



Community Farms in BC

Building Local Food Systems for Sustainable Communities
Community Farms Survey Report

A collaborative effort between
FarmFolk/CityFolk, The Land Conservancy of BC, and Simon Fraser University

Community Farms Program



Published by FarmFolk/CityFolk
March 2009

© 2009 by FarmFolk/CityFolk
All rights reserved

FarmFolk/CityFolk Society is a non-profit society that works with farm and city to cultivate a local, sustainable food system. We develop and operate projects that provide access to and protection of foodlands; that support local, small scale growers and producers; and that educate, communicate and celebrate with local food communities.

Community Farms in BC

Building Local Food Systems for Sustainable Communities

Community Farms Survey Report

**A collaborative effort between
FarmFolk/CityFolk, The Land Conservancy of BC, and Simon Fraser University**

by Hannah Wittman
Simon Fraser University
hwittman@sfu.ca

March 31, 2009

FarmFolk/CityFolk and The Land Conservancy of British Columbia Community Farms Program

The Community Farms Program brings together landowners, farmers, local communities, and resources to develop and support community farm models in BC.

Acknowledgements

The Community Farms Program is supported by program partners FarmFolk/CityFolk and The Land Conservancy of British Columbia.

We thank the Law Foundation of BC, Organic Sector Development Program, Real Estate Foundation of BC, Vancity Community Foundation, and Vancouver Foundation for funding projects under this Program.

Thanks also to Ramona Scott, Heather Pritchard, Chris Hergesheimer, and Wanda Gorsuch for their contribution to the study, and to Barbara Joughin for editing.

About the author

Hannah Wittman teaches in the Sociology/ Anthropology Department at Simon Fraser University, and conducts research on sustainable agriculture, community development, and agrarian citizenship.

Cover photographs by Brian Harris Photography

Table of Contents

Community Farms in BC: Building Local Food Systems for Sustainable Communities

1.	Introduction.....	1
2.	Background and Methodology.....	1
3.	About Community Farms	3
	What is a Community Farm?	3
	Why Community Farms?.....	3
	What Happens on a Community Farm?.....	4
	Community Farms – Benefits	4
	Community Farms – Challenges.....	5
4.	Land Tenure and Ownership.....	7
	Land Tenure – Practices and Experiences	7
	Land Tenure – General Challenges.....	9
5.	Working Together	11
	Working Together – Best Practices	12
	Working Together – Challenges	13
6.	Conclusion	15

1. Introduction

Community farms, broadly defined, are multi-functional entities that incorporate a wide variety of activities on a shared land base. Food production, environmental education, agricultural mentorship and training, social services, conservation of natural and cultural heritage, outdoor recreation and provision of co-housing are just a few of the initiatives that are currently developing on BC farms.

This report emerges from a collaborative effort between The Land Conservancy of BC (*TLC*), FarmFolk/CityFolk (*FFCF*), and Simon Fraser University (*SFU*).

TLC and *FFCF* promote the protection of local farmland through education and outreach. *TLC*'s Agriculture Programs division has as its primary mandate the "protection of farmland for farming", and secures farmland through several methods: donations and bequests, fee simple purchase, covenants, and leases. With *FFCF*, *TLC* serves as a resource to community groups who wish to form a cooperative or a society to build a community farm. *FFCF* works to educate the public regarding the importance of protecting farmland, supports farmers and producers, and connects farm and city in the cultivation of a local sustainable food system.

SFU's Centre for Sustainable Community Development and Department of Sociology and Anthropology support the sustainable development of communities through research, education, and community mobilization. By bringing a sustainable community development approach to food security and food-related micro-enterprise, *SFU* seeks to help create community-based solutions to urgent food security issues and develop pathways for permanent solutions.

Since February 2007, *TLC* and *FFCF* have worked together to promote a "Community Farms Program". *TLC* and *FFCF*'s vision for community farms involves multiple farm businesses operating collaboratively on land managed by a community-held society or cooperative, in which farm businesses have long-term tenure by lease, and have the possibility to build equity in their business.

