

THE BELLINGHAM HERALD

POSTED: Wednesday, May. 04, 2011

Fewer Whatcom organic farmers, but demand may create more opportunities

DAVE GALLAGHER - THE BELLINGHAM HERALD

While organic food continues to get more exposure with consumers, the number of Washington organic farms and overall sales have shrunk recently.

According to a study done by the Washington State University Center for Sustaining Agriculture and Natural Resources, the number of certified organic farms dropped 2.4 percent to 735 and the amount of acres used to grow organic products dropped 6 percent to just under 102,000 acres.

A similar trend took place in Whatcom County: The number of certified organic farmers locally dropped from 40 in 2009 to 34 last year, while the amount of Whatcom organic farmland dropped from 3,321 acres to 2,932 during the same period.



One part of the study where Whatcom was able to buck the state trend was overall sales. Last year's sales numbers are not yet available, but in 2009 Washington state farmgate totals were \$210.7 million, down from \$246.7 million in 2008. Whatcom County posted an increase during the same period, from \$4.9 million in 2008 to \$5.3 million in 2009. Whatcom's farmgate total in 2009 was the fifth-highest county total in Western Washington, behind Skagit (\$12 million in 2009), Thurston (\$6.4 million), Lewis (\$5.6 million) and King (\$5.4 million).

Statewide there could be several factors for the decline in farms, acreage and sales, said David Granatstein, who co-authored the study with Elizabeth Kirby. Recession is a big factor, he said in an email, with the most recent numbers indicating a plateau. However, he does see opportunity for growth again because of increased consumer demand.

"The growth trend is expected to continue, although at a slower pace than over the past decade," he said.

The opportunity also seems to be ripe in Whatcom County. Jay Dennison, a business manager for Growing Washington, which manages the Alm Hill Gardens near Everson, said he continues to see increased consumer support for organic food locally, as well as interest from younger people wanting to become organic farmers.

"Opportunities are out there; it's a consistently growing consumer market," Dennison said.

Shawn and Clarissa Langley have been a part of that growth. In 2007 they started Fresh Breeze Organic Dairy near Lynden with about 140 dairy cows; today the herd is more than 220. The dairy started out selling milk in local stores, now it has a line of cream products, which actually made it to the White House as an ingredient in Fran's Chocolate Salted Caramels.

"More and more people are taking the time to learn about what they eat and to recognize the benefits of organic food," Shawn Langley, a fifth-generation dairy farmer, wrote in an email.

2011 CHALLENGES: ENERGY PRICES, WEATHER

The drop in Whatcom County acreage last year was the first decline in recent years, and highlights one of the challenges locally. Land prices can make an organic farm cost prohibitive, Dennison said, and there's also the time it takes to transition a property. To become certified organic, a property needs to go through a three-year documented period of no chemicals. "You can't even have treated posts," Dennison added.

Other challenges this year may result in higher prices this summer locally. The increase price for fuel, as well as feed for organic dairies, are costs that will impact the price for consumers.

"Some people might be shocked at the price of food this summer," Dennison said.

It will also be interesting to see when products will make it to the grocery stores or the farmer's markets, given the cold spring. Dennison said the first sign of spring at Alm Hill Gardens is when asparagus is ready to be harvested. That usually takes place in the first couple weeks of April. As of last week, it still hasn't been picked.

"It's still a waiting game," Dennison said. "Some things like broccoli and cauliflower like the cold weather, but we need it to warm up and dry out before we start getting tomatoes or corn."

Forage, such as grass and silage that support organic dairy farms, took up the most Whatcom County organic land in 2009, occupying 1,805 acres. According to the study, forage was followed by vegetables (821 acres), grain (156 acres), fruit (31 acres) and herbs (20 acres).

Reach DAVE GALLAGHER at dave.gallagher@bellinghamherald.com or call 715-2269. Visit his business blog online at blogs.bellinghamherald.com/business or get updates on Twitter at twitter.com/BhamHeraldBiz.

Read more: <http://www.bellinghamherald.com/2011/05/01/1992362/2010-had-fewer-whatcom-organic.html#storylink=mirelated#ixzz1LzsCHSCm>