Lawmakers Focus on Local Food & Farm Bill

Enhancing production and marketing of locally grown foods in Kansas is the focus of a bill currently before the Kansas Legislature. SB 380 would establish a statewide task force to prepare a local food and farm plan containing policy and funding recommendations for expanding and supporting local food systems and assessing obstacles to increasing such production.

The plan would also include recommendations for expanding local food infrastructure for processing and distribution and encouraging farmers markets and grocery stores in unserved or underserved areas.

“While Kansas agricultural exports lead the nation, here at home farms capture less than 5% of the food dollar spent on fruits and vegetables in our state,” testified KRC Executive Director Julie Mettenburg. “With $767 million spent each year on produce alone in Kansas, that represents a significant economic opportunity that we are leaving on the table.” KSU research has found that only about $32 million or 4% of that $767 million is grown locally.

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Commentary:
Sustaining Water in Kansas: State Seeks Input to 50-Year Plan
by Mary Fund

Water in a variable and unpredictable climate has always been the reality in Kansas. Feast or famine is common, and sometimes within the same year. Over time, technological and engineering solutions have eased or solved some of the problems, like tapping the Ogallala or building the federal reservoir system for flood control, recreation and water supply. Development tempered with management has been the approach.

But as we have known for many years, the Ogallala that built the western Kansas agricultural economic complex is finite. Recharge is minimal. A recent KSU study found that 30% of the groundwater is gone. Without any change in use, within another 50 years, another 40% will be gone endangering the industrial agricultural empire built in the western part of the state.

Sedimentation and loss of storage capacity at federal reservoirs threatens water supply and flood control for many municipalities which serve 2/3 of the state’s population. Siltation also threatens the cooling supply for the state’s lone nuclear power plant. Water quality remains a concern statewide, and impacts quantity available for public consumption, but at present appears to be taking a back seat to quantity issues.

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From reservoirs suffering from periodic drought to center pivots over the Ogallala’s dwindling supply to variable supplies for livestock and household use, water in Kansas has always been a “feast or famine” problem. File photos.
Small Farmer Commentary

Concerns Rising Over 2,4 D Corn and Soybeans

by Mary Fund

When Roundup Ready™ seeds were introduced in the mid-1990’s, farmers were told these would eliminate the need for more toxic, prone to drift herbicides like 2,4 D. Farmers bought the Roundup Ready™ corn and soybean seed in record numbers, because it was so simple. Although they had to pay more for the seed, they could apply a low dose of the herbicide once instead of a high dose of two or more herbicides.

Today according to USDA, genetically modified (GM) herbicide resistant crops are grown on 93 percent of the soybean acres in the U.S and 85 percent of the corn acres resulting in heavy use of glyphosate, the chief ingredient in Round Up. Heavy use has resulted in weed resistance. Farmers began applying glyphosate more than once, or using a heavier dosage, or applying a cocktail of herbicides. Over time, all of this only fed the development of weed resistance. (KSU reports glyphosate resistance found in Kansas to marestail, common water hemp, giant ragweed, common ragweed, Kochia and Palmer amaranth or pigweed.)

Now, Dow AgroSciences is set to bring back an older chemical- 2,4 D, and is seeking USDA approval for 2,4 D resistant corn and soybean seed. 2,4 D is the 3rd most common herbicide used in the U.S. on farms, roadsides and in many lawn care products. But it volatilizes easily and is prone to drift, thus threatening off site crops. Fruits and vegetables and non-GE crops are especially vulnerable. It has also been linked to cancer and other health concerns, although EPA has repeatedly given it a pass.

Agricultural scientist Charles Benbrook estimates that widespread planting of 2,4 D resistant corn would trigger a 20-fold increase in 2,4 D use. Thousands of farmers, consumers, and health professionals are questioning the approval of 2,4 D resistant crops and have submitted comments to the USDA.

Just as this controversy is rising, USDA recently released a report stating that the impacts of genetically modified crops on the environment and on food production are mixed. USDA ERS researchers found that over the first 15 years of their commercial use, GMO seeds have not been shown to definitely increase yields, and that sometimes yields are lower than conventional varieties. Over reliance on herbicides for weed control, they wrote, has also led to weed resistance resulting in a need for more herbicides.

Other studies are also pointing to the damage to the soil microbiology that repeated use of the same herbicides and perhaps the GM seed itself are causing. The homogenization of the landscape through planting one or two GM crops, as higher crop prices encourage expansion of cropland at the expense of grass or even roadside ditches, riparian grass and forest areas, is challenging diversity in unprecedented ways.

