

# *Tilth Producers Quarterly*

A Journal of Organic and Sustainable Agriculture

## **Farmers Growing Together**

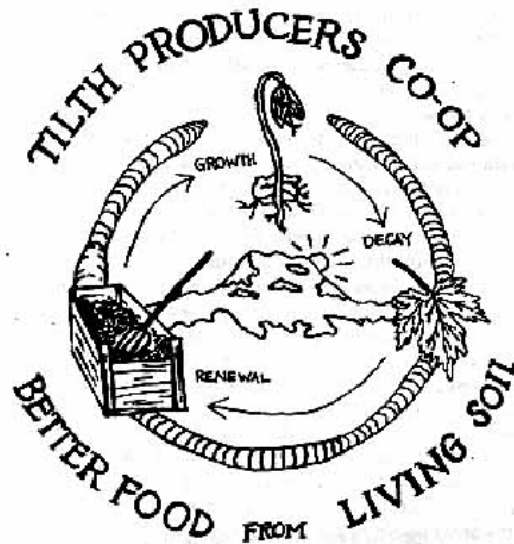
By: Unattributed

*The Tilth Newsletter*

Summer, 1977

Back in early January a group of farmers and gardeners from around the Puget Sound area gathered in Mt. Vernon to talk about the future of organic agriculture in the region. As each person spoke in turn about their needs and goals, the discussion returned again and again to the need for an organization that provided both an economic base that encouraged small-scale, organic food production, and a cultural base upon which people could work and grow together.

It took a few more meetings, but by mid-March the people involved agreed to join in forming a new Cooperative Association to assist producers in the production, processing and marketing of their crops and to promote an enduring agriculture in the Pacific Northwest. The name chosen for the new organization is the Tilth Producers Cooperative.



Evergreen Station and Hardscramble Farm in Whatcom County, Cascadian Farm in Skagit County, and Pragtree Farm in Snohomish County are the four commercial organic farms that are initially incorporating the new cooperative. All of the legal paperwork isn't completed yet, and it will probably be awhile before the organization is fully developed, but work on the idea has progressed a long way in the past six months.

All four of the farms involved had been members of the Northwest Organic Food Producers Association (NOFPA). Hardscramble had dropped out a couple of years ago, and the other three farms left NOFPA in March when it became clear that the organization was not going to be responsive to their needs. However, the decision to split with NOFPA was not an easy one, nor did it happen overnight.

For several years the Northwest Organic Food Producers Association was the only organization claiming to represent organic agriculture in the region. Always small (the number of "Certified

Growers” never exceeded 20, and there has always been a high rate of turnover), the organization’s primary function has been the administration of a very strict and expensive testing program.

There were several criticisms of NOFPA, the primary one being that the testing program is too costly and complicated, providing growers with little meaningful information and discouraging new people from joining. What’s more, the whole thrust of the certification program is consumer oriented. The organization provides few tangible benefits (aside from the right to use the NOFPA “seal of approval”) for producers themselves. And finally, NOFPA is very centralized, with control remaining in the hands of the same few people who started the organization five years ago. One farmer at the Mt. Vernon meeting summed up his feelings very bluntly, saying, “if that organization represents organic agriculture in this region, organic agriculture is really in trouble.”

Following lengthy discussion in a subsequent meeting over whether or not to break with NOFPA, it was agreed to continue working within the existing organization and try to make it more responsive. A series of reform proposals were drafted and representatives from Cascadian Farm, Evergreen Station and Pragtree Farm presented these to the NOFPA Annual Meeting in Yakima on February 19th.

The two primary reforms that the farmers were seeking were: 1) Decentralization of NOFPA into local chapters, and 2) Creation of a new Approved Grower status that would encourage greater participation in the organization. Despite some consternation, the proposals were approved by the NOFPA membership present at the meeting and it appeared that a workable compromise had been achieved. The farmers returned to their homes west of the Cascades planning to organize a local chapter of NOFPA.

It came as quite a shock a few weeks later to learn that, after everyone had returned home, there had been a special meeting of the NOFPA “Executive Committee” compromising all of the major reforms approved at the Annual Meeting. The farmers from west of the mountains got back together again on March 19th in Seattle and drafted their resignation from NOFPA. At this meeting it was also agreed to try a whole new approach, forming a cooperative of farmers working for farmers. It was later agreed to adopt “Tilth” as the name for the new producers co-op and use The Tilth Newsletter as the journal for the organization.

The goal of the Tilth Producers Cooperative will be to meet the immediate needs of small farmers. Organized under the Washington State Cooperative Association law (RCW 2432), the coop is being set up as a cooperatively owned business so that, by working together, producers can gain immediate economic benefits while contributing to the growth of the cooperative food system in the Northwest. Membership in the cooperative will be limited to commercial farmers and gardeners. It will be owned and managed by the producers themselves, and organized with county chapters.

