

Rural Papers

Reporting with commentary
on agricultural and rural issues



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Winter 2019

The Potential of Local Food Systems to Revitalize Communities

by Mary Fund



KRC's Annual Farm & Food Conference
November 2018, Wichita, KS

Photos by Tom Parker

“The food system is changing,” stated Dr. Mary Hendrickson, rural sociologist University of Missouri, “and how we participate in it is up to us to decide.” Hendrickson, keynote speaker at the KRC fall conference, went on to describe how the food system is changing and what is driving it. According to Hendrickson, communities, both rural and urban, small and large, can benefit from these changes. But the critical question she posed was “how do we capture and measure these benefits at home?”

Hendrickson spoke at KRC’s annual fall conference in mid-November. About 200 people from across Kansas and from neighboring states gathered to discuss the conference theme “Framing Our Future: What is Right About Food, Farming and Communities in Kansas”.

Many things are driving the change in our food system, Hendrickson explained. While many are satisfied or at least don’t question the highly processed foods of a corporate dominated food system, an increasing number of people are worried about food quality, safety, transparency and trust. Even treatment of workers is rising as a concern that consumers have about how their food is raised. The food system, she explained, is not a very trusted place right now if you are a big producer or player. People have lots of different perceptions. They are looking for something that reflects their concerns and their environmental

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Small Farmer Commentary

Renewing the Commitment

By Mary Fund

"It was after the devastating once-in-a-hundred-year flood of June 1984. A federal official was visiting a small northeast Kansas town a few weeks after the flood waters had receded. Local residents were explaining that if requested conservation and watershed structures had been in place upstream, the town would have been saved many hours of shoveling mud out of its main street businesses, not to mention the averted damage to crops, roads and bridges.

"The Washington, D.C. based official looked up and down what could have been main street of any small rural town U.S.A., shook his head slowly, and commented that he really did not see anything much worth saving. Lucky for our Washington friend that his hosts were basically gentle, polite people, and he was allowed to continue on his way with no more than an earful.

"But as record numbers of farmers are driven from the land and increasing numbers of main street businesses close their doors, such comments force us to pause and reflect on questions fundamental to the future of agriculture and rural communities. What is it we seek to preserve and protect? What are the values that guide us? And on what principles do we stand?"

So began the 1984-85 KRC annual report, at a time of record numbers of farm foreclosures and bankruptcies. KRC was a fairly new organization in the 80's promoting sustainable farming practices based on ecological principles. Our work (as did the work of sister organizations across the country) immediately gained traction as farmers searched for alternative practices that lowered production costs and offered new marketing ideas such as organic, value-added, direct marketing, CSA's, and grass fed livestock and more).

Sustainable agriculture took root and has slowly but steadily made progress into mainstream agriculture—albeit not anywhere to the extent needed, but farming practices such as management intensive grazing systems, extended crop rotations, cover crops and legumes for soil health are more common. Growing fruits and vegetables is being explored as a way to diversify the farm and income streams. Beginning or second career farmers are looking at specialty crops as a way to enter farming. Some are adding specialty crop enterprises to existing farms. Organic and sustainable/regenerative farming practices are reducing farm chemicals and synthetic fertilizers. Soil health is the buzz word. Organic systems, local food systems, value added agriculture, and beginning farmer programs received more support than ever in the just passed Farm Bill.

That same 1984-85 annual report summarized KRC's early values and principles in one sentence: "a diversified family size farming system based on principles of economic and environmental sustainability and social responsibility is necessary to a vital economy and a safe and healthy environmental and food product." Over the years, we have periodically reviewed those principles and values—revising the language, adding or changing emphasis as issues emerge or intensify. But we always reaffirm them. The heart of our program mission and work is still to build an ecologically based farming and food system, based in a strong commitment to biodiversity and diversification, and to social and economic equity - on farms, in agriculture, and in communities and among both rural and urban people.

Unfortunately, today does not look much different from 1984, as financial stress on farms and ranches reaches new highs and as rural communities -think rural hospitals, loss of grocery stores, struggling schools- are stretched to the breaking point. Today, both rural and urban communities face economic and cultural challenges, as big national threats emerge -think divisive politics, never ending

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Small Farmer Commentary

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military conflicts, increasing wealth concentration and income inequality—all amid the uncertainties of climate change.

