

CHAPTER 2 FARM AND RANCH VIABILITY: SURVEY RESULTS

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INTRODUCTION

This chapter reports on the results of a telephone survey with 52 farmers and ranchers from Missoula County during early spring of 2004. Like the in-depth interviews described in Chapter Three and a focus group with Hmong market vendors explained in Chapter Four, the survey was designed to increase understanding of what is needed for viable, commercial agricultural production in the County from the perspectives of producers themselves. The phone survey covered the following topics: views on the state of agriculture generally in the County; factors threatening and factors contributing to farm and ranch viability; perspectives on growth and development; local marketing experiences and prospects; and the possibility of an agricultural task force. After a description of the methodology and the characteristics of those who participated in the survey, the remainder of the chapter discusses each of these substantive issues in turn.

THE SURVEY: METHODS AND SAMPLE

Data Collection and Analysis

We utilized a phone survey to reach as many farmers and ranchers as possible and to learn about their perspectives on what is needed to keep farms and ranches viable here.¹ We developed a questionnaire based on a review of relevant literature and a previous study of producers in the County.² Several farmers, ranchers, and agricultural professionals in the area also provided valuable information about local agriculture. The questionnaire was pre-tested with three area farmers, and revised based on our experiences and their feedback.

Unfortunately, there is no comprehensive list of County farmers and ranchers available from which to draw a random sample. Therefore, we generated as large a list of producers as possible by compiling names obtained through a variety of sources (e.g., Missoula County Extension, word of mouth). This process generated a list of 65

¹ For a copy of the telephone survey tool, contact Neva Hassanein at the University of Montana. Authors of this chapter, along with students in a course centered on the food assessment in fall 2003, developed the survey tool. Our approach was greatly informed by Dillman's Total Design Method. See: Dillman, Don A. (1978). *Mail and telephone surveys: The total design method*. New York: John Wiley and Sons.

² Frost, Jane R. (1982). *Preparing an opinion survey on agricultural production in Missoula*. Internship report for Missoula County Planning. Unpublished manuscript. See also: Missoula Planning Office. (1983). *Missoula County agricultural protection study*. Missoula, Montana.

potential interviewees for the phone survey.³ We sent these farmers and ranchers a postcard in advance of phoning them to explain the purpose of the study, invite their participation, and let them know we would be calling. We made repeated attempts to contact everyone on our list.

Three interviewers conducted the phone survey during February and March of 2004. Of the 65 potential interviewees, 52 agreed to complete the survey,⁴ four refused to participate outright, and nine were never reached (e.g., no answer, asked us to call back but were never reached). This gives us a response rate of 80%.⁵ The interviews lasted anywhere from 10 to 51 minutes in length; the median length was 20 minutes.

For many questions the respondent was given a series of options to choose from (i.e., closed-form questions). The survey also included some open-ended questions, which allowed the respondent to answer in his or her own words while the interviewer wrote down the response. We analyzed the closed-form questions using statistical software. For the open-ended questions, we used a technique known as content analysis, a process that involves coding the qualitative data for relevant themes.⁶ The number of respondents to articulate a particular theme was recorded, and these numbers are noted in the presentation below. In addition, direct quotations are an important part of depicting the experiences and perspectives of the participants in the study, and are used here to illustrate the meanings of the categories.

About the Study Participants

The findings presented below give us a good sense about the barriers and opportunities to agricultural viability in the County; however, the results cannot necessarily be generalized to the whole population of farmers and ranchers. Although social scientists consider the response rate of 80% to be very good, our sample is not a random one. Thus, we cannot say with confidence the extent to which the opinions and experiences of the study participants reflect the larger population of farmers and ranchers in the County.

Nevertheless, by examining some of the characteristics of those who participated in the study, it seems that our sample is reasonably representative of the diversity of producers in the County. We know this because we can compare the characteristics of the study participants to the findings of the U.S. Census of Agriculture for Missoula County on several key dimensions, such as farm size, crops produced, and the extent to which they

³ Necessarily, this list excluded those who did not have current or listed phone numbers. In addition to the 65 identified as potential participants in the phone survey, we identified people whom we asked to participate in the focus group and in-depth interview (see subsequent chapters for details).

⁴ One of the 52 respondents stopped the survey in the middle, but his responses up to that point are included in our analysis below. Also, occasionally a participant did not answer a particular question. Percentage of respondent results are based on the total number of respondents who actually answered the question unless otherwise noted.