Margaret Mellon, a senior scientist with the Union of Concerned Scientists, in a recent interview for Acres USA, explains that it is not that Dow is substituting 2,4 D for glyphosate, but that they are adding it to the glyphosate tolerance. In a few years, she explains, we will see multiple herbicide resistance in weeds.

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To “solve” the weed resistance problem by adding layers of more herbicides, she asserts, ensures that Super Super weeds will develop. Mellon argues that instead of switching out chemicals we should adopt a more agroecological approach to agriculture. Not completely without chemicals, she explained, but with minimal chemicals.

Such an approach would involve turning to longer and more varied crop rotations to move away from the mono-cropping of GM corn or soybeans, something land grant universities have begun advocating to counter pest and weed problems. Planting cover crops to build soil health, control erosion and weeds, and hold moisture, and integrating livestock back into our farms would all add much needed diversity to our farmland and to our farm economy.

It would encourage greater diversity and encourage planting of specialty crops, fruits and non-GMO crops, thus allowing expansion of new enterprises essential to a farm to fork food system.

Contact Mary Fund at mfund@kansusruralcenter.org

Welcome to New KRC Board Members

The Kansas Rural Center held its 2014 elections at the winter board meeting February 22 in Topeka, Ks. Newly elected to the board were:

* Andi and Kurt Dale, Dale Family Farms, Protection. Dale Family Farms direct-markets products including beef, pork and poultry from southwest Kansas. Andi has served on KRC event panels and calls, providing expertise on strategic marketing. You can learn more about this inspiring family at: www.dalefamilyfarms.com/

* Lisa French, Cheney Lake Water Quality Project, Partridge. A former KRC staff member many years ago, Lisa is well known to farmers in the central part of the state. She partnered with KRC last year on the Women and Conservation project and has served on the Kansas Water Authority. Lisa and her husband, Jim who has also served on the KRC board and works for Oxfam International, farm in central Ks.

*Jennifer Kongs, managing editor, Mother Earth News, Topeka. A former employee of the Lominska's Hoyland Farm, Jennifer is passionate about sustainable food and farming and has been eager to volunteer with KRC. She and her fiance have recently purchased a small amount of land north of Lawrence. She has also been an active leader in the start-up of the new Lawrence-area environmental women's group.

Current board members Marjorie Van Buren (Topeka), Donn Teske (Wheaton) and Charlie Griffin (Riley) will also be returning for three-year terms. We extend a big thank you to Hilary Brown, Lawrence, who is going off the board.
More details are becoming available about the federal farm bill, signed by the president in January. The bill is basically a mixed bag with cuts to conservation and a failure to reform unfair uncapped, unlimited payments in some commodity payments and crop insurance subsidies.

But over the next ten years, it will invest about $1.2 billion for beginning farmers, local foods, organic agriculture, rural development, and specialty crops through innovative programs that have been stranded or in limbo for over the past year. Crop insurance subsidies have been relinked to conservation requirements, and several riders harmful to competition and the environment were rejected.

The new Farm Bill will spend about $1 trillion over the next decade with the bulk of that (79%) spent on food and nutrition programs (SNAP). Of the remaining 21%, 45% will go to crop insurance subsidies, 13% to commodity programs, 27% to conservation and 4% for everything else.

Reducing overall farm bill spending was foremost in Congress’ mind as they worked the bill. The final cuts (including automatic sequestration cuts) are about $12.7 billion for commodities, $6 billion for conservation, $8 billion for SNAP, and $3.7 billion out of everything else.

You can read more detail at the National Sustainable Agriculture Coalition website http://sustainableagriculture.net/blog/2014-farm-bill-outcomes/, but here are a few more highlights:

Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) funding is cut slightly. But the program’s payment limit is increased to $450,000. This was done at the behest of the CAFO industrial dairy and livestock sector, and will result in less EQIP funds being available for other farmers.

Renewable energy will receive $879 million in new dollars, including $435 million for the Rural Energy Assistance Program (REAP).

Local & regional food systems received a big boost, relative to where they started. The bill triples funding for the Farmers Market and Local Food Promotion Program, and nearly doubles the Community Food Projects funding. It also creates a new Food Insecurity Nutrition Incentive grant program for organizations administering farmers markets and grocery store programs that encourage increased fruit and vegetables consumption by SNAP recipients.

The bill also directs USDA to develop and implement a new Whole Farm Diversified Risk Management Insurance program to assist highly diversified farms of all kinds, including specialty crops, integrated grain and livestock farms, and organic farms—all of which have been left out of the federal crop insurance program in the past.

Organic Agriculture regained $11.5 million/year for the National Organic Certification Cost-Share Program, and funding was renewed for the Organic Agriculture Research and Extension Initiative. The bill also includes a provision to exempt organic farmers from paying into the conventional check-off programs, and allows the organic sector as a whole to establish a separate check-off program for organic if they decide to.

