

Farms that help the wild stay healthy

What follows is a KBOO radio interview with Jo Ann Baumgartner of the Wild Farm Alliance, that was then transcribed and published in Oregon Tilt's "In Good Tilt" newsletter. The Alliance was created by a national group of wild-lands proponents and ecological farming advocates who share a common concern for the land and all its inhabitants. Also in the discussion is Tim Franklin, the ranch manager of the Yale Creek Ranch in southern Oregon. Tim will give perspective on what it's like to be a rancher promoting biodiversity.

KBOO – We are talking about how organic farmers and ranchers can move into the un-stereotypical role as advocates for the conservation, restoration and preservation of biodiversity. There's a booklet, about 30 pages long, called *Biodiversity Conservation: An Organic Farmers Guide*. Jo Ann, tell us what the *Guide* is and why it was created.

JO ANN – The *Guide* was created because the National Organic Program (NOP) rule requires biodiversity conservation. The *Guide* goes through about 50 different practices that farmers can do to comply with the rule. A few years ago the Independent Organic Inspector's Association, a major group that trains organic inspectors, came to us and said, "Did you realize that the organic rule actually requires biodiversity conservation, and could we help them train inspectors?" So we put together a committee of organic farmers, certifiers and conservationists and came up with this guide that you can download from our web site; wildfarmalliance.org. That committee of experts helped us develop a set of biodiversity inspection questions that we took to the national guiding body, the National Organic Standards Board and they amended their model

organic inspection forms, to include biodiversity into the inspection process.

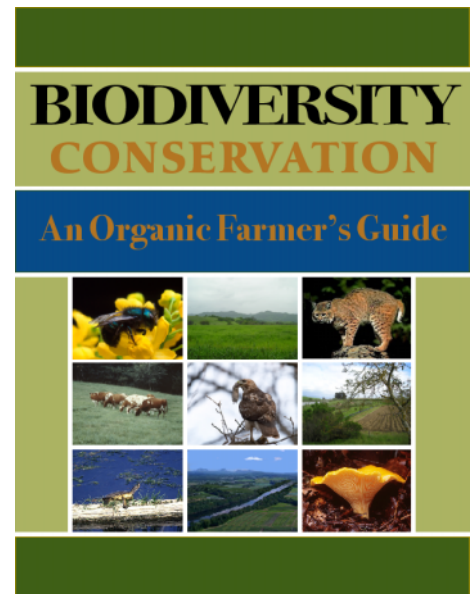
KBOO – And that was the change this past August.

JO ANN – Yes, and so the *Guide* is a supporting document for organic farmers to comply with the rule. But it can be used by any farmer, it's just that it does focus in on areas where the organic rule has been applied and enforced.

KBOO – What are some of the key concepts or practices that a farmer or rancher would apply if they wanted to comply with aspects of the NOP related to this? It sounds like what you are talking about is a step beyond what is mandated.

JO ANN – Biodiversity conservation is mandated in the rule. There always have been some farmers that have been doing a really good job and some that just didn't know what they were doing wrong and what they could do better. This guide will help bring the whole level of knowledge up in the organic industry. As far as practices; there is everything from farmers who have put up bird boxes to attract rodent eating birds, to providing habitat in farms in the form of hedgerows. Farmers supporting predatory insects and pollinators, to restoring riverine habitat that keeps our waters clean. The riverine habitats also serve as wildlife movement corridors.

Some farmers are even taking out marginal land, such as low, wet areas that were wetland and restoring it back to its natural state. This helps with flood protection and ground water recharge. These are just a few of the many practices.



KBOO – Tim is the ranch manager for the Yale Creek Ranch located at the confluence of Yale creek and the Little Applegate River. Tim, you have 85 acres of woodlands, pasture and gardens. You raise grass-fed cattle and sheep. You have chickens, you produce flowers, perennials for landscaping, fresh vegetables and you also supply some seed companies. Which is it more, a farm or a ranch?

TIM – Acreage-wise it's more of a ranch. There's more pasture land than cropland.

KBOO – How many cattle and how many sheep do you raise?

TIM – We have a small herd of cattle, about 40 head and we run about 40 or so sheep in the summer. We have a smaller flock that we keep over the winter.

KBOO – So you are implementing these practices down on the ranch?

TIM – Many of them, we are.

Promoting biodiversity on the farm

KBOO – Most of people’s criticisms of grazing on public land address the riparian zone, or the wet area around streams. What are you doing to promote or conserve biodiversity on the riparian zones of your ranch?

TIM – We have fenced all the streamside areas where we have active pastures and we limit or exclude livestock access to those areas, unless we are using livestock to help control some of the exotic vegetation. Beyond that perimeter fencing, in our pasture we have cross fenced to create a rotational grazing system, where we move livestock in a system that roughly mimics how wildlife or herd animals move through the environment. They graze and move on, allowing vegetation to re-grow. This maintains good ground cover and high pasture diversity. It helps build soil in the pasture so you don’t have erosion or runoff issues. This is on top of having a band of vegetation between the pastures and the streams to protect them from any type of water pollution.

KBOO – What are the invasive species that you have down there?

TIM – We have the full sweep, like any place that’s been farmed for over a hundred years. The major ones are the yellow star thistle and blackberries along the stream. The way we are working the blackberries is a combination of cutting them back and in some cases, grazing them back, then establishing natives that

are competitive. There’s a constant maintenance requirement over time, but it will be manageable once we get it knocked back a ways. Grazing management and mowing is helping us get a handle on the thistle.

