

# Co-op requires its member-farmers to follow organic practices

CO-OP from Page 1

On this day, the co-op will make deliveries to nine locations, including a downtown market, several restaurants, a school district and housing for the Jesuit priests at Gonzaga University.

### Humble beginnings

Robinette said the co-op is “light-years” ahead of when she and co-founder Joel Williamson began it in 2014. “When we first started, we were basically meeting farmers behind a hotel, next to the dumpster, running deliveries in Joel’s (car) and renting out a tiny little cooler in the back of the hotel,” she said. Today, the co-op has two delivery trucks and employs five people. “We’ve learned a lot,” Robinette said. “In some ways, it’s like going back to a very old, traditional way of doing things and in some ways it’s like completely reinventing the wheel and using technology to help connect people and tell the story of where their food comes from.”

LINC is one of nearly 1,500 co-ops in the nation, according to the USDA Rural Development Directory of Farmer Cooperatives. Of that total, 74 are in California, 14 are in Idaho, 21 are in Oregon and 46 are in Washington. Many, including LINC Foods, are organized to help small and medium-sized farms and ranches build a local customer base.

LINC Foods has become a significant outlet for Sproule. He sells 10 percent of his produce through the co-op, and may increase that to 15 percent this year, he said. On March 14, he delivered beets and microgreens — the first leaf stage of a vegetable, typically used for garnish or specialty foods — for distribution.

Sproule raises 6 acres of vegetables, primarily for farmers’ markets.

“A lot of the restaurants and schools order fairly large quantities,” Sproule said. “We’re a fairly large farm, so it’s nice to be able to move hundreds of pounds of things instead of smaller amounts.” Sproule plans to continue with the co-op.

“It’s growing steadily — that’s good for everybody,” Sproule said.

Hogan is a newcomer, having only become involved a few weeks earlier. He’d contacted the co-op several years ago, looking for an outlet for his produce. LINC contacted him when it needed more carrots, he said.

“They’ve been willing to take the larger carrots, which are slow movers for me,” Hogan said. “What kills me is having to throw them out because they didn’t move. I hate to put in all that effort to throw them out.”

### Grower standards

LINC Foods requires its member-farmers to follow organic practices, although they don’t have to be certified, Robinette said.

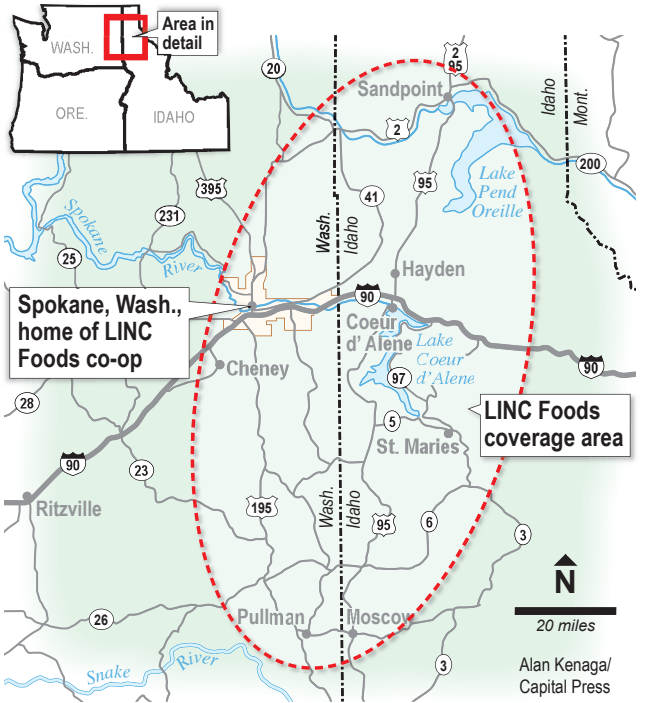
Any farmer who meets those requirements can sell \$500 of product through the co-op without joining — a sort of trial basis, she said.

Farmers who join pay \$100



Matthew Weaver/Capital Press

LINC Foods delivery truck driver Kyle Merritt and co-founder Beth Robinette watch as Latah, Wash., farmer Bruce Hogan moves carrots March 14 in the co-op warehouse in Spokane.