The idea behind the co-op is to help its members with the production, harvesting, processing and marketing of their crops. Through the co-op producers would be able to pool their buying power for group purchases of inputs such as organic fertilizers (rock phosphate, seaweed, dolomite lime, etc.), machinery, fruit trees and seeds. Through their county chapters members would be able to pool their knowledge of production techniques, exchange labor and machinery, trade seeds, learn new skills, and begin working together to coordinate planting and marketing. The cooperative could also provide a means for raising the capital necessary for the cooperative purchase of production harvesting and processing machinery that could be used by many members within a county or shared between several counties. A starting point for this type of operation is the granary that has been established near Big Lake by Cascadian Farm (see the article *Building the Granary at Big Lake*).

Ultimately, one of the ways the co-op could provide very immediate and tangible support for its members would be through firm contracts for specific crops that could be grown as part of a regular rotation. Barley, rye and potatoes have been suggested as possible crops the co-op could begin with in northwest Washington. Equinox Food Exchange, which is developing a similar processing and marketing capability, has proposed lentils and dry peas as potential crops contracted for east of the Cascades.

The idea is that the co-op could help each participating member get into production for the specific crop, providing assistance with planning and with production machinery if necessary. The co-op could then contract to purchase the crop at a set price and take on the responsibility for processing and marketing. At some point the co-op could also establish a brand name for distribution of food produced by its members through the cooperative food system.

None of these ideas are really new. In the past century producers cooperatives have become a well-established way for farmers to work together for their mutual benefit, and all of the ideas suggested above are currently in practice. Farm co-ops throughout the country now do more than \$57 billion a year in business. Some have over 500,000 members and are controlled by professional managers.

The few farms involved in starting the Tilth Producers Cooperative don't imagine anything on that kind of scale. Farmers have gotten ripped off too many times by organizations that grew beyond their control. One of the primary motives in forming the new cooperative is to ensure that power remain decentralized and that members maintain control through their county chapters. Most importantly, the goal is to extend the benefits of a producers cooperative to support and promote the growth of appropriately scaled, environmentally sound agriculture in this region.

Although all of the farms involved in initiating the Tilth Producers Co-op are dedicated to organic agriculture, they feel that membership in the new organization should not be limited only to strictly organic farmers. The goal is to re-vitalize local agriculture by supporting small farmers. In order to do this the co-op must support transition farmers and work with them by sharing knowledge of biological practices and by guaranteeing a market for crops they produce.

Of the thousands of acres under cultivation in northwestern Washington, there are less than 200 acres now in commercial organic production. More land will be converted to organic production only when farmers can get credible information, when they find there is a supportive community of producers in their area, and when they are assured that the transition to environmentally sound agricultural practices can also mean their economic survival.

In that first meeting back in January, when everyone had an opportunity to talk about their immediate needs, organic certification had a very low priority. Debate over the emphasis placed on certification was one of the primary issues leading to the split with the Northwest Organic Producers Association. The approach favored for the Tilth Producers Co-op is to develop a certification program that is decentralized, voluntary, and based as much as possible on trust rather than on expensive testing. The idea is to keep costs low and encourage more people to participate. Actually coming up with a common definition of what is meant by the word "organic" and with an acceptable set of standards will be one of many tasks facing the new organization in the next few months.

When it was finally agreed to begin forming the new cooperative, it was recognized that it was going to be a long process and the people involved committed themselves to seeing it through. Articles of Incorporation were drafted and agreed upon in May. The drafting of By-Laws, setting out how the co-op will actually be structured and operate, will be a much more difficult task and will probably take several more months to complete. Ideas and feedback from other people will be welcome throughout this process. It is hoped that there will be a nucleus of an effective producers cooperative functioning by next year, providing others with a framework to build on.

Although the Tilth Producers Co-op is still in its formative stages, the individual farms involved are as busy as ever, with the peak of the season rapidly approaching. Hardscrabble Farm and Evergreen Station are producing a wide variety of organic vegetables. Pragtree Farm is expanding its vegetable sales through the Corner Green Grocery in Seattle's Pike Place Market. Cascadian Farm has expanded its production of small grains & potatoes, which they will be processing through their Big Lake granary. Although work on the cooperative will have to slow down for awhile, there is a strong sense of community growing between the farms involved, and that's the foundation upon which the co-op will build.

We'll let you know how things evolve with the co-op. Commercial growers, especially in Whatcom.

Skagit or Snohomish Counties, who are interested in the co-op are welcome to get involved. Copies of the co-op's legal documents will be available as they are drafted for review and comment. Please send a \$1 contribution to cover duplicating and mailing costs to The Tilt Newsletter, Rt. 2, Box 190-A, Arlington, WA 98223.

Although the co-op is being established to serve people for whom agriculture is their life's work, the farmers involved are aware that they represent just one aspect of the much larger community of people working toward similar goals — preservation of the land, production of healthy foods, development of self-reliant communities, etc. Country homesteaders and city gardeners, as well as workers within the cooperative food system, are all a part of the alternative agriculture movement in this region and around the country. An idea that's been proposed is the formation of an "umbrella organization" that would work along side the farmer's co-op to bring together everyone interested in promoting organic agriculture and agrarian reform. There will be a meeting at Pragtree Farm on August 27th to talk further about this idea.