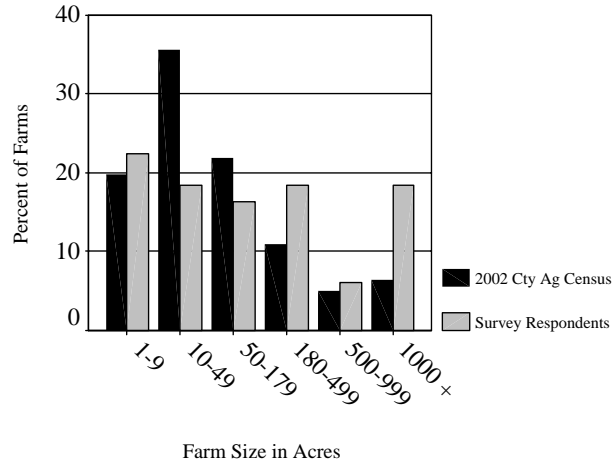
⁵ Of those we actually contacted, 93% agreed to participate in the survey (52 out of 56), which is an extremely high response rate. Response rate is important in interpreting results because one does not know whether non-respondents differ in some fundamental way from those who choose to respond.

⁶ Berg, B. (2004). *Qualitative research methods for the social sciences*. (5th ed.). Boston: Allyn and Bacon.

consider farming to be their principal occupation.⁷ Other characteristics of the study participants are described below as well.

Farm Size. The survey included farms and ranches from a range of size categories, as seen in Figure 1. Each size category was represented in our sample. Very large farms were slightly overrepresented, while farms between 10-49 acres were underrepresented somewhat in comparison with the Census of Agriculture. The median number of acres farmed by study participants was 100 acres.

Figure 1: Farm Size, Respondents vs. Cty. Ag Census



Crops Produced. Participants in the survey produce a range of crops.

Table 1 shows the number of farms/ranches in the sample that produce a particular crop and the percentage of the sample those producers make up. For comparative purposes, the numbers and percentages from the Census of Agriculture are provided.

Table 1: Crops Produced and Sold by Survey Respondents, Compared with 2002 Agricultural Census for Missoula County

| Crops produced | No. of farms in survey | Percent of survey sample | No. of Co. farms, 2002 Census | Percent of Co. farms, 2002 Census |
|-----------------------|------------------------|--------------------------|-------------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| Barley | 2 | 3.8 | 5 | .8 |
| Beef | 20 | 38.5 | 156 | 24.3 |
| Chicken/Poultry | 2 | 3.8 | 34 | 5.3 |
| Milk cows | 2 | 3.8 | 7 | 1.1 |
| Fruits/Orchards | 2 | 3.8 | 19 | 3.0 |
| Hay | 18 | 34.6 | 274 | 42.7 |
| Horses | 7 | 13.5 | 91 | 14.2 |
| Nurseries/Greenhouses | 3 | 5.8 | 16 | 2.5 |
| Sheep | 34 | 65.4 | 60 | 9.4 |
| Vegetables | 3 | 5.8 | 7 | 1.1 |
| Wheat | 2 | 3.8 | 7 | 1.1 |
| Other ⁸ | 7 | 13.5 | N/A | N/A |

⁷ The National Agricultural Statistics Service (NASS) conducts a Census of Agriculture every five years, most recently in 2002. It provides data at the county, state, and national levels. Data from the 2002 census are available at the following website: www.usda.gov/nass/ (August 2004).

⁸ For purposes of this study, “other” crops include oats, mushrooms, wine grapes, goats, canola, small grains, Tibetan yaks, and boarding horses. This is not an applicable category for comparison with the Agricultural Census.

The comparison in Table 1 shows that beef producers are somewhat overrepresented and sheep producers are heavily represented in the sample (probably because some of the producer lists we were able to obtain reflected livestock ownership). We conducted statistical analyses to be sure that the greater number of sheep producers did not badly skew our sample in other ways. Those analyses showed that sheep producers do *not* differ substantially from the other producers in the sample in terms of their experiences and opinions expressed in the survey.⁹

Location. As seen in Figure 2, many of those who participated in this study farm or ranch near the City of Missoula or in the Lolo area, although outlying areas of the County are also represented to some extent.

Gender. Of the participants in the phone survey, 33 are men (63.5%) and 19 are women (36.5%). According to the US Agricultural Census, women made up 19% of the *principal* farm operators in Missoula County in 2002.

Experience, Principal Occupation, and Income Sources. Many of the people who participated in this study have had considerable experience farming and ranching in Missoula County. As Figure 3 illustrates, about half of the sample has farmed or ranched here for more than 20 years. Nearly all interviewees were involved in farming and ranching at the time of the study; four had been involved in the past.

