

The Oregonian

In search of food's 98 percent solution

Monday, June 23, 2008

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Summer is finally here and people are flocking to farmers markets in search of Oregon's signature strawberries and other delights. Local and organic foods are going mainstream, and Oregon has helped lead the way.

And experts are watching. Beginning tomorrow, Portland is hosting the Sustainable Agriculture and Food Systems Funders conference. Representatives of private foundations from around the country who are interested in food issues have come to hear how Oregon farmers and ranchers balance concerns for productivity, labor and the environment. They have come to see the many steps Oregonians have taken to build a stronger local and regional food economy.

The question is: Will they find the right answers?

We already know agriculture is broken. Best-selling authors Michael Pollan, Eric Schlosser and others have issued comprehensive indictments of "Big Ag" as the source of many of the problems we face today in the food system. They are less clear about the solutions to those problems.

Many think the solution lies with small farms and more local purchasing. Indeed, there has been a nationwide explosion of farmers markets, community-supported agriculture and farm-to-school and farm-to-hospital programs. Others point to organic agriculture. Wal-Mart made headlines recently when it pledged to double the number of organic products in its stores and to make organic foods more affordable for its customers.

Both locally sourced and certified organic products are great choices and deserve consumer support. But in fact, they make up just a fraction of our food supply. Only 2 percent of food sales in the U.S. meet criteria for being "green, fair, healthy and affordable," according to a recent estimate by the W.K. Kellogg Foundation.

We need to think more broadly if we want to provide safe, healthy, affordable and delicious food for all citizens and better livelihoods for farmers and farm workers, all with less impact on our soils, water and climate. A more comprehensive definition of sustainable agriculture is the 98 percent solution.

When we look across agriculture, the vast majority of commercial farms are too large to take advantage of direct market niches such as farmers markets, but are still too small to compete successfully in commodity markets. These farms produce the majority of our food and steward the majority of our agricultural lands -- and they depend on modern distribution and regional, national and international trade.

The future for Oregon farmers and ranchers lies not in a futile race to grow and sell more and to do it more cheaply. Their success will be in growing and marketing high quality, highly differentiated, branded products with a credible sustainability story.

Oregon already has a strong reputation for environmental stewardship. We're home to a number of trusted natural and organic food brands. And there is growing support for sustainable agriculture in Salem and in the university system.

Oregon is already pursuing leadership in green building and green energy. Now experts from across the U.S. are looking to Oregon this week as an agricultural model on which to build. Let's lead the way toward finding a solution for the other 98 percent of agriculture.

Scott Exo is executive director of the Food Alliance, a Portland-based nonprofit that advocates for sustainable agriculture.