



AFT's 2008  
Steward of the  
Land—Nash Huber  
of Nash's Organic  
Produce—helps  
Washington's  
Olympic  
Peninsula feed  
itself from healthy  
local food grown  
on protected  
farmland.

# Produce Pioneer

ARTICLE AND PHOTOGRAPHS BY STEVE WERBLOW

The night before his 67th birthday, Nash Huber sits at the kitchen table with his farm management team—a crew of 20- and-30-somethings in Carhartt work gear and knit caps—having a lively discussion about how to encourage cabbage and kale to send up the flowering shoots that have become a hot spring commodity called raab.

Talk turns to what Sequim, Washington, used to be like before it became a bastion of high-value real estate, a refuge at the very tip of Washington's Olympic Peninsula where newcomers have flocked to raise their families in a small-town setting or retire by the shore, where only the sea stands between town and British Columbia to the north and Japan to the west. They talk about what Sequim—pronounced "Squim"—would have been like if Nash Huber hadn't made a commitment to the rich farm ground to help protect the area's agricultural lands from development.

At an age when many farmers are looking at trading in the farm for some rest and relaxation, Huber is ex-



panding his organic farming operation, taking aspiring young farmers under his wing and raising money to protect and revitalize the threatened agricultural heritage of Sequim and Clallam County. For his leadership and tireless work on farmland protection and local food issues, Nash Huber is American Farmland Trust's 2008 Steward of the Land.

### Leading by Example

"Nash is a valuable member of our community as an agricultural leader who sets examples for fellow producers and inspires people to become better stewards of the land they manage," says Joe Holtrop, district manager of the Clallam Conservation District, where Huber serves as a director.

In a way, Huber is both a pioneer and a throwback to the farming of his childhood near Vandalia, Illinois. "I came from a real diversified operation," he says. "On 150 acres, we had pigs, chickens, horses, beef cows and grass." Huber came of age as area farms intensified their operations,



LEFT: Nash Huber and his wife Patty McManus Huber; ABOVE: Irrigated vegetable fields at Nash's Organic Produce

sharpening their focus on corn and soybeans and expanding to survive the ups and downs of a cash grain economy. "I saw the writing on the wall," he says. "There wasn't going to be a place for me."

Instead, he took a degree in chemistry and worked in food product development for an agribusiness company, finding uses for the steady flow of Midwestern grain and oilseeds flowing from the growing farms. He even started graduate work in chemistry, but found himself drawn out of the lab and toward Washington's Olympic Peninsula.

"This was as far as I could get from the Midwest and still stay dry," he chuckles. "When I saw this valley, I knew. I just knew this was the place I would farm."

Huber rented a 35-acre farm and began raising hay, serving the community of small dairies that dotted the hillsides in the shadow of the snow-capped Olympic Range. He later moved north into the delta of the Dungeness River to start growing vegetables in the rich soil deposited by eons of seasonal floodwaters. The area's mild climate and moderate rainfall are ideal for the array of parsnips, rutabagas, turnips, cabbages, Brussels sprouts and other cole crops—as well as the farm's own variety of carrots from home-grown seed—that became the foundation of Nash's Organic Produce.

"We're one of the few places north of Salinas and Watsonville [California] where you can ship produce

12 months a year," Huber says. "We've got orders going out of here almost daily year-round."

Traffic has increased around Nash's farm over the years. In just seven seasons, the operation expanded from 25 acres to 350 acres. More than 150 acres per year are planted to vegetables—more than 100 types and varieties—and cole crop seeds. Huber added pigs and laying hens, which eat the grain that he plants to rest the land between vegetable crops; the pigs also root happily through old vegetable beds, fertilizing as they go. This year, he's teamed up with a poultry grower to produce organic chicken and turkey on the farm.

