



Steward of the Land pursues strategies to help North Olympic Peninsula to feed itself

By Diane Urbani de la Paz, Peninsula Daily News
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DUNGENESS — The fuss is beginning to simmer down now, after the celebration and the presentation of the check.

For their years of toil in the fields of the Dungeness Valley, Nash Huber and his wife, Patty McManus-Huber, last week received an unprecedented prize: the American Farmland Trust's national Steward of the Land award.

They and their company, Nash's Organic Produce, are the first Washington state operation to win the honor, which has been bestowed for the past 12 years, and the first organic farmers to take home the \$10,000 that comes with it.



Nash Huber, grower of some 100 kinds of produce on 350 Dungeness Valley acres, is now experimenting with 18 varieties of wheat planted this spring.

-- Photo by Diane Urbani de la Paz/ Peninsula Daily News

In answer to the oft-asked "What'll you do with the money?" query, Huber said he and Patty might embark on "some kind of agricultural trip," like the one they took to northern Italy in 2006.

The couple attended the World Meeting of Food Communities in Torino, and then traveled into the countryside, where they met people engaged in the same kind of farming they are.

Big questions

This week, however, Huber is back at work, back among the blossoming strawberries — and, as always, thinking about the big questions.

What will the rising cost of gasoline do to our food supply on the North Olympic Peninsula?

As land prices climb, will we have enough acreage left for growing food?

And what keeps a farmer like Huber, 67, going after 40 years of farming?

Huber has long been a leader on the farmland-preservation front; he was a founding member of Friends of the Fields, the nonprofit group striving to protect farms from development.

Patty is the fundraising chairwoman of Friends, which this year is expanding its reach beyond Clallam County to seek support from the Seattle metropolitan area.

Huber, however, doesn't own all of the 400 acres he farms. Much of the land on which he grows scores of vegetable varieties, plus pasture-raised pork and chickens, is leased.

About 160 acres are protected by conservation easements, but there's still the possibility that other parcels of cropland could be sold for development.

That has been the trend: Clallam County has one-fourth the farmland it had 50 years ago.

Growing wheat

But this spring, Huber took another step toward an agriculturally based future for the Dungeness Valley: He added 18 varieties of wheat to his mix.

Working with Washington State University's Center for Sustaining Agriculture, he and his crew are growing hard red and soft white wheat varieties on a small plot behind the packing shed.

Come late August, "we're going to have a field day, when we invite other growers to come," he says, and see how the crop fared.

Huber and his crew will measure each variety's yield, and analyze the wheat for nutrient content.

"The ultimate goal is to come up with enough information so farmers can make decisions as to what might work best in Western Washington," Huber said.

He envisions a day when local bakers can use flour from local wheat fields, to offer entirely local meals to the people of the North Olympic Peninsula.

Already Peninsula residents can have a breakfast of fresh local eggs and fingerling potatoes, a salad of lush local greens for lunch and a supper of local pork chops and roasted carrots and squash.

Bread is still the missing piece in these Peninsula-grown meals.

Here and throughout the nation, eating locally is becoming the rage.

Locavore — the word for someone who chooses locally grown food products — was the Oxford American Dictionary's word of the year in 2007.

But to Huber, this isn't just something to do because it's hip.

It may become a matter of thrift, as gasoline prices barrel upward.

'Economic necessity'

"It costs over \$1,000 to fill the tank of an 18-wheeler," Huber noted.

"At five miles per gallon, it's easy to see that growing our own food will eventually become an economic necessity."

Nash's Organic Produce has extended its reach beyond the Peninsula, and is well-known to shoppers at Seattle's University District and Ballard farmers' markets.

Some Emerald City residents have joined Nash's farmshare program, so they will start receiving boxes of fresh produce packed by Huber's crew.

But if the Peninsula's farmers are going to thrive, they will need many more local customers.

When asked what his hope is for local agriculture 20 years from today, Huber said:

"I'd like to see it supplying a significant portion of the food Clallam County citizens eat."

But the struggle over land use is likely to grow more intense.

Might Huber, whom American Farmland Trust officials call a visionary — enter politics?

"No, thank you. I want to keep my life," he said.

Huber also praises his crew of 35 workers, many of whom are in their 20s and 30s — and believes they just might be the ones to shape a healthy local economy.

In contrast, "watching elected officials, I see that they have a very limited ability to lead. They're on a two- or four-year cycle," he added.

"A lot of the issues we face require a longer horizon. You've got to be able to look out 20 years or more."

So as organizations such as Friends of the Fields and the North Olympic Land Trust continue seeking to preserve farmland, Huber will keep growing food and hoping that consumers will vote with their forks, steamers and sauté pans.

And after four decades in the fields, Huber's determination shows no sign of flagging.

What is the most rewarding part of this life?

"Working with people.," he says. "Watching people grow."
