

Stephen and Gloria Decater Talk, APRIL 11th 2005 Willits Economic Localization

Topics:

Live Power Community Farm

Non-Market / Associative Economy

CSA's

Definition of Community Based Farming

- Mutual support between farmer and consumer

- Shared risk

- Capitalization of farm infrastructure

- Protection from liquidation or cashing out to development

- Cooperative (vs competitive) farming community

Operating a CSA:

- People

 - Farmers

 - Core Group

 - Members

 - Workers

- Land/Permanent Farm Land

- Energy/Resources

Community Involvement and Participation

LIVE POWER COMMUNITY FARM

Thank you for coming and being interested in creating a new future for farming in Mendocino County.

I would like to begin with a brief description of how our farm developed in the last 30 years as an example of the development of community based farms. I will present key concepts for understanding community based farms and non market associative economic systems, and then describe community farm operation and strategies for securing farmland and dedicating it permanently to community based farming use.

Gloria and I started farming in Covelo in 1973 using a small part of a property that we were caretaking, using hand tools and raised bed French intensive techniques on about ¼ acre. For the first 7 years we practiced subsistence farming and worked off the farm occasionally for cash income. Then we helped initiate a farmer's market in Covelo, in which we were the primary growers. In 1987 we heard about a new way of organizing farms in Europe and Japan as producer/consumer co-operative associations. In Japan this became known as Teikei or "seeing the farmer's face on the food" and in the US as Community Supported Agriculture. We had a strong connection with a number of families in the Bay Area who had visited our farm in Covelo with their children on school class field trips. In 1988 we presented the idea of our farm growing food for them on a weekly basis along with a simple budget, crop projection and our history as growers. Many of the 15 people who came to that meeting joined the farm for the season, and quite a few are still members today. The next year our membership doubled to 30 members and we told our Covelo farmer's market customers that we wanted to continue serving them but in this new economic and social form. During the same time period we switched from organic to biodynamic farming practices which consciously coordinate agricultural work with the cosmic influences of sun, moon, planets, and elemental forces and we began making and using specially prepared herbal and natural materials to guide the compost fermentation, soil and plant growth, and ripening processes to an optimal development.

Today we serve about 50-60 households in Mendocino County and 100 households in the Bay Area. We are a commercially producing farm, yet we are not a market farm in the traditional sense. None of the food that we produce goes through the market; it all goes directly to the community of people that the farm serves. Reciprocally, this community of 160 households provides all of the economic support to our food production. Food is being produced sustainably and the necessary economic support for that production is coming back to the farm, but it does not flow through the conventional market or food system. So the farm is an actual example of a working alternative economic/food system existing side by side with the conventional system. This is our 18th year as a completely community supported and developed farm.

NON MARKET / ASSOCIATIVE ECONOMY

In order to create a truly sustainable farm we must also develop a new sustainable economic system. In the present market relationship we are asking the farmer to put in the time and investment to be there for us with the product while we have no commitment to the farmer to buy or use the product. Whether the farmer gets compensated for his work and expense and survives or thrives is simply a matter of chance. The very people, the farmers who are really treasures of the community, are seen as just another expendable resource, somebody else in the world will do it, maybe even for less. Is it any wonder that we have very few local independent farms in the landscape today? We see that the market economic system doesn't work well for small independent local farms, otherwise we would have more of them around. We need a new non-market economic form. What could we call this non-market economic form?

We can call this alternate approach an associative economy. We start from the basis of taking care of, meeting the needs of-the farmer, the members of the farm, and the environment. The bottom line is meeting all those aspects and that reflects the true cost of food on a renewable basis. There is no bottom line of profit for the stockholders and CEOs. Associative economy seeks to create reasonable compensation for the farmers so he/she can do their work without economic stress. This can be done in the budget by making the farmers' compensation equivalent to for example a teacher or minister. We could go further and put it on a needs basis. It is essentially non-profit farming that has no goal of accruing profit for individuals.

The conventional economic/food system is characterized by an understanding of the growers and consumers as separate and basically alienated and competing parties--the farmer is trying to get a higher price so he can stay in business and the consumer is trying to pay less to protect his survival. The dynamic that is the result of this economic relationship is strife, struggle, misunderstanding, aggression, etc. The farmer and consumer are both faceless, which leaves the door open for abuse to enter.

In the associative economic system, the growers and the eaters recognize that their interests are not mutually opposed, but mutually joined. Taking care of their own nourishment also means taking care of the farm, farmers, and the earth. For both parties, self-interest becomes mutual interest. As a farm, our survival depends not on the market, but on the strength and consciousness of our community. This is the opposite of globalized anonymity and unaccountability. The dynamic that can come out of the economic relationship is one of cooperation, creation of understanding, mutual support, and brotherhood.

CSA

Since the introduction of CSA's on the East Coast in 1986 and West Coast in 1988 until today, some estimated 1500-2000 CSA farms have been developed.

The original excitement about the CSA concept particularly on the East Coast was a result of introducing new, successful, and alternate social and economic approaches to an agricultural landscape which was increasingly witnessing the demise of local, independent owner operated farming, as is still the case today.

