

Organizing Food Communities

by Harry MacCormack

Our current industrially based food system functions with a series of assumptions: (1) Ever larger farms will provide ingredients globally; (2) those ingredients will be manufactured for consumer convenience; (3) both the ingredients and the manufactured foods can be stored and shipped; (4) box stores, conventional and natural, will stock all the foods a consumer needs. Fresh foods are moved in a similar fashion, the manufacture element being wash, refrigeration, and in more and more cases packaging. This is how we have organized our food communities world wide. It is the norm. It is why the average piece of food travels at least 1500 - 2000 miles, depending upon where you live. This food availability process seems vibrant in 2006. It does a good job hiding its primary vulnerability, namely the projection by fuel companies that around 2015 the petroleum upon which this system is totally dependent will become scarce enough to make the cost extremely high. Between 2015 and 2030 this entire system will deteriorate.

Some of us around the world have been working to shift or radically change our food communities processes for over 30 years. In the last 3 years we've organized, often around the notion of food sheds based around watersheds. Our organization, Ten Rivers Food Web, works in a 3 county area with the notion that a high percentage of the foods eaten by the 300,000 people in these water shed areas could be produced here. Currently roughly 2% are produced here. Most of that goes through successful farmers' markets, CSAs, a few restaurants, and a small amount of shelf space in natural foods stores. Our challenge is to get at least 35% in the next few years. To do this we've discovered that we need to think outside the industrial paradigm box. That paradigm has narrowed what is grown and processed in the central Willamette Valley here in Oregon to a few crops which are processed and sold mostly outside this area. Our biggest organizing challenge is to get people to think about ways to feed our local families, households, schools and other institutions before they look to markets outside the area.

We have discovered that almost all the local food processing facilities that were in our local communities are gone, usually to South America. Our local food production infrastructure is broken. One of the chief reasons that canneries etc. have moved or shut down is the cost of labor and the lack thereof. So we've begun talking about alternative ways of structuring food growing and processing and distribution infrastructures utilizing some of what has worked as we've built farmers' markets, CSAs, etc.

The first organizing element is to involve as many households as possible in creating a sustainable local food community base. We are working on ASSESSMENT TOOLS. These tools would have a household, living unit, or institution, including restaurants, look at and write down their food needs for an agricultural year. How many cans of tomatoes are needed between fresh tomato availability? Beans, green and dry varieties? Grains? Roots? Sprouting seeds?

A complete assessment of needs from an identified food community would then be entered into a data base. That data base information would be used to set contracts with growers.

A critical part of the process is what we have termed CSP, Community Supported Processing. Dry and wet processing facilities would be run with labor contributed by those very food consumers who are supporting the local process. Their labor counts as partial payment for their food.

This is a model of cooperation available to our three county area where we have literally thousands of acres being farmed in non food crops. Many of these growers have expressed interest in growing local foods. The transition would be a way to move this land toward organic production, as the petroleum base of conventional agriculture gets too expensive.

Which raises the question, how do we work with an urban area of several million consumers like Portland? There is some farmland around the Portland Metro area. But realistically Portland's food locality must reach at least as far as the Willamette Valley, Hermiston, and Southern Washington growing areas.

Finally, we have to begin to organize around the notion of land based community capital. Grains, beans, stored roots and fruits, herds and flocks are with highly fertile land, the basis of community survival. Part of our organizing will involve working with government bodies to stabilize land utilization. What sustains the food base of a locality is ultimately more important than development for other purposes.