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Land access for direct market food farmers in Oregon, USA

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the challenges direct market farmers face related to land access in the United States. The number of farms participating in direct market sales is growing in the U.S., though their relative number and share of the food economy is low. The benefits of direct market farms range from fresh, high quality food for urban residents and a stronger local food economy, to potentially greater environmental stewardship and enhanced community food security. However, direct market farmers face significant land access challenges related to affordability, appropriateness, availability, and security. We explore the challenge of land access through the experiences of direct market farmers in the north Willamette Valley region in Oregon. The region has a robust agricultural economy, a growing number of direct market farms, and a history of relatively strong farmland conservation influenced by statewide land use planning requirements. We collected data with a mix of methods, including a survey of direct market farmers; interviews and group discussions with farmers and other key informants; and secondary land use and parcel data. Despite Oregon's reputation as an agriculture-friendly state with strong consumer interest in local food systems, direct market farmers in the region experience land access challenges, including rising land prices relative to their incomes, a lack of appropriate land, a declining agricultural land base with competition from other buyers, and insecure leasing terms. These challenges suggest an uncertain future for direct market farming and its associated benefits. The article concludes by identifying potential strategies to enhance land access by direct market farmers, and suggesting areas for future research.

1. Introduction and background

In the past few decades, the scholarship on farmland conservation in the United States has focused mainly on the preservation of land near urban areas for agriculture, without explicit attention to the type of farmers using the land. In recent years, however, there has been growth in small-scale, direct market farming,[1] as well as scholarly attention to the positive economic, social, and environmental benefits it brings. In light of this growth, we suggest that land use planners and policy makers consider the land access needs of direct market farmers. Direct market farmers face significant land access challenges that are exacerbated by their need to locate near population centers and their low profitability.

In this paper, we examine the experiences of direct market farmers in accessing land in the north Willamette Valley region of Oregon. This region was selected due to the high prevalence of direct market farming, strong farmland conservation policies, and a growing population that sets up interesting dynamic tensions with direct market farming. We draw primarily on the experiences of direct market farmers as well as non-farmer key informants involved in some way with the direct market sector.

Our research indicates that direct market farmers experience challenges related to land affordability, appropriateness, availability, and security. We contend that Oregon's relatively strong farmland conservation planning has been mostly effective at preserving the overall agricultural land base but is not sufficient for ensuring a robust future for direct market farming in the region. Oregon's experience is an example for other regions in and outside the U.S. that are experiencing similar pressures including declining profitability for direct market farmers, rising land prices, and competition for the land.

In the rest of this first section, we provide background on direct market farms and their known benefits and challenges. We also introduce the study region. In the second section, we describe our research questions, which are (1) Is land access a barrier for direct market farmers in the North Willamette Valley? We examine this specifically in terms of affordability, appropriateness, availability, and security; and (2) What strategies can help address these barriers? We explain our mix of methods, which include a survey, interviews, and group discussions

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[1] Our use of the term "farm" in this article includes ranches, which is a type of farm focused on raising animals. There are a few exceptions where we purposefully distinguish between farms and ranches.

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along with descriptive data. In the third section, we present our results about land-related challenges for direct market farmers in this region. In the fourth section, we discuss the implications of the results both for Oregon and elsewhere in the United States.

Finally, we examine strategies that land use planners and their local government partners can undertake to increase land access for direct market farmers. While such strategies are important, larger structural changes to the capitalist food system and land market will also be needed. We conclude with recommendations for future research, including to compare the experience in this region to others and to evaluate the impact of interventions.

1.1. About direct market farms

Direct market farms are a small but growing sector of the food system (Martinez et al., 2010). Rather than selling to wholesalers or into global commodity markets, direct market producers sell directly and indirectly to local consumers who know their farm. Direct market farmers often utilize direct to consumer sales venues like pick-your-own operations, farm stands, farmers markets, and pre-arranged, subscription-based sales such as buying clubs and Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) (Martinez et al., 2010; Tippins et al., 2002). Many direct market farmers also supply products to local consumers through intermediated channels that highlight the “farm direct” nature of those products, including restaurants, grocery stores, and institutions like schools and hospitals.

In 2015, the USDA’s National Agricultural Statistics Service conducted its first nationwide Local Food Marketing Practices Survey to produce benchmark data about farms’ direct marketing practices. The survey found that more than 167,000 U.S. farms, or about 8% of all farms, produced and sold both fresh items like fruits and vegetables, as well as value-added products like meat, cheese, and wine, through direct marketing practices in 2015 (United States Department of Agriculture, 2016). Direct market sales amounted to about $8.7 billion in 2015, or about 2.2% of all farm sales recorded in the 2012 Census of Agriculture. Of these sales, 35% or $3 billion were direct-to-consumer sales, by 70% (111,000) of the direct market farms. About one quarter of those farms sold at farmers markets, almost one third at on-site farmstands, and about 4% via CSA (farm subscription). The remaining 65% or $5.7 billion in direct market sales were to retailers, institutions, or other intermediated local channels.

