

## Happenings at the *Whole Grain Connection* meeting September 18, 2010: *Marketing Organic Grains to the Whole Grain Chef & Baker*

Farmers present were Ron Skinner, John DeRosier, Fritz Durst, Ed Sills, John Finlay, Theo Bill, Bob Adams, Deborah Walton, Sally Fox, Steve Decater, Jim Durst and Paul Mueller.

We were very glad of the attendance and interest from Milt McGiffen from *UC Riverside*, Kent Brittan, *Yolo County* extension services, and Elpidio Tijerino from *Yolo County Agricultural Department*.

Monica Spiller, from the *Whole Grain Connection*, chaired the meeting.

### **Goals for the meeting** were:

- To generate interest in the *Whole Grain Connection* as a marketing organization for a wide range of organic specialty grains and legumes, and
- To recognize, and potentially provide, local infrastructure for successfully marketing farmers' organic specialty grains to local whole grain millers, bakers and others.

Most, I hope all, of the topics that were discussed are presented below. (After-thoughts and clarification are in parenthesis.)

### ***Whole Grain Connection*, potential as a marketing organization.**

Monica Spiller

The reason for this meeting came from analyzing recent difficulties encountered in marketing *Sonora* wheat, at the mill and bakery level; beyond the farmer's market and community supported agriculture level which has been generally very successful. (Previously the *Whole Grain Connection* effort was mainly to provide organic and appropriate wheat seed. However, *Sonora* wheat especially, has been increased sufficiently to begin to supply full size bakeries and whole grain millers.) For small crops of organic specialty grains and legumes, the localized path from farm to consumer is lacking a properly functioning infrastructure for harvesting, cleaning, storage, whole grain milling, packaging and distribution. (There is value added to the crop when a farmer owns the necessary equipment, or a farmer has an equipment sharing agreement with a neighbor.)

The *California Wheat Commission* serves to develop markets for the conventional, commodity wheat farmers in the State. The commission is supported through a tax, which is collected by certified California grain handlers (such as Adam's Grain in Woodland). After visits and discussion with the *California Wheat Commission*, it was clearly seen that organic specialty wheat destined for whole wheat products, could not be properly accommodated within the conventional commodity system. In any case, the commodity wheat system provides refined flour from wheat varieties falling into narrow classes, and it is currently providing only 5% of its flour in the whole grain form. The *California Wheat Commission* has suggested that the organic specialty wheat farmers should also pay the wheat tax. However, to date there has been no insistence

that we pay, because the organic grain-handling infrastructure is lacking for small batches and for identity preserved specialty varieties.

The model of a wheat crop tax supporting the *California Wheat Commission*, suggests that a salaried staff member for the *Whole Grain Connection* could be supported by a levy (not a legally required tax) on the organic specialty grain and legume crops. (Since crops other than wheat are to be marketed by the *Whole Grain Connection* in the future, it does not seem appropriate that we should seek to be a part of the *California Wheat Commission*.)

The expansion of our marketing effort to include other grains with the wheat, such as rye, oats, barley and rice, comes from farmer and consumer interest. The inclusion of a variety of legumes results from considering that wheat (and other grain) quality, and yield, can be improved dramatically with soil quality; this ideally would result from a 3-4 year crop rotation with legumes, repeated over many years. Such a rotation could include a variety of winter legumes, co-cropping, and possibly grazing, fallow and a vegetable crop. Judiciously rotating wheat into a new field in this way would reduce weed, fungal and insect pests, as well as steadily increasing soil fertility. Simultaneously, the need for purchased fertilizer such as chicken manure would be reduced.

#### **Farmer discussion notes**

- Wide range of acreage and marketing success represented by farmers present at this meeting, from very small scale farmers market and restaurant level success, to disappointment when there seems to be great potential to supply large bakeries or even export out of state or abroad (as identity and locality preserved crop)
- Reassurance was given to a very successful, small scale farmer, who feared that the marketing efforts of an organization such as the *Whole Grain Connection* would be emphasized only for the largest scale farmers. (The intention of the *Whole Grain Connection* is to serve the farmer of organic specialty grains and legumes destined for the whole grain market, no matter what their size. Only then will we be able to serve the diversity of individual customers who would like to be able to buy organic specialty whole grains and legumes.)
- On-farm equipment needs, especially for small grain and legume cleaning and storage, are a major expense for farmers entering organic whole grain and legume specialty crop production.
- Equipment sharing for small amounts of specialty grains:  
Some progress has been made in Lake County, and neighboring Mendocino and Sonoma, under Leonard Diggs of Santa Rosa Junior College, at Shone Farm. Specialty grain cleaning in the Southern Sacramento Valley including Yolo County is partially served by farmer Ed Sills, in neighboring Sutter County. In San Luis Obispo County, John DeRosier has recently set up small scale grain cleaning, a stone mill and a commercial kitchen; he is ready to serve neighboring farmers.  
(In Humboldt County, Dan Primerano has acquired harvesting and cleaning equipment, as well as a stone mill. He is currently refurbishing these and there is a potential for sharing and expanding services with neighbor farmers.  
On the coast in Santa Cruz County: Pie Ranch ([www.pieranch.org](http://www.pieranch.org)) has a stone mill, and a neighboring farm is working on providing small scale grain cleaning services.)

