

Our Agricultural Future

Warning Signs: Loss of Working Farms and Ranches

Missoula County is losing its working farms (includes ranches). Consider these indicators from the 2002 U.S. Census of Agriculture and other government sources:

- Officially, there were 641 farms in Missoula County in 2002, but 60% of them had sales of less than \$2,500.
- Fewer than half of the farms actually harvested crops from the land. The number of acres where crops were harvested dropped by 20% between 1997 and 2002.
- Farms are becoming smaller in size. By 2002, the average farm size was 403 acres, a drop of 9% since 1997.
- Over 10,000 acres were subdivided between 1990 and 2000. Flat lands previously in agriculture are among the most common areas to be developed.

These and other trends suggest that many of our smaller farms may be primarily rural residences with agricultural enterprises playing a fairly minor role.

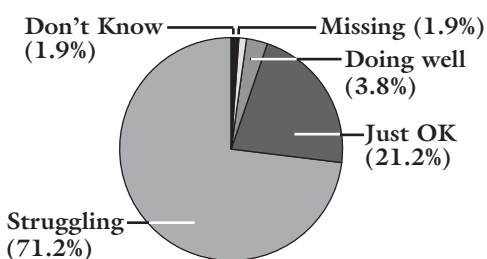
Hearing from Farmers and Ranchers

Community food security requires that we have farmers and farmland. Therefore, one of the central aims of the CFA was to identify what is needed to sustain agriculture in Missoula County. We decided to ask farmers and ranchers themselves, in order to draw on their experiences and knowledge. To do this, we conducted a telephone survey with 52 farmers and ranchers (80% of those we asked agreed to participate). To go more deeply into relevant topics, we also conducted in-depth interviews with 13 other farmers and ranchers, as well as a focus group with 11 Hmong vendors from the Missoula Farmers' Market. Here are just a few of the many findings.

State of Agriculture in Missoula County

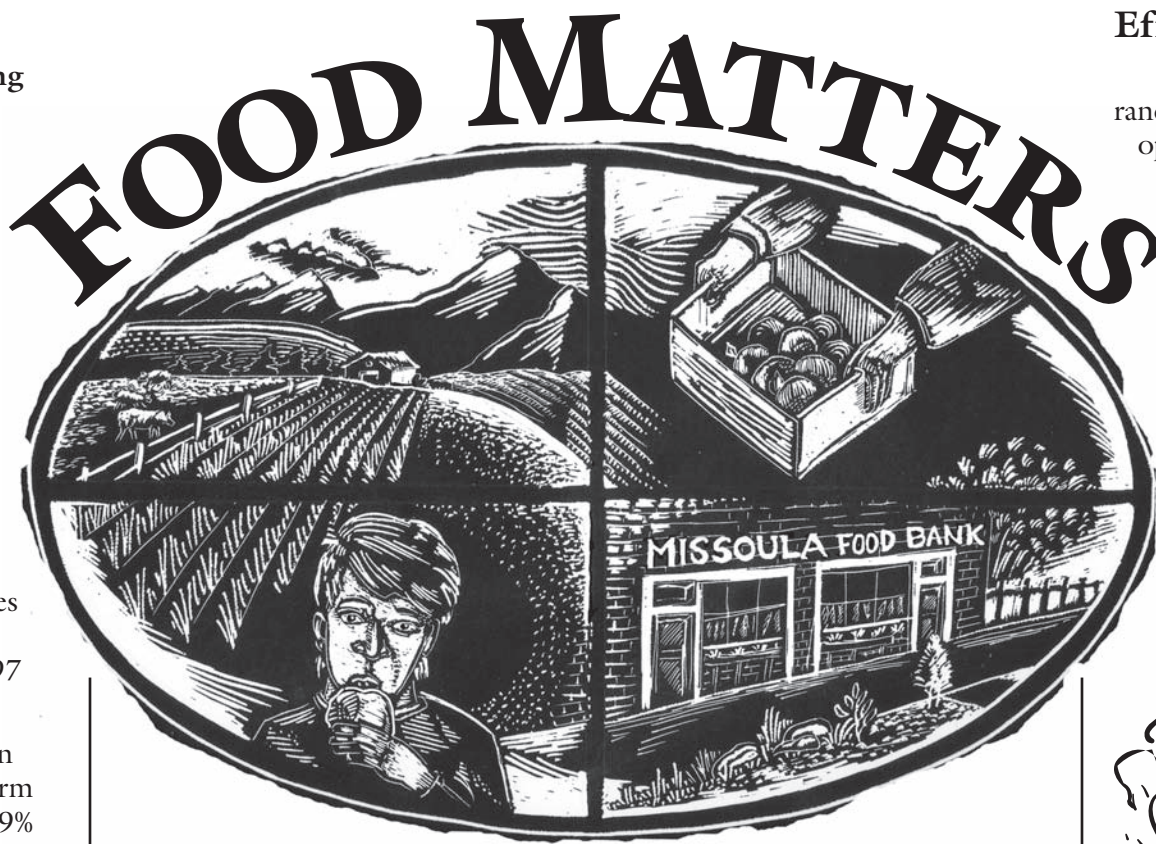
As the chart below illustrates, the vast majority of survey respondents think that agriculture in Missoula County is struggling. The source of that struggle is often two interconnected problems: low economic returns from farming and development pressures.

