

Conservation Showcase

A kind and gentle approach to produce production Farm family cares for workers, natural resources

At Inaba Produce Farms, taking care of the workforce is a top priority.

It's those workers who tend the fields, harvest and pack the produce for distribution, and fly from bloom-to-bloom to pollinate the plants. Some of the workers have two legs, and some have wings, but all are critical to the operation's success.

To help ensure that all of his workers stay happy, Lon Inaba, Operations Manager for the farm, has spent a good deal of time, resources and effort providing proper habitat. For his two-legged workers, the Inaba family built, with a loan from the then Farmers Home Administration, on-site facilities to house up to 40 people.

To keep his winged workers happy and productive, the Inabas have established native vegetation in hedgerows to provide suitable habitat for both native pollinators and beneficial insects that help protect the crops from the destructive variety.

In addition, Mr. Inaba is careful to use only the most gentle of herbicides and pesticides in his conventional farming operation – and he delays spraying when

ever it may pose a threat to the honey bees that do the heavy pollination lifting throughout his fields.



Lon Inaba is a third-generation Yakima Valley farmer and operations manager for Inaba Produce Farms, a 1500-acre produce farm near Wapato, Washington.

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too, and we depend on them.”

-Lon Inaba, Landowner

The farming operation produces a wide variety of specialty crops including squash, asparagus, sweet corn, onions, peppers, eggplant, cantaloupe, watermelon and other fresh produce. About a third of the 1500-acre site near Wapato, Washington is certified organic. One thousand acres of land are leased from the Yakama Tribe.

“I want to keep my bee guy happy,” says Mr. Inaba. “Our bees are our workers, too, and we depend on them.”



Sub-surface irrigation used in this cantaloupe field not only saves water and reduces erosion, but it allows workers continuous access to the fields.

Mr. Inaba appreciates the hard work and all of the hard workers required to make a living off the land. That appreciation goes back three generations to 1907 when his grandfather, Shukichi, broke out 120 acres of leased Tribal land – transforming it from sagebrush to cropland.

“Japanese Americans were not very popular back then,” Mr. Inaba says. “There was a law that said people of Japanese ancestry could not become [naturalized] citizens so they could not own land in Washington. That’s why my grandfather came to the reservation – to lease some land.”

Only immigrants who couldn’t afford, or who were prohibited from purchasing land, were willing to make such a substantial labor investment in leased land. Because hard work and tenacity were the only resources available to many of these immigrants, they invested anyway.

However, in the late 1920s, a more restrictive law was enacted prohibiting Japanese immigrants from not just owning land, but from leasing it, as well.

“As a result, my grandfather lost everything he had put into the land, and the family had to move around as sharecroppers,” Mr. Inaba says.

Undaunted, the Inabas eventually leased land again when their American-born – and therefore natural-born citizen – family members became old enough to enter into legal contracts. They began again and continued to prosper and grow through the 1920s and 1930s.

But on December 7, 1941, the nation of Japan bombed the United States naval fleet at Pearl Harbor.

Shortly thereafter, the Inabas and other Japanese American citizens were gathered up and transported to an internment camp at Heart Mountain, Wyoming. Their modest prosperity was to be forfeited again.

“The day after they had to go to the internment camp, the man who took over the farm started harvesting their early crops,” Mr. Inaba says. “It was pretty rough.”

After the war, the family returned, and in 1954, Mr. Inaba’s father, Ken, bought the farm’s first 40 acres. They began – yet again – and through the years, the Inabas have added more land and crop varieties, as well as storage and packing facilities.

An agricultural engineering graduate, Mr. Inaba took a six-month leave of absence from his job at the Hanford nuclear site to return to the farm to help his family build some coolers in 1982.

He’s been working at the farm ever since.

Like it depends on its labor force, Inaba Produce Farms also relies on natural resources to grow its vast variety of crops. Not surprisingly, the Inabas have made significant investments in the systems and practices that save soil and water resources.

“Even though we rent ground, we treat it like we own it,” Mr. Inaba says.

In the 1980s, through USDA’s Agricultural Conservation Program, the Inabas upgraded their irrigation systems with pipelines and settling ponds. During the drought years, they added return-flow pumps to the settling ponds to re-use irrigation tail water. A few years later, they began installing sub-surface drip irrigation systems.



In a field of asparagus at Inaba Produce Farms, NRCS Tribal Liaison John George and Operations Manager Lon Inaba review the farm’s conservation plan.

More recently, the Inabas have received additional assistance through the Natural Resources Conservation Service’s (NRCS) Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP).

“Without EQIP,” he says, “we would not have been able to convert many of our fields to drip irrigation, especially because we lease much of our land.”

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—Chris Johnson, NRCS District Conservationist

NRCS District Conservationist Chris Johnson says the conversion to sub-surface drip irrigation is more than a third more efficient than rill irrigation. “The drip system also significantly reduces erosion and provides more equitable distribution of the water throughout the fields,” he says.

Over the years, NRCS’ Johnson says, the Inabas have converted hundreds of acres of land from rill irrigation to drip systems. “It’s been a joy to work with Lon and his family on irrigation and pest management issues,” he says. “They are remarkable stewards and positive voices for conservation.”

In addition to reducing erosion through the improved irrigation systems, Mr. Inaba says he’s able to preserve the organic matter he’s worked so hard to build. In the lean water years, the more efficient drip systems can make the difference between a hearty crop and no crop at all. “In the end,” Mr. Inaba says, “if you want to be successful, you have to conserve the soil and water.”

Like all of his workers who make the production and distribution of their produce possible, the Inabas know that soil and water resources are essential to ensure the future of their operation.

“You can’t keep farming till it’s all gone,” Mr. Inaba says. “We have 150 workers, good people, who depend on us for their livelihood. So we hope to keep things going – and to be able to make a living for all of our families.”

*Written and photographed by:
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