

## A Board Member Shares Her Perspective on the Rural Roots/IOA Merger

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Imagine it. You're selling at the farmers' market. Your table, once overflowing with lettuces, tomatoes, herbs, flowers, is now reduced to two heads of lettuce, a lonely bok choy, three bunches of summer savory, and a wispy bunch of flowers you now claim is a table decoration and not for sale. There are no customers in sight. There is still an hour left in the market. An hour we fondly call the "Wine and Whine Hour", assuming there is a wine seller with samples in the market. And what do we do in that hour? Of course we whine about this and that, but we talk to our fellow farmers. We think of great ideas that we'll work on together over the winter.

I have a theory which I shall call, for lack of better, "Janie's Wave Theory". My theory suggests that great ideas from farmers start out as small discussions out in the ocean of thought (at the market), build over the winter into a great wave, crescendo into "we could really do this" in the late spring and crash onto the beach of reality (right close to the first planting date in the spring). Those great ideas, like the tiny bit of water at your feet, were hardly waves of success. We are cursed by the irony of knowing what to do, but not having the time to do it.

But we have come far in many areas. The Idaho Organic Alliance, earlier known as the Idaho Organic Producers Association helped create organic standards and build a strong program in the state. The IOA sponsored wildly-successful farm tours and provided grower education.

Those successes, waves of success if you will, that helped farmers and helped educate consumers, were exhausting. The Idaho Organic Alliance found itself as part of a growing organic movement, but with little time, energy, or funding to address many opportunities. We realized there are two important components to powerful farmer organization: the farmers themselves and staff members who are not

farmers, folks who are not seduced by the siren call of seed packets and warm soil.

The Idaho Organic Alliance merger with Rural Roots was not easy for some. We all tend to view change to organizations in which we have much time and energy investment to be an affront. We think something will be lost, something will be compromised. I would suggest that we have taken two organizations with much rich history and are building upon their past successes.

I saw the merger as offering two immediate advantages to Idaho farmers and consumers. First, an organization, able to represent the whole of Idaho (and even more broadly, the Inland Northwest Region), was formed. There are plenty of issues around agriculture that are set by state laws or policies. Idaho Organic Alliance members, being close to Boise, have testified before the legislature and visited state offices to get organic legislation enacted. Now Rural Roots has that same opportunity. Also, it's easier to sell an idea if you can say it will benefit folks across the state, instead of just one area. A group that represents growers in all regions can speak with one loud voice to state officials.

The second advantage is the opportunity for growers around the state to benefit from the close relationship of Rural Roots and the University of Idaho. Southern Idaho farmers who direct market or who are organic have often felt the U of I was not helpful to them. Now that I know the programs that Rural Roots and U of I Small Farm Team are working on, I am very encouraged.

I still like my wave theory to understand why many of the great ideas from farmers don't get very far, or if they do, it takes forever. But I really like knowing that those ideas can be presented to a new Rural Roots. Together we can move these great ideas higher on the beach covering more ground, reaching more people and helping more farmers stay on the land.