



Community Food Systems in Oregon

*Opportunities to Build Capacity for
Food Security, Health, and Economic Vitality*

Executive Summary

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“In the long view, no nation is healthier than its children, or more prosperous than its farmers.”
—Harry Truman

Introduction

Access to healthy, nutritious food is a core component of strong communities and a just society. In Oregon, we are fortunate to have a long growing season, high quality agricultural soils, and a large number of farms that produce a rich diversity of nutritious food crops. Food production itself is supported by an extensive web of processing, packaging, distribution and direct and indirect marketing systems. This complex network of activity can be called a “food system.” When this food is produced locally or regionally and relationships are developed among farmers, businesses, and consumers, a “community food system” is formed. Across Oregon, there are a growing number of nonprofit organizations, academic institutions, businesses, public agencies, and foundations focused on strengthening aspects, or the entirety, of community food systems. This community-based work offers tremendous potential to improve food security and health, and positively impact Oregon’s rural economies.

Food Security and Health: While Oregon produces significantly more food than it can consume, Oregon currently ranks second among all states for the number of people who are forced to skip or reduce the size of their meals because they cannot afford enough food (termed *very low food security*) (OHTF, 2010). In 2009-10, just over 50% of Oregon school children were eligible for a free or reduced-price school meal. In addition, there are strong correlations among hunger, food insecurity, obesity, and chronic disease, and low-income communities and people of color are more likely to suffer from diet-related disease (Shak, Mikkelsen, and Chehimi, 2010). According to the Center for Disease Control and Prevention, in 2009, 23% of Oregonians were considered obese, with closer to 2/3 considered overweight or obese.

Agriculture and Economy: According to Oregon State University (OSU) Extension in their 2008 *Oregon Agriculture and the Economy* report, the number of Oregon farms and their agricultural acreage has remained more stable than expected for almost three decades, and agriculture constitutes approximately 10% of the jobs in Oregon. The 2007 United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) Census of Agriculture provides this snapshot of Oregon agriculture:

- 38,553 farms and 16,399,647 farmland acres – down 4% from 2002; 73% of farms are 99 acres or less
- 83% of farms have annual sales less than \$50,000 and 67% have annual sales less than \$10,000
- The average age of farmers has risen to 58, with only 46% of farmers identifying farming as their primary occupation – the rest hold another job off the farm to supplement income.

Like most sectors, the current recession has taken its toll on agriculture. In 2009, net income for farmers and ranchers fell 41% – down to less than \$563 million from a record \$1.3 billion in 2004.

In addition, over the past 50 years, our nation’s food system has become increasingly industrialized, consolidated, and more globally focused. In general, this has led to improved efficiency for the largest farms, greater economies of scale, and reduced food prices. However, the loss of some aspects of smaller, more localized food systems that are rooted in personal relationships between farmers and the community has had a cost in terms of personal health, food security, and sense of place. In Oregon, we have had less impact from industrialized agriculture because of the diversity of farm products and a strong base of family farmers – many of whom have farmed and cared for their land for multiple generations.

Opportunities Ahead: Across Oregon, a significant amount of community-based work related to food systems has emerged over the past 10 years. During this study, a total of 11 organizations were identified as being engaged in statewide work, and at least 32 organizations are active at the community and/or regional level. This list does not include all of the 20 regional food banks or the smaller organizations and initiatives that touch on food system work in some way.

Across Oregon, people are coming together in their communities to connect directly with food producers, link growers with schools and institutions, teach people about gardening, and grapple with how to make nutritious local food available to everyone. The growth of farmers markets, community supported agriculture or CSAs (weekly subscription box), and local food guides have inspired a renewed connection to the “culture” of agriculture. If direct sales were a commodity, this would place direct sales as the 17th highest commodity just above blueberries and wine grapes. Oregon farm direct sales of \$15 per consumer are far above both the national average (\$4 per consumer) and the level of neighboring states (CA at \$4.48 and WA at \$6.75) (Lev, 2009).

While we celebrate the rise of community food system work in Oregon, we also recognize that we are challenged by what the Multnomah County Food Initiative termed a “two-track food system.” Those who have adequate economic resources and better access can purchase sustainable, local, healthy foods, while lower-income families in both urban and rural communities have fewer healthy food options nearby and are often priced out of purchasing these healthy foods.

This report provides a snapshot of the current community food system work taking place across Oregon. Given the limitations of time and travel, *it is by no means comprehensive*. However, as a result of the tremendous knowledge and expertise of the 48 people interviewed, key findings and strategic areas for potential investment were identified.