- For organic specialty crops, sustainability of pricing (due to true distribution of costs and salaries and break-even or better goals) is preferred, versus sheer profitability (as seen in the commodity market due to speculative pricing, subsidies, and hope for a bonanza)
- Growth only to a goal of manageable farm capacity and perceivable market.
- Purchased fertilizers such as chicken manure are subject to large price fluctuation, and can be prohibitively expensive
- Developing a 3-4 year rotation with the wheat, following a winter legume, fallow or grazing and possibly a vegetable as well as judicious co-cropping offers the advantage of soil building without large input of expensive purchases of fertilizer. Some input needs are expected anyway, such as a sulfur amendment to optimize protein production in grains and legumes. Other anticipated benefits of crop rotation, are improved weed control, improved fungal disease control and insect control.
- Grain production for organic dairy industry is prone to large price and need fluctuation, whereas organic human food crop production is potentially an open market. Better to aim for human market with high standards and use feed market to sell lower grades.
- Range of opinions on the need to aim for high protein wheat for whole wheat products. High protein wheat (ideal is 15% in bread wheat) is reflective of fertile soil, it is usually associated with higher yields, and is appreciated by end users who gladly pay a premium for the high protein. Low protein (7-11%) wheat is currently appreciated by bakers of cookies, and cakes. However, most bakers are accustomed to refined flour from hard wheat, where the concept of low protein wheat flour is to avoid toughness of more gluten. (In the conventional commodity market, even for soft wheat made into refined flour, this attitude has prevailed. Also there is a tendency to consider cookies and cakes as a fancy extra, so reducing the sense of responsibility to provide the maximum nutritional possibility.) Some education is needed to appreciate that wheat such as *Sonora* is soft and even when the protein is 15%, this soft wheat gluten does not behave with the toughness that can be found in hard wheat flour.
- Problems in marketing arise due to the mismatch in cleanliness between farm and direct destination mill, bakery, restaurant etc. There is a need for clearing centers such as a facility for final cleaning, cold storage, nitrogen or carbon dioxide treatment, packaging and distribution that could bring an organic farmers specialty crop to the required standard of cleanliness for acceptance into a mill or bakery, etc.
- Standards were discussed in general. The organic certification was regarded as the most appropriate, but suggestions were made that standards of sustainability could be defined and used as a mark of quality on a specialty crop. (It was afterwards realized that the standard that is currently most in need of definition is that of cleanliness. This would be a standard set by the community of farmers with guidelines produced by themselves; a task appropriate for the *Whole Grain Connection*.)
- Between-farmer communication and co-operation needs improvement. This could arise with a better networking system. The *Whole Grain Connection* network could be more effective through *Facebook*. (Milt McGiffen kindly offered to help us set this up, soon.)

**New and current focus for the *Whole Grain Connection* (moderated by Milt McGiffen):**

- Establish (cleanliness) standards for organic specialty grain and legume crops at point of sale

- Assist in establishment of organic specialty crop handling infrastructure at all levels for the achievement of desired standards (of cleanliness)
- R&D specialty crops for appropriate agriculture and marketing
- Educate farmers and customers about culinary, and nutritional properties
- Seek and recognize market potential for organic specialty grains and legumes
- Continue seed sales, appropriate seed selection, and seed maintenance
- Maintain an effective network among farmers and customers through Facebook, website, and meetings

**Potential development of salaried staff for the *Whole Grain Connection***

There is an increased need for qualified staff, given the expanded focus for the *Whole Grain Connection*; this was recognized by Kent Brittan. Kent also understands the potential advantages in pursuing sustainability on organic farms, of adopting a soil building rotation of grains and legumes.

The meeting ended with thanks to all those in attendance and especially to Milt and Kent for their interest and assistance.

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