The goal of the Community Farms Program is to actively encourage the protection of farmland for present and future food production by:

- Helping new farmers access affordable land
- Providing an information hub of farm-related governance models, best practices, management tools, and training
- Assisting a network of farmers, landowners, local communities, and resources to support community farm development in BC

2. Background and Methodology

This study seeks to identify key operational strategies practiced by existing farms that operate within a community farm framework in BC, and to identify challenges for the implementation of new community farms.

More than 20 BC farms have been identified by *TLC/FFCF* as leaders in sustainable organic farming practices, cooperative farm management, and commitment to farmland protection. Between March and June 2008, farm visits and semi-structured interviews were carried out to document the experiences and lessons learned by these pioneering community farms. All but one of the interviews were conducted by Hannah Wittman of *SFU*, accompanied by representatives of *FFCF* and/or *TLC*. The final interview was conducted by Ramona Scott of *TLC*.

Farms are identified in this report to the extent that information regarding the farm is publicly available on a farm's web site, or in particular cases where specific permission was granted to reveal farm information. Other specific interview data contained in the analysis has been anonymized to protect participant identities and confidentiality agreements.

Examples of Community Farms

	Name of Farm	Area	Activities
1	Lohbrunner Farm Langford, BC	40 acres	Market vegetable production Bird sanctuary
2	Keating Community Farm Duncan, BC	27 acres	Market vegetable production Orchard Forest/Riparian Restoration Heritage Housing
3	Horse Lake Community Farm Horse Lake, BC	133 acres	Market vegetable production Lamb/beef/poultry Pasture/hay Riparian conservation
4	Nicomekl Community Organic Farm Langley, BC	40 acres	CSA vegetable production Riparian/forest conservation Agro-forestry
5	Haliburton Community Organic Farm Victoria, BC	7 acres	Market vegetable production Forest/wetland conservation Orchard Environmental/agricultural education
6	Fraser Common Farm Aldergrove, BC	20 acres	Market fruit/vegetable production Agricultural education
7	Glen Valley Organic Farm Cooperative Abbotsford, BC	50 acres	Market fruit/vegetable production Pasture Forest conservation
8	Providence Farm Duncan, BC	400 acres	Market vegetable production Agricultural education and job training Equestrian centre Seniors' centre Pasture/hay Forest conservation
9	Linnaea Farm Cortez Island, BC	315 acres	Market vegetable production Agricultural education Primary education Pasture/hay Forest conservation
10	Gabriola Commons Gabriola Island, BC	26.5 acres	Community uses Market garden Orchard/berries Grazing Wetland conservation
11	Saanich Organics (Feisty Fields Farm and Northbrook Farm) Saanich, BC	27 acres	Market fruit/vegetable production Agricultural education
12	ALM Farm Sooke, BC	10 acres	Market fruit/vegetable production Agricultural education Seed saving

3. About Community Farms

What is a Community Farm?

The community farm model involves a return to agrarian ideals, in which “efficient and human-scaled agriculture” is enmeshed in a multi-functional landscape. This working landscape integrates local food producers into a supportive social environment that facilitates the long-term development of a sustainable food system.

In BC, various ‘engines’ are driving an interest in community farm development. These include agricultural land trusts that seek to protect local food production capacity and support agro-diversity, community organizations seeking multi-functional public space for education around food production, and individual or collective groups of farmers seeking community support for a vanishing way of life.

Why Community Farms?

A main barrier to local food production in BC is the high cost of land. Despite a growing demand for local food and a growing population, BC has less than 1/3 of the farmland in production needed to sustain local populations.¹

Between 1996 and 2006, BC experienced a **9.1 % drop** in the number of BC farms.² Farmland is being lost to development via exclusion from the Agriculture Land Reserve (ALR), while speculation and rising farmland prices have led to a 76% rise in farmland prices in BC from 2001-2006.³

Land prices are reaching \$100,000-200,000/ha for farmland in the Lower Mainland/Okanagan, or higher with housing on the land. The best farmland in BC, in fertile valleys along eastern Vancouver Island and in the Fraser Valley, is under the most development pressure as working farms are converted to individual residential housing, country estates, and hobby farms, with an accompanying loss of market production.⁴

Another barrier to local food production in BC is the lack of access to secure land tenure for young farmers entering the profession. Even when land can be leased through the private sector, a lack of tenure security is a barrier to investment in the extended time periods and resources needed to build soil fertility and farm infrastructure, which cannot simply be transferred to a new location.