Purpose and Methods

The purpose of this report was two-fold: 1) to provide Meyer Memorial Trust with a better understanding of the breadth of community food system work occurring across Oregon, and; 2) to identify several opportunity areas where further investment could catalyze, leverage, and/or expand capacity of the community food system movement. Potential outcomes of stronger community food systems in Oregon are:

- Reduced hunger and increased food security;
- Improved access to healthy food for people of all income-levels;
- Improved health outcomes from increased consumption of fresh, local meat/produce;
- Increased markets for farmers, especially small-mid-size; and
- Stronger local economies (especially rural) resulting from new food sector businesses, new food sector jobs, and food purchase dollars remaining in and circulating through the local economy.

Methods included: 1) 48 interviews with leaders from nonprofit organizations, government agencies, academics, business owners, and foundations; 2) participation in five Webinars; 3) participation in three community events; and, 4) extensive literature review and Internet research.

Defining Community Food Systems

An initial component of this research project involved determining how the Meyer Memorial Trust wanted to define “community food system.” The widely used definition below from the University of California at Davis best met the breadth of community impact that Meyer staff envisioned.

A *sustainable community food system* is a collaborative network that integrates sustainable food production, processing, distribution, consumption, and waste management in order to enhance the environmental, economic, and social health of a particular place. Farmers, consumers, and communities partner to create a more locally based, self-reliant food economy. Sustainable community food system projects increase resident participation to achieve the following goals:

- Access to affordable, healthy food for all members of the community;
- A stable base of family farms that use sustainable production practices and emphasize local inputs;
- Marketing and processing practices that create more direct links between farmers and consumers;
- Improved access by all community members to an adequate, affordable, nutritious diet;
- Food and agriculture-related businesses that create jobs and recirculate financial capital;
- Improved living and working conditions for farm and food system labor;
- Creation of food and agriculture policies that promote local or sustainable food production, processing, and consumption; and
- Adoption of dietary behaviors that reflect concern about individual, environmental, and community health.

Community Food Systems Work in Oregon

Over the past ten years, there has been tremendous growth in the number and sophistication of organizations working on various aspects of community food systems in Oregon. Some organizations are more focused on reducing hunger, while others concentrate on building the local food economy through increasing direct markets for farmers; work on public health issues such as obesity, diet-related disease, and increasing access to healthy food; or provide training to the next generation of farmers. The [full version of this report](#) includes a map, as well as a list of academic programs, state/federal agencies and initiatives, and foundations engaged in food systems work.

Key Findings

Our 48 interviewees were asked 10-12 questions focused on specific issues such as food system infrastructure, statewide leadership, Farm-to-School, and low-income access. More open-ended discussion, especially in regards to key opportunities to build the capacity of the food system movement, were also incorporated. Key findings include:

1) Strong Community Food System Work to Build Upon

Oregon's strong and growing number of organizations working on community food system issues are led by extremely talented and passionate visionaries – generally operating with limited budgets. One of the biggest challenges for these organizations is the intense and growing competition for a scarce number of private and public sector funding opportunities.

2) Infrastructure Needed to Strengthen Community Food Systems

Across Oregon, the need for more local food storage, processing, and distribution facilities and/or businesses came up repeatedly in interviews, including meat processing/rendering and grain storage facilities.

- ***New Storage, Processing, and Distribution Facilities:*** With changes in the agricultural system that focused on consolidation, commodities, and export, many communities that historically had adequate infrastructure in place have closed facilities, and those still in operation are often at capacity. The expansion of local food system infrastructure has the potential to reduce the

environmental impact of agriculture by lessening food miles traveled, to create food hubs that increase regional food self-sufficiency, and to boost regional economies with food sector jobs.

- **More Local/Regional Distributors:** Many interviewees discussed the challenges of working within the current distribution system – from distributors who won’t work with smaller farmers because of quantity or consistency, to small rural grocery stores that have trouble getting deliveries or stocking shelves at a reasonable cost.
- **Research and Feasibility Studies:** A first step in identifying infrastructure needs is to research the capacity of current storage, processing, and distribution facilities/businesses to meet local need. The second step is to examine the potential for renovating vacant facilities, constructing new facilities, and investing in the start-up of new food sector businesses.

3) Job Potential in the Food and Agriculture Sector

Primary job sectors in the agricultural industry include production, processing, support services, wholesale trade, transportation and warehousing, and retail trade. The greatest potential to increase family wage jobs is in the value-added processing sector. However, more economic analysis is needed to determine which products have the most economic viability and where they could best be produced.