The plight of rural communities in Kansas—continued depopulation, closed main street businesses, and struggling rural hospitals—has also become front-page news. Even the State Legislature has responded with forming a Rural Revitalization committee in the House this session, and the new Governor has created an Office for Rural Prosperity. Both hope to do more than plug the hole in the dike, but the role of industrial agriculture in creating the problem will make that difficult. The exodus of rural people and the decline of rural communities are due in large part to how and who controls how we grow, process and distribute food. The answer lies in how well we can regain control of that, and how can we can put people back into farming and communities—no small task.

In Kansas and globally we are seeing further homogenization of the landscape. Field borders and riparian habitat are being destroyed as grasslands and pastures are converted to corn and soybeans. Farmers plant more only to be caught with full grain bins and low commodity prices. Trade wars are showing just how vulnerable our agricultural economy is. Continued dependence on fossil fuel based inputs also contributes to longer-term problems, exacerbates carbon losses and climate change, and seriously compromises the resilience of natural systems.

Huge grain storage bins dot the rural landscape, but grocery stores continue disappearing in rural communities as well as in cities, reducing food access and availability to fresh, wholesome food. Income inequality has increased not just here at home, but across the globe, as opportunities for meaningful livelihoods diminish under the corporate industrial model that dominates not just agriculture, but our food system, and our overall economy.

Yes, the challenges KRC was formed to address still exist. Some might argue that if KRC was organized to fight the above, we did not do a very good job because today all of those issues continue. Indeed, they have intensified over the last 40 years. But the forces against us have been strong and pervasive, usually cloaked as benign or “signs of progress”. The dominant narrative, promoting the corporate industrial model as the only choice, encourages us to blame others, thus keeping us divided. (i.e. It’s environmental regulations; mis-information campaigns; low-income slackers; or unfair or corrupt international trade policies; or invading immigrant hoards.)

Since our beginning in 1979, KRC has expanded our vision of independent farms and revitalized rural communities to include local/regional food systems, new areas of related economic activity, urban-rural connections, and renewable non-carbon based energy. The expanded vision includes an enhanced partnership between rural and urban people, emphasizing an appropriate-scale, environmentally sound, food and energy system that provides opportunities for meaningful livelihoods and a safe environment and healthy food for all. We now include diversity of people

along with on farm diversity—realizing that just as multi-species plant mixes makes a stronger plant community, so multi-cultural mixes make for stronger human communities.

KRC will celebrate its 40th anniversary later this year (Annual Conference November 8-9, 2019). Throughout the year, KRC will be offering stories from our constituents, friends and partnering organizations of their journeys to more sustainable, ecologically based farms and ranches, to a more sustainable local and regional food system, and how their communities are discovering what community wealth really is. We will be assessing where we’ve been and what we’ve accomplished as we once more “Renew the commitment”. We hope you will join us.

For more information, contact Mary Fund, mfund@kansasruralcenter.org.

Join Us for WEALTH Day at the State Capitol - March 12, 2019 - 8:15 a.m. to 3 p.m.

On March 12, Kansans from across the state will come together to learn about and advocate for WEALTH policies at the Statehouse. WEALTH stands for Water, Energy, Air, Land, Transportation, and Health, and is made up of a network of organizations and Kansans who together work to educate Kansans and work for better public policies impacting our natural resources, environment, and human health. By attending you will:

- Get** up-to-date on current WEALTH policy priorities in Kansas
- Visit** the Solutions Showcase to learn from leading Kansas orgs
- Join** the Interfaith Climate Vigil
- Enjoy** a local foods luncheon (registration required)
- Sample** new ideas at the Cookies & Conservation Conversation
- Meet** with your legislators

WEALTH day is made possible by event hosts and sponsors who can exhibit at a booth during the Solutions Showcase, and/or make a financial contribution to help cover the Local Foods Luncheon and the Cookies & Conservation Conversation. If you would like to sponsor the event and/or become an exhibitor please visit the Climate + Energy Project website at <http://climateandenergy.org/page.59.-day>, or info@kansasruralcenter.org.