Despite this breadth of experience, only 37% of the study participants considered farming or ranching to be their “principal occupation.” In comparison, the 2002 Census of Agriculture for Missoula County reports that 45% of the principal farm operators considered farming or ranching to be their primary occupation. Note that the participants in the present study were not necessarily the principal operator of the farm (as defined by the Census). Not surprisingly, over half of the study

Figure 2: Farm/Ranch Locations of Participants

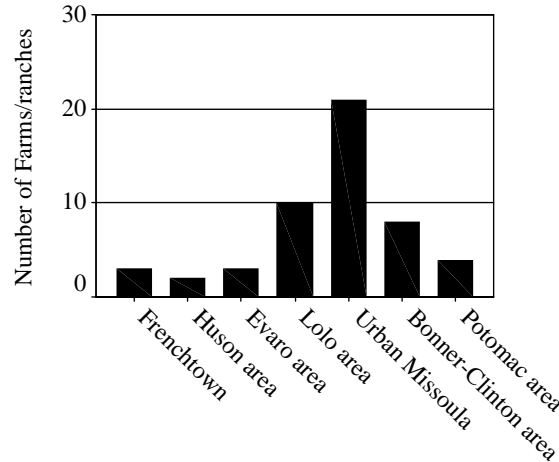
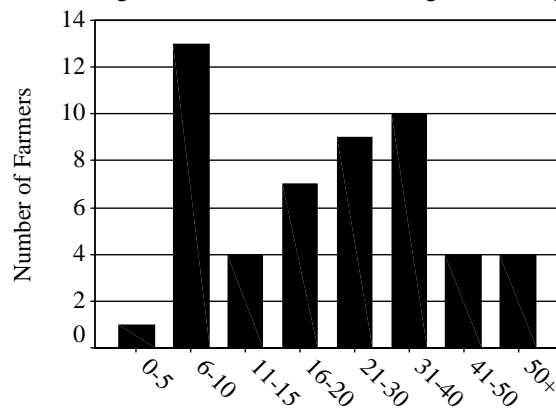


Figure 3: Involvement in Farming or Ranching



Years Farming or Ranching in Missoula County

⁹ The sheep producers do differ substantially from other participants in our sample on two characteristics: (a) sheep producers are more likely to work off-farm (67%) as compared with others (35%), and (b) they rely more heavily on income from off-farm sources (79% of the sheep producers get most of their income from off farm, while only 50% of the other producers do).

participants (56%) work off the farm, and 69% report that most of their income comes from off-farm sources. Nineteen percent report that all or most of their income comes from the farm, and 10% earn about half of their income from the farm and half from off-farm sources.

VIEWS ON THE STATE OF MISSOULA COUNTY AGRICULTURE

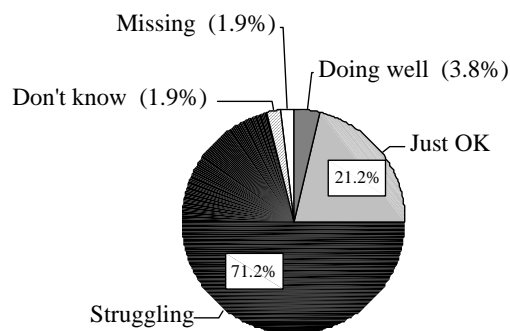
To get a general sense of the farmers’ and ranchers’ perspectives on agriculture in Missoula County, early in the survey we asked whether they thought agriculture in the County is “struggling, doing just okay, doing well or thriving.” Overwhelmingly, respondents have a negative view on the state of agriculture in the County today with over 90% saying it is struggling or doing just okay, as seen in Figure 4.

“Struggling” or “Doing Just OK” Explained

As a follow-up question, we asked the farmers and ranchers who answered that agriculture in the County is “struggling” or “doing just OK” what they think is “the most significant problem facing agriculture in Missoula County.” This was a general, open-ended question regarding the overall state of agriculture, rather than factors that are personally problematic. Analysis of the responses identified two prominent themes, which emerged repeatedly throughout the survey.¹⁰ Specifically:

- ❖ Half of the respondents (26) identified problems related to development, population growth, and consequent higher land values in the area as major factors affecting agriculture. They expressed concern that valuable farmland is being lost to development and to “subdivisions” in particular. As one producer said, agricultural land has “grown houses.” Seven respondents specifically referred to the increasing value of land, which both makes it attractive for landowners to sell and hard to acquire land for farming.
- ❖ Thirteen producers expressed the concern that low prices for their commodities and/or the lack of a good market make it hard or impossible to get a good economic return from farming. Contributing to these low returns, 10 people identified production costs such as electricity, hay, and irrigation as problematic.

Figure 4: Views on the State of Agriculture in Missoula Cty.



Respondents identified issues related to development as the primary factor threatening agricultural viability in the County; low economic returns are also a major concern.

¹⁰ Other themes were mentioned by respondents; however, those mentioned by five or fewer people have not been included here.

“Doing Well” Explained

Only two people said they thought agriculture is “doing well.” One of those mentioned their ability to supply their own hay and other resources as a contributor to doing well, and another explained their response by saying they think most producers sell locally and do well as a result. None of the respondents viewed agriculture as “thriving” here.

