

PART III FOOD FOR THOUGHT AND ACTION

INTRODUCTION

The aim of *Food Matters* is to increase understanding of the key challenges Missoula County faces with respect to agriculture and food consumption, as well as the resources we have to draw upon in meeting those challenges. The issues documented here and in our earlier report, *Our Foodshed in Focus*, are integrated. Therefore, solutions require a comprehensive and systematic approach that addresses the entire food system – from agricultural production, to food distribution, to consumption, to waste. Fortunately, many organizations and agencies are contributing a great deal toward strengthening various parts of the food system.

While individual organizations and agencies fruitfully address aspects of the larger goal of community food security, the food assessment process suggests that there is also great utility in taking an integrated and systemic view. Clearly, documenting what our food system looks like now is only a first step, and there are many more steps we need to take to make our local food system more secure. A community is said to be food secure if its residents obtain a safe, culturally acceptable, nutritionally adequate diet through a sustainable food system that maximizes community self-reliance and social justice.

Some ideas for moving toward the long-term goal of community food security are suggested below. Before turning to recommendations, we briefly summarize the most salient findings from the report and identify points of intersection between the interests of agricultural producers and consumers.

DIGESTING *FOOD MATTERS*

Despite a long history of farming and ranching in Missoula County, many producers report that agriculture is struggling today primarily because of two interrelated problems: low economic returns and growth-related development pressures. For many farmers and ranchers, low prices for their products and increasing costs of production are major threats to their operations. While most producers we spoke with see development and increasing land values as problematic, they often find themselves in a bind because their equity is tied up in their land and other farm-related assets. Producers are also concerned that the high land values associated with development are limiting access to cropland and pasture, and making it harder for new farmers to get started or existing farmers to expand. It seems that a major conclusion we can draw is that farm and land economics are integrally tied to perceptions of and decisions related to farm viability.

Despite the economic and land use pressures, a variety of factors facilitate or contribute to farmers' and ranchers' ability to keep their farms going. Two important factors are the amount and quality of their land, suggesting that these are assets worth maintaining if we are to keep agriculture viable here. Other key contributors to farm viability are working off-farm, selling into local markets, reducing production costs, and employing water and soil conservation practices. Perhaps most important of all is simply a deep attachment that many farmers and ranchers have to their way of life and their land.

For many farmers and ranchers, however, attachment to the land will not be enough to stem the tide of farmland loss if current economic and development trends continue. Agriculture provides multiple benefits – including food and fiber, wildlife habitat, scenic beauty, and other public goods. Although our farmer survey and interviews only touched briefly on various farmland protection strategies, the most support was voiced for using tax dollars, such as a bond, to create a farmland protection program, as well as using voluntary approaches, such as conservation easements. Regardless of which farmland protection programs might be put into place, farmers and ranchers need to make a living from the land. One way to improve the economic viability of agriculture appears to be the development of more local markets and the infrastructure to support such markets.

Our research indicates that there is strong interest among producers in marketing more of their produce and livestock locally; fortunately, many consumers also want to eat local food. Farmers and ranchers see advantages in terms of profits, as well as strengthening connections with those who eat the foods they grow. Producers also see barriers, however, in terms of difficult access to some local markets and limited infrastructure for food processing. At the other end of the food chain, some 60% of the consumers we surveyed expressed concern about how far away the food they eat comes from, and 55% would like to see more local foods in grocery stores. Thus, a major area of convergence between producers and consumers is around the value of local food.

Consumers' interest in local food is perhaps not surprising given the importance they place on food quality. In the food consumption survey, the most frequently cited concerns related to food quality issues, including food safety, pesticide residues on food, whether food is raised organically, food freshness and nutritional value. Of all these issues, food safety is paramount in eaters' minds. Almost 82% of survey respondents perceived food safety as a concern for them. More opportunities to access local food could increase people's knowledge about and trust in what they eat by shortening the physical and social distance between producers and consumers.

Many of the consumers who participated in the food assessment report that they must balance their desire to eat quality, nutritious foods with their ability to purchase or access such foods. Close to 77% of the survey respondents reported that the price of food they like to eat is at least somewhat of a problem for them. Not surprisingly, low-income participants were most likely to consider the price of food too high, typically citing low wages and competing needs, such as housing, medical costs, and utilities. Of particular concern were the impacts of household food insecurity on children and their development.