Community farms can help address some of the challenges faced by farmers and communities because they:

- Support local food systems by supplying locally grown food;
- Protect farmland for long-term food production through land trusts, covenants, and other means;
- Give new farmers access to affordable land through long-term leases;
- Provide supportive and flexible labour pools.

¹ BC Ministry of Agriculture and Lands, *BC's Food Self-Reliance: Can BC's Farmers Feed Our Growing Population?*, 2006

² Statistics Canada, 2006

³ BC farmland price increase estimated by BC Farm Credit, cited in Vancouver Sun, May 23, 2008

⁴ More than ½ of BC's farms conduct less than \$10,000 in farm sales, and BC's most rapid population growth is in southwest BC, near urban areas.

When a community invests in and supports a farm, the long term viability and security of the farm as a food production and social system are enhanced.

What Happens on a Community Farm?

Market production

On a community farm, market-oriented food production is complementary to a variety of other activities. Production is usually organic, and aimed at local distribution networks through farmers markets, on-farm sales, box programs, community-shared agriculture (CSA) share agreements, and in some sales to retail or restaurants, or through distributors. Production is also highly diversified. Community farms don't usually focus on the production of one particular commodity, or export production beyond the bioregion.

Conservation

The community farms we surveyed expressed strong environmental values, viewing farming as part of a re-integration of human communities with nature, rather than just a means to livelihood or commodity production. For example, most of the farms visited included areas set aside for wildlife habitat and biodiversity conservation use as riparian buffers, wetlands, forest barriers between seed fields, and timber management/woodlot areas. These conservation zones in some cases provided a link to wider ecological and education benefits of the community farm.

Education and training

Half of the interviewed farms included formal educational or agricultural and other job training programs. Ecological education—provided through formal schools and/or farming apprentices on-site, as well as through connections to high schools and colleges near the farm—is an integral component of the community farm model.

Public access

All of the farms used festivals, special events or specific forms of public access in general as a way to share farm amenities with interested parties. For example, one farmer commented:

*"We have a wonderful barn here. It would make the best barn dance in existence.
[The farm's] educational and recreational components shouldn't be overlooked."*

One farm has plans to organize public food demonstrations with farm produce, while another has a specific public access policy in place, offering a free disc golf course, extensive hiking trails, camps, workshops and conferences. Some host farm tours and farm working holidays.

Community Farms – Benefits

In a food climate where agricultural policy has been based on the notion of "get big or get out", typified by food safety scares and shortages of export commodities, community farming offers numerous benefits to farmers seeking to practice sustainable agriculture, and to communities seeking sources of healthy, locally produced food. By asking local communities to invest financially in their food system, farmland can be secured for future production needs, with accompanying social, economic, environmental, and agricultural benefits.

The vision and mission of community farms thus go beyond simply producing food, as evidenced in this example from one participating farm:

OUR VISION

“A community that changes the way we live on the Planet.”

OUR MISSION

Co-operatively preserving and stewarding organic farmland to support farmers in growing quality food for local communities.

Source: Cooperative Farm, Vision and Mission statement

Market resilience

With community support through relationships established in CSA share programs, farmers markets, and local distribution networks, farmers can enjoy a level of market and price security that doesn't depend on volatile global commodity networks. Cooperation among farmers can also ensure stability in the food supply.

Sustainable long-term agricultural production and stewardship

With long-term tenure security and a community-supported vision for protecting local and healthy sources of food production that does not damage the natural environment, community farms are significant in their desire to pursue environmental and social sustainable agricultural systems.

Source of social capital and community amenities

Community farms build social capital by involving a diverse group of individuals—farmers, community members, and organizations with different skills, creative innovations, and knowledge. This social capital contributes to generating community amenities beyond food production, including environmental and agricultural education, recreational opportunities, and nature conservation areas.

Community Farms – Challenges

Challenges for community farm development are myriad. Several participants suggested that tension arises between perceptions of farming as a “lifestyle or livelihood”. As one participant remarked,

“The new agricultural paradigm needs to incorporate more people working together, because that idea of the lone farmer out in the field by himself for hours, it’s just so unsustainable”.