Alan Kenagal/Capital Press

per year. The money goes into an individual capital account and farmers receive it back, plus their share of profits accumulated over their time in the co-op, Robinette said.

Robinette recommends the book “Wholesale Success,” by Atina Diffley, the handbook all the co-op’s farmers use as a guide for how their wholesale produce should look, be graded, sorted and packed.

“At the beginning, we didn’t really know anything about that — even to our experienced farmers, a lot of that stuff was kinda new,” Robinette said. “We got some weird stuff in some weird packaging. I’m very thankful to the customers that stood by us while we figured all of that out.”

The co-op has several guilds — one for produce, referred to informally as the Veggie Guild; one for livestock, the Critter Guild; a Grain Growers Guild and a Value-Added Guild. Value-added products are allowed depending on how many locally sourced ingredients they have and where the non-local ingredients come from, Robinette said.

The farms are all within a 250-mile radius of Spokane, but the vast majority are within a 30-minute drive of the city, Robinette said.

Both rural and urban farms participate, she said, enthusing that every co-op member “has the coolest background” and “is so different and so special.”

“We have everything, from a farmer who’s trying to start the first tech farm — he’s built his own walk-in cooler that has this awesome space-age interface that automatically adjusts the humidity and temperature based on what products are in it,” she said. “We have everything from that to farmers who don’t use a cell phone or the internet. We have to call them on the phone to talk to them and hope that they’re at home.”

Members’ politics are equally diverse.

“We have from the furthest left-leaning whatever to complete Libertarian — and everybody gets along,” she said. “Everybody can come together over this common mission of trying to feed our community and support each other.”

### Online

<http://www.lincfoods.com/>

### Where food goes

The co-op delivers to customers as far north as Sandpoint, Idaho; as far south as Pullman, Wash.; as far west as Cheney, Wash., and as far east as Coeur d’Alene, Idaho.

Each year the co-op meets with its main customers to determine the projected demand for the coming year. The co-op then distributes the projections to its members to give them an idea of what they should grow.

“We’ve blown through that every year and then some,” Robinette said. “That’s really helped us be able to give our farmers some certainty to scale up (production). It can be a really big investment to put more land under cultivation. We want to try and give farmers a guarantee.”

Gonzaga University is the biggest customer, though the co-op also works with other area universities and is getting into hospital food service and exploring the possibility of expanding into nursing homes.

“A lot of those big institutions, there’s tons of opportunity there, but it just takes a really long time to get your foot in the door,” Robinette said. “Some customers, it’s taken 18 months from when we started initial conversations to when we could actually start to become an approved vendor. It takes a certain amount of persistence to open some of those doors.”

Robinette is especially excited about expanding into hospitals.

“Hospitals are places for people to heal and get better,” she said. “I just know having access to great produce has to be helpful to that.”

Spokane restaurants such as the Blackbird Eatery, Central Food and Tomato Street are all customers.

“We’re always looking for opportunities like that. Where can we get local produce or food into a place where it’s never really been accessible before?” Robinette said.

### Growing sales

In the co-op’s first year, it had \$30,000 in sales. Last year, sales blossomed to \$250,000.

“We were very close to breaking even last year,” Robinette said. “I think we’re going to have another really big year of growth.”

The co-op would have been profitable last year but purchased equipment for its barley-malting operation in nearby Spokane Valley called Palouse Pint. It supplies malt barley to micro-breweries.

Washington Gov. Jay Inslee toured the malting facility in March.

“This is the first malting facility in Spokane since Prohibition, and one of two in the state,” said Tara Lee, deputy communications manager for the governor’s office. “It provides a unique opportunity for smaller farmers to market their crops in a new way while growing the craft beer industry in Washington.”

Robinette believes the state’s interest was partly due to the co-op’s work with barley.

“It’s one thing to take organic vegetables and sell them locally. That’s really cool,” she said. “But to be able to take what’s normally a really big commodity crop — where the farmer has no connection with the end-user — (and) actually give those farmers a way to connect with the end-user of their product, I think that piqued their interest.”

Since its founding, LINC Foods has also received several grants to help it become established and grow.

