

# The Power of Collaboration

## Community Food Co-op Farm Fund in Bellingham, Washington

BY JEAN ROGERS

Ten years ago, the Community Food Co-op (Bellingham, Wash.) initiated the Farm Fund, through which a portion of the co-op's donation budget goes directly to specific farm projects. The Farm Fund has grown steadily since its inception, with strong support from the co-op membership. The key to the Farm Fund's success, and the lifeblood of the program, has been collaboration. Taken alone, our resources would not generate significant benefits for small local farms. But joined by farmers and nonprofits and strengthened by a broad-based decision-making process, the Farm Fund has made a substantial impact on local food and farming.

We are a larger co-op with two stores, over 12,000 members and about \$22 million in sales, located in a small Northwest coast city with an active local food and farming movement. Our large, rural county has a strong agricultural economy, rich soil, good growing conditions, and over 3,000 acres in organic and transitional production. Still, farmland is threatened by encroaching development; small farms face significant financial challenges; the average age of Whatcom County farmers is 53.4 years old; and organically grown food makes up only a small percent of our total county agriculture. Strengthening our local, sustainable farms is a big goal to achieve with limited labor hours and capital—a typical scenario for many co-ops.

From the start, the Farm Fund enlisted the community's expertise. The co-op's board of directors commissioned a study of farmers practicing small-scale, organic and transitional agriculture. Focus groups drawn from among 27 farmers were asked to identify the challenges they face, potential solutions and the best way for the co-op to support the viability of sustainable farming in Whatcom County. The overwhelming response was that the co-op's most effective role would be to build the market to a level where local farms can thrive.

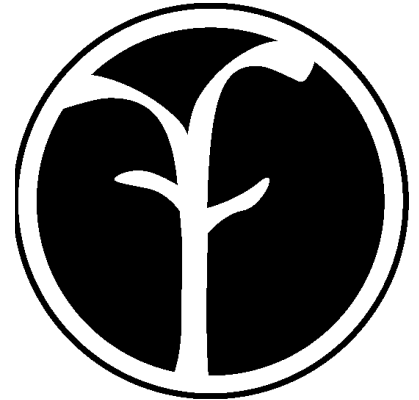
The co-op invited participation from an advisory committee of farmers, food advocates and co-op member-owners to guide the use of the Farm Fund. The presence of local farmers on the



Brigitt LeClair, owner of Wake Robin Farm, is a Farm Fund committee member and participant in several Farm Fund-supported projects.

committee has been central to the Fund's ability to prioritize the most pressing needs of our food producers. While we work to maintain a representative mix of farmers, food and farming advocates, and co-op member-owners, participation has been open. This practice has provided a wide range of views and volunteer energy and was instrumental in getting the program off the ground. The committee is currently in discussion about creating a more formal charter.

The early Farm Fund committee moved forward with the inspiration unique to an exciting, fledgling project rich with democratic process. Volunteer members created a logo, contributed newsletter articles, framed the program's



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mission, and developed a brochure. The first project was to provide funding and promotion for a "Whatcom Fresh" product label. The next year, the group backed a county-wide marketing program for the Bellingham Farmers Market, resulting in a record sales year.

### Food To Bank On

At this point the group was ready to take a new step, creating and incubating its own program: Food To Bank On (FTBO).

This program connects new sustainable farms with market opportunities, providing training and mentorship while paying them to grow food for area food banks. FTBO was launched in 2003 and has been enthusiastically embraced by co-op member-owners and the community at large.

As the concept for FTBO developed, it became clear that the co-op would need additional support to maintain and grow the project. The Farm Fund contracted with Sustainable Connections, a nonprofit group of business and community leaders working to transform and model an economy built on sustainable practices, to administer the program. A number of co-op vendors agreed to sponsor FTBO in ►

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Brian Campbell of Uprising Seeds demonstrates seed-saving techniques at a Farm Fund-sponsored workshop.

