

SOUTHWESTERN COLORADO GROWERS

An Expansive & Dynamic Local Farmers Network

Networks are not static. They continue to evolve and change overtime, sometimes in unexpected ways. That is the case with the network of local farmers in Southwestern Colorado. We got a chance to hear about it from Mary Vozar, who has lived and grown vegetables in Montezuma County for 25 years. She is currently farming 2 acres of vegetables on Confluence Farm along with her partner, Paul Bohman. Their local network has taken many forms over the years, and continues to grow and change.



Mary Vozar and Paul Bohman pictured at Confluence Farm.

Establishing Relationships

The initial impetus for a local network came from a local organic gardener named Nancy McGill who founded an Organic Growers Club in 2005-2006. To begin with, Nancy organized meetings and potlucks once a month in the winter. The gatherings attracted many gardeners, hobbyists, and farmers. At first the group was very loose and informal. Mary says it was not “the

kind that kept minutes or had officers. None of us were interested in that.” However, there were clearly big benefits early on. According to Mary, “The meetings helped with networking between growers, and it helped CNG farmers connect with each other. There was a lot of education and knowledge sharing - that’s how I found out about CNG and how I found Fedco- and a real sense of community.”

From the connections formed during these gatherings, farmers began to collaborate in new ways. They organized bulk orders of supplies together and rotated pick-up responsibilities, saving each farmer time and money. Farmers also began to host tours in the spring and summer. Mary felt that the tours were important “opportunities to see what people were doing, how they were doing it, and really get into the nitty-gritty of it.” Later on the group began collecting membership dues to provide a modest honorarium (usually in the form of a gift card to the local nursery or garden center) for guest speakers to give presentations on topics such as composting, cover crops, herbs, or trees best-suited to their climate southwestern climate.

As the group became more organized, they took on bigger projects. For three years they published a Local Foods Directory, and offered it for free at several locations around town. The hope was that the tourism board or another organization would take over the project, but this didn’t hap-



Michele Martz representing SongHaven Farm at the Cortez Farmers Market.

pen. Though they were able to secure funds from the county tourism board for the printing, the actual development of the guide itself fell to the members of the group. Because of the tremendous time investment this required, they decided not to continue the guide.

Though their accomplishments were many, being all volunteer put a large burden on a few people. Nancy sought to encourage others to take active roles, however, when she moved away after a few years later, no one had the time or inclination to take her place as the central organizer, and the groups stopped meeting regularly.

Re-Focusing & Looking Ahead

After the Organic Growers Group stopped meeting the group split roughly between gardeners and farmers. Many of the gardeners went on to the Mesa Verde Gardeners Group, which up until then had mostly focused on flowers but has now expanded to reflect the interests of its new members.

As for the farmers, based on the relationships they had formed within the

group, some farmers began to pool their products to supply restaurant accounts. One of the members of the former Organic Growers Group, Laurie Hall, operates a well-known bistro, "The Farm" with her husband, Rusty. Much of the produce they serve comes from their own farm, Seven Meadows Farm. With her restaurant and farming experience, Laurie was in the perfect position to bridge the gap between restaurants and local producers. She was marketing salad greens from Seven Meadows Farm to other restaurants and began organizing a handful of other growers to pool their prod-

ucts to supply the restaurants as well. Each week during the growing season, the farmers email their crop availability and price list to Laurie, who then consolidates the list for the restaurant buyers. Once the orders have been placed, Laurie also coordinates the pickups and deliveries, for which she charges the farms a small fee for the gas and her time. The arrangement simplifies the process enormously for restaurants who want local food, but not the headache of dealing in small quantities from multiple vendors. It makes it

easier for the farmers too; they can be part of a group offering a greater volume and variety, and they don't have to worry about communication or deliveries. Three of the farmers also became founding members of a new initiative in the region, the Ag Roundtable, which started in the winter of 2011. The Dolores Conservation District initiated the first few meetings of the Ag Roundtable by gathering stakeholders and supplying a professional facilitator to help the community brainstorm what they need and want for the region's agricultural future. Some of the ideas that were put forward include sharing equipment, increasing mobile poultry processing capacity, and starting a farmers' cooperative. They chose to focus on the farmers' cooperative, and outlined a preliminary vision that includes a year-round retail storefront, shared storage and distribution facilities, a multi-producer CSA and coordinating wholesale accounts.

The potential benefits of such a project are similar to those of pooling products to supply local restaurants, but several times greater. The cooperative could offer a greater variety and volume for restaurants and grocery stores and a central pickup and distribution center. The shared cold storage space would also allow the large costs of infrastructure investments to be shared among growers, and help small growers reap the benefits of economies of scale.

There are several challenges though as well. The upfront cost is the primary one. Another is that the planning and operation of a cooperative would require dedicated staff, rather than farmer's volunteering their time as they can. More broadly, a cooperative of this nature would face the same challenge that local food suppliers face across the country – how to ensure consistent year round quality and availability for buyers.

As a first step, the group is conducting a farmer's cooperative feasibility study with funds provided by matching grants from one local/state organization called [LiveWell Montezuma](#), and the [Rocky Mountain Farmers Union](#) that has a regional reach. The funding is primarily to hire a part-time Coordinator. Mary feels it's an enormous benefit to have someone conducting the study that is not a farmer herself and is paid for her time, and so can dedicate the time to the project that it deserves.

There is also a beginning Farm-to-School program in the region, in which LiveWell Montezuma is also very involved ([see article in the Cortez Journal](#)). At least 10 local farms have sold items such as lettuce, tomatoes, melons, and ground beef to the school district. As part of the program, they've made posters with photos and descriptions of each farm that supplies the school to give the farmers a face and a story. There are still many issues to resolve, particularly the price that schools are able to pay for food as their budgets are squeezed as well as the capacity of school kitchens to prepare fresh produce. While the program is just in its beginning stages and many challenges remain, they are laying the foundation for what will hopefully be a lasting relationship between school food programs and local producers.

The farmers network in Southwestern Colorado has grown and changed over the years, starting with social potluck gatherings and discussion groups; expanding to farm tours, bulk orders, and a local food guide; pooling products from multiple producers; and now exploring the possibility of forming a farmer cooperative. It seems it will grow and change much more in the years to come! ■



Top: Rusty and Laurie Hall of Seven Meadows Farm. Bottom: Harvesting greenhouse lettuce at Seven Meadows.