FACTORS THREATENING FARM AND RANCH VIABILITY

After asking the study participants about their views on agriculture in the County in general, we wanted to learn more about the factors that they feel pose a problem or take away from their ability to keep their *particular* farm or ranch in operation over the long term. In a series of 15 questions we asked them to state whether the specified factor was a “very significant problem,” a “somewhat significant problem,” or “not a problem” for their farm’s long-term viability. The results are presented in Table 2, listed in order of the most to the least problematic.

Table 2: Degree to which Specified Factors Pose a Problem or Take Away from Respondent’s Ability to Keep Farm or Ranch in Operation over the Long Term, as Percentage of Respondents

| Factor | Very Significant Problem | Somewhat Significant Problem | Not a Problem | Don’t Know |
|--|--------------------------|------------------------------|---------------|------------|
| Cost of producing your crops or livestock | 73.1 | 25.0 | 1.9 | 0 |
| Prices you have been getting in recent years for your crops or livestock | 46.2 | 42.3 | 11.5 | 0 |
| Property taxes | 46.2 | 34.6 | 17.3 | 1.9 |
| Recent electricity rates | 50.0 | 28.8 | 21.2 | 0 |
| Lack of grain handlers, food processors, and packers in our area | 38.5 | 26.9 | 34.6 | 0 |
| Competitive markets to sell your products into | 34.6 | 30.8 | 34.6 | 0 |
| Irrigation and access to water | 28.8 | 32.7 | 38.5 | 0 |
| Local land use policies affecting agriculture | 34.6 | 23.1 | 40.4 | 1.9 |
| Transporting your products to market | 23.1 | 25.0 | 51.9 | 0 |
| Total debt load | 11.5 | 28.8 | 59.6 | 0 |
| Environmental regulations | 19.2 | 19.2 | 61.5 | 0 |
| Interest rates | 17.3 | 19.2 | 61.5 | 1.9 |
| Government programs | 11.5 | 23.1 | 63.5 | 1.9 |
| Difficulty obtaining credit | 5.8 | 21.2 | 69.2 | 3.8 |
| Workers’ compensation costs | 9.6 | 15.4 | 73.1 | 1.9 |

Of the factors specified in the questions, respondents considered the high cost of production and the prices for their products to be the most significant threats to their own farm and ranch viability. Interestingly, in a 1982 survey of area producers, the same two factors were at the top of the list, followed by interest rates which were very high at that time.¹¹

It should be noted that the list of factors specified in our questions did not include growth and development, which we saw above was frequently mentioned as a threat to agriculture in general. After listing the series of factors, however, an open-ended question asked respondents if there were any other factors not mentioned that are a serious problem for the viability of their own farm or ranch. The most frequently mentioned response was related to growth and development. Ten respondents raised this problem and discussed their concerns that growth and development are leading to farmland loss, high land values, discouragement of agriculture within city limits, and other social impacts.

FACTORS CONTRIBUTING TO FARM AND RANCH VIABILITY

Given the purpose of this study, we also wanted to learn about those factors that might facilitate or contribute to keeping farms and ranches operating in Missoula County for the long term. Thus, in a series of 12 questions, respondents indicated whether a specified factor was “a very significant contributor,” “a somewhat significant contributor” or “not a contributor “to keeping their particular farm or ranch in operation over the long term.” Results are presented in Table 3, listed in the order of most to least contributing factors.

Perhaps not surprisingly, many producers report that getting a good price in some years even if they get a low price in other years is the most significant contributor to their operation’s viability. Physical features of their property – both the amount of and quality of their land – figured prominently in their responses as well.

Farming practices that help keep costs of production down are also important, and directly relate to the concern about high costs of production discussed above. The most frequently mentioned cost-saving practices fell into the following two categories: (1) water, energy and soil conservation practices, such as conservation tillage, gravity irrigation, and regulating irrigation (mentioned by 11 people); and (2) savings on feed costs, such as raising own hay or using poor quality/cheaper feed (mentioned by 11 people).

For nearly 65% of the respondents, income from a job off the farm was a *very* significant factor contributing to the farm’s viability. Indeed, over half of those interviewed have off-farm jobs, and about 69% rely mainly on off-farm sources of income. Reliance on off-farm income fits with the perception that economic returns from agriculture in the area have been too low to support many agricultural operations.

¹¹ The *Missoula County Agricultural Protection Study* by the Missoula Planning Office (1983, pages 10-12) reported the results of Jane Frost’s 1982 survey (see footnote 2, this chapter).