Nash's Organic Produce is a fixture at 12 local markets spanning 10 locations as far away as Seattle (2.5 hours to the east), natural food stores and groceries, and at Huber's own farm store north of Sequim. The farm also sells more than 100 community-supported agriculture (CSA) shares, which allow customers to buy into the farm at planting time and reap weekly shares of the harvest.

### Offer a Vision

Even when Sequim was still a sleepy farm-and-forestry town, developers were starting to see the potential to market its mild, maritime climate and its unique position



A farmers' market in Seattle's Ballard neighborhood

## Farming in Sequim

Sequim, Washington, sits at the very top of the Olympic Peninsula, a range of mountains that forms the western side of Puget Sound. The rugged mountains capture the warm, wet air blowing in from the Pacific Ocean, creating a lush temperate rainforest. But they are so effective at catching the rain that little moisture actually reaches Sequim, which receives 10 to 12 inches of rain per year. And the ocean moderates the temperature year-round, creating surprisingly mild winters for an area on the northwest tip of the United States.

The moderate rainfall, mild winters, steady snowmelt running down the Dungeness River and deep glacial soils allow farmers to produce crops year-round, and to nurture cole crops such as Brussels sprouts and cabbages over the winter to allow them to produce seed the following year. That makes Sequim an important seed-producing area, as well as a rich region for producing vegetables all year long.





Nash Huber is working to transition the farm to his young management team.

in the rain shadow of the Olympic Range, which shields the town from rain.

In 1994, Huber and his friend Fred Hudson sued Clallam County for not complying with Washington's new Growth Management Act, which requires counties to inventory their natural resources and develop plans to protect them. The lawsuits stalled as local farmland gave way to development.

The pair of plaintiffs then teamed up with neighbors and the local county extension agent and tried a positive spin: a Harvest Festival celebrating local farms. It was a huge success and became the model for similar festivals that have become an annual tradition in 11 area counties.

"It was becoming painfully obvious to me that legal action wasn't going to do the trick," Huber confesses. "You have to lead rather than push. You've got to offer vision."

Huber has spent the past two decades sharing that vision.

"He helps people understand that the area's strong farming heritage can continue to be viable," says Robbie Mantoosh, communications chairman for the

North Olympic Land Trust. "He also enables them to appreciate indirect values of his farming operations, such as wildlife habitat, scenic vistas and open space."

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### Motivated Managers

Huber's young managers share his vision. All are committed to teaching their neighbors—new and old—the importance of the local farm base.

"A couple of years ago, they were labeling farmland as 'unused potential,' developable land," says Josh Gloor, a Sequim native. "That led people not to value the open space."

Sam McCullough, another native of the area, adds, "You can't really blame [new residents] for wanting something better for their families. It *is* beautiful up here. But the long-term health and sustainability of the community was greatly overlooked."

McCullough reels off a list of relatives and friends who have moved out of the area, seeking real small-town life away from growing subdivisions and retirement dream homes. With those refugees went some of Sequim's history, its collective memory, part of its labor

## Saving Farms on the Olympic Peninsula

The isolated farmland at the top of the Olympic Peninsula—2.5 hours west of Seattle by ferry or road and 200 miles north of the vegetable farms of Oregon's Willamette Valley—are a unique resource. Several land trusts have sprung up to protect the area's farming legacy and local production capacity.



Nash Huber was one of the founders of the PCC Farmland Trust, formed by Seattle-based PCC Natural Markets when the 97-acre Delta Farm at the heart of his operation went up for sale. The trust currently holds conservation easements on 435 acres of farmland, including land hundreds of miles to the east. Huber serves on the advisory board.

Huber's wife, Patty McManus, sits on the board of the North Olympic Land Trust, which seeks out easements on farm and forest land that offers habitat and resource protection. Huber farms 80 acres of land protected by the trust.

Huber helped launch the nonprofit Friends of the Fields in 2000 to protect local farms with conservation easements, promote local food, and boost the northern Peninsula's five farmers' markets. "Nobody at Friends of the Fields says, 'Let's stop development,'" notes McManus, who sits on the board. "We're saying, 'Let's preserve some farms.'"