Rural Development. Value Added Producer Grant program will receive $12.5 million annually to help farmers develop new markets for farm identify preserved local and regional food products. The Rural Microentrepreneur Assistance Program will have $3 million a year to help very small rural businesses.

Beginning Farmer and Socially Disadvantaged Farmers and Ranchers. The bill reauthorizes the Beginning Farmer and Rancher Development Program, providing $100 million for new farmer training programs, including a new focus on military veterans. The final bill also provides $33 million for the Conservation Reserve Program-Transition Incentives Program to incentivize retiring landowners to rent or sell their expiring CRP land to new or minority farmers.
Local Food Task Force...

Continued from page 1

Kansas also has several underserved areas in terms of grocery stores and fresh produce. Rural and urban communities alike are assessing their options to provide food access for local residents. Statewide farm to fork task forces in Iowa, North Carolina and Oregon found that farms and increasing local production were critical to these food access solutions. The USDA food plate recommends that 50% of one’s food plate should be fruits and vegetables but less than 15% of Kansans reach that recommendation.

In Kansas, interest in locally grown foods has dramatically increased as the number of farmers markets has doubled to 118 over the last 20 years. Mettenburg also pointed to a growing network of Kansas farmers who have taken a local or regional food and marketing approach.

From Junction City, Hildebrand Farms Dairy sells milk into grocery stores across the state. In Kingman County, Fiat Farms provides fresh produce through its 100-member Community Supported Agriculture (CSA). At Protection, Kansas, Dale Family Farms are selling local beef, pork, and poultry. In southeast Kansas, Chautauqua Hills Farm operates a thriving u-pick blueberry operation. Nearby, at McCune, Schenker Family Farms are selling their meats plus products from their neighbors into Oklahoma, Missouri, and Kansas City. At Garnett, the Bauman Family began producing poultry for local sales and ended up opening a USDA inspected processing facility, which they have just expanded due to overwhelming demand. In Northwest Kansas, farmers formed the High Plains Food Co-op at Atwood, coordinating sales of food locally and into the Front Range of Colorado. And in Wichita, MG Honor Farm is partnering with companies like Cessna to offer workplace CSA programs.

“Specialization. Serving niches. Meeting market demand. Growing new enterprises. Expansion and investment. If this sounds like small business, that’s because it is,” Mettenburg told the Senate Agriculture Committee.

“To further understand the challenges that stand between farmers and local customers, we (KRC) have partnered with the Kansas Health Foundation on a three-year initiative to help communities work with their local farms to solve these food access challenges,” Mettenburg testified.

“We will continue to advance our understanding of the challenges standing in the way of our farms’ ability to provide food directly to our people, and we look forward to working with this important Task Force to advance some of these solutions.”

The original bill called for an 18-member task force from varying disciplines and interests including legislators, and representatives of farm organizations, Kansas State University economists and horticultural specialists, food stamp and WIC administrators, farmers markets, small business development, and others.

Before passing it out of committee, the Senate Agriculture Committee amended the bill cutting the task force to seven with three to be appointed by the Governor, one to represent the Kansas Department of Agriculture (KDA) appointed by the secretary of agriculture, one from Kansas State University appointed by the dean of college of agriculture, and one each from House and Senate agriculture committees. KDA was charged with the administrative responsibilities. The House could still amend it further.

But if passed, the bill would set up the task force by September 2014, and charge it with completing a plan with recommendations to submit to the Senate and House Agriculture committees in the 2016 session. Contact M. Fund at mfund@kansasruralcenter.org and Julie Mettenburg at jmettenburg@kansasruralcenter.org.
How do you vision the Kansas farm-to-fork future? What’s standing in the way and how do we achieve that vision? As you can imagine, these are not easy questions to answer but they are just a few the Kansas Rural Center asked statewide partners and regional leaders across the state last fall who are actively working on farm-to-fork issues and solutions. This spring and summer KRC will take these questions on the road and host a series of Agriculture and Health summits in communities across Kansas.

Community leaders, food producers, retail and institutional food purchasers, chefs, health professionals, and anyone interested in the future and Kansas’ food system and health are invited to attend agriculture and health summits to be held in the Greensburg, Colby, and Chanute regions of Kansas. Each regional summit will provide the opportunity for grassroots community members to learn more about the Kansas farm, food, and health environment while also providing a platform to voice their concerns and vision.

Experts will be invited to speak about specific challenges or opportunities relevant to that region. Some of the major themes identified in the dialogue last fall may be addressed at these summits. These include the need to increase regional food infrastructure, increased producer and consumer education, need for improved food processing opportunities, farm to school opportunities and food assistance programs support just to name a few.

