



LAND CONSERVATION CAN HELP CREATE A SUSTAINABLE FOOD SYSTEM

BY CASEY O'LEARY

Though I was born and raised in Idaho, I did not grow up farming. I came to farming as a young adult wanting to use my life energy to make the world a better place. For the past 16 years, I have grown diverse vegetables, seeds, and poultry on small-scale, intensive farm plots. I sell my produce in my community.

I cannot afford to buy land to farm, and as a result, I have had to move a lot. I've farmed 9 plots of land in the past 16 years, moving when landowners sell or move or want to develop their land. To farm well requires secure access to land. It takes a long time to build healthy soil.

I also founded and run the Snake River Seed Cooperative, which works with nearly 50 small farmers around the Intermountain West to save seeds from over 400 varieties of food crops, which we sell at area garden centers. The challenges I face with regard to land access are similar for many of the other farmers in the Co-op, especially those who are first-generation farmers without family land.

After years of feeding hundreds of local people and growing seeds for thousands more to plant their own gardens, on land that I will never own and can build no equity or security in, I pushed pause and came to the University of Idaho McCall Field Campus (MOSS) to study other ways I might be of use in this world. As a part of my degree, I put my skillset to use in an internship with the City of McCall, helping them to advance some of the urban agriculture and community food systems portions of their comprehensive plan. I came to realize that the same thing is happening all over Idaho. Farmland is rapidly being turned into sprawling subdivisions.

When COVID hit and grocery store shelves emptied out, people saw first-hand the importance of a local food system. Local farms, including mine, were flooded with customers, shining a light on the dark reality that our communities need to grow more, not less, of their own food. But that takes land. And we're losing it at an alarming rate as Idaho vies for the dubious title of "fastest growing state in the nation." And as more people move here, the need for food to feed them grows. As Craig Utter, executive director of the Payette Land Trust says, "The markets come 20 years after the land is gone."

Getting involved with the Payette Land Trust was like a breath of fresh air for me. They are taking the long view, thinking about the health of this area in terms of decades, not years. They imagine the kind of community and landscape we want our grandchildren to inherit, and they do it by building bridges and thinking creatively, rather than factioning off into the silos that increasingly define our modern civic landscape.

And bridge building based on imaginative visioning is truly what we need if we are to succeed at being able to navigate the tumultuous waters we find ourselves in right now. To be sure, the challenges surrounding agricultural viability are not limited to land access. Agriculture in Idaho has a lot to answer for. The dams that provide irrigation water and power have blocked salmon from returning to their spawning grounds, separating Shoshone, Bannock, Paiute, and Nez Perce folks from both their ancestral lands and a cornerstone of their traditional food systems. And the farm and ranch families who hang on are doing so in a culture that does not generally value the source or quality of their food. Decades of

policies at the state and federal level have made family farming harder in a globalized world. As families sell out for development, the agricultural corridors that have helped sustain them become fractured, and it becomes harder for others to continue farming as well.

But land conservation is an immediate and urgent step we can take as we simultaneously work to create a sustainable and just food system here in Idaho. Payette Land Trust notes that houses are the last crop that will ever be planted on the land.

We don't have to know all the steps to take. We can start by helping individual landowners find viable ways of conserving their land for future generations.

Payette Land Trust has a suite of tools in its toolbox to do just that. They are our most vital resource at this crucial juncture.