

PRODUCER SURVEY 2006 - SUMMARY

SJC AGRICULTURAL RESOURCES COMMITTEE

Introduction-

A two-page survey was developed by the new county Agricultural Resources Committee (ARC) last winter and mailed to approximately 200 county residents who are engaged in agriculture in some way. The following summary gives a current snapshot of some of the parameters and challenges for agriculture in San Juan County. Sixty-seven (34%) of the surveys were returned. There were 23 questions in the survey that were asked by the ARC in order to better understand the current circumstances and needs of our islands farmers. 33% of the responses came from San Juan Island, 32% from Lopez, 26% from Orcas, 6% from Waldron and 3% from Shaw.

Land Use-

The survey represented 3049 acres of land. This is 17 percent of the farmland reported for SJC in the last agricultural census. Half of the respondents are leasing at least some of the land they farm. When asked how many acres they farmed, the range in size was 0.25 to 700. The mean acreage for a farm in our county was 46 acres. 60% of the farms were 20 acres or less and 20 acres was the most frequent size reported (mode).

Economics-

Only 20% stated that they supported themselves by farming. 52% are farming part time. Although a significant number (47%) of farmers said they do not consider their farm to be economically viable, their reasons for farming were strong, and sometimes very passionate. (See *Why Farmers Farm* below)

Labor-

Although forty-five percent of the producers use farm labor, most (75%) thought that labor availability was a problem, and 70% thought farm worker housing was an issue. \$10/hr was the average rate given as a fair wage for an agricultural laborer.

Marketing & Distribution-

Most (68%) use some type of direct marketing, and 32% use some type of wholesale/retail distribution for their products.

Why Do Our Farmers Farm?

When asked why they farm, farmers and food producers were passionate in their answers. They expressed unequivocally, their love for and enjoyment of this work. "Because I like it and want to preserve the land" was a consistent comment. Feeding themselves and feeling strongly about providing healthy food for others in the community was a close second. In addition, financial reward including tax incentives, supporting family values, preservation of agricultural land and a sense of responsibility for doing the right thing by their land and enjoying a meaningful and healthy lifestyle followed. Other reasons for farming also illustrated the enthusiasm farmers feel for what they do.

Major Barriers to Farming -

When asked to rank a list of 10 possible barriers to farming, producers listed the following choices in order of importance: (1=most important)

BARRIER	RANK
Regulatory Barriers	1
Access to Markets	2
Water Resources	3
Information on Farm Support & Grants	4
Access to Farm Labor	5
Education and Technical Support	6
Access to Business Planning Services	7
Access To Finance	8
Energy Resources	9
Access To Land	10

What was the single most important issue that farmers felt the ARC should work on?

Comments here were intense, varied, well-articulated, and fell into eight categories. Three areas clearly dominated the responses indicating to the ARC “the tasks at hand.” Respondents were overwhelmingly concerned with the *preservation of agricultural land* in the county and encouraging continued and future farming through community support and awareness. Second in importance was considerable request for *education and technical support*, feeling that with education and consultation a greater number of people will feel more confident in farming their land and pursuing acquiring land for that purpose. Thirdly, farm producers hope that the ARC may, in some way, be able to become a more viable force in *addressing restrictive and often inappropriate national, state and county regulations* and for those agencies to consider small farms in their decisions concerning all of farming taking place in this country. Other important issues in descending order, were; *making land available, access to markets, economic assistance, ferry fares and tax breaks.*