

Farm Fresh in the Copper Valley

Farming in Alaska is intriguing. When one thinks of farming, they don't always think of Alaska, but before the 1940s, Alaska produced much of its own food. As Alaska became urbanized, much of the food could be shipped from outside at lower costs and support of Alaskan agriculture diminished.

Today, agriculture producers are located throughout the Copper Valley, with a concentration in the Kenny Lake area, and new farm land being developed in the Willow Creek area south of Copper Center.

Farming is hard regardless of location, but farming in the Copper Valley is harder than many other places. Distance to the major population areas, markets, and supplies combined with people's need to save money makes it difficult. In addition, short growing seasons and long, cold winters make it very challenging.

Due to a lack of support for agriculture, opening new farm land is difficult and very expensive. These challenges make it difficult for farmers to make their living off of agriculture. For many, this is the ultimate goal, but most have to work either seasonally or part or full time in addition to the long days on the farm.

The Copper Valley farmers are here because they love the lifestyle and the satisfaction of producing good quality products for themselves and their neighbors. A lot of the products in the Copper Valley are for subsistence in which they are consumed at home, but many great products are sold in the Copper Valley. There is the largest hog farmer in Alaska as well as beef producers, egg producers, milk producers, vegetable producers, and hay growers. Local businesses carry some of these local products, but the majority is sold directly to

individuals.

Aside from local businesses, the most common way to sell these locally grown products is by word of mouth. Some farmers promote their products on the internet and many participate in a variety of farmer's markets around the region throughout the summer months. There are many venues for farmers to sell their products, including a bi-weekly market in Copper Center and every Thursday in Valdez. These markets will continue through September.

Another way to get these farm fresh goods is through a Community Supported Agriculture program or CSA. With this type of program,

and Valdez. Currently, Benjamin Family Farm and Feed is in the process of starting their own CSA, offering beef, pork, and possibly meat chickens. They hope this will be operational in 2009.

Aside from collaborating on the farmer's markets, our local farmers are very independent. There is a local chapter of the Farm Bureau, which primarily acts as an advocate on political issues that may affect the farmers.

They can join the local chapter for a small fee. In addition, there is the Kenny Lake Soil and Water Conservation District in partnership with USDA/Natural Resource

Conservation Service which provides technical assistance to help agricultural producers develop good farming practices.

In 1986, the agriculture industry in Alaska created the 'Alaska Grown' program to highlight products grown in Alaska. It is designed to increase consumer awareness and consumption of Alaska agricultural products. Several farmers in the Copper Valley have adopted the 'Alaska Grown' label to promote their products.

Farmers can also adopt the title of 'Certified Naturally Grown' or 'Organic'. Both of these titles tell consumers that their products are grown without the use of synthetic fertilizers and pest controls and are processed, packaged, and transported without the use of artificial preservatives, additives, or synthetic pesticides and herbicides.

People choose to become farmers for many different reasons. Some farm just for their own home use, while others are second or third generation farmers who moved to the area and saw potential.

Matt Lorenz (For the Love of Gardening) just wanted to do something on his own. He wanted



Above: Display of Alaskan Grown radishes at the Farmer's Market in Valdez.

people purchase produce in advance and the farmer either delivers it or the consumer picks it up on a predetermined schedule. CSAs are very beneficial not only for the farmer, but the consumer. The farmer receives advanced money and knows what he is planting is already sold while the consumer has a pre-set guarantee that they will be receiving locally grown, natural, healthy food items.

To the best of our knowledge, local farmer Matt Lorenz, has the only CSA in the Copper Valley. He offers most types of vegetables and works with residents in the Copper Valley



Above: This steer provides milk to Benjamin Family Farms customers. Above Right: Matt Lorenz at the Valdez farmer's market. Middle Right: Everett collects fresh eggs. Bottom Right: Benjamin Family Farms pig.



to work for himself. He started with a personal garden and decided to expand four years ago. He now sells most types of vegetables, operates the cooperative known as the Kenny Lake Harvest Farmers Market and the local Community Supported Agriculture program.

Everett Benjamin of Benjamin Family Farm and Feed just continues to do what he grew up doing. Everett is a second generation Kenny Lake farmer. In the late 1950s, his Father homesteaded and farmed the property where the farm exists today. He grew up feeding the animals, bailing hay, and discing the fields. He and his wife Kerry now run the farm and pass similar chores down to his three children; Everett, Mikhail, and Mariah. When asked how he chooses what products to raise/grow, he says simply, "We do what we've always done. We also think of the things we know how to raise and try to develop new markets." Everett says it's a difficult life, with hard work, long days, and little money but at the end of the day it is extremely satisfying to be able to provide healthy, chemical free meats, eggs, milk and produce to the people in the Copper Basin and surrounding areas.

Due to large amounts of land, rich soils, and the ability to grow many things, the Copper Valley is rich with home grown goodness. Many are unaware, but farming is a viable structure and can use local support.

While locally farmed products may be slightly more expensive than similar products that are shipped in, they are 'worth it' by all accounts. Not only are they better for you, but they taste better as well. Customers are paying for quality and keeping dollars in the local economy. That's good news for everyone!

CVEA appreciates the work that local farmers do to support the needs of CVEA members and to contribute to the local economy of the communities we serve.

For more information on farmers markets in the Copper Valley, visit www.coppervalley.org, or email cvda@cvinternet.net. The farmers market in Valdez is located outside Rogue's Garden each Thursday at noon.

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