The group matched a \$300,000 grant from the state of Washington to buy the development rights on the raw-milk dairy across the road from the Delta Farm; they're currently raising funds to purchase an easement on Finn Hall Farm, a 50-acre parcel of prime soil.

"I'd like to utilize the publicity we get with this American Farmland Trust award to build some momentum for our fund-raising for the Finn Hall Farm easement," says Huber. "We're a brand we've brought to Seattle—now we want to use it to raise money in Seattle to buy the easement and keep this land in production."

force, he notes. "The community has lost an asset," McCullough says sadly.

He's devoted to holding the line on the land that he and the rest of Huber's team farm, as well as neighboring ranches. Without local farmland, there is no local food. And farmland is a hedge against the ecological consequences of development. "Our farm is twice the size of the town of Dungeness," McCullough notes. "The ecological aspect of the footprint of this farm is enormous."

Gloor, McCullough, Armstrong and the rest of the Nash's Organic Produce management team have gone door-to-door supporting a levy to raise funds to purchase conservation easements on local farmland (which failed after stout resistance by the developer community, but raised awareness of farmland conservation among voters). They sit on the boards of several of the area's farmers' markets; they participate on the Clallam Landworks Cooperative, spearhead a farm-to-cafeteria program, help organize harvest and farm celebrations, and started the "Clallam Grown!" education and marketing campaign to promote local food.

"We're invested in our land, our community, our neighbors," says Gloor. "We're trying to nurture our land to feed ourselves and feed our community."



## Passion for People

That management team—which also includes Cheryl Sarno, Jennifer Evenroth and Scott Chichester—is in line to own the farm someday. With no children interested in farming, Huber and his wife Patty McManus are working with a local lawyer to craft a multi-year transition plan that offers shares in the operation to the managers in a sweat-equity arrangement.

Huber sees a strong tie between the farmland he's trying to save and the young farmers he's trying to en-

courage. "Without land, you can't offer anybody a future in agriculture," he says. "If they don't have security in the land base, how can they have security in agriculture?"

Nash's Organic Produce is a perfect illustration of his point. "My first 15 years or longer, I was just doing it on faith, year to year," Huber says.

When a choice 97-acre farm went up for sale in 1999—and was sure to fall to a developer—Huber caught the ear of a customer at PCC Natural Markets, a Seattle food co-operative with a strong commitment to local, organic

## Pioneers in Conservation

The Dungeness River, which carries snowmelt from the towering Olympic Mountains to the rich delta above Sequim, Washington, has been over-allocated for generations: there are more claims on the river's water than the river can support. When farmers drew heavily on the river to irrigate crops through dry summers, there was precious little water for the six species of salmon that call the river home.

To keep more water in the river without locking farmers in court battles over water rights, local farmers teamed up with area tribes, the local conservation district, and state environmental agencies. First, they vowed to always leave at least 80 cubic feet per second of flow in the river so levels wouldn't drop too low for fish. To keep their promise without starving farms of vital irrigation water, the local irrigation association began a \$5.5 million project to construct a reservoir and pipe 18 miles of irrigation ditches, eliminating the leakage and seepage that kept water from both the river and the farms.

The Clallam Conservation District—which Nash Huber serves as a director—helped engineer and accomplish the project. The district also helped farmers improve 47 miles of riparian habitat, clear up five impediments to fish passage on the Dungeness, plant 1,200 feet of hedge-row to protect the river and implement best management practices to conserve water and protect the river from farm runoff.

Parts of the project have been funded by Washington's Pioneers in Conservation program, which has supported 23 projects in the Puget Sound area to protect both salmon and local farmers. Funded by the Washington State Conservation Commission and the National Fish and Wildlife Federation and supported by American Farmland Trust, the Pioneers in Conservation program grants up to \$75,000 to qualifying projects that improve rivers or riparian habitat.

