

DIRECT & PERMANENT

farmers and investors take action with farmland preservation programs

BY HEIDI BROADHEAD
PHOTOS BY KENNETH RAY AND HEIDI BROADHEAD

On an unseasonably sunny day in late January, farmer Joel Blais leans on a metal gate next to a stately, weathered red barn. Thirteen sows are lounging around and munching hay in a nearby loafing shed. Blais looks happy in his rubber boots, but a bit distracted and overwhelmed.

“When I got here this morning, six of my sows were out,” he says.

Blais has rounded up five sows already, and the last one is still chowing down on a pile of organic grain in a corner of the barn. He rigged up a sort of low-level barbed-wire chute between the barn and the shed. The remaining vagrant wanders out of the barn and steps right over it.

“I keep reinforcing the structures,” he says. “They keep outwitting me.”

Crying Rock Farms is Blais’s first direct experience with farming. Until early last year, he was working at Microsoft and investing in real estate in Tacoma’s Hilltop neighborhood, where he grew up and still lives, commuting to Orting daily to farm and take care of the sows. His curiosity about raising pastured pork as both an investment and a way to make a difference in the food community led him to take Cultivating Success classes through Pierce County Extension in early 2009. One year later, Blais is an organic pork and hops producer.

It took a lot of coordination to bring this together. In early 2009, horticulturalist Julie Kintzi entered the picture. While Kintzi has never farmed herself, she admits to a lifelong love of farming.

“I’ve watched a lot of farmland disappear,” says Kintzi, whose family was in farming a generation ago but had to sell because it wasn’t economically viable. “I wanted to do something direct and permanent.”

She contacted PCC Farmland Trust to learn how to go about buying a farm and leasing it to an organic farmer. PCC Farmland Trust, a non-profit arm of PCC Natural Markets with the mission of saving farmland in Washington, has been coordinating farm preservation projects since 1990. In April 2009 Melissa Campbell, PCC Farmland Trust’s Stewardship & Land Associate, told Kintzi about an opportunity in Orting.

That opportunity was part of the 100-acre Ford Dairy Farm, which was being sold by the family who had owned it for the past 40 years. The sale had been in progress for two and a half years, with a 28-acre plot remaining available after the other 72 acres had been split between two other family farms: Kim and Dan Hulse (Tahoma Farms and Terra Organics CSA) and Ken and Carrie Little (Little Eorthe Farms). For these properties, the farmers worked through various lending programs to purchase the land on their own, and PCC Farmland Trust secured funding from the Washington State Recreation Conservation Office, as well as county-designated money from Pierce County Conservation Futures to purchase the organic agriculture conservation easements for all three properties.

Purchasing the farmland conservation easement ensures that the land will be retained for agricultural use forever. PCC Farmland Trust works with community and governmental groups to raise the money to pay

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Farmer Joel with a hungry new mother.

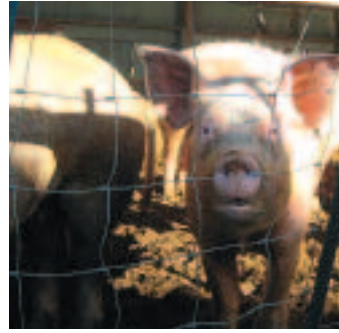
Farmland Trust Programs

Land Trust Alliance has a registry of Member Land Trusts operating in Washington State. Many small communities and a long list of nonprofit groups offer such programs. Find one in your area. www.ltanet.org

Washington State Office of Farmland Preservation www.ofp.scc.wa.gov

PCC Farmland Trust www.pccnaturalmarkets.com/farmtrust

American Farmland Alliance (for national trends and reports) www.farmland.org



the cost of a developer's premium, giving the landowner whatever they could get from a developer if they sold it for non-farm use.

Kintzi made an offer on the 28-acre plot, and the seller counter-offered, but it was still too high.

Campbell put the word out through Capital Press Agricultural News and various Western Washington agriculture listservs that the property was still for sale. Blais's Cultivating Success instructor, Chris Benedict, emailed the class and Blais followed up on it.

Blais built a business plan for raising organic pastured pork and hops on the property. He talked to Northwest Farm Credit Services about financing options and special programs for farmers, but he didn't qualify.

"There were a lot of programs, but you had to show three years of farm management experience. I tried to use my experience developing a sustainable urban community in Tacoma," says Blais, "but that didn't fit."

He says that he was able to find a loan at 10 percent interest, but he declined. Meanwhile, time was running out on the grant monies, so PCC Farmland Trust contacted Julie Kintzi again.

"The fact that I'm not a farmer works in my favor," says Kintzi. "The way [the banks] see it, I'm investing in the land. It is never considered valuable as farmland."

Kintzi looked at Blais's business plan and met him to talk about the possibility of Kintzi purchasing the property and Blais signing on with a lease-to-own option.

"He just had an enormous amount of passion," says Kintzi. "I met him and felt he was the right fit."

In addition to a business plan, Blais had to provide PCC Farmland Trust with a succession plan, his strategy for who will take over the farm. He agreed to the conditions of the organic farmland conservation easement, including PCC's guidelines for sustainable practices and providing educational opportunities such as farm tours.

Above: Left to right: the last escapee says hello to a friend; a cold drink on a warm day; some pigs love the paparazzi; already planning the next escape

"Our #1 requirement is a commitment to sustainable and organic farm practices," says Campbell, who visits the farm twice a year to see how Blais is doing and to gauge what kind of support he needs as a new farmer.

"You imagine the problems you will have," says Blais, "but then the problems you do have are pretty basic, like how to get the water to the pigs when you don't have a well." Or how to get them back in their shed, once they've figured out a new escape route.

But Blais is optimistic despite his challenges and sharp learning curve. He lost his first batch of piglets, but the second batch was born in January and they're doing well. He's planted his hops. He has a mulefoot boar that his son named "Kid Pig."

And he's excited about the possibility of a built-in, supportive organic farming community in Orting. Pretty soon after he arrived, his neighbor Ken Little welcomed him to the neighborhood. They found that they share a love of brewing, and they have talked about starting a co-op.

"I see a community developing with the other farmers and I think about my kids growing up here. It's worth the risk," he says.

As for Kintzi, she already has a list of prospective farmers who would love to have a similar arrangement, and she says that as soon as she sells to Blais, she'll be looking for more farmland to buy right away.

"I watch Joel on the farm and I feel very inspired," says Kintzi. "Once you work the land you make a connection with the land. I can see him developing that, and I know he'll want the property. And I'll feel good knowing that conservation rights are secure." *eS*

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