Summit participants will also have the opportunity to comment and add to earlier dialogue from Statewide Partners and regional leaders in roundtable discussions.

Last fall, KRC convened over 60 Statewide Partners and Regional Leaders including food producers, processors, distributors, retailers, and others to identify strategic goals for a Ks. Farm to Fork vision.

These goals and visions along with feedback from the regional summits will be published in a Statewide Farm-to-Fork Food Assessment and Plan by this summer 2014 which will then be used to help generate a targeted list of policies at all levels needed to provide support or remove barriers in Kansas’ farm-to-fork food system.

The Kansas Rural Center is leading a 3-year Statewide Partnership Initiative, Community Food Solutions for a Healthy Kansas, aimed at increasing healthy foods access and consumption in Kansas. KRC has chosen to advance a farm-to-fork approach to the initiative’s goals, recognizing that in Kansas, our own farms are a critical part of the solution to good eating and health.

Final dates and agenda’s for these events will soon be announced at Kansasruralcenter.org. If you would like to volunteer or donate to any of these events please contact Natalie Fullerton at nfullerton@kansasruralcenter.org or 402-310-0177.
Local Food News

April Kicks-off with the First in a Series of Workshops
On Profiting from Polytunnels in Kansas

by Cole Cottin & Dan Phelps

Interested in increasing the efficiency and profitability of your farm utilizing polytunnel structures, such as high tunnels? “Profiting from Polytunnels” is the theme of the first in a series of ‘Tunnel to Table’ workshops coordinated by the Kansas Rural Center to advance participant knowledge of and success with polytunnel (or “plasticulture”) production in Kansas.

On-farm polytunnel workshops will be hosted on farms across the state throughout 2014, with Kansas farmers highlighted as expert presenters. The series will conclude with the release of a Tunnel to Table decision making tool and resource guide for Kansas farms.

The kick-off Tunnel to Table workshop will be held at Juniper Hill Farms in northern Douglas County, Kansas, on Saturday, April 5, from 10:00 am to 4:00 pm. It will cover both basic and advanced polytunnel concepts and strategies.

A registration fee of $15 includes lunch. Women and minorities are encouraged to attend and may be eligible for workshop scholarships. Registration details are available online at kansasruralcenter.org/T2T, or by contacting Cole Cottin, KRC Program Coordinator, at ccottin@kansasruralcenter.org or 785-992-4572.

Julie Mettenburg, executive director of the Kansas Rural Center, explains why polytunnels may be of particular value in Kansas. “We are a state with extreme weather. Polytunnels can provide significant crop protection, easing some of the production challenges with specialty crops in Kansas. They can also dramatically extend the production and income season for Kansas growers.”

Growers of all scales and experience levels as well as farmer educators and farm service providers, will benefit from producer-led presentations and roundtable discussions at the April workshop. Topics will include: structural integrity, overcoming common challenges, crop planning, financial analysis, and useful advancements in polytunnel technology.

Participants will gain an enhanced understanding of the benefits and challenges different types of tunnel structures present in our region, and will learn about various resources available to introduce or enhance polytunnel crop production.

The afternoon workshop session will continue outdoors with a farm tour and series of polytunnel production and low-tunnel construction demonstrations with hosts Scott Thellman, owner/operator of Juniper Hill Farms, and Dan Phelps, Tunnel to Table Activity Coordinator.

Juniper Hill Farms is located just north of Lawrence, Kansas, and produces over 900 acres of hay and alfalfa alongside four acres of diverse year-round organic vegetables. Scott Thellman - a first generation farmer and senior student of agricultural business at Iowa State University - manages Juniper Hill with a great deal of professionalism.

“We schedule plantings on each of our tunnels’ five beds at the beginning of the year to ensure adequate supply of our products to markets on a weekly basis,” explains Thellman, “Beds are planted weekly, biweekly, or monthly based on historical yield/production/sales data compiled on farm to ensure the highest profitability and maximum efficiency within each structure.”

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Recognizing that pollinators play a role in a diversified farming system, and that our bees are in crisis, KRC has dipped its toes into this area of interest thanks to a small grant in Douglas County. Response to the initial announcement of “An Introductory Beekeeping Workshop” for February 25 was so overwhelming that a second workshop was quickly scheduled for February 24. Nearly 200 people attended the two workshops.

Workshop attendees learned about honey bees and sustainable beekeeping practices from Master Beekeepers Becky and Steve Tipton. Interested participants also filled out applications to be one of six lucky people to receive a free hive of honey bees, basic beekeeping equipment and beginning beekeeping training, this spring. Recipients of the free bees and beekeeping equipment will be chosen and notified early in March.

