

Appendix 6: Formal Farmer Networks – Survey and Interview Data

Attempting to coordinate multi-farm cooperation and even out variability in producers' access to it, were a handful of formal farmer networks. In quantitative surveys, most respondents cited such networks, like the nonprofit Alternative Energy Resources Organization (AERO) or Montana Organic Association (MOA) as "moderate" sources of support and accountability, with remaining responses scattered across the spectrum from 1 to 5. While such networks were key for several producers, their importance for any given household depended on how long they had been farming, their level of access to like-minded people outside of such groups, and their ability to attend group meetings. Formal groups were most important for producers who were either early on in their transition, insufficiently connected to other members of their moral economy, or both. For these producers, formal groups provided a means of establishing a community - often to replace the one they had lost when abandoning conventional production.

AERO – a “citizen’s renewable energy organization” founded in 1974 as a corollary to environmental activism against coal development – was the most frequently cited of these supportive groups. “AERO’s been hugely important,” said a young couple that had been farming for four years. “Just when we start to think that maybe what we’re doing isn’t really worth it, the sustainable ag community does something or says something. Like last year, we got that AERO award, which was just a huge boost to our resolve.” AERO had served a similar support role for a previous generation, for whom it had also been a technical assistance provider and even business incubator. Beginning in the 1980s, AERO membership – many of them farmers - had begun to focus squarely on sustainable agriculture as a key vehicle for orienting the region’s economy away from fossil fuels.

"AERO had that community of like-minded folks," a sixty-three year-old producer recalled. "There was kind of a handful, half a dozen to a dozen [agroecological] farmers in the early eighties We were all AERO members so that was our community and we started visiting with what we wanted to do and what we wanted to accomplish. I mean, all of the founders of [the VBSC at the center of this study], AERO's what brought us together. And then, at that time, AERO was the clearinghouse for sustainable agriculture information as well as the community and the philosophical side of it. AERO was the one who basically took up that challenge of transitioning agriculture to be a renewable resource."

The Montana Organic Association was also mentioned by several growers as a source of support, and one farmer/rancher had been deeply engaged with Holistic Management International.

These contemporary groups, however, were merely the latest in a long line of civil society organizations that had been key to supporting these farmers' success. Ten producers were current or former members of the Farmer's Union, an association

founded in 1902 in response to increasing concentration in grain markets. Under the motto “cooperation, legislation, education,” the Farmer’s Union had successfully organized producer cooperatives all over the American West, utilizing a grassroots strategy that folded the union’s social change agenda into the everyday fabric of rural life. VBSC farmers recalled going to Farmer’s Union camps as children and attending meetings with their parents, which were “a real community thing.” “I’m a Farmer’s Union member,” one recently retired VBSC producer told me. “I go to the county convention and participate in the policy work. My folks were Farmer’s Union. I can remember when the Farmer’s Union had really active locals. There was one at the rural school where I went to school. I remember getting together and we’d all get around the piano and sing camp songs.” Other producers had joined their parents at National Farmer’s Organizations marches in the mid-seventies, advocating for a price floor for agricultural commodities. “That’s another nice thing about organic,” one of these producers told me, showing me the protest signs he had saved in his garage from the NFO marches he had attended with his father. “You get a little more fairness.”

Many VBSC producers narrated a similar generational trajectory: grandparents who had been part of early wheat pools and cooperatives, parents who had bolted from increasingly stodgy farm organizations mid-century to join the Farmer’s Union and National Farmer’s Organization, and friends in their own generation who had drifted from these groups to join the Alternative Energy Resources Organization and early certification efforts in the 1980s. Now, they noted, young farmers were starting new groups. Nearly everyone I spoke to felt that the core values animating such efforts had been successfully passed down, irrespective of the fate of specific organizations.

One older VBSC grower, for whom the Farmer’s Union had been so foundational to his outlook that he “couldn’t separate church and my parents and the Farmer’s Union in my mind,” commented that other groups had in many ways supplanted the function of his beloved organization, whose vest he still wore to nearly every function. “It seemed like AERO replaced the Farmer’s Union to me, with the new idealistic people thinking and coming up with new ideas,” he said. “The Farmer’s Union had that when I was kid, at least I thought so Now they’re in the middle.” Rather than try to reform the Farmer’s Union or apologize for its evolution, this producer had enthusiastically joined the board of AERO. He had recently been given a Lifetime of Service Award by the Montana Organic Association, which clearly recognized the man’s participation in all three groups as part of a common community effort.