Over the ensuing 20 years as CSA became a buzz word for hope for hard pressed independent farmers, many of the original social and economic principles got left behind as the term CSA got spread over a spectrum of business manifestations. CSA often became simply another marketing mechanism along with retail, wholesale, and farmer's market.

Today in California we see examples of both ends of this spectrum. "The Box" on one hand where the "farmer" doesn't actually grow anything or have a farm but buys in produce and distributes it and delivers it to "members" as a service and convenience based market without any term of commitment. At the other pole is the community farm-in the original sense- growing all the food distributed and inviting the community to participate in farm visits and work and creating awareness of commitment and relationship. THE BOX approach will not create a new awareness of our food system.

CSA is not about another way of marketing, it is about sustaining our farms through the power of relationship and community and transforming our economic life so that it brings compassion, support, and brotherhood into our lives instead of strife and antagonism

Obtaining one's food through a community farm rather than a market requires a different approach and consciousness. Members need to give input about their food needs and quantities to the farmer so that the planting plan can be tuned to the needs of the community. There is also a learning curve on how to utilize food that is local and seasonal, because the preparation, preservation and storage of food that comes straight from the land is not something consumers are familiar with.

The maximum potential for positive change is through a community farm as the original definition of CSA intended.

DEFINITION of COMMUNITY BASED FARMING

What are the attributes of a community based farm and what is community supported agriculture? First let us look at a definition of community based farming:

A group of people joined together with a conscious intent to operate a farm through meeting the farm's operating budget and sharing the food which the farm produces.

They are not buying food per se, but rather supporting the successful operation of the farm according to mutually held principles of sustainable and organic or biodynamic production.

The intent is to create and maintain a permanent farming operation_which will always serve as a healthy food producing resource for the community it serves.

There is a conscious committed relationship between the growers and the eaters and a sharing of risk engendered by adverse climate or other natural conditions.

Capitalization of the farm infrastructure_is made by the farmer and possibly also through some assets held by members or supporters and rented for maintenance fee to the farm or possibly held by non-profit organization.

The farming operation, farmland and farmers, are protected from destruction_by uncontrolled market forces and cashing out to development_by using non-market associative economic business forms and placing land ownership in non-profit or shared equity forms of land ownership.

Since each community based farm is serving its own community of members, several community farms can operate side by side without being in competition with each other.

Several community based farms can work in co-operation with each other serving the same member community_with a wider variety of foods. For example a vegetable/meat farm and a fruit/dairy farm and a grain/beans/seeds/oil and poultry farm and so forth working in concert.

OPERATING A CSA

PEOPLE

Farmer: Makes farm plan, crop plan, and annual operating budget and operates farm. Contributes farm news to newsletter, maintains income and expense records.

Core group: Advisors to farmers on farm crop and budget plans. Help co-ordinate membership, farm events, communications and press releases, and organization within the CSA, represents CSA along with farmers at conferences. Assist in grant writing/fundraising, assist with newsletter production and recipes.

Members: Raise money to meet the cost of the annual operating budget. Give feedback to farmers on the varieties, quantities, and quality in crop planning. Give feedback on how the farm is working for them as a whole with positive suggestions for improvement. Contribute recipes and comments to the newsletter. Participate on voluntary basis in farm field work, farm festivals, and family visits, and holding investment in farm capital needs.

Workers: employed (market economy), apprentices and members (non-market associative economy)

LAND -- PERMANENT FARM LAND

Just as we need a new economic concept such as associative economy to address long term viability of farms, we also need a new concept of land ownership to address long term preservation of the best farmland in farming use. Historically we have not thought of farms as permanent places-as the next generation left farming and development encroached the farms have been cashed out. This is a great mistake and great tragedy and loss as the infrastructure and soil fertility of a farm are often built up over generations and can and should serve for generations. When we thought food could be brought in from any part of the globe perhaps it seemed only sad as local farms were extinguished. With peak oil we now have a new perspective- it may be not only sad, but also a matter of future survival. So we need to insure that the new local community based farms we build now will be permanent farms. As permanent farms the investment in farming and energy infrastructure will be justified since the property will be maintained in active farming use as a food producing resource for the local community.

We can preserve farm properties in active biodynamic or farming use by placing all speculative and non-farming use potential of the property in a land trust, leaving the farming use potential in the hands of the farmer.

ENERGY / RESOURCES

Using Solar Power/Animal Power

Live Power Community Farm is 40 acres of arable land and using the numbers of its operation as examples we can see the following.

Workers: The farm requires 5 full time workers and 3 to 4 work horses to operate.

Land utilization: 6 acres vegetables, 2 acres grain, 30 acres hay and pasture, 2 acres buildings and orchard.

Livestock: 6 herd cows/6calves, 8 ewes/12 lambs, 4 draft horses, 2 feeder pigs, 150 laying hens.

Fertility: The farm generates its own compost (approximately 50 tons a year) from its own livestock manures and plant residues and grows green manures for direct incorporation in the soil. Small quantities of oyster shell lime and rock phosphate are imported.

