

Tilth Producers Quarterly

A Journal of Organic and Sustainable Agriculture

Equinox is Born!

About a Warehouse to Facilitate the Exchange of Food Between Producer and Eater and to Guarantee a Market for the Small Farmer

By: Tom Cloud

The Tilth Newsletter

Spring, 1977



The Equinox Food Exchange, a new warehouse for the Inland Northwest, came to life in mid-January with its first co-op deliveries. However, the idea for a rural warehouse that would serve the needs of both producers and consumers has been picking up steam for some time. The idea came up at several gatherings of food system workers in Ellensburg, Star Butte and Spokane, and the new warehouse formally came together following the Barter Fair last fall. Equinox is seeking to create the economic structure necessary for the alternative food system in the Pacific Northwest. They are currently publishing the Alternative Market News (\$5 per year) , and they are working toward the following goals:

GENERAL GOALS

1. To connect regional producers to local markets.
2. To provide processing and storage facilities for grain and beans.
3. To facilitate cooperation between regional coops through networking of group buys.
4. To network regional surpluses to coastal markets.
5. To expand natural foods markets through education and helping new coops.
6. To provide employment in alternatives.
7. To support collective efforts throughout the Northwest.

Equinox Food Exchange phase I is well underway. Thursday night Anna and I sat in front of the wood heater in the warehouse waiting for the Community Produce truck to deliver our second order. We worked until (lawn shuffling thru bags of seeds, nuts and grains, stumbling over boxes of produce, dry fruit and juices, until we had 4,603 lbs of miscellaneous foodstuffs separated into neat piles marked "Pan-handle Natural Food Coop," "The Store," "Moscow," and "Pullman."

Back in front of the fire we figured up the bills while Chris and Rainbow, who had just woken up, loaded the orders into Fancy, the faithful Metro-van.

With invoices in order, various notes and reminders in numerous pockets, and a thermos of hot

soup, Rainbow and Chris headed down the road. Anna and I went to bed, leaving David alone with a messy house and two lively children. There went Friday.

Saturday morning I awoke feeling refreshed, thinking about a trip to Spokane only to realize that I had to stay by the phone waiting for the co-ops to call in their next order. Yes, phase I is well underway.

This doesn't mean that we are complacent about our operation. We have much to learn to get the goods to the coops without feeling completely doesn't We're just beginning to see how we can incorporate the volunteer help we've been offered by local coop members and neighbors. We need to become more efficient in working co-op generated surpluses into our regional network.

Walla Walla has a source of apples, apple juice and dry prunes; Pullman has a good honey source; Flathead Coop in Montana wants to provide the network with cheese. As yet we have neither the capital or facilities to inventory these goods and the coops order flow is too small to make special runs. And we need to learn how we can effectively serve small farmers and help build a system in which small producers, consumers and distributors mutually support each other.

Granary Proposed

"This brings us to phase II, the granary operation which is now still in a very nebulous stage. I have been mulling this one over, asking questions, and have come up with some thoughts which I need feedback on.

It seems to me that there are two categories of producers we should be serving. First are the "homestead" producers who produce enough for themselves and to trade with neighbors. These people usually have on-farm storage and could benefit from on-farm cleaning. A clipper cleaner and (possibly) a small disc separator mounted on a trailer and geared to be driven by a tractor PTO would do the job. The separator might not be necessary depending on how the clipper and its operator relate.

The cleaning machines and crew could be at a farmer's door within a day's notice, but there would have to be pre-harvest coordination with all of the farmers desiring to be served. Ideally the cleaning crew could plan a one to two week circuit serving one or two homesteads per day.

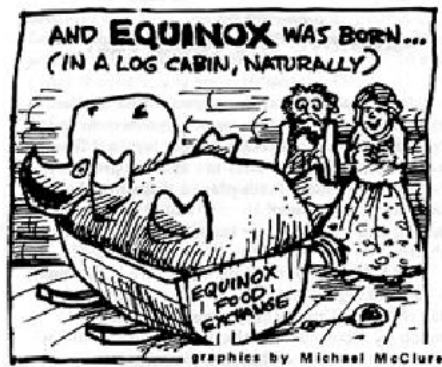
The other group of producers we should serve is the small commercial grower and farming collectives who need to generate a major part of their income with a cash crop. This task is much more complicated. To do it we must truly build an alternative system on a viable scale.