Focus group participants described a variety of creative and resourceful ways they try to fill in the gaps in monthly food budgets, including fishing, hunting, and community gardening. Other strategies are not particularly nutritious (e.g., eating more starchy foods) or can be humiliating (e.g., dumpster diving). Emergency food providers, like the Missoula Food Bank and the Poverello Center, provide help that low-income residents use and greatly appreciate; however, reliance on those services can sometimes be disempowering. Thus, while governmental and non-governmental programs continue to provide vital emergency services, there appears to be a need for additional, creative approaches that emphasize empowerment and self-reliance.

An important area of convergence between the interests of agriculturalists and consumers is in the perceived value of local food; however, a major challenge is to devise strategies that meet the economic needs of both farmers and consumers. Obviously, some consumers can afford to purchase high quality, local foods; and many of those consumers are making that choice, as evidenced by the success of the Missoula Farmers' Market and the grocery stores that sell local food. For some consumers, however, the cost of food will continue to be a problem, regardless of where that food was grown. Opportunities for farmers and ranchers could potentially be expanded, particularly by developing institutional markets at the University of Montana, area schools, and more. Such expansion requires new distribution networks and more processing facilities, especially for livestock, both of which are challenging tasks. In addition, there appear to be opportunities to make more local foods available through nutrition and other food programs. Some of the specific recommendations below begin to identify ideas for addressing these challenges and opportunities.

If nothing else, the Missoula County Community Food Assessment suggests that we need more public dialogue about how best to protect working farms and ranches and how best to meet citizens' needs for quality, nutritious food. In recent years, a number of North American cities, counties and state governments have established "food policy councils" to develop solutions to local food problems, considering the whole food system. Often, local governments sanction food policy councils, which make recommendations on the food- and agriculture-related needs of a community. Food policy councils ideally include people who represent a wide range of perspectives. In the farmer and rancher survey, about two-thirds of the respondents approved of the idea of establishing an agricultural task force that would promote agricultural markets and preserve agricultural production in the County. A food policy council could add to the idea of an agricultural task force and include addressing consumers' interests in food quality, local food, and access to a nutritionally adequate diet in a self-respecting way. As discussed below, the establishment of a food policy coalition is recommended as a first step toward creating a more permanent council.

RECOMMENDATIONS

We offer the following recommendations with the hope of generating a community dialogue about the future of food and farming in Missoula County. The recommendations emerged from a series of conversations among Steering Committee members and University of Montana partners engaged in the CFA. These recommendations are based on our review of the research findings presented here in *Food Matters*, as well as *Our Foodshed in Focus* and *Grow, Eat, and Know*. The first recommendation describes how the specific policies and activities in the other recommendations could be brought about.

Recommendation 1: Create a multi-stakeholder, food policy coalition that addresses community needs related to food and agriculture in a comprehensive, systematic, and creative way. There is no existing entity that takes an integrated, approach to solving the food and farming problems identified in the CFA. The coalition could advise City and County government, as well as work with relevant non-governmental agencies to make our food system more secure.

Progress toward achieving this recommendation can be accomplished by:

- a. Providing an opportunity for dialogue and creative problem solving that does not currently exist by including a wide array of food system stakeholders. Include representatives from a variety of food and agriculture related perspectives, such as: farmers, food processors, wholesalers, distributors, grocers, restaurateurs, anti-hunger advocates, conservationists, community leaders, agricultural service providers, land use planners, health officials, universities, and other citizens as food consumers.
- b. Exploring various organizational options for constituting the food policy coalition (e.g., as a coalition, non-profit group, advisory board to local government).
- c. Reviewing and prioritizing the recommendations from the Community Food Assessment presented below. Focus on solutions that meet the particular needs of our community and build on our assets.
- d. Identifying organizations, public agencies, or other entities that might work to implement specific projects to carry out the recommendations.
- e. Exploring and pursuing funding opportunities, as well as establishing partnerships between public and non-profit sector organizations.

Recommendation 2: Improve food quality and access to healthy foods at emergency food services and elsewhere in the County. Consumers in our CFA research identified food quality as their primary food-related concern (e.g., food safety, pesticide residues on food, use of organic and local foods, etc.).

