



## Oregon poised for leadership in sustainable agriculture

*Farmers are not in a futile race to grow and sell more, more cheaply*

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Guest Comment

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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. As local and organic foods go more mainstream, Oregon is helping lead the way.

And that has not gone unnoticed. Last week, Portland hosted the Sustainable Agriculture and Food Systems Funders conference.

Representatives of private foundations from around the U.S. interested in food issues came to hear how Oregon farmers and ranchers balance concerns for productivity, labor and the environment.

They came to see the many steps Oregonians have taken to build a stronger local and regional food economy.

But what answers did they take away?

It's already widely believed that 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. But these authors are notably 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 nation-wide explosion of farmers' markets, community supported agriculture, farm-to-school and farm-to-hospital programs. Others point to organic agriculture. Wal-Mart made headlines when it pledged to double the number of organic products in its stores and to make organic 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. According to a recent study by the W.K. Kellogg Foundation, only 2% of food sales in the U.S. meet criteria for being "green, fair, healthy, and affordable."

So I have to ask, "What is the 98% solution?"

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.

When we look across agriculture, the vast majority of commercial farms are too large to take advantage of direct market niches like farmers' markets, but still too small to compete successfully in commodity markets long-term.

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.

I believe the future for Oregon farmers and ranchers is not in a futile race to grow and sell more, more cheaply.

Their success will come from 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.

There are opportunities for farms and ranches at all scales in our state to make continuous incremental improvements in their social and environmental performance, to tell their stories, and to capture market rewards for doing so.

Oregon is already pursuing leadership in green building and green energy - but I think our biggest opportunity for leadership is in sustainable agriculture. People across the country are looking for a new model for agriculture. Oregon can lead the way to the 98% solution.

*Scott Exo is executive director of Food Alliance.*