



2017 Spring Forum Summary Report

Background & History

The Whatcom Food Network (WFN) is a group of organizations that came together in 2010 to create a more just and coordinated food system in Whatcom County, from farm to fork to food disposal. The WFN mission is:

“Working to build common understanding and facilitate collaborative efforts toward an equitable, sustainable and healthy food system for all.”

The 2017 Spring Forum was the 13th biannual forum the WFN has held since 2011. The goals for member forums are two-fold: to increase participants’ awareness of work being done across the food system, and to create a connecting point for the richly diverse organizations involved in the food system to come together and discuss important topics.



Forum Overview

On May 25th, 2017 the Whatcom Food Network hosted its biannual Spring Forum in the Squalicum Boathouse. Approximately 40 individuals and representatives from different organizations and food businesses from around Whatcom County attended.

Whatcom Food Network Chair, Adrienne Renz, started the forum by introducing the Network’s mission and goals and giving an update on current work, including the Community Food Assessment which is being updated now and will be finished this summer, and the new website which will be finished by this fall. The remainder of the forum included two presentations, detailed below, and time for facilitated networking.

Session #1

The Past, Present, and Future of Dairy

Panel: Mylon Smith - MyShan Dairy, Hans Wolfisberg - Edelweiss Dairy, David Lukens - Grace Harbor Farms, Rich Appel - Appel Farms, and Larry Stap - Twin Brooks Creamery, Moderated by Nichole Embertson, Whatcom Conservation District



Nichole Embertson, from the Whatcom Conservation District gave a short introduction to the history of dairy and the economic impact this sector has on agriculture here in Whatcom County. Dairy's influence, both historically and currently, has strongly shaped this place in both cultural and economic terms. Our region lends itself to dairy production and families have been farming here since the early 1900s. The industry has increased and decreased over the years, with a peak of over 400 farms in the 1990s, to around 100 family dairy farms currently, with an average herd size of 400 cows.

Overall, Washington's dairy industry is a \$1.3 billion dollar industry, ranks 12th in total milk production nationally, and is 4th in milk production per cow. Whatcom is the second largest dairy county in Washington State in terms of numbers of cows (with Yakima being the first), but we have the highest average milk production per cow. This is due to better general genetic selection, cow management and care, as well as our climate which is perfect for dairy farming with its mild seasons (less heat and cold stress), rich soils for crop production, and long rainfall season.

Five questions were presented to the panel with each farmer offering his unique perspective. Though each farm was distinctly different, farmers had many overlapping responses which are summarized below.

1. Tell us about your dairy and main products you produce:

Mylon Smith: MyShan Dairy originated from a 4H project with one Guernsey cow, they now have 35 Cows on 10 acres and direct market Guernsey cow milk that is certified non-GMO.

Hans Wolfisberg: Grew up on a dairy farm in Europe, Edelweiss Dairy now milks 150 cows and is a member of Organic Valley – a nationwide company with about 2,000 dairy farmers. All the milk he produces is sold and marketed through Organic Valley

David Lukens: Grace Harbor Farms originally started with two goats, later Davide married into a Dutch Family with three generations of dairy farmers. Grace Harbor milks about 60 cows and make yogurt, keifer, and buttermilk.

Rich Appel: His dad started the farm in the late 1960s and the third generation is coming on now. Appel Farms is a cheese businesses and dairy with 600-650 cows. About half the milk goes into

cheese making and they crop about 500 acres. They recently put in a cheese shop that is a café and retail outlet.

Larry Stap: Twin Brook Creamery is a 4th generation farm that is currently training generation six! They are on the same parcel of land his great grandfather established in 1910. They originally sold to Darigold but switched to glass bottling (a huge and costly transition) and now sell to a variety of stores in our region.

2. Why, or why not, did you decide to direct market your product. What niche are you trying to fill? How far is your product distributed?

The farmers that did sell directly from their farms to retailers and consumers spoke of the ability to have more control over the price of the product. When selling to large distributors on the open market, there can be incredibly large price swings that are hard for small farms to weather. Currently, there is a lot of support for direct marketing from small local farms. Many people are looking for and support these products. Many of the dairies saw unmet needs (e.g., milk in glass bottles), or were approached and asked to produce different products, like a special cheese for example.

