

# Transition Techniques

Conserving the river and an organic conversion

The cool waters of the McKenzie River splash in the background and wet the air as the wind rushes through the riparian forest. Crops like tomatoes, lettuce and dry beans populate 40 acres unmarred by pesticides or synthetic fertilizers. Livestock linger as students visit on a field trip, learning about the crops that become their lunches, and local farmers experimenting with new techniques discuss their strategies over test crops.

This is the image of the future shared by McKenzie River Trust, EWEB, Cascade Pacific RC&D, Willamette Farm and Food and host of other partners collaborating on the planned demonstration farm at the freshly acquired Berggren Watershed Conservation area. Dave Ritchie, cartographer at the Lane Council of Governments and project overseer, says, "I think what we all envision is a place that can set an example for how to cope with changes in agriculture and agricultural markets, especially locally."

This summer, McKenzie River Trust became the proud owner of 92 acres of riparian forest and farmland along the McKenzie River, thanks to EWEB and the BPA's donation to compensate for the Willamette Valley Project (an extensive series of dams) and a contribution from the original landowners, Richard and Sandra Hunsaker.

Organizers are collaborating to create a 40-acre organic demonstration farm on the site of what is now conventionally grown hay. The farm will feature crops that aren't widely grown in Lane County but have the potential to create sustainable local markets. Soil tests in the works will reveal more about what these crops might be. Ritchie says the criteria are fairly simple, "Something that can grow here, something that has reasonable opportunity for whatever processing might be and something like tomatoes that people eat regularly or have some other destination market."

New farming techniques can be tricky, and venturing into new markets a risky business. Providing a laboratory for organic ideas could persuade farmers to commit to a conversion.

"I think the biggest challenge is financing it because there's a lot of input in the transition process," says Lynn Fessenden, executive director of Willamette Farm and Food. "It's typically a three year process, sometimes longer. And for those three years, they can't sell their crops at a premium price."

Part of Willamette Farm and Food's role in the demonstration farm will be helping the farm and other



Farm managers are still deciding if they want to keep the old agricultural pond on the demonstration farm site

PHOTO BY SHANNON FINNELL

local farmers find markets for their transitional organic produce. "Schools are a good market for transitional crops that are not certified organic because most schools aren't buying all organic," Fessenden says.

FoodHub, another development intended to help farmers match their crops to markets belongs to Ecotrust, a Portland-based conservation group. "FoodHub is like an online dating service for industrial producers and consumers," Ritchie says. Consumers can search for produce with specific attributes, while producers can list any quantity or location of food that they wish to sell. Fessenden and Ritchie think that the tool will be useful in creating a niche market for transitional crops grown on the demonstration farm and others like it, which have the same inputs as organic food without the organic certification.

According to EWEB water quality expert Karl Morgenstern, organic farms around the McKenzie River can protect the safety of Eugene's sole source of drinking water and make a profit at the same time. "In order to make agriculture economically viable and to get young people interested and engage in agriculture as a business again, we needed to do a number of things to start changing that paradigm over the next 20 to 30 years," Morgenstern says.

In addition to abstaining from pesticide and synthetic fertilizers, Morgenstern plans to protect the river by adding

an extra hundred feet of buffer zone that already separates the fields from the McKenzie. "There will be a buffer of shrubs and plants that are beneficial pollinators and beetle habitat," Morgenstern says. "Beetles are great predators of insects."

Along with the farming being performed by employees of the demonstration farm, organizers are considering other options, such as participation from schools. "There's talk too about having parts of the farm where other growers can come in and see if they can do some things to bring back to their own farm to implement," Morgenstern says.

Ritchie emphasizes that the groups involved in the demonstration farm expect to learn a lot from local farmers during the process. "It's not like we're landing and telling people how things should be done," he says. "We're really expecting to be a collaborative experience with the farmers in the area."

The BCA joins Big Island Conservation Area immediately across the McKenzie, part of McKenzie River Trust's plan to support a contiguous wildlife corridor that allows for the free movement of native species.

Fessenden says that the groups are ready to support that vision. "We're excited to partner in whatever way works best," she says. "A whole group of us went out there last spring and started dreaming all sorts of dreams." **EW**

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