

Food Security

Last year, food security meant growing or storing enough food to get by, at least until the store opened or the ferry docked. Lately food security is on a par with homeland security. There are riots and rationing, food for thought and food for fuel. Can we do anything to change the world?

Food is linked to the price of oil. Most commercial fertilizers are made from natural gas. On average, food travels 1500 miles from the soil to the supermarket, and not in a hybrid. Now corn is being increasingly processed for fuel, raising the price of corn and decreasing the supply for food. Our food is marinated, if not drenched, in oil.

I don't know about you, but try as I might, I haven't been able to change the price of oil. What we can do is to reduce our oil usage. For food, this means buying locally and when possible, buying organic. In one small decision made in the grocery store aisle, you have reduced trucking and synthetic fertilizer use. In fact, if every American ate just one meal from locally produced meat and produce, we would save 1.1 million barrels of oil*. Maybe we can change the price of oil after all.

Back to food security. San Juan County may not grow most of its own food, but the islands are renowned for their bounty: delicious grass-fed meats, fresh seafoods, a vibrant palette of locally grown vegetables, and more. We need, at the very least, to keep the option of growing our own food. In order to achieve that, we need three things: enough land, enough farmers, and the markets to make farming profitable.

How much land would this take? In a 2001 study, Cornell researchers estimated that a diverse diet requires 1.2 acres to feed one person.** Presently in San Juan County we have less than one acre of farmland for each permanent resident. In fact, we would have to double our farmland acres to meet the goal of producing our own food. This is why the Agricultural Resources Committee advised the County Council in 2006 to work for maintaining the amount of Agricultural Resource Land we still have, and requiring

mitigation for changing any of this resource's designation. It's both a challenge and an opportunity.

Thirty years ago in British Columbia, farmland was being lost at a rate that would strip San Juan County of its ag potential in one year. In response, the Canadians established an agricultural land base called the "Agricultural Land Reserve," that preserved about 5% of the entire province. It took a long public process to accomplish, but you can see the results when you drive east from Vancouver. Instead of sprawl, you see spreading green fields. In thirty years, there have been changes in the Reserve, but the area preserved has remained about the same. Their vision became a reality.

Maybe we can change the world after all.

* from Barbara Kingsolver's Animal, Vegetable, Miracle, 2007

** from D. Pimentel and M. Giampietro, "Food, Land, Population and the US Economy", 2001

[Here's a small, delightful step to take to help preserve our local farmlands: Support local farmers. Farmer's markets are open every summer Saturday on Lopez, Orcas, and San Juan Island. Stop by the Lopez Community Center in Lopez Village from 10am to 2pm, the Orcas Historical Museum in Eastsound from 10am to 3pm, or the county courthouse parking lot in Friday Harbor from 10am to 1pm.]