The workshops were the first in a series of four pollinator conservation workshops being hosted by KRC as part of a grant from the Elizabeth Schultz Environmental Fund, which was created through the Douglas County Community Foundation by retired KU professor Elizabeth Schultz to increase awareness and understanding of the local environment.

Participants got a peek into the complex and interesting lives of honey bees, the challenges they face due to Colony Collapse Disorder and other stressors, and learned about sustainable beekeeping practices and local beekeeping resources and organizations. Master Beekeepers Steve and Becky Tipton led the conversation on bees and beekeeping.

The Tiptons were excited about the opportunity to help introduce more people to honey bees and beekeeping, and by the prospect of adding new beekeepers in Kansas. “It is my belief that the bees will be saved by returning to the practices of 150 years ago, when every “farm” had a few hives of bees,” Becky stated.

This notion jives well with KRC’s mission. According to Julie Mettenburg, Executive Director, “KRC believes strongly in a farm and food system that is diverse and works in conjunction with the natural environment, not against it. Incorporating honey bees and pollinator habitat into the Kansas farming landscape, in both rural and urban settings, is a step in the right direction for improving the health of the land and people in Kansas.”

Recipients of the free bees and beekeeping equipment will be registered in area beginning beekeeping courses in order to learn the basics before their package bees arrive in late April. Each new beekeeper will be paired with a mentor from the local beekeeping community to help oversee hive assembly and installation of the package bees.

KRC will host two additional workshops in Douglas County as part of the grant. A pollinator habitat workshop will be held in late spring or early summer to provide education and resources on creating pollinator habitat. Gardeners and farmers will learn strategies for creating pollinator habitat at low cost utilizing native plants and flowers that benefit pollinator populations as well as other wildlife species. A workshop in late summer will focus on marketing and selling honey and other hive products, locally. More information on these events will be provided as it becomes available.

For more information contact Joanna Voigt at jvoigt@kansusruralcenter.org.
Water and Future of Kansas...
Continued from page 1

Combine all these with increasing weather extremes of high precipitation events and/or drought intensified by climate change, the already feast or famine nature of water in Kansas and the High Plains is multiplied.

Last October, responding to growing concerns about the declining Ogallala Aquifer and accelerated sedimentation of federal reservoirs, Governor Brownback issued a call to action for a new Vision for Water in Kansas—a 50 Year vision to meet current and future water needs. The Kansas Water Office (KWO), Kansas Department of Agriculture (KDA), Kansas Water Authority (KWA), and other state agencies plus the Governor’s Council of Economic Advisors make up the “Visioning Team”. They are on a one year mission to solicit input from stakeholders (that is all of us), compile data, conduct research, and develop a plan forward.

The state has had a state water plan since the mid-1980’s when an on-going planning process was instituted. But this new focus is like the existing planning process on steroids—extra energy and effort are being poured into it. The KWO and KWA staff are fanning out across the state with presentations and meetings asking for public input—our concerns and ideas for programs and policies.

State officials plan to have a draft vision statement or plan ready by July, then take it to the public again, with a final version to be ready by the October 2014 Governor’s conference on water. Watch your local media for meetings in your area, or go to the KWO website for a look at their calendar. (http://www.kwo.org/50_Year_Vision/50_Year_Vision.htm)

KWO’s regular calendar also lists meetings of the Basin Advisory Teams and the Kansas Water Authority and others that will also provide information about the water planning efforts. (http://www.kwo.org/calendar/calendar.htm)

Kansans need to pay close attention to this process, as interesting ideas are already being thrown about such as the Kansas Aqueduct Project. This is actually the revival, with new twists, of old plans to move high flow water from the Missouri River via canal to western Kansas.

A similar idea was floated in 1982 and shot down due to its high cost and the political quick sand surrounding interstate and interbasin water transfers. Whenever water supply gets tight in the Plains states, schemes to move water from distant sources pop up, like the other mid-1980’s proposal to melt glaciers in Canada and pipe the water south.

If the aqueduct idea is serious, then the question must be asked as to whether the state has indeed moved beyond its development mentality to management and conservation, which is what many claimed with the establishment of the State Water Plan in 1985.

One thing that has not received much discussion yet is financing. Given the changes to the state’s tax structure the past two years and the uncertainties of state revenues, who and how will we pay for the programs, structures and changes needed?

As some quickly pointed out when the Governor launched his water initiative last fall, funds for the existing state water plan have been routinely cut for many years. Already this session, legislators cut the funds to dredge John Redmond Reservoir, one of the linch pins of solving one of the state’s most serious reservoir problems.

