

## **ARC Stands Up for Farmers**

I want to spread the word about the good work that the Agricultural Resources Committees (ARC) is taking on. This relatively new group was created by the former County Commission to protect and encourage island agriculture, both by advising local government and through its own initiatives. ARC members are now rolling up their sleeves and getting to work.

People may wonder why we need a local committee dedicated to agriculture. What exactly are the benefits of having a robust agricultural community and economy? Are local farms really under threat?

The benefits are simple but profound. Local agriculture ensures an accessible supply of fresh, healthful food, even in times of emergency. When land stays in agricultural use, treasured island views are preserved - picture Crow Valley on Orcas, or the rolling fields of Lopez. Well-managed farmland makes good environmental sense. Agriculture contributes to the local economy through job creation, sales, and supporting businesses.

Farms can also provide unexpected economic benefits. For example, financial studies conducted in dozens of communities nationwide have consistently found that farms and open lands generate more tax revenues than they receive back in public services. This holds true even when the land is assessed at its current agricultural use. In comparison, residential land use consumes more public funds than it generates.

All our local farms are small-scale, family operations. In many cases they are oriented towards sustainability and organic methods. These farms are beautifully appropriate for a small county with special environmental features.

However, our local producers face serious obstacles. Food distribution networks favor big operations, and the global marketplace puts cheap, overseas produce at our fingertips. Islanders who could afford outstanding local fare instead drive to the mainland and shop at large chain stores. An array of costly, time-consuming, and confusing regulations further discourage farmers. Though regulations may be well-intentioned, they tend to excessively impact small operations.

Perhaps most alarming for the future, the county's high and rising land prices have made it quite difficult for new farmers of average means to get started – income from the farm just can't pay the mortgage. It's also costly to pay workers a living wage in this high-priced county.

Yet there's a new generation of farmers in the islands. Determined residents and newcomers bitten by the farming bug have found creative ways of making it work. Young people without land have sought out properties to lease, and long-time farming landowners have helped the newcomers get a leg up. Side jobs help pay the bills. I hope these future farmers find San Juan County to be hospitable, and proud of the good work they do.

The Agricultural Resources Committee wants farms and farmers to thrive in the San Juans. After surveying local producers, the ARC has settled on a few top priorities, including: 1)

creating better access to local products, through venues such as year-round farmer's markets and cooperatives; 2) linking up new farmers with land and other resources to get them started, and 3) improving regulations that disproportionately impact our small farms. Expect to hear more about these projects in future months.

How fortunate we are to have neighbors who do the honorable work of farming.

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SJC Land Bank Representative