

**Workshop Title:** Considerations for Cooperation: Cooperative Farming Models

**Speaker(s) & their title(s):** Alyson Chisholm, *Windy Hill Farm*

### **Executive Summary**

Alyson Chisholm outlines her experiences working cooperatively, founding and working in co-ops both in British Columbia and New Brunswick. She shares what techniques have worked for her in these co-ops and the basics of starting and running a co-op.

### **Detailed Notes:**

#### **Coops**

- Defining cooperation: working together for the same end
- Principles of your coop: refer to slide 3
- In a corporation you have more say the more shares you own but in a coop you can only have one share and one vote.
- Buying coops often prioritize buying from other coops.
- There are for-profit and not-for-profit coops.

#### **Benefits**

- You will learn many skills such as meeting facilitation and conflict resolution when working in a co-op (refer to slide 5 for many more benefits)

#### **Challenges**

- Cooperation is hard work.
- You have to give over control and think of decisions that are best for the group.

#### **Glen Valley Farm**

- Alyson was a founding member of Glen Valley Farm which was bought by a group in the Fraser Valley. The members formed a co-op that allowed them to buy the land. The coop is now 15 years old.

#### **How does it continue to work?**

- The co-op owns the land and takes care of all the day-to-day maintenance
- The co-op also leases the land to shareholders who are all farmers.
- One of the rules of the co-op is the requirement that the members must be organic farmers.
- The co-op is managed by several committees.
- All farmers run their own businesses and can do what they want within the parameters of their lease.
- The members share markets, facilities and equipment.
- They use consensus decision-making; 3 card system: green, yellow and red
- In meetings they use these cards to communicate. The green card is for a question, yellow card moves the process along faster and red card stops the discussion whether it is over time or off topic.
- The cards are also used for decisions Green: I agree, Yellow: I will support but am not fully in favour, Red: I do not agree but will work for a better solution.
- Alyson says that in her time in the co-op the red card was used very rarely and the yellow one occasionally.

#### **Cooperative Farming Benefits**

- Able to share equipment and they all had different products that they marketed together.
- One requirement was to write a proposal before you could make certain changes to your lease, which helps you consider the impact of what you're doing.

#### Equipment sharing/bulk buying

- They stored some equipment together and the co-op rented equipment to members based on cost of equipment.
- Good records are the key to trust and transparency: quantitative records are important.

#### Cooperative Marketing

- Alyson was also a member of Langley Organic Growers, which was a group of five farmers that sold together and covered five markets a week on three different days.
- The farm that was going to the market would get priority on some items to take to the market as a payment for going to the market.
- They sold the produce wholesale and charged a 50% mark up which went to salaries, marketing, scales, signs etc.
- The surplus from the mark-up would go to market fees for the next year, donations to other groups, and the rest would be distributed among members.
- After moving from British Columbia to New Brunswick Alyson helped form Organic Corner at Dieppe Market – a co-op between Ferme Alva and Windy Hill: the first year they sold together both of their incomes increased.
- The next year they added a third farm with herbs which stayed for one year, they left and then a salad green farm came for a season.
- They are now incorporated as a co-op, similar to Langley model.
- They take 20% from everyone's sales no matter if you're selling at the market or not.
- This year has been an experiment. Now there are four farms which are members. Three CSA farms and the salad greens farm.
- They were able to start early at the market and have stayed at the market later in the year.

#### Really Local Harvest

- Really Local Harvest is a co-op of farms in South East New Brunswick.
- The co-op is 10 years old.
- It is a co-op of organic and conventional farms together which is quite unusual.

#### Incorporation

- Alyson compares working together to dating and incorporating to getting married.
- There is a legal process involved in incorporation.

#### Tips

- Start small!!
- Keep good records.
- The more diverse you are the more work is involved.
- The people who share the most meals together form the closest bonds.
- Take time to form personal bonds with other members.
- Coops take a lot of work and if it benefits you than it is okay that it takes all this work.

#### Questions

Does the coop buy produce from farmers?

- No, everything they sell at the market is on consignment: you only get paid for what you sell.

How do you manage produce standards?

- Important to work with farmers who you can communicate with. We are working to standardize bunch size between the different farms selling at the co-op market stand.