



USDA Natural Resource Conservation Service Center
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Small Farmers Class Works to Support Grays Harbor County Agricultural Community

Overview

In February 2009, Columbia-Pacific Resource Conservation & Economic Development Council along with Washington State University Extension and Grays Harbor County Weed Board, partnered to offer the popular beginning farmer's course "Cultivating Success". It had been over 14 years since anything like it had been taught in Grays Harbor County. The course, which targets small landowners, focuses on the principles of sustainable agriculture and basic business planning.

Class Focuses on Local Needs

Nearly 30 landowners, representing over 460 acres, took the 13 week course. The curriculum was tailored to incorporate local controversial issues such as water rights, tax preparation, wildlife depredation and open space taxation. And they heard stories of hardship and success from some of Grays Harbor County's most innovative agricultural producers. Two Saturday field trips to highly successful farming operations further demonstrated the practical implications of sustainable agriculture.

At the last class meeting, participants shared future plans for their property. Many were already engaged in some kind of agriculture; raising dairy goats, managing a greenhouse, starting a community supported agriculture program, or raising eggs, fruits or vegetables for family and friends. Another common theme expressed was the desire to put sustainable agriculture to work by improving pollinator habitat, changing grazing management and developing a pasture-fed poultry system.

Connecting Back to Community

The most telling gauge of the class' success was that participants didn't want it to end. Networking between participants and presenters started early and continues to expand into the larger agricultural community.

Now months after the last class, participants still meet to collectively do a Farm Walk on one of their properties. Farm Walks provide the farm host a chance to glean ideas and knowledge from fellow students and agricultural professionals, while sharing the special features of their business or property.

Another group of class participants has begun working on a website to help connect Grays Harbor farmers with consumers and other farmers. Using the latest web design technology, they are creating a website to showcase local agricultural diversity. The website will be hosted by Grays Harbor Tourism.