

Small farms are gaining institutional recognition

FARM from Page 1

After an “obligatory globe-trotting walkabout” and some years involved in property development, he settled on agriculture and its ecological and economic connection to nearly everything, from climate change and social justice to nutrition.

Drawn by Oregon’s land-use laws that protect farmland, he and his wife, Machelle, also a Microsoft refugee, moved from Seattle in 2010 intending to create a farm based on a model of “permaculture.” That is, an agricultural and even social system that mimics natural ecosystems.

Varma believes Our Table Cooperative is an alternative to a food system that she says is broken, unhealthy and mired in “hidden cultural stuff.”

“The problem’s not one of how to grow a better carrot,” Varma said. “It’s much more pervasive and deeper than that.”

“People talk about the subsidies in the Farm Bill,” he said. “The real subsidy is not in the Farm Bill, it’s that a soda machine (was) considered normal in a high school. That’s the subsidy to corn.”

He isn’t alone in his thinking.

Making a statement

“We have a generation of people in their 20s and 30s who are interested in going into farming as a business and as a statement of how they see the world,” said Garry Stephenson, director of Oregon State University’s Center for Small Farms and Community Food Systems.

While the number of small farms counted in the 2012 Census of Agriculture actually declined compared to the 2007 census, their impact in urban areas is considerable.

In Portland, self-described homesteaders converted abandoned city lots into specialty herb gardens and sell to high-



Eric Mortenson/Capital Press

Andrew Watson, right, a former Netflix engineer who wants to start a small farm in Oregon, rinses carrots grown at Clackamas Community College’s garden. The college offers students a certificate in urban agriculture.

end restaurants. Others invent tools scaled for small farms, such as battery-powered tillers and adjustable handcars equipped with bicycle tires. Some carve out a living by hosting farm dinners, selling at farmers’ markets and delivering to community supported agriculture customers.

Increasingly, small farms are gaining institutional recognition and help. OSU’s small farms center and extension programs help beginning and small farmers, while the USDA provides grants and expertise through agencies such as the Natural Resources Conservation Service and National Institute of Food and Agriculture.

In many cases, the agencies are interacting with people who were drawn to farming by a sense that the food system doesn’t work and that regionally, at least, they can fix it.

A better way

Josh Volk of Portland, a mechanical engineer who turned his skills to designing and building farm tools, said farming is attracting people

who have worked in other industries or businesses.

“They’re not necessarily looking for an easier way to make a living, but they’re looking for a better way to make a living,” he said.

Volk, a consultant who helped design Our Table and who has written a manuscript profiling four farms of less than five acres, said environmental concern is a common entry point for new young farmers, and agriculture is an outlet.

“If you’re going to be growing things, you have to be nurturing in some sense,” he said. “It’s not a coincidence.”

It’s a movement that shows no sign of fading. In September, more than 200 people attended a one-day small-farm school put on by OSU. Also this fall, Clackamas Community College southeast of Portland became the first school in Oregon to offer a certificate in urban agriculture.

The program attracted students such as Andrew Watson, a former statistical engineer for Netflix who,

with his wife, is looking to buy a small farm in Oregon. He grew up on a conventional dairy farm in the United Kingdom and now hopes to grow vegetables and have dairy goats and chickens.

“I devoted myself to high-tech, now I’m devoting myself to producing food,” Watson said with a smile. “It’s quite a content switch, but you’re still producing something people enjoy.”

Fellow Clackamas student Chad Bennett was recruited for high-tech companies in the Portland area such as Intel before getting laid off. He decided to pursue his real interest, growing food, and established a farm on the one-fifth acre he owns in East Portland. His wife continues to work in high-tech while Bennett grows leafy greens, root crops and salad mixes.

He said Portland is a food-conscious city that supports such ventures.

“It will be more sustainable if people are growing food right around them,” he said. “Otherwise you’re using a truck and driving it across the country.”

Multiple motivations

Community college instructor Chris Konieczka said some in the urban agriculture program are simply looking to have the “sweetest” home garden, indulge a hobby or make a little money on the side. He said others pursue it as an issue of “food justice” — the concern that the poorest people can’t afford or don’t have access to nutritious food.

Urban agriculture can change the food system, support local economies and spread economic benefit to more people, Konieczka said.

“We’re kicking in a little bit of difference to the world,” he said, “and that feels good.”

Our Table Cooperative, the Sherwood farm, incorporated in 2013 and was founded on that notion of change.

Varma and his wife chose the site carefully, buying land that was close to Portland’s supportive foodies and access to the urban amenities that would be attractive to workers.

They looked for land with good soil and existing water rights, the lack of which hampers many beginning farmers. They purposefully sought property whose previous owners had been through Oregon’s Measure 37 and Measure 49 land-use process, and won the transferable right to eventually add two more residences. Most development is not allowed on Oregon farmland.

When built, those houses will be rented to workers. Varma hopes workers will be attracted by a trade-off of reduced income in exchange for subsidized rent and subsidized food from the farm.