Working together

Multi-functional farms have diverse objectives and goals, and “community” does not always predate the farm. Clear strategies for cooperative business management and community-building need to be designed, practiced, and regularly evaluated. For more information about working together on community farms, please see Section 5, Working Together.

Farmland acquisition and protection

Rising land prices and residential or industrial developmental pressures, as well as zoning and other regulations affecting agricultural land use, make it difficult for new farmers to acquire land and for existing farmers to keep land in agricultural production. For more information about acquiring and protecting farmland, please see Section 4, Land Tenure and Ownership.

Regulations, insurance, and certification

Other challenges facing community farm development are linked to navigating the institutional pathways of alternative zoning, and regulating value-added farm production (i.e. meat processing and commercial kitchens). Liability insurance for multi-functional farms is increasingly difficult and expensive to obtain. Certification for organic production and appraisal, legal surveys, and monitoring for conservation covenants are costly and time-consuming processes.

Perception of unfair advantage

A BC regional agrologist expressed concern that the advancement of community farms would necessarily depend on philanthropy, grants, and subsidies, and thus would not be economically viable and/or would compete with neighboring farms "not eligible for such subsidies". However, under current market conditions, interviewed farmers paid lease fees well within the range of privately-owned leases, and farmers exhibited a wide range of incomes.

Since land rents are comparable on community farms to similar land in the region, the "subsidy" provided by a community farm model is a social and environmental one, rather than economic. It allows for diversity in production and organizational models, and the provision of community amenities, including the protection of wildlife habitat and biodiversity. Community farms also play an important role in producing social capital, through networking community members that play a role in land management.

Housing on community farms

Agricultural Land Reserve (ALR) regulations prohibit the subdivision and non-agricultural uses of ALR land. Additional housing may be permitted on ALR land for "clearly demonstrated" farming purposes, including apprentices, farm workers, and additional farmers.

Municipal government has significant influence on Agricultural Land Commission decisions. In fact, the greater barrier to community farms is municipal bylaws and zoning regulations. Temporary housing may be an interim solution for multiple farm businesses operating on the same land base until the community farm is well-established and proven to be economically and socially successful.⁵

⁵ Gorsuch and Scott, 2008, *Community Farms Program Feasibility Study: Legal Landscape*. The Land Conservancy of BC and FarmFolk/CityFolk.

4. Land Tenure and Ownership

Community farms that were surveyed exhibited a wide range of tenure and land ownership models. In the face of such serious challenges as vanishing farmland and increasing land prices, communities and farmers have come up with a number of creative solutions to ensure that farmland is protected for agriculture, and that cooperative farming enterprises can build equity and enjoy long-term security of tenure.

Community farms in BC are operating under a variety of models:

- Land owned by land trust, leased to farmers
- Public land, leased to land trust or farmers
- Land owned by land cooperative, leased to farmers
- Land owned by a non-profit society, leased to farmers
- Owned privately, leased to farmers with agricultural covenants and long term leases

The process by which farmland is acquired and protected for farming by the surveyed farms also varied widely. Some farmland was saved from development through philanthropy, with retiring farmers donating property to a land trust under an agricultural covenant. This method requires the land trust to keep the land in production by leasing it to farmers.

Other properties were purchased in the real estate market by community groups that raised funds to buy land. Contributors to the land purchase became shareholders in a land cooperative, which leases sections of the property to cooperative farm businesses.

In other cases, municipal and provincial governments have collaborated with community organizations to offer long-term leases on agricultural land.

Land Tenure – Practices and Experiences

Land held by land trust

Some community farms in BC have been developed on land that was purchased by or donated to The Land Conservancy (*TLC*). Lohbrunner Farm is a 40-acre property that was donated to *TLC*, with 28 acres designated as a bird sanctuary. The remaining 12 acres of potential farmland are now leased to enterprising young farmers who are converting a section of this land to organic market vegetable production. In two other cases (Keating Farm and Horse Lake Community Farm), *TLC* facilitated the formation of cooperatives for the initial purpose of purchasing these 27-acre and 133-acre farms. *TLC* retains title to the land, and assigns 99+ year leases back to the cooperatives for local organic food production and sustainable land stewardship.

