside farmland and guarantee that it will forever be used to grow food, Meter replied.

Local governments have yet to take such steps.

But other groups are.

Land protection groups

Jefferson Land Trust, a private, nonprofit group based in Port Townsend and serving East Jefferson County, buys or protects farms, as well as open space and animal habitat.

For more information, phone 360-379-9501 or visit www.saveland.org/.

Farmland acreage is among the 1,300 protected by the North Olympic Land Trust, based in Port Angeles, which can be reached at 360-417-1815 or www.northolympiclandtrust.org/.

Friends of the Fields, a nonprofit based in Carlsborg, has worked with the North Olympic Land Trust to preserve 146 acres of farmland in perpetuity.

The nonprofit group, which can be reached at 360-683-7750 or www.FriendsoftheFields.org, is now raising money to protect the 50-acre Finn Hall Farm east of Port Angeles.

Bob Caldwell, founder of Friends, attended the summit.

After Meter's speech, Caldwell and the scores of other participants held discussions on how to build a local food network, and exchanged e-mails and phone numbers.

For those who couldn't come to the summit, the simplest way to connect with that network is to "shop at your local farmers markets," said Kia Armstrong, marketing and outreach coordinator for Nash's Organic Produce near Sequim.

Weekly markets are open in most North Olympic Peninsula towns including Forks, Sequim, Port Townsend, Port Hadlock, Port Angeles — and starting next month, at the Chimacum Grange.

Baril likened the food summit, with its varied crowd, to the early stage of a barn-raising.

"We're here to raise a new barn and a new vision," she said.