Farmers' and Ranchers' Views on the State of Agriculture in Missoula County (N=52)



Low Economic Returns

Of those we surveyed, 98% said that the cost of producing their crops or livestock was a "very significant" or "somewhat significant" problem when it comes to keeping their farm or ranch in operation. For 88% of the respondents, recent prices for their crops or livestock was viewed as a problem.



Highlights from the Missoula County Community Food Assessment

Why Food Matters

Food is a basic need. Yet, most of us know little about where it comes from, the conditions under which it was produced, and how it got from there to here. To understand food issues in a community, we need to learn about the entire food system from production, processing, and distribution to food consumption. One way to build our understanding is to conduct a community food assessment.

What is a Community Food Assessment?

A Community Food Assessment (CFA) is a systematic, participatory approach to investigating a wide range of local issues and assets related to food and farming and the links between these and community goals. Its broad purpose is to inform and build support for change actions to make the community more food secure.

What is the Missoula County Community Food Assessment?

In spring 2003, University of Montana faculty initiated a CFA to gain a better understanding of Missoula County's food system. To incorporate community input, a diverse steering committee representing 15 different organizations and interests in the local food and farming system came together to plan the CFA. The committee identified the following questions to investigate:

- What is needed for viable and sustainable, commercial food production in Missoula County? What are the existing assets and barriers to creating a more viable and sustainable production system?
- What concerns do Missoula County residents of various income levels have about food? What do they perceive as the County's food-related assets?

The committee also provided input into the research process, and developed recommendations based on the findings. UM undergrad and grad students were key participants in the process. We highlight some of the findings here. For more information, see *Food Matters: Farm Viability and Food Consumption in Missoula County*.

Effects of Development

Nearly 58% of the farmers and ranchers surveyed felt that their operations are affected by development trends. Of those 30 respondents, 22 (74%) considered those effects negative, four saw development as positive, three were neutral, and one was undecided.

"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."

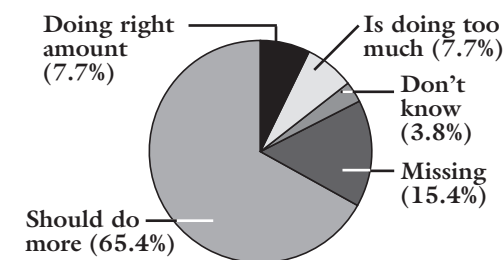
- local rancher



"The biggest thing that weighs on my mind is that you have his grandfather, my grandfather, my dad, and now me. And I don't want to be the one that goes, 'Okay, let's just cash out, put the money in the bank' and you know, live high off the hog... I feel a sense of responsibility... If you think about all the blood, the sweat, the tears, the child death, cold winters, hot summers, the Depression, two World Wars, all those things. That weighs heavily on me."

