

PROGRESS REPORT(S) ON THE LABOR COOP(S)

* Responses to the request that people write about their *
* ideas on labor exchange were not great. This is another *
* one of those very busy times of the year for RIA members. *
* However, we welcome submissions for the next newsletter. *
* They may include descriptions of jobs undertaken, sugges- *
* tions for other types of groups, questions, philosophical *
* ponderings, high contrast black-and-white photographs, *
* drawings, poems...you get the idea--anything!! We'd all *
* enjoy hearing from you. *

I have been asked to write about the labor co-ops organized this Spring. My perspective is unique since I have been involved with both of the groups that currently exist.

At the organizational meeting in March the gathering soon divided into two groups: one group interested in meeting every week and the other wanting to meet every other weekend. The weekly group was simply committed to working at one another's places on a regular basis, and its members are not working out. Most of the people in the semi-monthly group came with a specific task in mind to be done by the group. By the end of that meeting the latter group had a schedule of work days through the end of June and a fairly good idea of the work to be done on each date.

With that accomplished, we went to see how the weekly group was progressing. They were talking about cutting fence posts. That interested me because Ginger and I were planning to put up some electric fence this spring and would need posts. So, while my long term intentions are to be involved with the bi-weekly group, cutting fence posts got me involved with the weekly group. Because I have had the time, I have continued to work with the weekly group.

The weekly group generally tries to get started around 9 A.M. and finish around 4. This schedule allows people with livestock time to do their chores. People bring their own lunches. Besides cutting fence posts, the weekly group has cut firewood, done timber stand improvement, and electric and barbed wire fencing. Lunch is a time to visit and also discuss matters that directly relate to the work group, such as next week's work: where, what day and tools we will need to bring. Each person's hours are kept track of so everyone knows where s/he stands. The weekly group has averaged five or six people each work day.

The bi-weekly group has about seven households and meets every other weekend, either on Saturday or Sunday, depending on the members having the work day. Starting time at the first three work days was around 10 A.M. These work days tend to be family affairs. Children play nearby while the adults work. The number of people working at any time varies, depending how many adults from each household attend and how much attention the children need. Lunch may be bring-your-own or potluck and specified by the person(s) having the work day. There is also a break at some point. No

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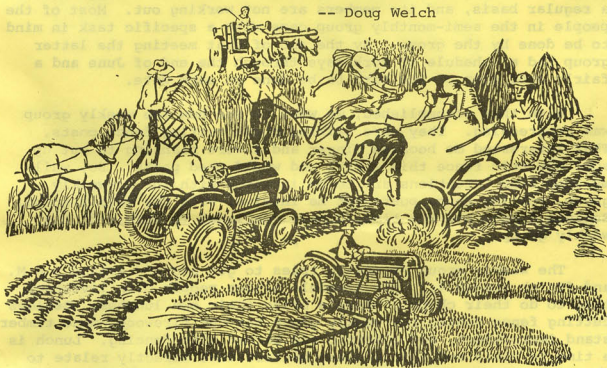
records of hours are being kept. The bi-weekly work group has cut firewood, planted white pine seedlings and cleared brush to re-claim a hay meadow. Ten to fifteen adults have attended the first two work days.

As you can see, these two labor cooperatives are different in their size and approach to a similar purpose. The personalities, preferences and needs of the members determines how the group organizes itself. Both groups are getting a lot of work done for their members. Hopefully, this discussion will encourage more people to organize work groups.

My involvement with both labor cooperatives has been personally satisfying. There is a sense of shared accomplishment--in contrast to the competitive aspect of our society where accomplishments are individual and one finds oneself at the top (or bottom) alone and lonely. I also enjoy the learning and sharing of information that can be part of working with other people. That whole process tends to be both stimulating and supportive.

Effective labor cooperatives with committed members could be a vehicle for re-building local rural life. Work days also serve a social purpose, strengthening the sense of community among members. Much of the work being done by the labor cooperatives are major projects that are developing our individual places. Even in the case of a bi-weekly group where each place is visited three or four times a year, it would not be hard imagining a farmstead being quite different two years from now than it is today. And, for me, that's an exciting possibility--to help others get their land into shape and to see our own place changing and becoming what we have envisioned that it could be.

-- Doug Welch



John and I belong to the "bi-weekly" group Doug referred to in his article. I have the advantage of writing just before press time, so we've got six work days under our belts by now, with one more to go in our first cycle. I know everyone in our group would agree that it's been worthwhile and worked at least as well as we hoped it would.

In terms of the time spent, we've probably come out about even--Montans could, perhaps, have planted their 2,000 trees in somewhat less than seven days; it probably would have taken us at least seven full days to remove all the old siding from our house by ourselves; the Ainsworths figured the time spent in the work group will probably work out to be the same amount it would have taken them to cut, split, and stack their 18 face cords of wood; etc.