

Gleanings From the Farm Walks Program (Fall 2015)

FARM WALK BOOKLETS

To download Farm Walk booklets and access complete summaries, please visit tilthproducers.org

“ACCESSING LAND AS A BEGINNING VEGETABLE FARMER” / QUACKENBUSH FARM / Sept 14, 2015

On a drizzly, mid-September day, eighteen farmers, farm interns, and community members gathered at Quackenbush Farm near Ridgefield in Clark County. Attendees were greeted by owner/operators Matt and Jennifer Van Wey, and Rachel Quackenbush, who began their farm adventure together in February 2014. These young farmers shared the recent memory of what was required for them to access land, gain resources, and begin a vegetable farming enterprise.

In the beginning, Matt, Jennifer, and Rachel (along with a fourth young farmer no longer working with them) wanted to start a small farm after the one they had all been working for closed. They found their parcel of land on Craigslist and were attracted to its viable acreage, several out-buildings (including a non-functioning walk-in cooler), and comfortable house. Matt still holds a full-time position with the Department of Lands, Jennifer was able to work full-time on the farm in 2015, and Rachel works for the farm part-time. Matt explained that their off-farm jobs reduced the financial risk of beginning a farm business. Their most time-consuming part about launching the farm was the marketing. Keeping the website updated, promoting their CSA, talking with local restaurants—all required more time than Matt had anticipated. He suggested that any new farmer should make the small investment of building out a simple, well-designed website.

As the group walked the two acres in production at Quackenbush Farm, Matt and Jennifer pointed out how they reuse and repurpose



Photo credit: Angela Anecon

Farm Walk attendees help Jennifer Van Wey (far left) harvest winter squash at Quackenbush Farm in Clark County, WA.

farm materials to keep their input costs low. Besides the challenge of marketing, they faced another major one this season—aminopyrolid-contaminated manure used in their compost subsequently decimated their tomatoes. Aminopyrolids are a class of pesticides often used in hay production and landscaping for control of broadleaf weeds. When animals eat hay from a pasture treated with the pesticide, the chemical is not broken down and appears in the manure. This contaminated manure—even when composted—causes problems in many vegetable crops. Lesson learned: always know (and test!) the source of soil amendments.

In the future, this small farm would like to expand to more farmers markets and restaurants. Since they started farming, Matt and Jennifer have experimented with over 50 varieties of plants, but want to focus on what works for their land and their markets—bringing that number closer to 30 varieties. They would also like to be able to hire a full-time employee and/or offer internship opportunities.

It was apparent that these young farmers have taken the time to experiment and discover what works best for them and their land. For now, renting allows them to build a farm business that will carry them into the future as they turn visions into attainable goals. We look forward to seeing how Quackenbush Farm continues to add to the food system of Clark County.

This Farm Walk is supported by the Beginning Farmer and Rancher Development Program of the National Institute of Food and Agriculture, USDA, Grant # 2012-49400-19575. For more resources and programs for beginning farmers and ranchers please visit www.Start2Farm.gov.

RENEWABLE ENERGY FARM WALKS 2015

“SOLAR ENERGY ON THE FARM I & II”

BROAD LEAF FARM / October 5, 2015

TAHOMA FARMS / October 26, 2015

Tilth Producers teamed up with Northwest Sustainable Energy for Economic Development (Northwest SEED) to bring our community a series of Farm Walks focused on renewable energy, supported by an Environmental Justice Grant from the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency. Northwest SEED is a Seattle-based organization that works to create communities powered by locally-controlled clean energy solutions. They provide technical assistance, education, advocacy, and implementation of clean energy projects. This exciting partnership with Northwest SEED kicked off with two Farm Walks in October, each emphasizing the use of solar energy on the farm.

At both Farm Walks, Northwest SEED Project Manager Mia Devine

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presented on the effects of climate change within agriculture, how renewable energy sources can help mitigate climate change, and the benefits of renewable energy. She provided details on finding funding and taking advantage of incentive programs to pay for solar installation. Such programs and incentives include the USDA Rural Energy for America Program (REAP), federal tax credits, Washington Solar Production Incentive, and MACRS Depreciation. Mia explained that if a farmer were to take advantage of all programs and incentives (plus account for the energy they are not purchasing), the cost of their system would be 65-75% off after year one. Amazing!

Also in attendance at both Farm Walks was Shannon Ellis-Brock of Puget Sound Cooperative Credit Union who spoke to their Energy Smart Loans, low-interest loans for solar projects up to \$35,000. She was extremely helpful and succinct in outlining the benefits for both the farmer and the regional economy to locally finance a solar project.

The first of the Farm Walks was held at Broad Leaf Farm in Everson (Whatcom County). Owned and operated by Dusty and Leslie Williams, this 10-acre certified organic farm utilizes a 8.6 kW solar electric system which supplies about 25% of the farm's electricity needs.

Since the 1970s, Dusty always played around with the notion of solar-power and utilized an off-grid system. When he learned of the availability of incentives through Northwest SEED Project Coordinator and fellow Whatcom County farmer Mia Devine, Dusty made the investment, having his system installed by EcoTech Solar, a Bellingham based company, in 2014. Dana Brandt, founder of EcoTech, was in attendance and presented on the basics of solar terminology, the basics of a photo-voltaic system, site requirements, installation, and cost variables. Since he helped Dusty with his system, Dana was able to speak directly to the process to assess the site, determine the size of the array needed, and see the system through its installation.

Also in attendance at Broad Leaf was Jeff Aslan, Energy Program Manager of Sustainable Connections, a non-profit based in



Photo credit: Angela Aneagon

Dana Brandt of EcoTech Solar answers questions about the Broad Leaf Farm solar array which he helped install, Everson, WA.



Photo credit: Angela Aneagon

Dan Hulse of Tahoma Farms talks about how much power their array has provided the Pierce County, WA farm.

Whatcom County. Jeff spoke about the various services they offer to increase energy efficiencies in the region. This includes providing energy assessments for businesses—including farms!—to help understand their energy usage and create goals around obtaining renewable energy systems. After attendees saw the general set-up of his solar array, Dusty took attendees on a short tour around his farm, a portion of which he leases to young farmers. It was great to see how Broad Leaf is utilizing renewable energy and also providing space for the next generation of farmers!

The second farm host was Tahoma Farms near Orting (Pierce County). Farmer owners Dan and Kim Hulse greeted everyone to their certified organic farm, which in years past was a large dairy operation. The farm itself is on land secured through the PCC Farmland Trust as a conservation easement. Between their organic production practices and mission to preserve farmland, it was no surprise that Dan made the decision to install a large solar array atop one of the old livestock barns. To speak to the installation of Tahoma's particular array, Chris Brooks, project manager for Sun's Eye Solar based in Tacoma, was in attendance to explain the inner workings. Besides explaining the basic terminology and system set-ups, Chris essentially sold everyone on the use of micro inverters. Afterwards, Dan and Kim took everyone on a tour of their farm—namely their wash stations and packing shed.

Overall, both Farm Walks informed farmers on the steps they can take to tap solar power on their farm. Further, they proved that solar energy systems perform well in Western Washington with plenty of local manufacturers and installers to choose from. So don't let the dreary days of winter fool you into thinking that it's not possible to benefit from a solar array of your own.

This Farm Walk series is sponsored through an Environmental Justice Grant from the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency.

Summaries by Angela Aneagon, Education Coordinator.