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## Whatcom Farm Incubator Project - Brief Overview

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The Whatcom Farm Incubator (WFIP) is a land-based project dedicated to the promotion and growth of local, sustainable and socially responsible farm businesses. The farmers of the WFIP will learn from each other, generate healthy food and draw together diverse farming communities while protecting and nurturing the land. At WFIP we believe that food connects us to each other and to the land.

### Why a WFIP?

As Whatcom County faces the challenges of a growing future the need to maintain a safe, sustainable and economically viable agricultural foundation becomes increasingly clear. As our County's population grows, so do the economic and social challenges of building and maintaining our agricultural roots. Sustainable Connections and Kulshan Community Land Trust (KulshanCLT) have teamed up to create a land-based farm incubator project in Whatcom County.

Through reviewing the surveys of current and past participants in Sustainable Connections [Food to Bank On \(FTBO\)](#) program and in speaking directly with those farmers and others with interests in agriculture, it is clear that the most common barriers to success for beginning farmers are: 1) Access to affordable and available organic farmland, 2) Access to affordable infrastructure like tractors, greenhouses, irrigation equipment, etc. 3) Opportunity to spend more time in proximity with peers to share ideas and learn production, marketing and other best practices from one another.

A Whatcom Farm Incubator Project (WFIP) has great potential to expand opportunities and markets for local farmers while raising awareness for protection of agricultural lands. This project will strengthen community among farmers and work to raise awareness for food justice and food shed issues.

The WFIP is modeled after other programs around the country that not only support and help economically viable and sustainable farm based enterprises but also work with communities on issues of food and social justice and natural resource protection. Some of the models we have turned to for ideas, guidance and advice include:

- Intervale- Burlington, VT. ([www.intervale.org](http://www.intervale.org))
- FarmStart- Guelph, Ontario ([www.farmstart.ca](http://www.farmstart.ca))
- ALBA (Agricultural and Land-Based Training Association)- Salinas, CA ([www.albafarmers.org](http://www.albafarmers.org))

### What is a Farm Incubator?

Farm Incubators are land-based educational, training and support programs for beginning farmers who wish to start their own agricultural enterprises but may lack the initial

capital outlay and/or experience to farm on their own. Components of an Incubator often include: access to land and farm infrastructure at a reasonable rate; mentorships with experienced farmers; educational opportunities; financial planning support including loan counseling and grant application assistance; individualized business consulting; and marketing and distribution cooperatives. Incubators also serve to educate the public about the importance of agricultural preservation and local food production and consumption. [ALBA](#) in California and the [Intervale Center](#) in VT are examples of well-established and successful farm incubators. Click [here](#) for a list of links to other incubator projects happening across the country and related resources.

### **Who, Where and When?**

In October 2007, Sustainable Connections and [Kulshan Community Land Trust](#) (KulshanCLT) prepared a [Phase 1 Report](#) on the feasibility of creating a Farm Incubator in Whatcom County. Sustainable Connections' experience working with beginning farmers through the Food To Bank On program and KulshanCLT's expertise in acquiring property, along with their commitment to preserving affordable access to land, makes these two organizations uniquely suited to implement a Farm Incubator in Whatcom County. In Jan/Feb 2008, an [advisory committee](#) was formed and in September 2008 Sustainable Connections hired an Americorps VISTA to work just over half time on developing the WFIP.

To date we have been in contact with other incubator projects to gather information on their models, leasing options, programs and budgets. A multitude of different funding sources have also been investigated, with many solid leads and community support indicating that we would, with some legwork and targeted fundraising, be able to fund the project.

The major work to be done for the WFIP to move forward is finding the project a home. Ideally, the WFIP would sit on a minimum of 100 acres with a current water right and would have farm buildings that could work for a variety of uses. The possibility of on-site housing and an administrative office is also a consideration. The site should also be easily accessible and relatively close to either Bellingham or Ferndale.

Looking to the future, the WFIP partners envision offering technical assistance and customized business development assistance to all farmers, not just those involved in the program, as well as taking steps to increase market access for Whatcom County agricultural products, such as a site for consolidation and distribution to larger customers or for value-added food production.

We welcome your feedback! We are seeking input, ideas, tips and referrals (particularly towards available farmland) from the community. If you have something you would like to share please contact Eva Agudelo or Derek Long at Sustainable Connections ([eva@sconnect.org](mailto:eva@sconnect.org), or [derek@sconnect.org](mailto:derek@sconnect.org), 360-647-7093) or Ann Russell at KulshanCLT ([annrussell@kclt.org](mailto:annrussell@kclt.org), 360-671-5600).