

In reaction to the brutal dog attack on the goat herd at K-Jo Farm, I asked the VIGA membership how we should respond as the primary agriculture organization on Vashon Island. Many growers and non-growers alike state unequivocally that VIGA contribute immediately to the K-Jo Donation Fund at US Bank. Others emphasized the glaring need for an acknowledged enforceable Island policy regarding loose dogs. “Go to the authorities, ask for help”, these voices said. Some declared such attacks a tragic but inevitable fact of farming. Notable to me were those who remained silent. Is it even possible to have a unified message from such clear, disparate opinions?

Sifting through the responses, I was struck by the straightforward eloquence of Matt Lawrence, VIGA Board Member and employee at Sea Breeze Farm: “Over the winter Sea Breeze lost many chickens due to the high wind and rain storms that hit Vashon in January. Those chickens, [and the dollars they represent] can never be recouped. Every day a hawk or an eagle swoops one or two of our ducklings or chicks away. Sometimes we find the remains, sometimes we do not - \$20 a day? I am sure other farmers can report loss of equal or greater numbers as well. It’s the non-verbal agreement we make as people who run livestock on pasture; the reward is superior, and so is the cost.”

Most farms on Vashon indeed accept this risk. Because our predominant model is small, even micro scale farming, the cost to build industrial standard infrastructure to house animals efficiently isn’t feasible. Such industrial methods for food production are actually why many of us began farming for ourselves in the first place. For example, commercial egg producers pack hens four to a cage, with row upon row of wire cages stacked floor to ceiling in windowless warehouses. To prevent these stressed birds from harming each other, chicks are debeaked when only days old. Like Confined Animal Feeding Operations for hogs and cattle, these hens remain their whole lives under such conditions.

Those cannot be happy animals. I believe their product cannot contain the same nutrition or taste as a chicken who spends its life scratching around in the sunshine, eating bugs and seeds, doing the things a chicken ought to do, rather than being treated as a food-in, food-out machine. Industrial methods eliminate risk from hawk and dog and weather, but at too high a cost.

Kurt Timmermeister of Kurtwood Farms loves to be known as a Vashon Farmer but hates to be treated as a charity case. “I don’t want people to buy my food because they want to support a good cause. I’m subject to the same business rules as other enterprises, as bigger farms. I want you to choose my products because they are the very best available.” In addition to coming from truly happy pastured cows, Kurtwood Dairy products spend less time in storage, less time in transportation, and no time at all with a middleman. Kurt is individually responsible for the quality every step from cow to customer. “If I get sick, or break a leg,” he states, “there are only two, maybe three people on the Island who could step in to continue the twice-a-day, every day operation.”

This is another risk corporate producers have eliminated by a network of industrial plants collectively processing vast quantities of milk. A single farm's misfortune does not impact the supply nor the profit margin for shareholders. In the same vein, all of us who spend hours weeding rather than applying poisons to our soil assume a greater risk to the bottom-line. Our effort is spread thinner, our yield may be less productive but our soil will live to grow another crop. Irrigation and groundwater do not carry our toxins on to our neighbors nor does the appearance of our gardens supersede the concern for the health of insects and wild birds and children who visit there.

Vashon's unique network of small-scale, direct-marketing farms absolutely offer a unified message. We are risk-takers because we believe the product is far superior. We are small-scale because quality of life, for the farmer and for the animals, is far superior. We direct market to our community because the health benefits of our products for your family is as important as our profit margins. In short, we are strong people building a strong community.

You can Support Vashon Farms by knowing where your food comes from, what a real farm looks like, how eggs, meat, and produce are grown and what the risks are for both production and consumption. Help us build a strong community by watching for loose dogs. They all have the potential to devastate a small farm. Report such dogs immediately to the authorities and to those farms in your neighborhood. In short, unify our message as a diverse, powerful community: Together we will thrive.