KBOO – This publication, *Biodiversity Conservation; An Organic Farmers Guide*.

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Jo Ann, looking at your web site it seems like there are similar but not as developed other publications in this vein.

JO ANN – We do have the *Wild Farm Alliance Briefing Papers* that address these issues in some depth. We have one on agriculture cropping patterns, one on grazing, one specifically on water, another on connectivity. Also, we have one on private and public support farmers can access, one on local versus global control of food and one on farming using agricultural easements.

KBOO – You just used a term, “Connectivity.” Tell us more about this word. It has a lot of different meanings based on context

JO ANN – It’s wildlife movement corridors or linkage, usually a river corridor, but it can be one piece of land

connected to another piece of land by a strip, or a connection. Ideally farmers in their watersheds work with others to ensure connections are there so wildlife can pass safely through.

KBOO – There’s many different sections in this guide Jo Ann; Whole farm diversity, uncultivated farm diversity, two sections connected to “when there’s livestock,” doing wild crafting and gathering from nature. Why would a farmer or rancher be interested in promoting biodiversity off their land?

JO ANN – The farm is part of a bigger landscape. If you have a crop that needs pollination, there are native pollinators moving from wild habitat into your farm and in some type of crops doing amazing amounts of pollination. Overall, this is worth \$40 billion dollars of orchard, row crop and pasture business in the US. There are other types of species moving through like barn owls and bats that eat pests, catch rodents and other insectivorous birds that are passing through. There’s also water coming through the land. Most farmers want to be good stewards and don’t want to have a lot of sediment and any kind of fertilizer runoff from their farm impacting the next farm down below, or having bad neighbors above them. All these different watershed connections make the farm part of a bigger ecosystem.

Working with, not against nature

KBOO – Tim, let's bring a little of what Jo Ann was talking about and see how it relates down on Yale Creek Ranch. Do you do any biodiversity conservation promotion off your 85 acres but in the immediately surrounding area?

TIM – We work with neighbors and local watershed restoration groups such as the Natural Resource Conservation Service. We work with them on some streamside restoration projects. Our neighbors above and below us on the river have recently fenced livestock out of the stream and are working to restore native vegetation communities, similar to what we are doing. We work with them on water conservation projects as well – on managing our irrigation withdrawals and diversions, to conserve to the extent that we keep as much water as we can in the stream. Those are a couple of examples.

KBOO – Do you have any idea what species you are having a positive aspect for?

TIM – The ones in the streams here are steelhead, resident cutthroat and rainbow trout and other fish like the sculpin and lamprey. Just downstream from us is the upstream limit of chinook and coho salmon. We live in a mix of pasture and oak woodlands as well as croplands that are incredibly rich in biodiversity. Just up slope in more conifer dominated woodlands you have species like the spotted owl.

KBOO – A common assumption related to livestock ranching, is that ranchers kill potential threats of predators. Wolves, bear, cougar for example. Is that anything

that you have to deal with in your end of the state?

TIM – Sure we have got plenty of predators here: bear and mountain lions, coyotes, bobcats. Golden eagles take our chickens.

KBOO – Do you ever kill any of the predators?

TIM – We have to get some credit for the amount of feed we have donated to the local wildlife.

Here's what we do. We have our pastures divided up. We have smaller pocket pastures in closer to the barn and outbuildings, areas where we can keep an eye on our livestock. That ends up being where we concentrate our sheep and chicken flocks. We had them out in the far pasture farther away from the activity on the farm, but we were losing too many chickens to the local golden eagle.

The chicken and the sheep rotate in to where we can keep an eye on them and they both go in at night. The cattle herd is large enough where predators tend not to be as much of a problem and we are out and active in those pastures. Our presence helps as well. Those are some of the strategies that we use.

KBOO – Jo Ann, this publication is fairly new. Do all people pursuing organic certification have to show they are doing this, or is it “Ok, you're organically certified, and here's this stuff you're supposed to be doing and report on once in a while?”

JO ANN – Every site is different and the rule requires biodiversity conservation.

Obviously, in some places the biodiversity is just about extinct. Farmers are not expected to turn it back into some wildland, but to do what they can. For instance, a farmer in the Central Valley of California, which in places can be very sterile, is putting in a hedgerow. But in any case, this guide is just now getting sent out to all the 10,000 or so organic farmers in the country and a similar guide, created specifically for certifiers, is being sent out to all the organic certifiers in the country. It's new to a lot of farmers. The head of the USDA's NOP has said he is going to be incorporating biodiversity into the training he does with certification agencies.

So it is in the rule and it's just a matter of people getting up to speed.

Oregon Tilth collaborated in WEA's biodiversity committee with other organic certifiers, farmers and conservationists giving input to clarity and usefulness of the Guide. Tilth also sent a joint letter with WEA when the guides were mailed to the growers.

This interview originally aired on KBOO radio on the People Rise Up program by host/producer Andrew Geller. People Rise Up explores issues related to inter-human and species fairness, preservation of the biosphere and inclusive and participatory democratic self-organization. The show airs on Wednesdays, 10-10:30 a.m. at 90.7 fm., and can be accessed online at www.kboo.fm.