Table 3: Degree to which Specified Factors Contribute to Keeping Respondent’s Farm or Ranch in Operation over the Long Term, as Percentage of Respondents (N = 51, unless noted)

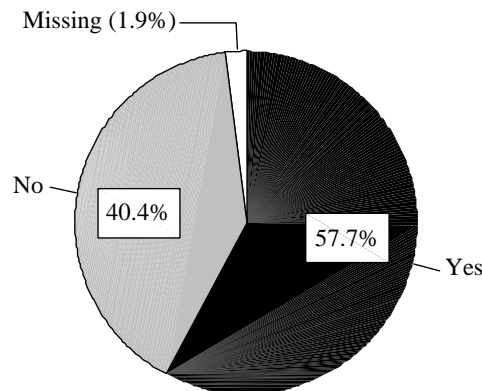
| Factor | Very Significant Contributor | Somewhat Significant Contributor | Not a Contributor | Don’t Know |
|---|------------------------------|----------------------------------|-------------------|------------|
| A good price in some years even if other years are bad (N = 49) | 53.1 | 34.7 | 10.2 | 2.0 |
| Amount of land you have available | 62.7 | 19.6 | 17.6 | 0 |
| Quality of land you have available | 60.8 | 21.6 | 17.6 | 0 |
| Farming practices that help keep costs of production down | 54.9 | 27.5 | 17.6 | 0 |
| Technical assistance or help from Extension or NRCS | 45.1 | 33.3 | 21.6 | 0 |
| Direct, local markets for your crop or livestock | 51.0 | 23.5 | 23.5 | 2.0 |
| Income from a job off the farm | 64.7 | 7.8 | 27.5 | 0 |
| Support or help you get from other farmers in the area | 33.3 | 35.3 | 31.4 | 0 |
| Market value of your land (N = 48) | 29.2 | 35.4 | 35.4 | 0 |
| A specific niche market | 47.1 | 11.8 | 39.2 | 2.0 |
| Marketing contract for your crops or livestock (N = 50) | 30.0 | 26.0 | 40.0 | 4.0 |
| Government programs | 19.6 | 27.5 | 52.9 | 0 |

PERSPECTIVES ON GROWTH AND DEVELOPMENT

We asked the respondents a series of questions about growth and development in Missoula County and how it relates to farming and ranching. In particular, we were curious whether respondents were directly affected by development, whether they viewed it as positive or negative, and what role they saw the County playing in farmland protection.

As illustrated in Figure 5, nearly 58% of the respondents feel their

Figure 5: Development Affecting Respondent's Farm/Ranch

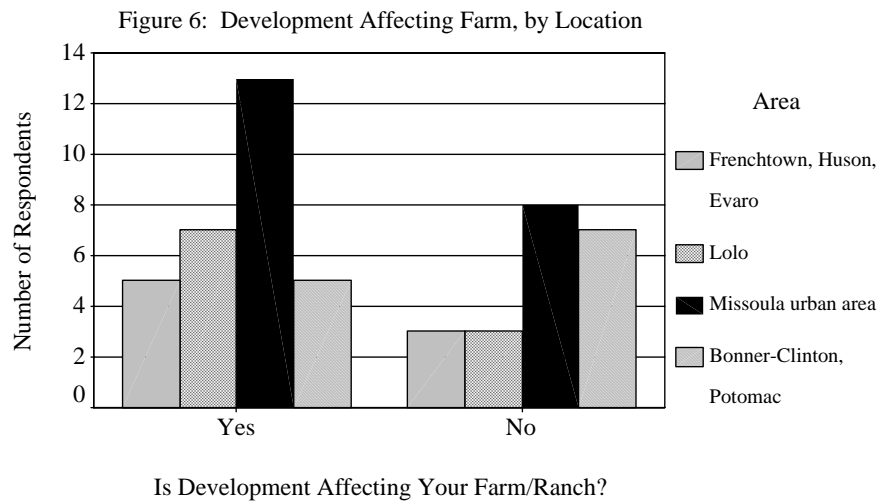


operations are affected by development trends. The introduction to this question gave respondents statistics regarding development. We let them know that in the last ten years, the County’s overall population grew by 22% or about 17,000 people. We also mentioned that the population in areas outside of city limits of Missoula increased by 46% and that also during the 1990s, over ten thousand acres outside of the city have been subdivided. Then, we asked them whether this development was affecting their farm and ranch, and if so, whether those effects were positive, negative or neutral (see sidebar).

Is Development Positive or Negative?
 Of the 30 respondents who said that development is affecting their farm or ranch, 22 (73%) considered those effects negative, four saw development as positive, three were neutral, and one was undecided.

Development Effects by Location

As the city of Missoula spreads out from the center, farmers on the fringe of the city, including areas near Lolo and Frenchtown, are feeling the effects of subdivision and development more than in other areas of the County. We analyzed the 51 responses to the question of whether development is affecting their farm or ranch by their general location (see Figure 6). With the exception of areas near Bonner, Clinton and Potomac, a majority of respondents from each area said that development is affecting their farm or ranch.