Present economic forces make it impossible to try to connect one or two farms to the five coops of our inland region. We must expect to serve the coastal warehouses in Eugene, Portland, Seattle and Vancouver, B C . To build this system we need more than cleaning and storage facilities. We need market information, a working trust between processor and warehouses, AND a commitment by consumers to support small farmers thru this system.

The Alternative Market

Perhaps I should be more specific in relating the pieces of the puzzle/plan that I have been working with. Market information is sketchy. Although Pullman, Moscow, The Store in Spokane, and North Country People's Coop have sent in commodity questionnaires, much of the data seem to be guesstimates and do not account for the growth rate these coops are experiencing. From this information it seems that folks in our inland region purchased thru coops: 3,500 lbs of soybeans, 1,280 lbs of buckwheat, 2,600 lbs of barley, 3,150 lbs of millet, 4,270 lbs of split or whole green peas, and 4,620 lbs of lentils. The only figure on wheat consumption was 10,000 thru NCPC. Figures do not include flours or rolled cereals consumed.

Such small figures would not provide an economic base for a processing facility or even one small commercial farm. Rather than try to deal with this ten tons of assorted grains, beans and legumes, I feel the warehouse should supply one or two commodities throughout the larger region. My present choice would be lentils and dry peas.



Lentils and Peas

At present there is no source of either organic lentils or organic dry peas. I understand that Cosmic Farms grew 40,000 lbs of organic lentils last year only to have them mixed in storage with non-organics because no commercial elevator would custom clean them.

From talking with Joe Barrons and other granary operators, I understand that a fanning mill and a gravity separator would clean these legumes satisfactorily. Both machines are available at a reasonable price.

From talking to small farmers I understand that lentils can be grown in the Colville and Republic areas---and there is no lack of smallholders looking for a cash crop to grow. Once again market information is lacking.

I sent a letter asking of lentil and pea sales to C .C. Grains, Starflower, and Fed-Up. So far only Fed-Up has responded. In 1975 they distributed 5, 164 lbs of lentils and almost 7,000 lbs of peas. Of course they could not commit themselves to exclusively carry organic lentils and peas from Equinox. Besides the fact that we do not have a performance record and established relations necessary to gain their trust, we also have to relate to the Canadian sense of nationalism. Some Canadians would rather buy non-organic products grown in Canada than import from American growers.

We have not heard from C.C. Grains or Starflower so I don't know if they want to or can afford to rely on Equinox, an unproven entity. Without the active support of these warehouses and an assurance of capital from coops and individuals, we certainly cannot ask farmers to grow lentils for us. Perhaps we should postpone granary plans for a year, until we have a solid working relationship with all parties involved.

A "solid working relationship" is what is needed to bring about phase III, the forging of this "alternative system" folks keep talking about. The various card decks and lists of "contact people" were the first step in giving people access to each other.

Now these people; co-op workers, warehousemen, and farmers must take some time from their individual tasks to work together on a regular basis. This the Exchange collective cannot do for you, although we have the potential to facilitate that interaction.

Equinox has been set up as a "cooperative association" and has already begun selling stock to coops, farmers, and collective workers. We have written a proposed set of by-laws defining the rights and responsibilities of all members, giving the collective workers control over daily working decisions and the general members control over policy decisions such as expansion plans for the coming year, purchase of costly pieces of equipment, making and taking of large loans, payment of dividends, etc. A Board of Trustees consisting of farmers, co-op workers and Equinox workers would meet prior to the annual membership meeting to develop a policy proposal for the members to amend, adopt or reject.

This board of trustees, made up of volunteers with one year terms, is obligated to meet only once

a year. Yet it can also function as a quarterly, or even monthly forum for inter-regional workers. Although Equinox will function as a connection for participating members in its weekly truck runs, we cannot deal with regional problems with the energy and imagination that a group of dedicated, local people can. It is up to everyone to make this a truly cooperative association.

We hope to hold the first general membership meeting sometime in the spring to ratify the by-laws. (If anyone would like to help organize this gathering it would free us to concentrate on other things). We will of course be circulating copies of the proposed by-laws before then although we have not decided where and when.

If anyone wants a copy of the by-laws now, write and tell us. If you have any comments, criticism or information pertaining to any of the plans and dreams I have mentioned (or any I have not mentioned) please write or call us at **Equinox Food Exchange, Rt 1, Box 197, Cheney, WA 99004, phone (509) 235-4489.**