<■ exchange for promotion. The project grew quickly, and shoppers started to donate in larger amounts. In 2006, FTBO was moved to Sustainable Connection's Food and Farming Program, freeing up the Farm Fund for future projects. Over 20 farms have participated in the three-year program. Many are now co-op suppliers, and FTBO "graduates" are mentoring the next group of new farmers.

At this point, the Farm Fund's budget had grown enough to allow selecting four or five projects to support each season. Highlights include startup funds for a farmers market in a nearby town; the first organic-seed-saving workshops in the county; funding for a worker-owned cooperative farm; and a subsidized Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) program for low-income residents, started by "Growing Washington," a group of young farmers and activists. The Farm Fund also provided startup funds to the "Food Bank Farm," the first farm growing produce solely for the Food Bank. Additional funding went to a well-established local land trust working on a promising program, "Affordable Access to Land for Farming," based on the community land trust model.

Recently, lack of access to capital has been identified as an increasingly significant barrier for local farmers. The committee was receiving applications for individual farm projects that were clearly important to the farms' success, but didn't fit our grant process, which is better designed for community-based projects. The Farm Fund decided to complement the grants with a low-interest, revolving loan program designed to provide short-term, low-interest financing to farmers and food producers. The revolving loan fund received an enormous boost from the Sustainable Whatcom Fund of the Whatcom Community Foundation, which

provided a \$12,000 matching grant to the new program. We also benefited greatly from information and experience shared by Chequamegon Co-op (Ashland, Wis.) and La Montanita Food Co-op (Albuquerque, N.M.) about their revolving loan programs, and from the website of the Northeast Organic Farming Association of Vermont.

Revolving loans have the potential to help local farmers meet their infrastructure needs, diversify products, increase environmentally friendly practices, fill gaps in the local food supply and create new markets. Funds may be used for purchase of machinery, equipment, construction, farm supplies, or other resources necessary for increasing productivity and social impact. Donations to the revolving loan fund will be used repeatedly, making a strategic investment in the future of our farms.

We have already received a good response about the opportunity from the local farm community, and the local press is providing good coverage. The future of the program remains open—we hope the loan fund will grow through collaboration with local organizations and businesses. With this two-pronged approach—loans to individual farm businesses and grants for local food and farming projects—the Farm Fund hopes to address both supply and demand, needs that were stressed by farmers serving on the committee.

Throughout its existence, the Farm Fund has combined resources with partner groups to infuse projects with multiple sources of promotion, financial and administrative support, infrastructure and community outreach. The Fund also offers the co-op membership an opportunity for direct involvement by donating to the program at the registers. Member-owner donations have become a significant part of the budget

and, in surveys, member-owners consistently rate the Farm Fund as one of our most valuable community programs. All indications are that the Farm Fund reinforces awareness of the value of local agriculture and that our member-owners appreciate being Farm Fund collaborators in their own right.

While collaboration offers a great opportunity to give an exponential kick-start to a project, it is also a learning process. Any group embarking on such a project should consider early on whether the goal is to maintain the project as a co-op program or to prepare for a trajectory where the project will eventually be housed with a partner organization. Discuss how you want to address promotion and credit for the program. If project sponsorships and funding are shared, work together to determine where those resources will be directed if the project is spun off to just one organization. Be attentive to potential conflicts of interest, and build appropriate systems into the process. Do your research, so you are not duplicating another group's efforts or competing for the same resources. Consider fiscal sponsors as a way to work with nonprofit foundations. Stay informed and aware of issues in the local farm economy and community. Above all, build ongoing direction and guidance from local farmers into your program from day one.

Ultimately, partnerships offer a great opportunity for local groups to strengthen each other's work and build unity. From our experience, the inherent challenges are well worth the effort and serve to teach us more about our roles as cooperatives and cooperators. In an era when new models are critically needed to improve our food systems, not to mention our economic, social, and environmental situations, programs like the Farm Fund offer a wealth of opportunities to grow sustainable, local farm economies that will best serve our member-owners and our communities. ■

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