Comments on Effects of Development

Throughout the survey and specifically in response to questions about development, many people repeatedly raised the issue and elaborated on their perspectives about growth. We recorded these comments (which include both those who feel directly affected by development and those who do not), and analyzed them for general themes. These themes are presented below, and can be used to help us interpret why people see development as positive or negative.

- ❖ Several farmers/ranchers mentioned positive effects of development. These comments were largely related to their economic worth being tied up in the land and the need to sell for retirement or because the economic returns of farming are so low. As one participant simply stated: “Our retirement is in the land value.” Others simply see development as “inevitable.”
- ❖ Four people specifically explained that increased land values make selling some or part of their land for development appealing. One mentioned: “You can do better by selling to developers than keeping it in pasture. It’s sad that it is happening. I would probably sell if someone offered. There are a lot of houses going in here. People are getting more money.”

“Growth is making the place worth more, which makes it tempting to sell for development. You just don’t make money from ranching, but love to do it.”
~ Respondent
- ❖ Four people mentioned that development has negative impacts because it reduces the amount of land available for agriculture. As one person put it: “Availability of land is a problem that will kill farmers...Development is going to drive farmers out.” Another explained: “It’s the pressures of a growing population that drive real estate through the ceiling. You can’t afford to buy land.” Some specific concerns mentioned include loss of land to lease and loss of land in hay production leading to increased cost of hay. One participant explained: “We don’t have enough hay because of lack of land from development.”

“It is a shame we are losing so much land to development, and agriculture isn’t important.”
~ Respondent
- ❖ Three people mentioned a need for subdivision control and for incentives and/or compensation to farmers for keeping land in agriculture.
- ❖ Three people identified local government as part of the problem. They perceive that City and County government favor development or do not understand rural needs.

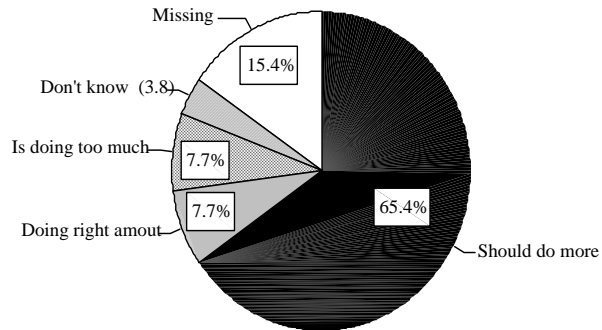
“The County is allowing too many houses and subdivisions to go up.” ~ Respondent
- ❖ One respondent who did not feel development was directly affecting their ranch said that it “indirectly affects” them. This person noted that it “reduces the amount of farm products which limits the interest of buyers...Have less, too hard to get to market and have fewer buyers looking for it. It is subtle. You notice it when it is gone.”
- ❖ Some respondents mentioned that development brings problems with neighbors, especially dogs running loose and complaints. Other concerns included: increased taxes; increased land values, which limit the ability to expand farm or ranch; and increased traffic.

County's Role in Farmland Protection

The respondents' perspectives suggest that both the low economic returns from agriculture and high land values associated with development are often driving changes in areas surrounding Missoula and in other rural parts of the county. Many respondents felt, however, that more should be done to protect farmland from development.

Specifically, we asked respondents whether they thought Missoula County¹² should be “doing more, is doing about the right amount, or is doing too much” to protect farmland from development. As seen in Figure 7, the majority (65%) of farmers and ranchers we spoke with feel the County should be doing more. Indeed, at several points in the survey people expressed their view that County government fosters development. Analysis of these findings in relationship to the farmer's or rancher's location did not identify statistically significant differences among respondents in different locations.

Figure 7: To Protect Farmland, Missoula County . . .



Note that 15% of the study participants had problems with the response options presented in the question, and hence are “missing” from the pie chart in Figure 7. Four of these respondents said the County “should not” or “does not have the right” to do anything, largely because of private property rights. Another person said it “depends” on how the County gets involved. A couple of people mentioned that the County cannot help address the economics, while another suggested that the County should act to help farmers stay in business. One person thought it was “too late” to do anything.

Thus, most of the farmers and ranchers we spoke with would like the County to “do more” to protect farmland. Yet, it was also clear that at least a fair number of respondents did not want the County to do anything that might infringe on property rights and/or they felt that the County should not do anything more.

LOCAL MARKETING

Scholars and agricultural experts increasingly recognize the importance of local marketing and the economic and social opportunities it can create in a community.¹³ Therefore, we asked the participants a series of questions about their perceptions and

¹² What was meant by “Missoula County” was not specified in the question, but it appeared to be generally assumed to refer to County government.

¹³ Kloppenburg, Jack R., Jr., Hendrickson, John and Stevenson, G.W. (1996). Coming in to the foodshed. *Agriculture and Human Values* 13(3), 33-41.

involvement in local marketing. We asked study participants about whether they currently market locally, the ways that they market locally, their perceptions on the advantages and disadvantages to local marketing, whether they would like to sell more in the local market, and how such markets could be pursued.