WEALTH Day is a collaborative effort. Event hosts include: Climate + Energy Project, Kansas Rural Center, Kansas Interfaith Action, Kansas Natural Resources Council, Kansas City Chapter NAACP, Grassland Heritage Foundation, Friends of the Kaw, and the Metropolitan Energy Center.

The Road Ahead - An Electoral Vision

by Paul Johnson



Elections really do matter. Kansans elected a new Governor – Laura Kelly – who has promised a political philosophy of moderation, a restoration of critical state services and a ‘common sense’ pragmatism to work in a bi-partisan manner to address key structural issues facing our state. A somewhat more conservative Kansas House and the Kansas Senate will have to be constructive partners in facing the State’s challenges. Progress will take time. Consensus must be found. The national and state economy will have to cooperate to provide the necessary revenues to meet many of these challenges. Priorities will have to be established and progress made in increments to reverse a decade of decline.

Governor Kelly was very clear in her stated priorities of resolving public school financing, expanding Medicaid for 150,000 uninsured Kansans, jumpstarting a stalled transportation plan, and fixing a broken child welfare system that has failed thousands of children. The revenue picture will be critical.

The Governor pledged no new taxes so

continued economic recovery is vital. Good news came in November when official revenue forecasts increased income tax revenues by over \$300 million. But continued performance is still uncertain. Sales tax revenue is as important as income tax to the Kansas’ State General Fund (SGF) and the forecast for sales tax growth is at best uncertain. With recent U.S Supreme Court decisions on taxing internet sales and allowing states to enter the realm of sports betting, there may be additional revenues to Kansas but it will take time to expedite these expanded revenue sources. The caution light is that the U.S. economy is in its longest economic expansion ever and recessions are a way of life for a market economy.

While the Governor has laid out certain priorities, it will be essential for lawmakers working with the Governor’s office to establish essential, substantive policy proposals for Kansas. As a co-equal branch of government, the Legislature should play its role in policy development and assist the public in focusing on certain issues including those below:

Housing. This debate should begin with developing a Comprehensive Affordable Housing Strategy to promote economic development statewide and confront housing affordability for thousands of economically challenged families in Kansas. Once the semi-private Kansas Housing Resources Corporation (KHRC) was separated from the Kansas Department of Com-

merce & Housing in 2003, KHRC has been out of sight and out of mind to most legislators.

KHRC does not present a complete annual report to legislative committees to assess progress with multi-family rental construction, weatherization funding and expenditures from the federal Community Development Block Grant. The statewide First Time Homebuyers Loan program - administered by Sedgwick and Shawnee Counties - has been non-existent for the last four years. The Governor working with the Legislature should re-establish a Governor’s Commission on Housing that reports on housing accomplishments and lists policy recommendations and place the First Time Homebuyers Loan program within KHRC.

Hunger. Hunger exists here in the nation’s breadbasket. According to an Issue Brief from the Kansas Health Institute in 2015, one in six Kansas households were food insecure in 2013 (with 1 in 5 households with children food insecure, and 1 in 3 households of single women with children food insecure). Kansas ranked 44th of the 50 states in that 31% of those eligible for food stamps (SNAP) did not access them. Kansas ranked 50th for the percent of low-income children served by the Summer Food Service Program. (Note: this has improved some since 2015). Food stamps or SNAP accounted for 70% of all public or private food assistance in Kansas in 2013.

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Finally a Farm Bill

by Mary Fund

The long awaited 2018 Farm Bill was finally passed in the very last possible days before the holidays, and signed by the President on December 20. This followed two years of intense debate and several weeks of limbo as final negotiations took place largely behind closed doors. The bill included both victories and disappointments for the sustainable agriculture community, and there is plenty to work on as implementation, rulemaking, administrative reform are all just as important now that the legislation has been completed.

The major next step is passing agricultural appropriations bills. Just hours after the 116th Congress was sworn into office in early January, the U.S. House voted and passed two bills to end the government partial shutdown that went into effect in late December. One bill included six of the seven remaining appropriations bills and included the Agricultural Appropriations package. Failing any Senate attention, the House then passed a stand-alone FY 2019 Agriculture Appropriations bill. This was the same bill offered earlier as part of the package of six bills passed by the house. Both versions of the FY 2019 Agriculture Appropriations were nearly identical to the version the Senate passed at the end of 2018, which included several important funding increases for sustainable agriculture. However, Senate leadership at this point has held firm to not take up any spending bills without funding for the Trump border wall. At this

writing, there has been no progress on negotiations to end the shutdown and reopen the government, and pass appropriations bills.