Progress toward achieving this recommendation can be accomplished by:

- a. Strengthening the ties between emergency food services and local markets for the production and distribution of fresh and healthy foods to low-income individuals and their families.
- b. Informing low-income residents who use emergency food services of the options available for accessing healthy foods through participation in the Community Supported Agriculture program and the community gardens.
- c. Establishing a program to facilitate gleaning on farms and residential orchards.
- d. Encouraging farming and ranching practices that maximize food safety and quality and that minimize the use of pesticides.

Recommendation 3: Work with relevant advocacy organizations to create public education campaigns around the human right to food, and expand the current dialogue around cost-of-living concerns to include food issues. The CFA research found that cost of living issues, specifically low wages, pose significant barriers to accessing healthy, nutritious foods for low-income individuals and their families. In addition, government nutrition programs are underutilized.

Progress toward achieving this recommendation can be accomplished by:

- a. Creating and supporting community-based infrastructure that can promote food self-reliance: community kitchens, cooperative buying clubs, community freezers, food preservation programs, increase community gardens.
- b. Creating opportunities for the development of micro-enterprises and food-related businesses.
- c. Creating and supporting programs that move beyond providing emergency food toward increasing resources that build a sustainable, self-reliant community food system.
- d. Promoting participation in nutrition programs, including those at farmers' markets, and strengthening public education programs about available food resources.

Recommendation 4: Develop a strong community-based food system that supports local farmers and ranchers, and meets consumers' interest in access to locally grown food. In rebuilding our local food system, a major challenge is to devise strategies that will address the need for farmers and ranchers to earn a fair price for their products and the need for consumer affordability.

Progress toward achieving this recommendation can be accomplished by:

- a. Investigating how we can build on existing resources and develop more and expanded markets for local foods.
- b. Creating institutional markets for local foods (e.g., at schools, hospitals), and expanding the University of Montana's Farm to College Program.
- c. Addressing the need to rebuild infrastructure for food processing (particularly for livestock) and for local food distribution (particularly to meet the needs of institutional and other local markets that require larger deliveries).

- d. Eliminating barriers preventing low-income residents from gaining access to fresh, healthy, locally-grown foods, through such mechanisms as nutrition programs and community-based infrastructure promoting self-reliance.
- e. Expanding programs to promote local food purchases, such as coupons for WIC clients and seniors so they can get produce at farmers' markets.

Recommendation 5: Identify and assess strategies for protecting and assisting working farms and ranches, and for keeping agricultural land affordable for farming and ranching. Agriculture is a valuable part of our cultural heritage. It contributes to open space, wildlife habitat, and other public benefits. A healthy agricultural system is also integral to the long-term security of our food system.

Progress toward achieving this recommendation can be accomplished by:

- a. Developing relevant criteria for prioritizing the protection of agricultural land, including factors such as: importance to local food production; economic viability; farm/ranch scale; historical and/or cultural significance; soil and land capability; and other conservation benefits.
- b. Educating farmers, ranchers and the general public about (1) the context within which land use planning and decision making currently take place, and (2) various strategies for protecting agricultural land.
- c. Exploring the potential for a countywide bond that would provide funding for farmland protection.
- d. Supporting efforts that would amend the current tax structure to provide relief for agricultural producers, perhaps providing tax incentives for those who produce foods for local markets and emergency food providers.
- e. Exploring ways to facilitate entry into farming to make it feasible for young farmers to get started.
- f. Organizing a grazing and agriculture land stewardship cooperative in the County, connecting pasture landowners with livestock producers and providing technical support on weed and grazing management. Agriculture service providers (Extension and NRCS) can help with implementation of this idea.
- f. Creating educational programs for Hmong and other market gardeners wanting information about season extending strategies.
- g. Initiating dialogue with farmers/ranchers about their technical assistance needs regarding methods to reduce costs of production, so as to improve the returns.

Recommendation 6: Investigate further the extent to which transportation to food outlets (both grocery stores and food pantries) is a concern for low-income residents throughout the County and develop appropriate recommendations for change. The CFA indicates that transportation to food outlets is an emerging issue for low-income individuals in Missoula County as population increases and as supermarkets are located further from neighborhoods.

Progress toward achieving this recommendation can be accomplished by:

- a. Assessing the current mode of transportation of food pantry clients.
- b. Mapping the relationship between supermarket locations, bus routes, safe walking and biking routes, and various residential neighborhoods.
- c. Researching ways that other communities have successfully addressed inadequate transportation to and from food outlets.