Direct market farms tend to be located near urban areas and close to their markets (United States Department of Agriculture, 2016). More than half (53%) of direct market farms were located in metropolitan counties or counties in metropolitan statistical areas (MSA) of one million or more residents that (1) contain the entire population of the largest principal city of the MSA, (2) are completely contained in the largest principal city of the MSA, or (3) contain at least 250,000 residents of any principal city of the MSA (definition of MSA from Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2017). Greater than 80% of farms sold all of their directly marketed food within a 100-mile radius of the farm (United States Department of Agriculture, 2016).

The preference of direct market farmers to locate near their markets in urban areas influences their land access. Notably, the cost of land near urban areas is typically higher (Ahearn and Newton, 2009; Condon et al., 2010; Lopez et al., 1988; Theobald, 2010). A number of studies have found that the most significant nonfarm factor affecting farmland values near urban areas is the demand for developable land for residential or commercial uses (Borchers et al., 2014; Livanis et al., 2006; Zhang and Nickerson, 2015). Another challenge is the development of farmland for other uses. As an example, California loses 40,000 acres of farmland annually to the spread of urban, suburban, and exurban areas (Thompson, 2009).

There may also be some benefits to farmers of proximity to urban areas. In a study of four western states Wu et al. (2011) found that some farms adapt to and benefit from their proximity to urban and suburban residences, mainly by growing more high value crops such as fresh berries, gourmet mushrooms, and heritage tomatoes, and thus generating higher net farm income compared to growing lower value (per acre) crops like corn and wheat. In New Jersey, however, Lopez et al. (1988) found that proximity to urban and suburban areas is experienced differently by different farmers. Only vegetable growers experienced improved production choices, prices, and profits. Other farmers, notably livestock growers, were negatively impacted.

1.2. The benefits of direct market farms

Research over the last fifteen years has linked direct market farms with a range of benefits. The typically mentioned benefits include enhanced rural-urban and producer-consumer connections (Hinrichs, 2000; Schnell, 2007; Feagan and Henderson, 2009); environmental benefits through ecologically sound production practices (Feenstra, 1997) and reduced carbon emissions from transportation (Pirog et al., 2001; Weber and Matthews, 2008); fresher food for urban residents (Ahearn and Newton, 2009; Brown and Miller, 2008; Schnell, 2013); positive economic outcomes for producers (Park et al., 2014; Sharma et al., 2016); economic multiplier effects for nearby or related businesses (Barney and Worth Inc., 2008; Brown and Miller, 2008; King et al., 2010); increased direct and indirect employment related to the farming operations (Brown and Miller, 2008; Swenson, 2011); open space, cultural heritage and recreation opportunities for consumers and nearby residents (Nickerson and Hellerstein, 2003); and in some cases, lower food prices for consumers (Larsen and Gilliland, 2009). The extent of empirical data supporting these findings varies, with some benefits like economic impacts having stronger evidence and others, like fresh food and food security for people with low incomes, needing further research (Lowery et al., 2016; Martinez et al., 2010). Much of the research is limited to case studies, limiting any generalized conclusions about the merits of direct market farming compared to more indirect food chains.

Analysts have also suggested that direct market farms in the US and around the world are able to contribute to community resilience in the face of threats from rising fuel prices, climate change, and disasters (Holt-Giménez and Altieri, 2012; Altieri, 2008). As an empirical example, some scholars point to how Cuba enhanced its food self-reliance and ultimately peoples’ nutritional outcomes during decades of fuel scarcity by supporting small-scale direct market farmers (Wright, 2009). Another argument in favor of direct market farming is that it offers alternatives to global capital trade systems, where a small number of actors have increasingly centralized control over key agricultural functions (De Schutter and Vanloqueren, 2011; Lyson, 2004).

While direct market farms have many benefits, researchers caution that they are not the single answer to the many economic, environmental, and social problems of the dominant food system. A critical examination of direct market farming reveals important concerns. For example, local food systems, in which direct market farms are nested, are not inherently more supportive of justice than food systems at other scales (Born and Purcell, 2006; Allen, 2008; Hinrichs, 2003). Local food is not always less carbon-intensive or more environmentally friendly (Coley et al., 2009; Weber and Matthews, 2008). Direct market farms do not necessarily offer fair working and living conditions for farmworkers, in part because they often cannot afford to do so (Allen et al., 2003). Another concern is that some consumers (mainly people of greater economic means) are more able to buy directly from local farmers than less-advantaged people (Colasanti et al., 2010; Byker et al., 2012; Alkon and McCullen, 2011; Guthman, 2008; Lowery et al., 2016). These critiques are not finite, and many direct market farms and organizations are working to overcome them, such as by subsidizing lower income people to shop at farmers markets (Dimitri et al., 2015). As noted above, some studies even show that direct market farms, via farmers markets or other outlets, offer relatively low prices and do in fact have low income customers (Larsen and Gilliland, 2009). Another