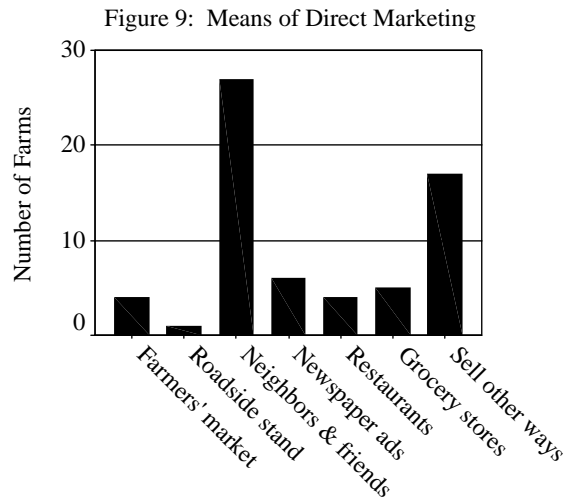
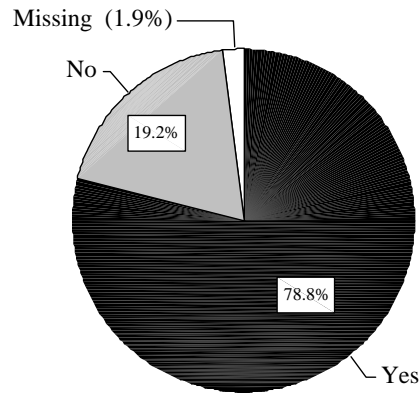
Participation in Local Markets

Interestingly, the majority of the farmers and ranchers we surveyed sell directly to consumers or participate in local markets to some extent, as seen in Figure 8. Note, however, that we did not ask them what percentage of their sales are local, which means that a producer may only very occasionally use such avenues.

A comparison of direct market sales by farm size suggests that farms and ranches in each size category, including those over 500 acres, are engaged in some local or direct marketing. In other words, farm size alone is not a good predictor of whether someone sells locally or directly to consumers.

We asked the 41 respondents (79% of the sample) who said they market locally about how they do it (see Figure 9). Selling directly to neighbors and friends is the most common method of local sales. Thirty-three respondents sell in other ways, including word-of-mouth, to Lolo Locker, spinners’ guilds, and livestock sales in the County. In addition, farmers and ranchers in all size classes report that they are engaged in direct marketing to neighbors and friends.

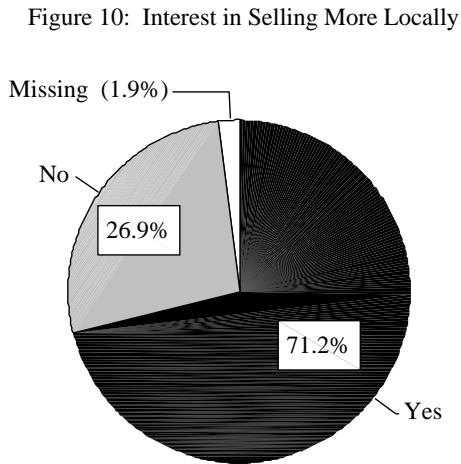
Figure 8: Marketing Directly to Consumers or Locally



Selling More Locally: Advantages and Disadvantages

A majority of the study participants would like to sell more locally, indicating the potential for greater connection between producers and consumers (see Figure 10).

We asked the 37 people who would like to sell more locally what they see as the advantages and barriers to such markets. It is clear that the study participants perceive a number of economic and social benefits to local marketing. Analysis of their comments revealed the following themes and the number of people who mentioned them:



Advantages to local marketing.

- ❖ Getting a better price (13 people)
- ❖ Saving money, especially shipping costs (12 people)
- ❖ Connecting producers and consumers, especially because it creates greater knowledge of food's origin (9 people)
- ❖ Making marketing more convenient, no middleman (7 people)
- ❖ Producing better quality food (includes health, freshness and fewer additives, hormones and pesticides) (6 people)
- ❖ Providing benefits for community and local economy (5 people)
- ❖ Encouraging local appreciation for particular product (2 people)

Disadvantages to local marketing.

- ❖ Lack of or closed markets, including location and people's receptivity (13 people)
- ❖ Lack of processors/packers, especially for livestock (7 people)
- ❖ Costs, especially transportation and advertising (6 people)
- ❖ Lack of time or it is a hassle (5 people)
- ❖ Rules & regulations, especially government/health department (5 people)
- ❖ Limited by farming practices and products raised (4 people)
- ❖ Need more land or no place to raise more livestock (3 people)
- ❖ Prices or economy prohibits (2 people)
- ❖ No marketing co-ops (1 person)

Why not market locally?