Rather than focus on one crop — by expanding the blueberry acreage that was already in place, for example — the farm grows multiple types of vegetables, berries, flowers and fruit.

“What we lose in efficiency, we gain in resiliency” through diversification, Varma said.

Varma said the farm produces a lot of food but is not yet making a profit and so hasn’t yet paid dividends to co-op members. The farm hopes to make a profit by 2017.

Farm membership shares cost \$5,000 for workers; \$1,500 for producers and \$150 for consumers. Workers can pay the fee up front or with a down payment and payroll deductions. The farm pays a minimum wage of \$10.40 an hour for farmer members and no more than two times that for managers. The wage rates are based on the Massachusetts Institute of Technology’s living wage calculator for the Portland metro area. Varma said MIT recently increased its Portland calculation to \$11.25 an hour but the farm can’t catch up to that until 2016. The farm’s three owner groups are represented by a board of directors.

Gianna Banducci, Our Table’s marketing director and a cooperative member, said the farm has had a mixed reception from conventional farmers. Some are apprehensive or merely curious, others identify with the challenges of starting a small, diversified farm.

“For myself, personally, I’ve never worked harder, I’ve never put myself into a job like this,” she said. “At the end of the day, it’s mine. If it doesn’t get done, it’s because I didn’t do it.”

Varma’s overriding concern is maintaining the land for farm use over generations. The average age of American farmers is 57, near retirement, and developers may be the only ones with enough money to buy farmland outright.

The shared ownership model, or holding land in a public trust and leasing to new farmers, may be alternatives, he said.

“We knew we wanted to manage the land with an eye to long-term health,” Varma said.

Japan may be allowed to protect several commodities, including wheat, barley

TPP from Page 1

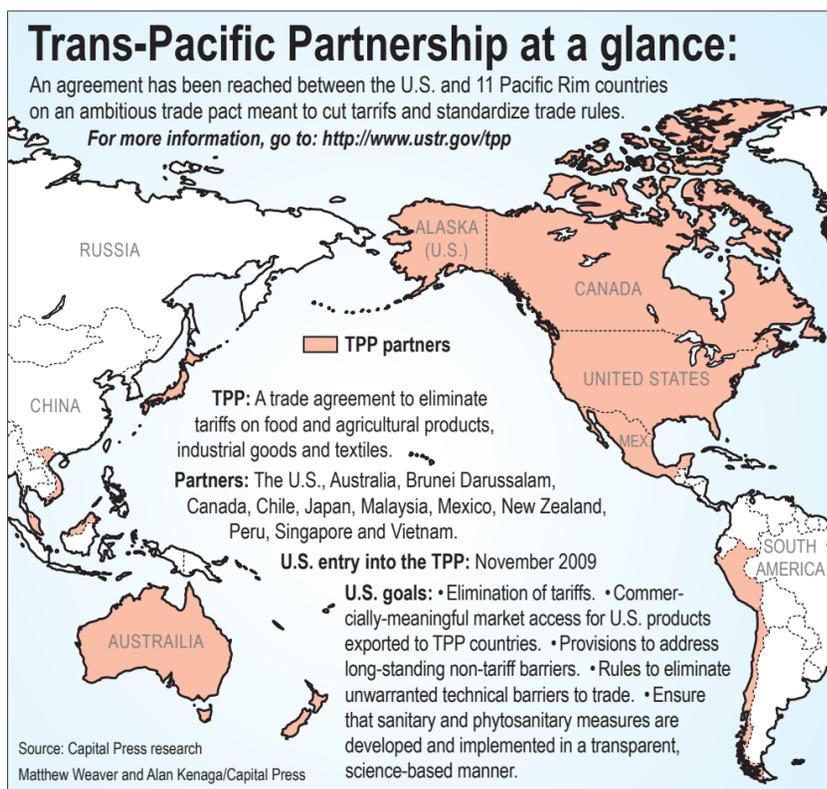
to the United States, so our longstanding position to the U.S. government has been to get other countries’ tariffs down to zero as well,” he said. “We’re anticipating that will be the case, but we need to see the details.”

Powers hoped sanitary and phytosanitary standards covered in the deal would prevent future trade barriers among TPP countries. It’s an area in international agricultural trade that’s creating problems, he said, with standards initially designed to protect against pests and diseases being used to create trade barriers that aren’t justifiable.

“We’re talking about how do we obtain the kind of access to export markets that other imports already have into our country,” he said.

Randy Suess, a former U.S. Wheat Associates chairman, said Japan may be allowed to protect several commodities, including wheat and barley, under the pact. Japan doesn’t grow much wheat and heavily subsidizes its wheat and barley farmers, he said.

“It’s not that big of a deal, but it seems like if we’re really



going to have a true free-trade type policy, everything would have to be on the table, and I guess that isn’t going to be the case,” he said.

Suess said the agreement is designed to level the playing field for U.S. farmers. Some of the countries in the agreement are already good trading part-

ners, and others, such as Vietnam, are emerging markets for the United States, he said.

“As far as wheat and barley goes, I think we’re going to be

happy with this,” Suess said.