Electrical power: The farm utilizes about 30,000 kwh of electricity annually for lighting, refrigeration, irrigation, and tool and equipment operation. It currently generates about 20,000 kwh of that power through a 13 kw photovoltaic system.

Soil tillage: Tillage and general farm work is done with 3-4 draft horses. Hay baling is done with a tractor until a ground drive baler for horses can be acquired.

The farm produces vegetables for 160 member families-approximately 300 people over a 30 week season. This is a weekly supply of vegetables with eggs and livestock also available.

To get an idea of how much land would be required to produce the food needed for 13,000 people in the Willits area on a sustainable basis using the solar energy of draft horses, photovoltaics, and people we can extrapolate these numbers from LPCF as below.

13,000 people divided by 300 people equals 43 farms each at 40 acres or 1,733 acres total.

Since this represents only a part of a full diet we would probably need to double or triple these numbers depending on the diet chosen.

COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT and PARTICIPATION

It will take a new kind of farm to provide the public the opportunity to re-encounter their agriculture through being on a farm and participating in the day-to-day work and life of the farm. A farm such as LPCF has to be consciously designed and developed so that it can accommodate and encourage public involvement and interaction. The farm then becomes a community farm, in addition to a producing farm, out of the recognition that the task of the farm in our present time is not only providing healthy, nourishing food, but also creating the avenue for people to re-enter the garden and develop the consciousness, strength, and commitment to care for it. When we realize that 160 households can provide a viable economic base for a small family or community farm, and then think of how many 160 households go in and out of our supermarket doors each day, we can see that we could have hundreds, thousands of healthy farms even in and around our urban areas. If the people eating became conscious of their power and the transformative role they could play, they might well choose to direct the money they already spend on supermarket food to the creation and support of community farms in their local areas.

As important as quality, vital, life giving food is today for people, perhaps equally important is the opportunity for people to reconnect with the land and recognize and experience the wondrous and loving gifts of creation and redevelop our relationships to mother nature and the earth which sustains us.

A community farm can create an avenue for this healing through member participation and family visits, field work, and festivals which would be difficult or impossible to accommodate in market and corporate farms. This is particularly true when the community farm is scaled to the solar based energy of people and workhorses rather than large scale mechanization. Many private and public schools are also looking for the opportunity to bring school children to experience the farm and farming and man in positive relationship with nature through conscious and respectful cultivation and culture.

Giving class visits and farm related workshops can also be a source of income for the farm as well as performing a social deed and giving hope for the future.

Comments from Gloria after slide show:

I would like to thank you all for asking us to share our farming operation with you. And to thank you also for all the work that you have been doing these last several months. It is so inspirational. We came to hear Richard Heinberg's talk, and even though the information he had to share was so overwhelming, we went away encouraged from the energy of the people in the room.

That energy is similar to what has made it possible for Stephen and I to continue farming all these 30 years in the way that we do. There have been countless apprentices, farm members, school class visits, friends, and family who have shared and cared with us. We are carried by their energy. We couldn't do it alone. Even though we are performing the day to day running of the farm, there are so many people surrounding us who are there to support us in some way or another. And, it appears to me, that within your group, you can take that support system even further and actually create farms with several families involved and will be able to run the farm so much easier. Of course there is the challenge of working in community, but once you find a way to work that out, there is so much that you can do and with such joy! What we share with the many children who come to our farm is that the workload is so much less when it is shared, that we need teamwork. And when you can work together with a common purpose, such happiness can come from it.

Community farming is about relationships, about heart, and about community. Planting onions with Elizabeth McMahon for hours into the evening and hearing her Olli jokes which kept us planting, having Erin Carney and Jane Fitcher and Laura Liska come to our Biodynamic quarterly meeting and see what biodynamics is about and visiting the farm. Having Laura Liska come to the farm when she first signed up because she wanted to meet the farmers. Knowing that Jan Hincker likes fried green tomatoes, so I make sure I give her plenty green tomatoes when the time comes. And of course sharing the farm with so many children and seeing their faces light up when they milk the cow or try to push a wheelbarrow and how proud they are when they do.

There is no question that there is a lot of work, but there is also room for much heart and joy.

I would like to close by reading this piece that was on the internet a few years ago, and many of you may have read it or heard it. It just seems to fit. It is part of the Message from the Hopis New Year 2000 and again Thank you.

MESSAGE FROM THE HOPI ELDERS

NEW YEAR 2000

To my fellow swimmers;

There is a river flowing now very fast. It is so great and swift
And there are those who will be afraid. They will try to hold
on to the shore
They will feel that they are being torn apart and will suffer
greatly.

Know that the river has its destination.
The elders say we must let go of the shore,
Push off into the middle of the river,
Keep our eyes open and our heads above water.

And I say,
See who is in there with you and celebrate!
At this time in history we are to take nothing personally,
Least of all ourselves. For the moment that we do,
Our spiritual growth and journey comes to a halt.

The time of the lone wolf is over.

Gather yourselves!
Banish the word "struggle" from your attitude and
vocabulary.
All that we do now must be done in a sacred manner and in
celebration.

We are the ones we have been waiting for.