

Mapping Our Foodshed

We all know that San Juan County is rural. We see farms wherever we look. We may go to the farmer's markets on weekends to buy our food, or maybe we notice the Island Certified Local stickers at our favorite restaurants. But how much food is really grown here? How much could be grown? How much farmland are we losing? These sorts of questions may not keep you up at night, but its something that the people at the Agricultural Resources Committee take their food seriously.

We all like to eat. And, the benefits of "eating local" are numerous. That's one reason the ARC is attempting to map the county's foodshed. You already know that a watershed is the area that feeds a certain stream. A foodshed is similar, but the food that feeds this local population comes only from farms and gardens, and we would like to know more about them. We want to know what is grown, where, and how much land is in reserve to grow more.

There are other reasons to map the county's farmland. Although the USDA conducts an agricultural census every five years, it tends to miss small, noncommercial farms, which are common in San Juan County. The county may know the acreage in the Ag Open Space tax program, but doesn't keep track of the farmland that is not in the program. To be honest, we don't really know how much farmland we have, or how much of what is grown on it.

King County produces a comprehensive field survey of all its agricultural land every five years or so. They have a policy of 'no net loss of farmland' built into their Comprehensive Plan. Their baseline acreage was established in 2002. They monitor this farmland annually to within a tenth of an acre, about the size of a large garden. When their numbers fall, they conserve more land to make up the difference.

King County also has more money than we do. Instead of a full time staff, our ARC has two part-timers. Instead of sophisticated software, we have a twelve-year-old Honda and

a clipboard. But San Juan County has the edge when it comes to gathering information, because we are small enough for people to care and help us out.

So this is a plea, to all the farmers and gardeners and landowners in the county. You can help us to figure out what is grown here, how much farmland we are farming, and how much is in reserve. Farmland location could help in situating a new food processing facility or a farmer's market. Other information (Barns? Fencing? Old grain equipment?) is helpful, too. But we don't care who you are, or how commercial you may be. Sorry, but we want a picture of what's for dinner, not your smiling face.

Please complete our San Juan County Food and Farmland Questionnaire. It is available online at www.sjcarc.org/foodshed.asp . Or you can stop by the Conservation District office in Friday Harbor for a copy. If you call 378-6621, you can complete the questionnaire over the phone (Mondays, Tuesdays, and Thursdays are best). The questionnaire will also be in the upcoming ARC newsletter.

With your help, we'll be at the San Juan County Fair, August 13-16 with the first rendition of our farmland maps for you to peruse. And if you see an old blue Honda pulled over to the side of the road, we aren't tourists. It's okay to wave.