So, appropriations for the farm bill programs were held hostage to the government shut down that ended late January, due to the impasse over a border wall - and thousands of government workers went without pay, and services were curtailed across the country.

Some USDA offices opened up during the shutdown to handle loans and tax issues, but the shutdown had far-reaching impacts on market information, loans, and trade, etc. SNAP, the federal nutrition program, had funds to operate until the end of February, but would have left many women and children hungry if the shutdown went on indefinitely. (As this goes to press, another potential shutdown looms.)

Farm Bill Summary:

Here is a short summary of major wins and losses in the Farm Bill passed and signed in December:

Local/ Regional Food Programs:

- Creates the Local Agriculture Market Program (LAMP) and provide \$50 million/year in mandatory permanent funds. LAMP combines the old Farmers Market and Local Food Promotion Program and Value-Added Producer grant programs.
- Instructs USDA to allow farmers'

markets to operate individual Electronic benefits transfer device for accepting SNAP benefits at more than one location.

- Creates a new "Urban, Indoor and Other Emerging Agricultural Production, Research and Education Extension Initiative" and creates a new Urban Agriculture research, education and extension initiative competitive grants program. It also instructs USDA to create a new "Office of Urban Agriculture and Innovative Forms of Production" office.
- Reauthorizes the National Sustainable Agriculture Information Service/ Appropriate Technology Transfer for Rural America (ATTRA).

Conservation:

- Protects funding levels for the Conservation Title as a whole, but long-term funding for working lands programs will see significant cuts in later years of the bill. While the bill retains a relatively equal balance between EQIP and CSP funding from 2019-2013, the bill significantly redistributes funding from CSP to EQIP in the following 5 years of the bill, thus reducing overall working lands conservation funding in the future.
- Decreases the livestock set-aside with in EQIP from 60 to 50 percent but does not include any reforms to limit funding to new and expanding concentrated animal feeding operations (CAFO's).

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The Future from Here: Assessing Post-Election Kansas

by Tom Parker

In midterm elections this year, the majority of Kansas voters rejected the sharply divisive Republican candidate Kris Kobach for Laura Kelly, a moderate Democrat. While some considered her win a repudiation of the Trump Administration, Governor-elect Kelly saw it as a shift toward a more bipartisan, common sense approach to governance. With 48 percent of the statewide vote to Kobach's 43 percent, it was evident that her focus on school funding, highway construction and Medicaid expansion resonated with voters weary of baseless rhetoric. On the national level, Democrats took control of the U.S. House of Representatives but lost seats in the U.S. Senate.

The election was, in many ways, a mixed bag that left many people scratching their heads and asking, What now? To get some ideas of what Kansans can expect, the Kansas Rural Center invited Dorothy Barnett, Executive Director of the Climate + Energy Project, Paul Johnson, KRC policy analyst, and Zack Pistora, Legislative Director for the Kansas Chapter of the Sierra Club, to answer that question at their annual Food and Farm conference, held Nov. 16-17 in Wichita. The panel was moderated by Rachel Myslivy, Assistant Director of the Climate + Energy Project.

Each speaker was asked to outline the top priorities they believe Kansans should be aware of during the upcoming

legislative session, then Myslivy asked them to name their top tip for civic engagement and the number one question people should ask their legislators.

For Barnett, addressing the state's energy future was paramount. Though many climate and energy issues were neglected by the former administration, she was optimistic that the newly elected Governor Laura Kelly and Lt. Governor Lynn Rogers would boost opportunities for advancing the clean energy economy and for tackling issues on the environment and climate change.

Not only will the governor get to appoint two members to the Kansas Corporation Commission, she will also appoint members to the Citizen Utility Ratepayer Board, or CURB. The three-member Kansas Corporation Commission regulates the state's telecommunications businesses, pipeline companies, water, electric, gas and power companies as well as transportation companies. CURB is an independent state agency responsible for protecting the interests of residential and small commercial utility ratepayers from unreasonable utility rates, and to promote long-term, cost-effective reliability of utility services.

