BUILDING A LOCAL FOOD SYSTEM

by Harry MacCormack

Several years ago we created Ten Rivers Food Web to generate a secure food system in Linn, Benton, and Lincoln counties. A primary question for us was ‘what is the basis of a human food system’?

An answer came from work directed by Jason Bradford in a 2005 study for Willits CA food security. His work noted that for the daily human caloric need of an average 2500 calories 90% will come from dried grains and legumes, which assumes the remainder can be found from some local supply of vegetables, cheese, meat, etc. This data was calculated for “emergency” purposes. But as noted by author James Kunstler, we are about finding ways to survive the converging catastrophes of the 21st century which so far has been The Long Emergency.

Grains and beans have defined cultures for centuries. Asia is generally a rice culture, although wheat, barley, and corn have been prominent in modern time. Soy, lentils and fava beans have been major rotations and food staples in Asian cultures. Mediterranean and African cultures are thought to be the cradle of ancient wheat, barley, teff, millet, and many beans and peas. The Americas are defined by corn, quinoa, amaranth, and many beans. European diets are rooted in buckwheat, rye, spelt, barley, and wheat. When you sit down to eat in any culture some form of grains and very often beans or peas are what is offered. Even meat and dairy foods are reliant on grains.

For Ten Rivers Food Web these facts transferred into project direction. Our collective goal is to have at least 30% of the food consumed in our three counties be from local sources by 2012. If 90% or even 80% of that food is coming from grains, beans, and edible seeds, then our focus was understood to be insuring that those products are available from local growers, processors, and distributors.

This meant organizing among farmers with acreage and combines as well as homestead and backyard growers, neighborhoods and rural communities. To read the entire history of this effort look at Dan Armstrong’s reporting http://www.mudcitypress.com/beanandgrain.php. In short, we formed an interested group of volunteers made up of Ten Rivers Food Web board members, Willamette Farm and Food Coalition out of Eugene, some processors and a wholesaler, all of which has been termed the Southern Willamette Valley Bean and Grain Project.

This was necessary to focus our effort at changing the paradigms in the farming, consuming, and food activist communities. Those paradigms ranged from (1) grow commodities for export (2) purchase what is cheapest (3) vegetables and fruits grown locally are the basis of local diet. Our work attempts to transition several hundred thousand acres of current grass seed land into local food, grown organically, with a diversity of dry land crops in rotation. If we are successful, all of the grains, beans, and edible seeds from all of the above listed cultures will be available from local growers for local consumption. Storage facilities, processors of all kinds, local distribution will be available in every community across our four county area. This basic, on the ground,

revolution is gaining support at all levels. Some grants are being given, the USDA being the first to give money for the work. Some new small businesses are being generated, one being the wheat grass pasta project soon to be in production through Mazzi's and the work of Krishna Kalsa in Eugene. Stalford Seed Farm in Tangent has been the first to transition hundreds of acres. Others are watching and some smaller farmers have begun to grow product. Consumers as individuals or groups have learned to contract with farms to get farm-direct prices and support those farmers taking risks. Consumers requesting organic practices are the goad which gets farmers to change to organic practices.

Several questions loom as a result of the work over the past couple of years.

1. Can edible seeds such as flax and hemp (both of which were once major crops in the Willamette Valley) be reintroduced?
2. Can oil from those crops and grape seed be another base for our food system?
3. Are the low yields of Hard Red Wheat and other Spring wheat (they are a third to a half of Fall planted wheat, rye, triticale, yields) justified by the extra 2% protein? We have determined that to offset costs HRW should be twice as expensive.
4. Are we better off planting millet, dry corn, flax, quinoa etc. in warm Summer soils?
5. How do we get Carbon into valley soils, necessary for releasing Silicates? Both necessary for raising Calcium and other mineral contents in crops?
6. How best to utilize the alleopathic compounds released as exudates by grains for weed control in follow crops? Grains were typically rotated through vegetable fields for this reason during the cannery era in this valley.
7. Other than calories, what are the amino acid, vitamin, mineral values in beans, grains and edible seeds grown in the Willamette Valley climate? Can we enhance these values through growing techniques and utilizing the grains, beans, and seeds in sprouted form, as opposed to ground form?
8. Can we get breeders to work on varieties for the Willamette Valley, dry land production, that is organically grown?
9. Can we utilize all the diversity possible here to create a Willamette Valley cuzine?
10. Will we find ways to hold farm land from development, create mentorships and land-skill opportunities among younger and older growers?
11. Will the majority of consumers shift their food needs to locally produced?