What works well

- Farmers access land at a fair lease price, with long-term tenure.
- Farmers build equity in their farm business, which is held separately from the land.
- Land is protected from speculation and development in the real-estate market.
- Land trust can help build network of community farms and shared experiences.
- Land trust can facilitate agricultural and conservation covenants that may reduce property tax obligations.

Challenges

- Acquiring land for donation or purchasing land on the open market for protection by land trust can be a lengthy and expensive process.
- Land management organized through a community organization and subleased to farmers can create challenges related to governance and communication.

Public land

Two of the surveyed farms are located on public land. In the case of Nicomekl Community Farm, *TLC* acquired the remaining four years of a 40-year lease on 20 acres of Crown land, and sub-leased the property to a CSA farmer. *TLC* has applied for a 30-year Crown land lease and, if successful, will continue making the land available for local food production under the community farm model. In another case, the Haliburton Farm Society acquired the lease on seven acres of municipal land. Some of the land has been designated to two independent market gardeners, while the remaining area serves as a public farm demonstration area and nature preserve. New zoning arrangements were pursued and achieved by the Haliburton Society for a “demonstration farm” zone.

What works well

- Land is leased from the Crown or local government which is affordable in the short-term.
- Long-term leases (up to 30 years for Crown land, varies for municipal) can be obtained, especially on agricultural land.

Challenges

- Federal and provincial government policies on public land management tend to change with political regimes.
- In the case involving leased Crown land, lease negotiations are subject to a political climate that currently favours devolution of publicly-held land. Although long-term leases may be obtained, government still maintains the right to sell the land at the end of the lease term.
- Where leasing societies have a rolling or 'seamless' five-year lease, it may be based on the current relationship between a sitting government and the leadership of the society. Unless clear criteria for long-term security are stipulated in a lease, continued renewal for farm production may be perceived as based on a good-will rather than a legal basis.

Land cooperative

Two of the surveyed farms belong to land cooperatives. Fraser Common Farm is a 20-acre land cooperative that leases 6.25 acres to the Glorious Organics Cooperative. The remaining area is used as forest reserve, pasture, and for housing. Glen Valley Organic Farm Cooperative is a land cooperative which leases portions of the land to two separate farm enterprises involving three full-time farmers. These farm businesses were chosen by the land cooperative for their complementary aspects (market gardening and chickens).

What works well

- Costs of land acquisition are shared amongst community members, who become shareholders in the land cooperative.
- Farmers can access land at a fair lease price, with long-term tenure.
- Farmers can build equity in their farm business, which is held separately from the land.

- The land cooperative model can also be applied to reduce the capital costs of new farm start up (for example, equipment, seed, and marketing cooperatives), shared among several farming operations.

Challenges

- Community organizations must manage multiple subleases and potential conflicts between competing land uses.

Society

In three cases (Linnaea Farm, Providence Farm, and Gabriola Commons), land is owned by a society. Farming (market gardening) is one of several community activities carried out on the land, in addition to agricultural education, job training, therapeutic healing, and providing space and infrastructure for community activities.

What works well

- Farming is a complementary element of broader, year-round programming.

Challenges

- Income from seasonal farming activities alone may not be sufficient to sustain organizations or farmer due to competing priorities from other community farm activities.

Private ownership

We also conducted interviews on several farms which are privately held but in which operations on the land exhibited characteristics of a community farm model. Cooperative production or cooperative farming/marketing enterprises and a stated desire to preserve farmland featured in decisions to include these farms in our analysis.

Challenges

- Without an agricultural covenant, farmland is not permanently protected for agriculture.
- Landowner retains major stake in land-use decisions.
- Long-term security for operating farmers may face conflict with landowner estate planning and market pressures to sell or develop land.

Land Tenure – General Challenges

One of the most important problems stated by almost all participants in the study was the difficulty of securing tenure for farmland in BC. Tenure security for permanent agricultural use continues to be a challenge for all of the community farms visited.