How will the Kansas economy, based as it is on agricultural production and industry, adapt to what may be an even more variable climatic future? How do we ensure that the way we farm enhances soil and water resources as opposed to finding new ways to continue extractive practices or adoption of a new piratical approach on the water of others?

Page Stegner, essayist and historian about the American West once wrote “To promote growth of any community beyond its legitimate and predictable water resource is to risk one of two things: eventual slow down or collapse, and retrenchment to realistic levels; or a continuing and piratical encroachment on the water of other communities at the expense of their prosperity and perhaps life…”

What would a sustainable water future look like in Kansas and across the High Plains? This is the question that all Kansans should be asking in the coming months. Contact Mary Fund at mfund@kansasruralcenter.org
FDA Listens: An Update on Federal Food Safety Rules
by Cole Cottin

In December 2013, U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) announced that it will make “significant changes” to proposed federal food safety rules after receiving significant comment and feedback from farmers and advocates across the nation.

“You spoke. We heard you.” Announced Michael Taylor, the FDA official leading the process. “...we have learned a great deal, and our thinking has evolved,” he explains. Taylor credits the change in thinking to the many farmers, researchers, and others who provided input during the public comment period for the rules on produce safety and preventive controls for human food - which were published in January 2013.

The Kansas Rural Center joined many of its partners and constituents in submitting feedback on the proposed produce and preventative control rules during the initial comment period.

In summer 2014, FDA will accept public comment on revised provisions in the produce and preventative controls rules. The provisions undergoing major revision include those dealing with water quality standards and testing, standards for using raw manure and compost, provisions affecting mixed-use facilities (such as food hubs and CSAs), and procedures for withdrawing the qualified exemption for certain farms.

When will the rules begin to directly impact farms? Once comments are submitted and reviewed for the various rules, the FDA will publicly issue final rules with a corresponding enforcement date. The FDA is congressionally mandated to finalize the rules by mid-2015.

According to FDA, depending on the complexity of each rule, impacted businesses will have about 6-months to a year to comply once the rules are finalized. After that grace period, the rules will officially be in effect and enforced.

How exactly the rules will be enforced remains a topic of discussion. FDA attorney, Marc Sanchez, recently advised, “We will see FSMA enforced through a combination of traditional practices, such as warning letters, as well as through third-party, private litigation.”

The Kansas Rural Center will notify email list subscribers when the comment period opens for the revised produce and preventative control rules. To subscribe, visit: www.kansasruralcenter.org.

U.S. Farmland Being Eyed by Private Equity

Over the next two decades, over 400 million acres of farmland in the U.S. will change hands as older farmers retire. New evidence indicates this land is being pursued by private equity investors, which is helping increase land prices, which in turn makes it harder if not impossible for beginning farmers to get into farming.

Critics say private non-farm investment could speed up the already fast paced consolidation of the US food industry with broad based ramifications for both human and environmental health. The Oakland Institute, a watchdog group focusing on global large scale land acquisitions, is tracking rising interest in farmland from the financial industry.

They report the amount of U.S. land owned by private investors is thought to be relatively low, pointing to a 2011 estimate that large-scale investors owned around one percent of U.S. farmland, worth between three five billion dollars. Another industry analyst estimates this at $10 billion, suggesting that institutional share of farmland ownership is rising.

Combine rising interest from the financial sector with the aging of the American farmer (about 6% of farmers are under age 35), high land prices, and that 70% of US farmland is owned by people over 65, and we are set on a demographic collision course.

Interest in farming, however, is at an all time high. The Agrarian Trust, a group that helps people access land, states that “U.S. federal agriculture policy today is not aligned to the country’s best interests, instead pointing away from greater agricultural diversity, regional resilience and greater strengthened opportunity for rural economies.” They report an explosion of interest in farming from young people, but that there are not enough federal tools to help. Read more at http://www.ipsnews.net/2014/02/half-u-s-farmland-eyed-private-equity/.
Events and Resources

Union of Concerned Scientists Report:

Healthy Farmland Diet: Growing Less Corn Would Help Our Health

If farm policies helped us choose healthier foods, U.S. farmers would grow them, and bring a host of benefits to farmers, the environment and consumers, according to the Union of Concerned Scientists (UCS) in a report last fall. “The Healthy Farmland Diet: How Growing Less Corn Would Improve our Health and Help America’s Heartland” used economic modeling to estimate the impacts of dietary shifts on farm production.

The report found that if Americans ate fruits and vegetables at USDA-recommended levels—increasing consumption by 173 percent over current levels—U.S. farmers would grow 88 percent more of these foods. Conversely, if meat and dairy consumption fell to levels recommended by the Harvard University School of Public Health, farmers would grow less corn and other grains used as livestock feed—8 million acres less.