Kansas has done an admirable job with renewable wind energy, she said, but lags behind in solar generation. Consumer and small commercial access to solar energy, often hampered by needless regulations, deserves a solar bill of rights that would make solar energy more accessible and affordable.

Of critical importance, and long overdue, is the need for a state energy plan. "Kansas is one of only six states that don't have one," Barrett said. Part of that plan should focus on climate resiliency and the role of new technologies in the face of a changing climate, she said. Scientists predict that in the coming decades weather patterns will become more severe, so it's time to investigate alternate strategies such as separating communities on micro-grids that would help redistribute energy both during and after natural disasters.

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Rachel Myslivy and Dorothy Barnett of the Climate + Energy Project, and Zack Pistora, Kansas Chapter of the Sierra Club (far right), listen to Paul Johnson, KRC Policy Analyst, at the KRC Farm & Food Conference in mid-November.

Sustainable Food and Farming News

Conference Panel Addresses ‘What’s Right About Kansas’

By Tom Parker

“That’s the thing about rural Kansas,” Corie Brown wrote. “No one lives there, not anymore.” The Los Angeles author’s assessment on rural Kansas in particular and Kansans in general was the outcome of an odyssey across the state for an online article published in April 2018. Its title, “Rural Kansas is Dying: I Drove 1,800 Miles to Find Out Why,” set the stage for her thesis.

She interviewed farmers, university professors, politicians, local food system supporters and farm group leaders about the state’s rural population and community decline and what could be done to mitigate it. She found little hope in their responses.

While many felt some of her conclusions were accurate, many who were interviewed felt disappointed that she did not place more emphasis on the efforts being made to address the problems and challenges rural communities and farmers face. They ended up feeling used, and none more so than Marci Penner, who had recommended many of the locations and people for the interview.

As director of the Kansas Sampler Foundation and co-author of “The Kansas Guidebook for Explorers,” Penner has traversed the state countless times and talked with the same people Brown had, yet her assessment was totally the opposite.

“I feel very differently,” she said. “I’m not some Pollyanna who thinks we’re doing great, because we have many issues. There are reasons why it has changed over the years, and reasons why some towns aren’t thriving. But because of the people in this room,” she told a conference crowd last November, “I have confidence that we can create a new rural, a new paradigm, of what we want rural to be.”

Penner offered her upbeat perspective in “What’s Right about Kansas Farms, Food and Communities,” a panel discussion at the Kansas Rural Center’s annual Food and Farm Conference, held mid-November in Wichita, Kansas. Panelists were Luke Mahin, director of Republic County Economic Development and board member of the North

Central Kansas Food Council; Debbie Beardon, Market Manager and secretary of the Allen County Farmers’ Market Board and founding member of the Core Leadership Team for Allen County Growing Rural Opportunity Works Food and Farm Council; Donna Pearson McClish, founder and director of Common Ground Producers and Growers, Inc.; Steve Swaffar, Executive Director of No-Till on the Plains; and Ed Reznicek, General Manager for Central Plains Organic Farmers Association. Keynote speaker Mary Hendrickson, a rural sociologist at the University of Missouri at Columbia, also offered insights about how rural communities can build social, financial, natural and cultural capital to address the changes facing rural America.



Panelists at the KRC conference addressed “What is right about Kansas?” Left to right: Ed Reznicek, Steve Swaffar, Donna McClish, Debbie Beardon, Marci Penner, and Luke Mahn.

Luke Mahin, who was one of Brown’s sources, was puzzled at how few of the positive endeavors he mentioned made it into her article. While it’s true that Republic County has lost population, down from a high of 19,000 in 1890 to 4,700, by embracing economic development and investing in new technologies, the county offers more opportunities for entrepreneurs, small businesses and Internet-based businesses than most rural counties, he said.

Similar benefits apply to agriculture. Farmers are innovating and adapting new technologies, and there’s a lot of talk about pushing agriculture forward.

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Sustainable Food and Farming News

Lessons Learned from Kansas Specialty Crop Growers Report Available

The Kansas Rural Center (KRC) announces the availability of its latest report, *Lessons Learned from Specialty Crop Growers Across Kansas*. The 42-page report is a compilation of five previously published profiles of successful Kansas specialty crop growers, plus the proceedings of a one-day facilitated discussion in February 2018 between those experienced growers and five beginning specialty crop growers.