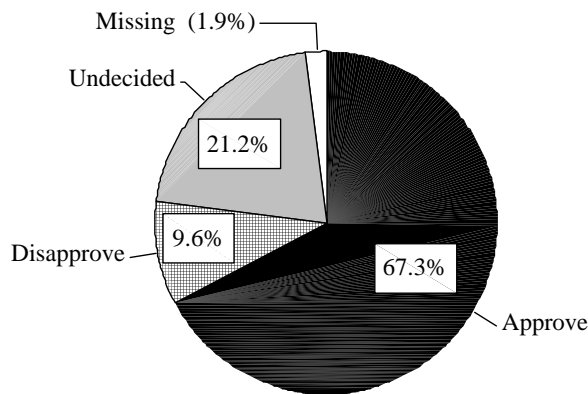
Twenty-seven percent of all respondents did not want to sell more locally. We asked why, and here are the themes in their responses:

- ❖ Other markets better (because of price, scale of operation) (7 people)
- ❖ Hassle or it takes too much time (includes having to be a salesperson) (4 people)
- ❖ Old age of the respondent (2 people)

AGRICULTURAL TASK FORCE

We asked study participants about whether they “approve, disapprove, or are undecided” about “the creation of a task force that would recommend ways to promote local agricultural markets and preserve agricultural production in the County.” As seen in Figure 11, over 67% of the survey participants approve of the idea, although a substantial percentage (21%) were undecided. A similar question was asked in the 1982 survey and found that 56% approved, 26% disapproved, and 18% were undecided.¹⁴ Several raised questions about who would be on the task force, and stressed that farmers and ranchers would have to be represented.

Figure 11: Opinions on County Agricultural Task Force



“Having a task force is a good idea. Open space and farmland should be protected. This area has some nice farmland.”
~ Respondent

SUMMARY OF THE FARMER AND RANCHER SURVEY RESULTS

Our original research question asked what the exiting assets and barriers are to viable agricultural production in Missoula County. Several themes emerged repeatedly and prominently from the analysis. Although the survey is not based on a random sample, the themes are bolstered by the in-depth interviews described in the next chapter and shed light on some of the key opportunities and concerns among producers in the area.

Clearly, the farmers and ranchers surveyed conveyed their sense that agriculture is struggling here. The source of that struggle is often due to two interrelated problems: low economic returns and development pressures. Respondents viewed high costs of production as a major threat to farm and ranch viability. Another major concern was low prices; however, it also appears that getting a good price in some years even if other years are bad is a major contributor to keeping these farms and ranches going. Interestingly, assets for long-term viability included the amount and quality of the land individual

¹⁴ The Missoula County Agricultural Protection Study by the Missoula Planning Office (1983, pages 10-12) reported the results of Jane Frost’s 1982 survey (see footnote 2 above).

producers have, suggesting that these are assets worth maintaining if we are to keep agriculture viable here.

Throughout the interviews, the majority of the farmers and ranchers we spoke with expressed feeling the effects of growth and development in the County, and they tend to see these effects as negative. They are concerned about the loss of working agricultural land to subdivisions and the associated loss of a way of life. Development has other effects as well, including conflicts with new neighbors.

The issue is not clear-cut, however. Many respondents find themselves in a bind because their equity – and therefore their retirement income – is in their land and other farm-related assets. Increasing land values mean that new farmers or existing farmers who want to expand cannot afford to buy land. In other words, low economic returns often mean that one cannot pay for farmland by farming it. In that context, selling land for development becomes appealing. Thus, a major conclusion we can draw is that farm economics are integrally tied to perceptions of and decisions about development.

One way to begin to address issues of farmland loss is to improve the economics of farming and ranching locally. A growing population can also be a growing market. Indeed, the survey results suggest that there is a strong interest among producers in local marketing. They see economic benefits, especially in terms of getting a better price for their product. Some respondents also expressed an interest in reducing the distance between consumers and producers so that eaters may have a better sense of where their food comes from. As the survey of local consumers discussed in Chapter 5 illustrates, there is also strong interest among consumers in buying locally.

Local marketing is not without challenges, however. Although some respondents feel that local marketing helps them save on transportation costs, others say that it costs more to market locally. In addition, producers feel that local markets need further development, and there is a need for more processing infrastructure.

Where do we go from here? The majority of those who participated in the survey would like to see the County “do more” to protect farmland. They also conveyed fairly strong support for the creation of an agricultural task force that would promote local agricultural markets and protect agricultural lands. A similar recommendation for a task force emerged from the 1982 study of producers in the County. Unfortunately, that strategy was not pursued. Over the ensuing twenty years, the trends toward agricultural decline have continued and even intensified here; yet, consumer interest in buying local food has grown. Such a task force could devote attention to the issues and opportunities highlighted in the survey. The idea of a task force is discussed further in Part III.