The Washington State Department of Agriculture provided the co-op with a

\$138,000 USDA Specialty Crop Block Grant in 2015 to start the LINC Foods Safety Program and help farmers obtain Good Agricultural Practices certification. The grant ends in 2018, according to department public information officer Mike Louisell.

In 2016, LINC Foods received \$301,261 from the specialty crop multi-state program, which promotes collaboration with other grower organizations in Eastern Washington, Northern Idaho and Western Montana and food safety training by providing GAP and Food Safety Modernization Act education, resources and technical assistance.

A USDA Value Added Producers Grant for \$250,000 supports malt marketing, Robinette said.

“The grants are really helpful,” she said. “We are using them to help us grow faster than we could have otherwise while building a sustainable business model.”

### What’s next

Much of the co-op’s sales go to schools, which take the summer off, so more large customers are needed in the summer, Robinette said.

“A couple big institutions that wanted to purchase from us year-round would be really helpful,” she said.

The co-op also started a Community Supported Agriculture-like produce program to bolster summer sales.

Robinette also wants to continue to cooperate with other regional food hubs, coordinating marketing and sharing information.

She expects more farmers to join, although the co-op must balance giving existing farmer-owners more opportunities with adding new growers, she said.

“So far we’ve just so surpassed what we’ve been able to get our hands on,” she said. “I think that we’ll be adding more farmers for a while.”

# Policy calls for ranchers and WDFW to agree on tactics

WOLF from Page 1

If in place last summer, WDFW could have initiated lethal removal seven days after the first depredation.

Also, WDFW would have considered shooting wolves last fall in the Smackout pack. WDFW documented one probable and two confirmed depredations within eight days. Under the existing policy, the pack was still two confirmed depredations away from being a candidate for lethal removal.

In cases in which attacks are farther apart, four depredations will remain the threshold, though the window will be shortened to

10 months from 12 months. One probable attack could be counted.

Stevens County Commissioner Don Dashiell, a member of the advisory group, said the new policy improves the lethal-removal protocol. But he said it still doesn’t give WDFW the room to act as soon as attacks begin.

“I’m not that enthused because my vision was one depredation, and we do something,” he said.

The policy also calls for ranchers and WDFW to agree on tactics to prevent and respond to depredations before using lethal control as a last resort. Martorello said the department will not require

ranchers to sign damage-prevention contracts. “It can be a dialogue,” he said.

Conservation Northwest’s representative on the advisory group, Paula Swedeen, said the changes were sensible.

“It’s at least a conversation between the (WDFW) conflict specialist and the producer,” she said.

WDFW also pledged to make more information available about what it and ranchers are doing to keep wolves and livestock apart. Swedeen said the on-the-ground measures should reassure wolf advocates. “I think it keeps temperatures down when people have more of a description,” she said.

# ‘People don’t understand the amount of genetic change that’s already happened (naturally) over literally centuries’

MONSANTO from Page 1

Asked if the merger will create redundancies between the Woodland facility and Bayer CropScience’s new vegetable seed lab and greenhouses in West Sacramento, Purcell said there are some differences between the two labs.

Moreover, ag research facilities in the area already interact and collaborate because of their proximity to the University of California-Davis, he said.

Monsanto is working with other universities, too. The company recently entered into an agreement with the Broad Institute of

the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and Harvard University to use so-called CRISPR Cpf1 technology, which allows researchers to edit genomes at precise locations, according to the institute.

Using the technology, researchers can edit traits in corn, soybeans and other crops and ultimately develop new varieties years sooner than by using traditional breeding techniques, Monsanto vice president of biotechnology Tom Adams has said.

“It’s early,” Purcell said of development and use of the CRISPR technology. As for the wider issue of GMOs,

he said it is “one tool” that growers can use.

“In biotech, GMO is a great tool,” he said. “You need all the tools in the tool box.”

He said most people want good, safe, affordable food, and there’s room for all types of production in the marketplace.

“People don’t understand the amount of genetic change that’s already happened (naturally) over literally centuries,” Purcell said.

At the same time, while some in the company wish they could move faster with advances in genetics, “you have to operate within society’s norms,” he said.