- local farmer

According to Farmers and Ranchers (N=52), to Protect Farmland, Missoula County...



Hmong Market Gardeners

Members of the Hmong community make up about 40% of all vendors at Missoula's Farmers' Market, and they contribute much food to the Missoula Food Bank. Gardening is interwoven into Hmong culture, and is an especially important activity for families, including both young and old. Some of those we spoke with are concerned about accessing land for their market gardens, and they would like to see the Farmers' Market grow and extend its hours.

"[Gardening's] important because for the Asians like us...It makes us happy when you walk through the gardens and see everything growing up, it makes us feel so happy and excited. Also food for our families, we are the kind of people who eat a lot of vegetables, so that is important to us. So always we are reminded of what we did in Laos, its not that much different here."

- Hmong market gardener

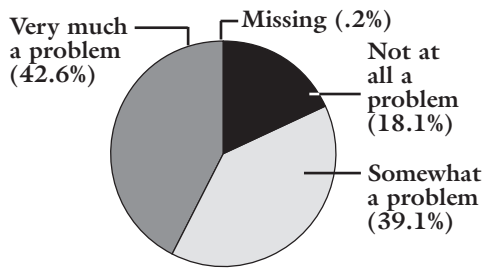
What Do Eaters Think About Food?

Understanding eaters' food-related concerns and assets is a first step toward addressing community food security. To learn about eaters' concerns, we administered 624 surveys to County residents with various income levels and we conducted two focus groups with 19 low-income County residents.

Food Quality Concerns Loom Large for Eaters

Food quality issues such as food safety, pesticide residues on food, eating organic, food freshness and nutritional value were the most important food-related concerns. Of all these issues, food safety is paramount on eaters' minds. Almost 82% of survey respondents perceived food safety as at least somewhat of a problem or concern for them.

How Much of a Problem is Food Safety for Survey Respondents? (N=624)



"I think a lot of pesticides and preservatives cause a lot of our health problems today."

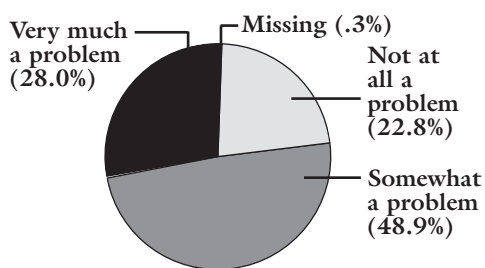
- consumer

Tough Choices for Low Income Residents

Any discussion of hunger or food insecurity must address the ability to purchase food. Wages have not kept up to cost-of-living increases in Missoula County. Close to 77% of the survey respondents identified that the price of food they like to eat is at least somewhat of a problem for them.

Low-income respondents were more likely to consider the price of food too high, especially those foods they felt were healthier and more nutritious.

How Much of a Problem is the Price of Food for Survey Respondents? (N=624)



"I have to eat foods that are very cheap like potatoes, breads... a lot of that type of stuff."

- consumer

Farmers and Consumers Share Goal of More Local Food



In today's global food system, food changes hands about 33 times between the farm and the supermarket shelf, and travels an average of 1,300 miles to reach our plates. Interestingly, in our study farmers and ranchers want to shorten the distance between the field and the consumer. Seventy-one percent of the farmers and ranchers surveyed are interested in marketing more of their produce and livestock locally. Farmers and ranchers see advantages in terms of profits, as well as increasing connections between producers and consumers; however, they also see barriers in terms of access to local markets and limited food processing infrastructure.