- **Storage, Processing, and Distribution Facilities/Businesses:** In order for regional food systems to meet the needs of producers and institutional buyers, more regional storage, processing, and distribution facilities – or on-the-ground “food hubs” – are needed. Food entrepreneurs and/or venture capital will be necessary to finance these start-ups.
- **Food Business Cooperatives:** The creation of new food business cooperatives, including worker owned cooperatives, could address multiple social and economic benefits and provide a strong business model for new food sector businesses. Oregon has an existing network of cooperatives and an organization that supports new start-ups. Evergreen Cooperatives in Cleveland, Ohio, presents an innovative model for “green” job training and employment in the food sector.
- **Training New Farmers:** Across the state, there is renewed interest in farming from people of all ages, who see the profession as a good match for their social and environmental values. Some of these new farmers need access to land, and most need small business skills. Training programs like OSU’s Beginning Farmer Program, S. Oregon Farm Incubator Program, and Rogue Farm Corps could be expanded to meet this need. New value-added food processing centers could also provide training and employment while linking producers with larger institutional (K-12, university, etc.) markets, while area food banks could utilize shared storage and processing facilities and provide job training to benefit both emergency and non-emergency food systems.
- **Supporting Immigrant Farmers and Food Entrepreneurs:** Training programs for immigrant farmers like Adelante Mujeres and Huerta de la Familia are successfully providing business skills, and access to land and to farmers markets and other direct outlets. Adelante Mujeres and Bienestar in Hillsboro are also actively working on a new community kitchen that would create jobs and support immigrant-run food businesses.

4) Community Food Systems Address Hunger, Health, Social Equity, and Access

There are complex intersections among hunger, health, and obesity that have been researched and documented in recent years. Most often these disparities result from unequal access to healthy food based on race, socio-economic status, and geographic location. Community food system work is taking on the challenge of addressing these complex issues.

- **Encouraging Community Leadership:** It is critical that those who have, or are currently, experiencing hunger, health, or food access issues, become empowered to shape community food

system solutions. They hold great knowledge of what will work for their communities and their participation is critical to success.

- ***Subsidizing Access to Locally Produced Healthy Food:*** Today, locally produced healthy food can at times be more expensive than food shipped in from other states. Access for low-income households is being improved through electronic benefit transfer (EBT) machines at farmers markets, SNAP match incentives, WIC farmers market coupons, subsidized CSAs, mobile farmers markets, and local food purchase for the emergency food system. More research and strategies are needed to reduce barriers to access that are related to income, education, and geographic location.
- ***Maximizing use of Federal Nutrition Programs:*** Many interviewees emphasized that communities should maximize use of Federal nutrition programs, including SNAP, WIC, and school meal programs. There is interest in better understanding what people are purchasing with their SNAP benefits to determine if more education is needed to encourage healthy choices.
- ***Supporting Nutrition Education and Cooking Programs:*** Interviewees generally agreed on providing education programs focused on nutrition, food budgeting, and cooking while work is being done to improve our food environment. One person asked, “How can you teach about healthy food and then send people back into a toxic environment full of junk food and fast food?”
- ***Expanding Home, Community, and School Garden Opportunities:*** Home, community, and school gardens came up in many interviews as tools for empowerment, education, and self-reliance. They offer great potential to teach people about where their food comes from, local agriculture, and the benefits of good nutrition.
- ***Improving Food Environment/Expanding Healthy Retail:*** In recent years, the Healthy Retail movement has taken off nationwide and there is need and momentum that Oregon can leverage. The focus of “healthy retail” is bringing grocery stores and other healthy retailers to underserved urban and rural communities, especially “food deserts” where there is little to no access to foods needed for a healthy diet. Healthy Food Retail projects can improve healthy food options at urban corner stores, rural grocery stores, and other places with limited access.

5) Farm-to-School/School Gardens Positively Impact Next Generation

In 2009-10, 50.2% of the 559,100 school-age children in Oregon (280,668 children) were eligible for a free or reduced-priced school meal. On a daily basis, just over 200,000 children in Oregon eat a free or reduced-priced lunch (ODE, 2010). Farm-to-School programs connect local farmers and food processors with school cafeterias in preschools, K-12 schools, and colleges. They allow for more Oregon agricultural products on the lunch line, and directly connect youth to food production through school gardens, field trip to farms/ranches, and/or farmers in the classroom (Ratcliffe, 2010).

- ***Positive Impacts on Nutrition and Health for Next Generation:*** Research shows increasing participation in school meal programs is relevant in fighting obesity because children who eat school lunch consume twice the servings of fruits and vegetables and greater amounts of grains and dairy than students who do not participate (Rainville, 2001). The good nutrition that school meals can offer, combined with hands-on education about healthy eating and agriculture, can change behaviors and help us turn back the tide on hunger, obesity, and health-related disease.
- ***Positive Economic Benefits:*** These programs also have positive economic benefits. In 2007, Ecotrust piloted a Farm-to-School pilot program in 91 Portland and Gervais district schools that served about 22,000 lunches per day. It revealed that for every \$1 spent by schools on Oregon products, another \$.87 cycles throughout Oregon’s economy. Ecotrust’s new online *FoodHub* tool will help increase school and institutional purchasing of locally produced food.
- ***Potential to Leverage Investment:*** The W.K. Kellogg Foundation and Northwest Health Foundation (NWHF) have both contributed resources to Farm-to-School in Oregon. Since 2008, Ecotrust’s Food and Farms Program has served as the regional lead agency for the National Farm