For the farms that sell wholly or in part to distributors like Organic Valley, they appreciate the efficiencies that come with being able to focus exclusively on milk production. It is a different business model that allows the farm to sell to a large market and avoid the risks and huge financial commitment of building a processing facility while also taking on all other business tasks like marketing, sales, etc.

For direct market farms, product is sold in a variety of places – the demand for local has been huge so many sales are right here in Whatcom County, but the farms also sell down to Portland and beyond, or even to small East Coast delis that carried specialty cheeses.

3. What do you see as the biggest challenges to operating a dairy in Whatcom County?

These dairy farmers experience many of the same pressures that make farming in Whatcom County challenging:

- **Government regulations** – While there is strong commitment to keeping food safe and their animals and the environment healthy, all of the dairymen expressed the struggle and financial burden of regulations from multiple levels of government. From USDA inspections to the Nutrient Management Act, the farmers work very hard to manage the increasing time and dollar costs associated with each new regulation.
- **Price of land** – In Whatcom County the price of agricultural land poses a particular challenge because of multiple factors including farmers from Canada buying land, and a growing urban population that drives land values higher.
- **Public disconnect from farming** – As fewer and fewer people are farming, the public has become increasingly disconnected from agriculture. The panel members spoke passionately of their commitment to environmental stewardship and animal husbandry and that they want to reintroduce the public to what Whatcom County dairy farmers are working hard to do.

4. Unique and innovative things you are doing on your farm?

The farmers spoke of working to protect water quality in multiple ways, from meeting Nutrient Management Act standards to trying innovative projects like sand filters. They are exploring new

technologies for managing manure, and robotic milkers. They also spend a lot of energy focusing on consumer education.

5. How do you see the dairy industry changing in next 10 years?

All panelists spoke of having to navigate a multitude of challenges to stay economically viable, and working harder to be more efficient as costs increase. They worried that the inherent economic difficulties might discourage future generations from choosing to pursue farming. They also predicted that consolidation will likely continue.

One of the most hopeful messages was that there is a strong foundation and future for dairy here in Whatcom County because of factors like our ideal climate and the innovative people who work in the industry. The panelists agreed that paramount to the future of dairy is getting the public engaged and supportive of their farms and industry.

Throughout the moderated portion of the panel and the discussion that followed, it was obvious how much these farmers loved what they did despite the challenges that come with running a dairy farm. Someone asked about how they manage work life balance and the responses revealed that, for dairy farmers, and most other types of farmers too, life and work aren't separated, they go hand in hand. One farmer noted that scaling up his operation actually gave him and his family more space and time since their larger staff could "shoulder some of the load." Another farmer shared, "It's long days but there is no better way to grow up than on a dairy farm." Another concurred saying, "It's a lot of work seven days a week but you get to see miracles all the time, you learn patience, you spend lots of time with your kids. It's hard work but it's rewarding."

Session #2

Creating a Whatcom Food System Plan

Chris Elder, Whatcom Food Network Coordinating Team Member

Chris, who is a member of the Whatcom Food Network's Food System Planning Subcommittee, gave attendees a broad overview of what a food system plan is, how it could be used, and why this would be valuable for Whatcom County.

The Whatcom Food Network sees development of a food system plan as a process to identify and ensure stewardship of a long-term food system vision for Whatcom County. The process begins by identifying opportunities and challenges in our local food system and defining common goals and strategies to address them. The plan can serve as a tool to facilitate effective collaboration, problem solving, and shared learning across all food system stakeholder groups (e.g., farmers, retailers, consumers and local and regional governments).



A food system plan could be used in Whatcom County to bring together stakeholders with

government officials to address some of the challenges identified in the 2017 Community Food Assessment Update. Some examples include improving food access in East County in a coordinated way, addressing affordable land access for farmers, and specifying government and institutional food procurement guidelines. To further explore challenges currently faced within each sector, and how a food system plan could address them, forum attendees broke into groups by sector and responded to several questions. The Food System Planning Subcommittee will incorporate this input in the design of the planning process.

Wrap Up & Next Steps

Keep a look out for information for our next forum, which will be held in the fall. Between forums please continue to use the WFN Listserv and subscribe to the WFN Facebook page. Information about forums, food system planning, the CFA and more will be posted to both. Everyone is welcome to subscribe and submit emails. Please contact the facilitator if you would like more information (Diana Meeks: dianam@sustainableconnections.org).