Cost to purchase/lease

The cost to farmers to purchase or lease farm land varies widely. Trends show that purchase values correspond to local real estate fluctuations, with no recognized ‘subsidy’ for community or environmental amenities provided, other than a slight reduction in land value and property taxes for ALR land. ALR lands are still subject to speculative real estate behavior. Specialized appraisals are needed to determine whether there may be a reduction in property and income taxes for conservation or agricultural covenants.

In this study, land rental values ranged from \$250-435/acre for cleared land. Study results show that established farming operations on community farms are paying lease fees within a comparable range to surrounding land that is privately owned. Factors influencing lease rates include the quality of the land, access to services, distance from markets, social relationships that been built up between farmers and landlords, and regional trends in leasing arrangements.

Land rental⁶

All but two of the surveyed farm operators rent the land they farm. In three cases, farmers lease from a land trust, two rent from land cooperatives, two lease public lands, and two rent private land. Two non-profit societies own and operate, or plan to operate, on farm land.

Some rentals are verbal agreements, while others are short-term renewable agreements. Outside the community farm context, verbal and short-term renewable rental agreements have led to farmers repeatedly losing land that they have improved for local food production. For this reason, long term leases with clear responsibilities outlined are essential for the success of a community farm project.

We asked participating farms about the division of responsibility for land and building maintenance on these farms, and responses varied widely. In some cases responsibility is clearly outlined in an agreement (repairs and regular maintenance to be taken care of by renters). In other cases, problems rose from a lack of clear agreements on such responsibilities. Land cooperative members generally invest in major infrastructure repairs, while renting farmers are responsible for day-to-day maintenance.

One community farm stated that it had applied for a municipal community grant for major renovations used to modify the irrigation system, which benefits the individual farmers in addition to the public demonstration garden. In several cases, land cooperative members contributed funds to deal with infrastructure repair (i.e. leaky roof for farmer housing). Rather than a subsidy, this community support is viewed as an investment to secure and protect the long-term viability of the farm as a food production and social system.

Agricultural covenants and bylaws

ALR designation does not require that land be in agricultural production, but simply restricts non-agricultural uses.

An 'affirmative agricultural' covenant may be applied to community-managed farmland to ensure it remains in agricultural production in perpetuity. Research on this type of covenant is underway by *TLC* and University of Victoria Environmental Law Centre. Covenants and leases may result in legal and organizational costs to community farm stakeholders.

In addition, most farms, even those held by a cooperative or society, do not have bylaws stipulating that the land must be kept in farmland production. While current members of both cooperatives in the study express a vision of continued agricultural production, there is currently no legal basis for permanent protection for agriculture.

To address this situation, Linnaea Farm placed on their land a four-zone conservation covenant held by *TLC* and Cortes Island Conservancy. The zones are: Agriculture Zone, for organic food production; Forest Zone, where harvest of forest products must be “sustainable”; Residential

⁶ Gorsuch and Scott, *A Guide to Farmland Access Agreement: Leases, Profits a Prendre, Licenses and Memoranda of Understanding*. The Land Conservancy of BC, November 2008.

Zone, which provides space for farmer housing and farm maintenance activities; and Protected Zone, with little human interference other than trails. Gabriola Commons is also carrying out land-use planning activities based on agricultural zoning.⁷

Succession planning and equity transfer

Farms operating under private tenure face perhaps the most significant challenges in protecting land in perpetuity for agriculture. Succession planning and transfer of equity is a major challenge for many working farms, especially in cases of retirement and estate planning where families needing to extract value from the land for retirement and inheritance purpose see no other option than selling at market price. These prices are out of reach for new farmers seeking to establish a profitable farm business. While a number of local farmers are able to lease land, the lack of long-term tenure in a speculative real estate market also serves as a challenge to protecting food production spaces in the region.

5. Working Together

People work together in many different ways on community farms. Individuals and groups collaborate to acquire land, develop and carry out diverse farm activities, and manage capital and other assets. In several situations, people also live together on the land.

Successful community farms have found a need to talk about and define, in writing, how decisions are made about land uses, farming activities, living arrangements, and business interests. The process of building this framework for governance is an essential part of developing the "community" in community farms, and it needs to include all the stakeholders.