Suess hopes other countries, including China and Indonesia, will eventually join TPP.

Suess expects TPP to be a significant topic in the presidential campaigns.

The deal still must be approved by Congress. President Barack Obama must wait 90 days before signing it, and Congress will then begin debate on it.

Ag groups, however, aren’t unanimous in their support for the deal.

Bill Bullard, CEO of R-CALF USA in Billings, Mont., said his organization will encourage Congress to reject the deal.

“We are very disappointed that what we have is but yet another trade deficit-generating free trade agreement that will only cause more harm to our U.S. cattle and sheep industries,” Bullard said.

Bullard said trade agreements give developing countries a forum to force the United States to relax its health and safety standards. He wants to see the United States work to increase health and safety standards in other countries before allowing them access to the

U.S. market.

“(TPP) will result in the further relaxation of our health and safety standards and the further erosion of our ability to maintain the highest health and safety standard in the world,” Bullard said. “Currency valuations have far more impacts on trade than tariff compromises or reductions.”

Blankenship pointed to the success of securing trade promotion authority — called fast-track authority — for the Obama administration in June, allowing the TPP negotiations to continue. Congress won’t be able to modify the agreement, only vote for or against it.

Democrats opposed the authority for Obama, while supportive agriculture groups wanted to see it approved.

“That was a heavy lift, and we accomplished that, so let’s be optimistic that if the trade agreement in its final version is as positive as what many had hoped, we can push adoption of the agreement across the finish line,” he said.

The TPP nations account for up to 42 percent of all U.S. agricultural exports, totaling \$633 billion, U.S. Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack said in a statement.

‘Going to meetings didn’t keep my sheep from being slaughtered and my dog from being torn up’

WOLVES from Page 1

wolf advisory group since it was created in 2013. The dual roles are thrusting him into the spotlight, again.

He didn’t attend last week’s WAG meeting in Ellensburg because the organization he represents, the Cattle Producers of Washington, quit the group. CPoW said WAG had become a forum for theoretical discussions that excused WDFW from managing problem wolves.

“It’s a worthless group from the cattlemen’s standpoint,” said Stevens County Cattlemen’s Association President Justin Hedrick, who was the Cattle Producers alternate member. “We’re worse off

than three years ago when the group started.”

Dashiell was one of three people who signed CPoW’s resignation letter.

“It was pretty hard for me to give a convincing argument (the group) was doing any good,” Dashiell said. “Going to meetings didn’t keep my sheep from being slaughtered and my dog from being torn up.”

Nevertheless, Dashiell hasn’t ruled out staying on the panel and representing himself. He remains listed as a member. WDFW has ramped up its investment in using the WAG to mediate conflicts over wolf management.

“I guess the value to participate is so you are informed

on what they’re up to. As far as solving the problem, I don’t know if it will or not,” Dashiell said. “Maybe things are turning in the right direction, maybe. It’s hard to say. ... I guess it’s a work in progress. I don’t have a whole bunch of time to work this thing out.”

CPoW withdrew less than two weeks after Dashiell tentatively agreed at a WAG meeting in early September to work with conservation groups on a 2016 grazing plan. Dashiell said reaction from colleagues about the potential collaboration wasn’t “too bad.”

“Everyone who talked to me said they understood the position on the deal, but I did hear some rumbling that environmentalists were going to

make my grazing plan, and they were going to call all the shots,” Dashiell said. “We didn’t give up lethal control. We didn’t give up anything.”

Environmentalists were cautious, too, about supporting a plan that would risk depredations on livestock, followed by pressure to lethally remove wolves.

“It took some soul-searching on the spot,” said Tim Coleman, director of the Kettle Range Conservation Group. “The whole idea of killing wolves before they’re recovered is very difficult and almost unacceptable.”

Dashiell said he’s lost confidence in non-lethal wolf deterrence, though he’s still open to working with environmen-

talists, especially if they want to endure camping out with the sheep. But he’s not sure what he’ll do next year.

He estimates he lost 300 sheep to wolves in 2014. WDFW shot one wolf, but the Huckleberry pack remains largely whole and has split into two groups. Wolves mauled one of Dashiell’s sheep dogs this summer. Dashiell said the dog has healed and hangs around the house.

“He’s way more friendly and sociable than he ever was,” Dashiell said. “I don’t know if he’ll work again.”

To avoid further losses to sheep, Dashiell kept his flock this summer in Eltopia in south-central Washington and spent more than \$10,000 a

month on hay. The sheep were safe, but ended the summer underweight, he said.

“They like green grass, brush and shade in the summertime,” he said. “It just didn’t work. It kept the sheep alive, but there’s no money to be made.”

“They’re going to have to go someplace because we’re not going to do that again,” Dashiell said. “Any place in the mountains, there’s wolves, so I don’t know where you go.”

If he brings the flock back to northeast Washington and depredations occur, “I’ll be accused of just doing it so lethal control will kick in,” Dashiell said. “I want to stay in the sheep business, but don’t know if I can or not.”