At the other end of the food chain, 60% of consumers were concerned about how far away the food they eat comes from. They expressed a strong interest in buying locally grown and produced food with 55% indicating they would like to see more local foods in the grocery stores. Consumers, however, are also concerned about the price of locally grown food. A major challenge is to devise strategies that meet the economic needs of both farmers and consumers.

"It's frustrating how... survival has become a money thing...the ones that have the money can afford food."

- consumer

The top cost-of-living concern for survey respondents was personal wages being too low. Almost half of the 19 focus group participants reported running out of food each



month and having to make tough choices about whether to pay heating, medical and housing bills or buy food. Medical bills, rising utility rates, high rents, underemployment, job loss, and transportation costs were common themes addressed by participants that compromised their ability to eat well.

"Which is more important, having my house warm or having food in my belly and my daughter's belly?"

- consumer

"Well, do I put gas in the car or do I buy a gallon of milk?"

- consumer

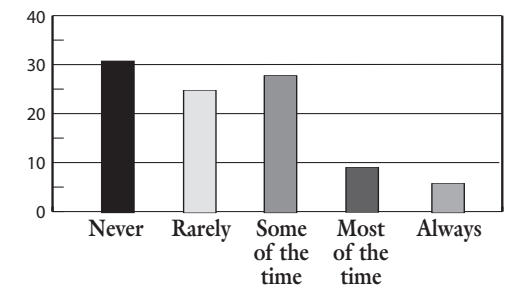
Community Food Security

"Community food security is a condition in which all community residents obtain a safe, culturally acceptable, nutritionally adequate diet through a sustainable food system that maximizes community self-reliance and social justice." Montana is among five other states whose relative hunger status has worsened since 1996. A number of recent trends compromise food security in Missoula County:

- Only 30% of the students eligible to participate in the Free and Reduced School Lunch Program in the County actually participated from 1999 through 2002.
- About 6% of the County's population received food stamps in an average month; but nearly 15% of the population lived below the poverty line.
- Most emergency food providers in the County have seen an increase in the need for and use of their services.
- In 2002, clients made nearly 31,300 visits to the Missoula Food Bank; that number was up 19% from four years prior (1998).

Sixty-five percent of survey respondents identified that having enough money to buy the food they needed for themselves and their families was at least somewhat of a problem or concern for them. Forty-three percent of survey respondents indicated that they limit meals at least some of the time due to a lack of money and approximately 35% skipped a meal at least some of the time due to lack of money.

How Often Survey Respondents Limited the Size of Meals Due to a Lack of Money (N=618)



"Purchasing food would not be as much of a problem if working wages were higher and health insurance and dental were available."

- consumer

Food for Thought and Action: Recommendations

The Steering Committee for the Community Food Assessment and its University of Montana partners hope these recommendations will inspire community dialogue about the future of food and farming in Missoula County. The first recommendation describes how the specific policies and activities in the other recommendations could be brought about. See the full report, *Food Matters*, for more details.

1 Create a multi-stakeholder, food policy coalition that addresses community needs related to food and agriculture in a comprehensive, systematic, and creative way.

2 Improve food quality and access to healthy foods at emergency food services and elsewhere in the County.

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.

4 Develop a strong community-based food system that supports local farmers and ranchers, and meets consumers' interest in access to locally-grown food.

5 Identify and assess strategies for protecting and assisting working farms and ranches, and for keeping agricultural land affordable for farming and ranching.

6 Investigate further the extent to which transportation to grocery stores and food pantries is a concern for low-income residents throughout the County.

CFA Reports Available

Food Matters: Farm Viability and Food Consumption in Missoula County. Presents studies designed to understand what it will take to keep agriculture going in Missoula County and to document concerns consumers have about food.

Grow, Eat, and Know: A Resource Guide to Food and Farming in Missoula County. Helps you locate organizations and businesses - everything from agricultural programs to food assistance agencies to a diner's guide for local and organic food.

Our Foodshed in Focus: Missoula County Food and Agriculture by the Numbers. Uses existing statistical information to describe patterns in seven major areas of the local food system and how these have changed over time.