Important elements of this process can include:

- identifying and allocating authority
- distributing decision-making powers
- choosing decision-making processes
- ensuring accountability
- defining responsibilities and rights
- defining and managing relationships

Taking the time to reach agreement about how to work together will help create healthy relationships and make working and living together easier, even when challenges arise.

Having support in farming operations, whether through a CSA model or a cooperative enterprise, is one way to bring farming back as a socially and economically viable activity. However, the cooperative model is not for everyone. Supporting diverse farm operational models is an essential part of promoting secure and sustainable community farm operations.

Several organizational models exist that can be applied to land tenure, farm operations, businesses, housing, and other considerations on community farms. These include:

- Cooperatives (land, worker, and/or business)
- Society
- Partnerships (land and business)
- Private ownership (land and business)
- Integrated individual enterprises on shared land

⁷ <http://www.linnaefarm.org/>; <http://www.gabriolacommons.ca/>

Working Together – Best Practices

Specific shared values were expressed by interviewed farmers in terms of farm governance. These included a commitment to organic farming, the need for community support of farming as a viable career, the importance of environmental stewardship, and the need to foster public education about local food security.

In some cases, community farm organization is based on the actions of a group of people with a prior history of cooperative organization. One example is Fraser Common Farm, where a local society formed a land cooperative and worker cooperative. A long history of social capital and personal relationships led to resilience in the face of organizational challenges.

All of the interviewed farmers expressed ideas about the importance of involving community members in farm management. In the following section, we describe several instances of 'working together', where stakeholders with interests in land, food production, conservation management, education, and housing have developed governance structures to negotiate these sometimes divergent interests.

Land cooperatives

When local communities invest financially in their food system, farmland can be secured for future production needs, with accompanying social, economic, environmental, and agricultural benefits. In a community farm cooperative model, individual shareholders purchase a stake in a working farm, valued at \$5000/share in the cases included in this survey. The shareholders in the resulting land cooperative participate in management and long-term planning for the farm, and have the right of first access to purchase produce from the farm. They are also involved in decisions about agreements with individual and groups of farmers who lease sections of the land for farming businesses.

A good example of a land cooperative is Glen Valley Organic Farm, in which community shareholders purchased a 50 acre working farm in 1998. The shareholders rent out the majority of the land and some housing located on the land to three farmers in two farm businesses. Community activities take place in common areas of the farm.

Worker cooperatives

Fraser Common Farm (a 20-acre land cooperative held by 40 shareholders) leases six acres of land to a worker cooperative called Glorious Organics Cooperative, comprised of six worker cooperative members. The remaining land contains orchards, pasture, housing and community space used by land and worker cooperative members. Decisions about overall land use are made by the land cooperative, while specific decisions about production are made within the worker cooperative.

Society

Providence Farm is a good example of a community farm on land managed by a society. Providence Farm is a 400-acre farm owned by the Sisters of St. Ann, a religious organization on Vancouver Island.⁸ The Sisters of St. Ann lease the land to Providence Society, which has a 12-member Board of Directors with ties to the surrounding community. Providence Society manages specific land uses on the farm, including renting out areas for a therapeutic equestrian centre and to other farmers for pasturing and hay harvesting. The Society hires a market garden

⁸ www.providence.bc.ca/

coordinator to lead a field and greenhouse operation that produces vegetables for several regional farmers markets, local restaurants, and for the food programs run by Providence Society. The market garden also provides a community space for rehabilitation and therapeutic horticulture.

Working Together – Challenges

A community farm exhibits very different organizational characteristics than a traditional, privately-owned farm. The majority of the interviewees expressed that the organizational side of a community farm is vastly more difficult than the growing/production side. Understanding organizational capacity and common stumbling blocks is extremely important in the community farm process. Some key challenges that emerged from the study of these examples are described in the following sections.

Multiple layers of authority

Almost all of the properties in the survey involve multiple layers of organizational authority, multiple stakeholders, and multiple (and often competing) perspectives on how land should be managed and how decisions should be made. Layers of authority include: government regulations on land use (municipal bylaws, ALR status, riparian conservation, etc); land ownership arrangements (cooperative, land trust, society); worker or production cooperatives that rent land; community societies with multiple goals and stakeholders; and individual farmers who may seek to simply lease land for production but must manage their objectives in the context of a multi-functional property.