This in turn would drive changes in farming practices that would build healthier soil, improve air and water quality, and increase access to fresh, affordable, healthy foods in farm communities. It would also be good for farmers, as recent studies have shown that more diverse, local food systems create jobs and increase farm profits.

Current farm policy incentivizes commodity crops such as corn and soybeans, which are used as livestock feeds as well as in most processed food products. Americans on average eat only about half the vegetables and fruits they should. Encouraging increased growth of fruits and vegetables would benefit health of both people and our resource base.

The full report is available at the UCS website at: http://www.ucsusa.org/food_and_agriculture/solutions/expanded-healthy-food-access/the-healthy-farmland-diet.html.

Farmers Market Vendor Workshop Planned for March 29 in SE Kansas

To help novice and experienced vendors, alike, with marketing, management and food safety issues, K-State Research and Extension is hosting the "Southeast Kansas Regional Farmers Market Vendor Workshop" on Saturday, March 29 at the First Christian Church of Pittsburg, 705 E. Centennial Drive. The workshop is supported by county Farm Bureau associations of southeast Kansas and the Kansas Department of Agriculture.

The day begins with registration at 9 a.m. and the program starting at 9:30 a.m. Program topics and speakers include:

* Kansas Food Safety Inspection Requirements – representative of Kansas Department of Agriculture (KDA);
  * Weights & Measures Requirements – Maureen Henzler, KDA;
  * Food Safety Best Practices for Vendors – Londa Nwadike, K-State Research and Extension food safety specialist;
  * The Business of Being a Farmers Market Vendor – Annarose Hart, KDA;
  * Introduction to Good Agricultural Practices (GAPs) for Fruit and Vegetable Growers – Cary Rivard, K-State Research and Extension horticulture specialist;
  * Maximizing Your Sales at Farmers Markets – Tracey Graham, former coordinator for Kansas Rural Center's Farmers Market Project; and
  * Food Safety for Value-Added Products – Fadi Aramouni, K-State Research and Extension food safety specialist.

The regulations to be covered apply to the entire state of Kansas, but the best practices apply to any state (including Missouri and others), so the workshop will have relevance for vendors beyond Kansas, Price said.

The early registration of $15, which includes snacks, lunch and program materials, is due by March 21. After that date and at the door, the fee is $20. A printable brochure and registration form is available at the K-State Research and Extension Southeast Area office website: http://www.southeast.ksu.edu/. More information is available by contacting Anna Mae Brown at 620-724-8233.
KDA & KSU Release

New Food Safety Guide

A new “Food Safety for Kansas Farmers Market Vendors: Regulations & Best Practices” guide was unveiled at the recent Kansas Farmers Market Conference. The Kansas Department of Agriculture and Kansas State University partnered to create the guide.

The publication includes a list of which foods can and cannot be sold in Kansas without a license, which licenses are needed and where to get them, and a number of other regulatory requirements and best practice recommendations.

“We’ve found confusion to be widespread regarding what existing food safety regulations are and how to comply with them at Kansas farmers markets,” explains Cole Cottin, Kansas Rural Center Program Coordinator and local specialty crop farmer.

Cottin who received a sneak-peak at the food safety document as one of its reviewers stated, “I think this is a really useful tool. It covers a lot of ground using clear and easy to follow language.”

Both print and electronic copies of Food Safety for Kansas Farmers Market Vendors: Regulations and Best Practices can be accessed by contacting Annarose Hart at farmersmarkets@kda.ks.gov or 785-296-0362.

The Fourth National Rural Grocery Summit will be held June 9-10, 2014 in Manhattan, Kansas. The summit will offer the latest and best ideas regarding rural grocery operations. Attendees include store owners, concerned citizens, funders, non-profits, government agencies, food suppliers, university researchers and business leaders. Participants will spend two days talking with one another about the “triple bottom line” of rural grocery benefits—economic development, nutritional health and community sustainability.

Because the loss of a rural grocery store threatens the health of local citizens and the very existence of that community, Kansas State University, Kansas Rural Center, and a broad range of partners launched the Rural Grocery Initiative (RGI) in 2007. This collaborative group works to better understand rural grocery challenges and provide solutions to address those challenges.

Since 2008, the Rural Grocery Summit’s attendance has grown over 90% and attracted participants from 16 different states. The 2014 Summit will offer over 40 interactive sessions related to rural food access and grocery operations. Keynote presenters include Ken Meter from Crossroads Resource Center in Minneapolis, Minnesota, and Mark Winne, author and speaker on community food systems from Santa Fe, New Mexico.

The new rural grocer “toolkit” will also be released at this year’s summit. This toolkit offers a wide variety of informational resources to current and potential grocery store owners.