to School Network. Oregon is the first state to create state-level Farm-to-School and School Garden positions. In addition to ODA, ODE, and Ecotrust, regional Farm to School coordinators are working in the following areas: Eugene, Hood River, Corvallis, Ashland, La Grande, Bend-La Pine, and Portland. The Lane County Farm-to-School Program was recently honored with two districts selected (4J and Bethel) out of 15 sites nationwide to receive visits from USDA officials.

6) Importance of Community Assessment, Leadership, and Networking

Increasing the capacity of communities to work together to meet their own food needs is critical for shaping strong, sustainable food systems and achieving positive outcomes.

- ***Oregon's FEAST – A National Model:*** Oregon has a new community organizing model called Food Education Agriculture Solutions Together (FEAST). Created by Sharon Thornberry at Oregon Food Bank, FEAST provides an opportunity for community participation in facilitated discussions about food, education, and local agriculture, and for building a healthier, more equitable, and resilient food system. FEAST events have taken place in nine rural Oregon areas, and the program is starting to be seen as a model nationwide; OFB is in the process of replicating it for distribution. U of O RARE volunteers (Resource Assistance for Rural Environments, Americorps-funded) augment FEAST events with two-year community assessments to organize folks around specific food system projects. Assessments are currently being conducted in Southeast Oregon, Pendleton, La Grande, Astoria, Grant County, and Hood River.
- ***Statewide Networking and Sharing of Best Practices:*** Throughout the interviews, the sentiment was not to fund a new statewide convening organization or to have an existing organization take on a defined leadership role. However, many organizations in more rural parts of Oregon wanted to be more connected to organizations doing similar work. They all agreed that meeting face-to-face once a year would be beneficial for sharing best practices. Strengthening online resources was also suggested as a low-cost strategy to increase communication and networking.

7) Funding Challenges and Opportunities for Community Food System Work

- ***Foundation investment continues to play important role:*** Grants from local and regional foundations like MMT have played a significant role in building community food system work to date. Many interviewees commended MMT and other funders for wanting to learn more about food system work.
- ***More funding opportunities needed:*** Several organizations spoke of the limited number of funding sources for food system work. Federal funds for these projects are highly competitive and often only for start-up or pilot projects. As more foundations learn about food system efforts, the hope is that the pool of funders will grow. Many interviewees mentioned the need for general operating support and multi-year grants in order to grow their organizations.
- ***Potential to leverage Specialty Crop Grants:*** Each year, the Oregon Department of Agriculture (ODA) receives allocated funding (\$1.7 million in 2010) from the USDA to provide grants that enhance the competitiveness of specialty crops in Oregon. These dollars could be leveraged with foundation support to encourage projects focused on strengthening community food systems.

8) Areas Identified for Technical Assistance and Research

- ***Federal Grant Assistance:*** By providing technical assistance and match dollars for Federal grant applications, Oregon can maximize Federal support for community food system efforts.
- ***Economic Analyses:*** Compiling solid quantitative data would assist local stakeholders in identifying priorities for economic development and the potential economic impact of community food systems. Another potential analysis would involve determining which of the 20,000 products not in the New Seasons Home Grown program might be feasible for production in Oregon.

- ***Farm Transition Planning:*** What is the future of food production in Oregon when the average age of a farmer has risen to 58? Friends of Family Farmers has a small, new online I-Farm program to link transitioning farmers with emerging farmers. The Farm Bureau and others provide workshops on transition planning. However, in order to keep Oregon's valuable food-producing farms viable, an investment is needed to reach out to aging farmers to share resources and options.
- ***Low-income Access to Healthy Food:*** More research and creative thinking is needed to derive solutions to barriers facing low-income access to healthy local and regionally produced products.
- ***Shared Values and Measurable Outcomes:*** The creation of a clear vision and identification of indicators or outcomes would help focus efforts and allow us to measure progress. North Carolina's 2010 *Farm-to Fork* project led by the Center for Environmental Farming Systems (a partnership between two universities and the N.C. Dept. of Agriculture) and California's 2005 *Vivid Picture Project* coordinated by Ecotrust's Food and Farms Program offer excellent models for statewide visioning and planning.

The opportunity to improve food security, health, and economic vitality through community food system work is a positive solutions-oriented approach to persistent issues like hunger, obesity, and unemployment that continue to challenge our great state. In building upon the innovative work already occurring through increased investment, we can improve the quality of life and health for all Oregonians and provide a model for strong community food systems nationwide.