"The program offers grants to projects that help the farm business as well as the environment—specifically



Huber's farm is certified "salmon safe."

salmon," explains Don Stuart, director of AFT's Pacific Northwest office in Seattle, Washington. "These are projects that not only will help recover the salmon, but that benefit the farm operation at the same time."

Huber and his neighbors have saved more than 3,000 acre-feet of irrigation water per year, and the gravity-pressurized pipeline has minimized pumping costs. Stuart says the work along the Dungeness is a great example of what Pioneers in Conservation set out to accomplish.

"You look at these projects and they're all sort of heartwarming," Stuart says. "Not only is saving fish not inconsistent with agriculture, agriculture can help the fish. And if you don't save agriculture, it might be difficult to save the fish."



## Nash's Organic Production

Nash Huber took his chemistry degree and put it to work building an organic farm, using natural fertilizers, compost and cover crops to build his soil. Instead of herbicides, he chops up weeds with tillage equipment or burns them with tractor-mounted propane torches. Huber prefers to try to let beneficial insects prey on pests before looking for an organic insecticide. His pigs don't get protective antibiotics—they pick up their own natural protection by rooting in the soil, which is rich in natural protectants.

Huber's philosophy revolves around integrated pest management, producing the healthiest possible crops and animals so that they are most likely to fend off pests and diseases, and then tipping the scales when necessary to favor natural controls. That requires an intimate knowledge of local ecosystems.

"Among the predatory, beneficial insects that eat aphids, typically the adult phase is a nectar feeder and the larva is an insect feeder," explains Scott Chichester, the farm's vegetable production manager. Though the farm has purchased lacewings and other aphid-eating insects and released them in the field, Chichester is focusing now on nurturing local predators.

"More and more I'm trying to build the native population without doing releases," Chichester says. "We plant a lot of flowers like alyssum and let crops like cilantro and dill go to the flower stage to allow the adults to feed on nectar and lay their eggs here."

agriculture. The co-op formed the PCC Farmland Trust, bought the farm, raised money to pay off the mortgage, and signed a 30-year lease with Huber. That long-term commitment is especially vital to a farmer dedicated to improving the property with stream-protecting buffers and building the soil through years of crop rotation. It also was a cornerstone in building a bulwark against the erosion of farms in the rich piece of the delta around the old Dungeness schoolhouse.

"If they'd put houses on this place, the key would have been turned," says Huber. The dairy across the road, the pasture on the other side of the fence—all would have been likely to fall like dominoes.

Today, most of the land farmed by Nash's Organic Produce is in long-term leases and covered by conservation easements. With high land prices and tight margins in farming, Huber and McManus own very little of the 350 acres they farm—just 10 acres and a packing shed, along with an adjacent two-acre property that includes an old creamery building that now serves as a home

for Armstrong and her husband, a meeting space for the team, and the future home of the farm store and a community center. Even the current store is on rented property.

Affordable housing for farm employees is a priority for Huber in a market that skyrocketed as luxury homes popped up across the landscape. Two managers live in houses operated by the farm, and others have invested in adjacent property—not an easy feat on a farm wage.

## Valuing the Land

Huber believes that Sequim residents are starting to see the value of buying local food, especially as rising fuel prices make it more expensive to ship food from faraway farms.

"Local food is going to be a pretty important thing over the next couple of years," he predicts. "People are starting to put it together how important food is to communities. What I see in people—in the community, at the farmers' market, at the store—is that they're looking for

something,” Huber adds. “I think it’s a connection, a way to ground themselves, to help them understand their lives and how they connect to things.”

Huber can relate. Two cups of coffee into the morning of his 67th birthday, he leans against a fence and watches a bald eagle coast over a field on the Delta Farm, which he helped to save from development. “I love being here this morning,” he says with a broad smile. “I love working with these young people. I enjoy taking time off and riding my bike, but providing food—that’s what grounds me.”

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Nash's Farm Store is a fixture in the community for local food.