KRC contributions to the toolkit include a “how to” and resource guide for grocers interested in developing and expanding niche markets for locally sourced food, as well as a number of tools to help strengthen economically viable farmer-to-grocer connections.

Overall, the summit will chart a path forward for operating grocery stores, bringing healthful foods to underserved areas, and ultimately sustaining our rural communities.

The National Rural Grocery Summit will:* spotlight the latest and best thinking about rural grocery stores and rural community sustainability,* demonstrate the nutritional, economic development and community benefits rural grocery stores provide,* highlight rural grocery store success stories,* provide an opportunity to talk directly with funders, grocery distributors and grocery owners, and* identify strategies to establish and sustain local grocery stores.

“This summit provides a significant opportunity for people to gather together and explore ways to strengthen local grocery stores and rural communities,” says Dr. David Procter who leads the Rural Grocery Initiative as Director of Kansas State University’s Center for Engagement and Community Development.

Please visit the project’s website at www.dce.k-state/conf/ruralgrocery to learn more about the summit and to register.
Local Food News

Tunnel to Table Workshops...
Continued from page 6

“Anyone looking to polytunnels as a lucrative farm enterprise would benefit from this workshop,” asserts Thellman, who intends to share crop planning strategies and a detailed financial analysis with workshop participants. “Hightunnel production is not as easy, profitable, or beneficial as you might think,” he explains. “You really need to crunch your financial figures to ensure success. Without the proper preparations, you will more than likely not meet your annual projections or make a meaningful return off of your investment.”

Phelps adds, “There is a real opportunity for Kansas farmers to strategically employ polytunnels to ramp-up production and increase year round sales of specialty crops. The local and regional demand is strong; Kansas farmers should seize their market share.” Of the $760 million Kansans spend annually on fruits and vegetables only 4 percent are produced in-state.

Additional workshops in the Tunnel to Table series include:

* An early September visit to Full Circle Aquaponics (Atwood, KS) – an educational farm that is part a 1,500 acre diversified family farm with a 30ft. by 72 Ft. high tunnel and a topless tunnel (plastic sides and birdnetting top)

* A late September visit to Werner Creek Farm (Winfield, KS) – a 14-acre farm selling fresh fruits and vegetables, flowers, herbs, honey, and nuts.

* An early October visit to Jay’s Jellies, Produce and More (Clay Center, KS) – Growing intensively on 1¼ acres, with over 6,700 square feet under plastic, this farm produces and sell an immense diversity of fresh produce, nearly year-round.

Kansas growers with experience using polytunnels of any type are encouraged to complete the Tunnel to Table growers survey, still available at www.kansasruralcenter.org/T2Tsurvey.

For more information contact Dan Phelps, Tunnel to Table Coordinator at dphelps@kansasruralcenter.org, or Cole Cottin at ccottin@kansasruralcenter.org.

Celebrating 35 Years of Support for Sustainable Agriculture -- *Rural Papers*

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Contributors to the Kansas Rural Center’s work to promote sustainable agriculture in Kansas receive KRC’s newsletter, *Rural Papers*, 5-6 issues/year, and Policy Watch E-Updates, and other Center special reports and information alerts.

A donation of $35/year is suggested, for *Rural Papers* or $25 for Weekly Policy Watch E-Updates; or $50 for both *Rural Papers* & Policy Watch.
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Rural Papers, January-February-March 2014
Calendar

February 24-August 25 Growing Growers Series of Market Farming Workshops, Kansas City area. See KRC’s website at www.kansasruralcenter.org/calendar

March 29 & April 12 Kansas City Food Circle “Eat Local and Organic Expos”; March 29 Johnson County Community College Gym, 9 a.m. 2 p.m.; 12345 College Blvd, Overland Prk, Ks. and April 12, Penn Valley Community College Gym 3201 Southwest Trafficway, KCMO. Visit www.kcfoodcircle.org for more event details.

March 29 SE Kansas Farmers Market Vendor Workshop, Pittsburg, Ks. Sponsored by KDA and KSU. Go to: http://www.southeast.ksu.edu/ or contact Anna Mae Brown at 620-724-8233.

April 5 High & Low Tunnel Workshop, Juniper Hill Farms, Lawrence, Ks. 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. Contact Cole Cotrin ccottin@kansasruralcenter.org

April 11 Joint Meeting of the Ks. WAter Authority, Natural Resource Agencies, and Stakeholders, Manhattan, Ks. See www.kwo.org

June 9-10, 4th National Rural Grocery Summit, Manhattan, Ks. For more information & to register go to: www.dce.k-state/conf/ruralgrocery

Please check the KRC website for updated and more detailed calendar and announcement information on the above and for additional events at: www.kansasruralcenter.org

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