

Comox Valley Organics Cooperative

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Producer Co-op

Context:

- Italy enshrines co-ops in their constitution. Everything is a co-op! They are big enough to supply Costco! How do they keep from imploding? They have institutions to support their co-ops. E.g. in economic downturn they allowed workers to use their EI to start worker co-ops. E.g. They provide co-op development funds which can pay for middle management if they need it (e.g. to do quality control). Arzeena got to visit Italy on a trip sponsored by VanCity.
- Why did the Tree Fruit Co-op in BC fail? No quality control, no member education in language that people could understand, producers sold their worst fruit to the co-op so their reputation for quality fell.
- Ethos of self-sufficiency on the west coast. But this is not the way farming is supposed to be! It's supposed to be people helping each other e.g. barn raisings, potlucks, etc. Stress of being Jack and Jills of all trades. "Just YouTube it." Never meant to be that way.
- Neil and Arzeena have two degrees in agriculture each! But this didn't help them to figure out how to farm. But they had the resources to buy land (2010) and invest in infrastructure including second hand. Started Amara Farm in Merville.
- See table by Heather Pritchard of the problems co-ops are trying to solve

Why form a producer co-op?:

- Marketing veg is hard. Crop failure. Timing. Result was coming to market with piddly amounts. Customers want to see abundance. So it made sense to work together with other farmers.
- Comox Farmers Market prohibits you from selling product that is not yours.. So had to form a co-op in order to combine produce at one table.
- The Comox Farmers Market runs 50 days of the year, sometimes three times a week! By combining efforts they could take turns.
- Can also form a worker cooperative and farm cooperatively (need to track hours)

Prior History with producer co-op:

- Amara formed their first co-op in 2015 (Merville Organics). With farmers who liked each other Combined their meetings with food.
- Started a CSA. But they are a pain in the butt to organize! CSA had 150 shares! Helpful to have various sources of product. Rotated pick-up spots Good mid-week income. Once they hit 100 shares they realized they could hire a farm manager. Tripled sales.
- Built brand and system of distribution.
- Possible to do restaurant sales e.g. Shelter Restaurant in Tofino requires 100 bunches of kale per week! When this is divided by 5, it means only 20 bunches per week. Much more doable.

Comox Valley Organics:

- Member farms are Amara Farm, Carraic Farm, Everfields Farm, and Minwaadizi Farm
- Collectively they grow 47 things at the height of the season
- Sell the bulk of their produce through the Comox Valley Farmer's Market
- Each farm is responsible for seed to harvest of their crops.

- The farms do planning together and pay for the rest of the services together - wash station, cooler, packaging.
- Produce is funneled to different markets.
- 20% of sales revenue is put back into the co-op to pay for sales, marketing, bookkeeper, delivery driver
- Need a protocol for bringing on new members

Admin:

- Use a giant Google spreadsheet of what is available
- Hired manager who decides where produce goes
- Generates invoices.
- Willing to share this spreadsheet.
- Software is available to do this but it is expensive. They are on a shoestring so use Google.
- Get paid every 2 weeks.
- The surplus at the end of the season is distributed based on % of sales.

Benefits of producer co-op:

- Share the workload - marketing, distribution, sales
- Share the costs of infrastructure - wash station, cooler, van, greenhouse, land
- Able to produce more and create abundance and choice that customers want
- Learning from other farmers
- Mutual support
- Can do other things together e.g. form a Farmer's Institute to do farmer education and be a direct voice to the Dept of Agriculture

Drawbacks of producer co-op:

- Decisions take a long time, everyone needs to approve everything
- LOTS of meetings
- Power imbalance - requires continuous check-ins with different sized farms
- Lots of paperwork
- People = personalities and feelings, requires good communication skills e.g. Non-Violent Communication training is helpful.
- Difficult to share resources e.g. truck,, tools. Need rules and need to be militant about them. Or you price it e.g. include cost of maintenance. Need to be able to cover your costs.
- Can fail when it feels like you're putting in more than you are getting back..

How to find people to form a producer co-op?

- Figure out who are the people who actually show up to meetings
- "Date" for one year before making a commitment to each other
- Implement a membership share from the beginning to share costs - \$100 each?
- New members pay more to compensate original members for their initial work - \$500 each?