Diverse agendas and objectives

Managing the diverse agendas and objectives of many different stakeholders about how land should be acquired and managed is a time-consuming and arduous task, and one that is not the clear responsibility of any one person or organization.

For example, one case involves a lack of agreement between members of a cooperative society and *TLC* over the use and management of sections of farmland that are under heritage designation, but which overlap with designated farm use (i.e. fencing). Because participants experience a lack of clear organizational authority and decision-making process over how to negotiate competing land uses, farm production has been stalled. In other cases, disagreement has involved different perspectives by participants on long-term land use planning and cooperative management between distinct farm enterprises operating within a particular community farm. Working out these different perspectives was time-consuming and in one case was only resolved by one of the parties leaving the farm.

Creating community from scratch

In some cases, new organizations, cooperatives, and farm enterprises are initiated for the purpose of creating a community farm. One farmer, in the process of forming a cooperative enterprise with two previous work colleagues and one newcomer, remarked,

"It's interesting because we are sort of a group of friends coming together with an ... unfamiliar person. We don't know how we're going to work with them but it seems like it could be a good relationship. We come on the same sort of terms of wanting the same sort of things out of what we are doing."

In another case, a land cooperative that had formed specifically to purchase a heritage farm called for applications for new farmers to work the land, and asked two individual applicants (both novice farmers) with no prior relationship to meet one another and form a business partnership. The newly formed partnership had to build a level of trust, and a set of social relationships with the farmer in transition (who stayed on-farm during the first year to mentor the transition), the other farmer leasing land on the farm, as well as the land cooperative. These levels of social networking on the farm have economic and environmental implications, in addition to the organizational ones. For example, regarding production decisions, the new farmer remarked,

"The fact that we were implicated in this community and that we had enough trust to move ahead was instrumental to this actually working. But ... one of the risks that we're looking at right now,... in terms of the business plan, is that if we at some point want to end whatever our business relationship is, or if we want to change what are, have two separate businesses on the farm ... we'll have a responsibility to other farmers on the farm, that implication in the community is really empowering, and it's also really daunting."

Succession and equity

Most of the interviewed farms are fairly new, so the question of succession was more one of planning than experience. In community farms where the land is managed by a cooperative, the cooperative Board must approve the succession. That is, a farmer cannot simply sell his/her enterprise to the highest bidder. Once a prospective tenant is approved by the Board, then the sale of the farm business (not including the land) is a farmer-to-farmer transaction.

In one case, a farmer leasing land from a cooperative reached retirement age. A pair of new farmers, in a formal business partnership, then purchased the “retiring” farmer’s enterprise. This transaction involved purchasing farm implements outright. It also involved offering a 10% crop-share for perennial fruits and berries for three years, and a payment comprising 10% of net income as payment for “Markets and Mentorship” for three years. This allowed the retiring farmer to stay involved in the farm for a transition period and to receive compensation for the long term build up of market access and local ecological knowledge.

6. Conclusion

Building a vision and practice for community farms in British Columbia will require significant effort to overcome many of the challenges facing local food systems, including rising land prices and land scarcity, government production and housing regulations that affect agricultural land, distribution networks, and farmer recruitment.

Community support for agricultural land protection, increased opportunities for agricultural education and apprenticeship, and clear but flexible tenure and governance models for farm business operation are essential for building the capacity of community farms in BC.

A growing interest in local food by urban communities and renewed engagement in agriculture by young farmers are positive signals that a community farm movement is evolving. Further research, evaluation, and sharing of experiences are needed, however, on how to best build and assess community capacity for farm development.

This study emphasizes that there is no concrete 'model' for community farms which can be replicated. In each case, a combination of diverse people, land, and resources came together to build a unique enterprise. Community farms research and practice should focus on further exploration of these diverse models of agricultural cooperation to evaluate how each model works in diverse situations. In addition, notions of economic viability varied in each situation. Questions of livelihood and lifestyle are also issues that need to be addressed within a community farm context.

Community Farms Program
2009