

## Rural Roots: What Does Our Name Say?

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**M**ost who have lived in eastern Washington, Oregon, or throughout Idaho for even a few years recognize that some areas in the Inland Northwest are growing by leaps and bounds, while others face decline or new social and economic barriers. Many folks continue to move to this region for the same reasons people stay — to savor and enjoy the wild and open feel of this country. Ironically though, our expanded presence can also affect the qualities that attracted us in the first place, such as a sense of connection we want to feel to the land and to each other. In short, our sense of rootedness to landscapes and lifestyles that sustain rural life in the Inland Northwest is also impacted by our very love for and use of these places and resources.

As newer leaders within the organization, we want to offer our perspectives on the name of the organization we're both proud to serve: **Rural Roots**. To us, the name represents two key things. First, the name reflects the deep and robust connection between *where we live* and *how we live*. Second, the name **Rural Roots** serves as a call to action to retain our roots — the legacies, the heritage, & the seeds — by doing something for them and the rural landscapes in which those roots plunge. The cry, rural roots, guides us to engage in the work necessary to create and retain sustainable food-producing and consuming practices. It serves as a beacon to support those who have staked their livelihoods on ensuring that the food we eat is local, healthy, and increasingly sustainable.

The goals, mission, and vision of **Rural Roots** (page 23) embrace and celebrate the direct and vital link between our identities, the places we call home, the practices of sustainability we enact, and the collective qualities of our lives. As we watch rapid conversions of productive ranches and fertile farms to shopping malls, tract housing, golf courses, and new highways, we experience not only the loss of

biodiversity in the region, but we also put our connection to the land that feeds us in greater jeopardy.

The changes surrounding us translate to community impacts when we see a favorite farm sold to developers or cattle guards covered with indistinguishable malls and box-stores. Amidst that change, **Rural Roots** seeks to retain the qualities of production that are integrally tied to communities. For instance, the awareness that people of the Inland Northwest want to be involved with and have some intimate knowledge of the farms and ranches that are the chosen origins of their food continues to increase dramatically.

The desire to be able to trust the source of one's supper propels a variety of opportunities for those with the know-how and land to satisfy that interest. For example, while a city like Boise now touts multiple farmers' markets that operate throughout the week, not just on Saturday, almost all of those markets are hungry for local growers to provide them with adequate amounts of produce to sell to a burgeoning population. In less populated areas as well, increasing numbers of families seek out and join subscription-based, farm-share CSAs wherein they pay farmers a fee to grow their vegetables. The demand for the relationships between eaters and farmers is now so strong that many CSAs sell out of their shares months before the first spinach leaves are snipped, and in some cases, even planted. Lots of folks are also "buying" a fruit tree each year at a local orchard where they can take their kids for an enjoyable afternoon of picking fresh fruit straight from "their" tree.

Others are hunting for naturally or organically grown local lamb, beef, and pork or free-range poultry raised by a rancher that they can get to know and trust. For many such ranchers, finding eaters for their livestock is not the issue; finding enough organically certified feed, or that which meets an operator's standards can be most

challenging. There are many parents who want their kids to pet a real cow or see a real turkey strut his stuff on a genuine farm. They can't always find farms nearby enough to give their kids these experiences. Thus, the name **Rural Roots** symbolizes these attachments that bring together supply and demand, people and place, food and health, and the past and future.

Although the population growth of the Inland Northwest region overall strains the rural character of some areas, many who are part of the increasing urbanization of our open spaces also want to support viable, sustainable, and healthy local food systems. **Rural Roots** supports that desire and is working to turn those challenges into opportunities by educating eaters and growers about the value and necessity of the interconnections between a rural Inland Northwest landscape and support for those who work sustainable farms and market gardens that put quality local food on our tables.

Education, though, is not enough. We must all take up the challenges of food stewardship to act by examining our own practices. We can shop at local markets and support locally-owned restaurants that support local growers. These actions also embody what we expect you to feel when someone says '**Rural Roots**'. We can demand that our elected officials do everything in their power to encourage rural spaces in urbanizing places. We can encourage others to learn more about sustainability and to act on their knowledge.

The challenge of our era is also an opportunity as we find ways to integrate our rural roots with our increasing urbanization. Meeting this challenge will require us to listen, to teach, and to learn from each other, and then to act. In short, we must stay mindful of our own rural roots by taking courage and energy from the beauty in the land that still surrounds us, and in the potential of those relationships yet to be built between the people and the land. Join us in digging in deeper.