“Interest continues to grow among Kansas farmers and want-to-be farmers for ways to diversify their farms or to find new enterprises for the growing market demand for local, fresh fruits and vegetables,” stated Mary Fund, KRC Executive Director. “This report is a modest attempt to share information among growers, and to document what growers see as the challenges and needs if specialty crop production is to move forward in Kansas.”

Kansas only grows about 4% of the fruits and vegetables it consumes, which points to potential economic opportunity. Historically, Kansas grew many more acres of specialty crops until commodity crop agriculture took over most of those acres.



The *Lessons Learned* report is available online at the Kansas Rural Center’s website at [website https://kansasruralcenter.org/growing-under-cover/](https://kansasruralcenter.org/growing-under-cover/). A limited number of hard copies are also available by contacting mfund@kansasruralcenter.org. Farmers profiled include Dave Svaty of Svaty’s Produce near Kanopolis, Frank Gieringer of

Gieringer’s Orchard and Berry Farm near Edgerton, Chris and Christi Janssen’s C and C High Tunnels in Scandia, Dan and Kathy Kuhn’s The Depot Market in Courtland, and Nina and Jeter Isley’s Y-Knot Farm and Ranch near Bird City in far northwest Kansas.



Most feature high tunnel or hoop-house production in addition to field production. Crops feature a full range of vegetables from salad greens, tomatoes, peppers

and pumpkins to a variety of fruits: you-pick strawberries and other berries, and apples and peaches. More than one also direct market grassfed beef, lamb and chicken. One also raises certified organic grains and another conventional grain crops.

The report joins KRC’s trilogy of specialty crop guides: *Growing Under Cover: Polytunnel Options* (December 2014, Updated Oct. 2018); *Growing Under Cover: A Kansas Grower’s Guide*, 2016; and *Growing Over Cover: A Kansas Specialty Crop Grower’s Guide to Cover Crops*. All are available for download in color and/or black and white at KRC’s website <https://kansasruralcenter.org/growing-under-cover/>.

Hard copies are also available upon request for the *Growing Under Cover: A Kansas Growers Guide*.

The report was published as part of a project supported by the Specialty Crop Block Grant Program at the U.S. Department of Agriculture and administered by the SCBG Program at the Kansas Department of Agriculture in Kansas.

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Sustainable Food and Farming News

Depot Market: Scaling to Wholesale with Specialty Crops in North Central Kansas

By Jennifer Kongs

Most specialty crop operations in Kansas rely heavily on direct-to-consumer sales. While several farmers are specializing and scaling to provide to institutional and wholesale purchasers, one of the largest and to-date most successful is Depot Market in Courtland, Kansas, run by Dan Kuhn and his wife, Kathy. Currently, the farm's sales are nearly 80 percent to wholesale outlets. But that's not how Kuhn got started and isn't where he intends to keep growing.

Kuhn wanted to be a farmer, "but I was raised as a city kid in Shawnee. After attending KU, I went to K-State and farmed some orchards nearby. When I graduated, I had an opportunity to work on an orchard north of Courtland, so I



Dan Kuhn has 190 acres under production including 12 hoophouses with mostly tomatoes, and sells in ten states as well as to local markets. Pumpkins are the biggest crop. Melon and squash are planted with rows of wheat as wind protection.

a convenient location for deliveries and pickups.

"We started with apples, including you-pick, all through the '80s, but moved away from them toward vegetables as

moved here and started working for that orchard, then started farming for myself," Kuhn says. In 1989, he and his wife bought 1.5 acres and the old Santa Fe Depot in Courtland, renovated it, and moved it to the property alongside Highway 36, where it still sits today. The site houses a retail store, vegetable washing/packing house and walk-in cooler (added in 2010), and is

the market shifted. We raised seven kids and lived below poverty level for a long time. My wife did some teaching and for a few winters I worked at a meat-packing plant to pay bills," Kuhn says. The family relied on borrowing from the bank when needed and organic growth to scale. "I didn't start with anything. I had no land and wasn't from here. In 1981, my grandmother died and left me \$12,000. We probably wouldn't have made it without that."

It was clear on the day KRC visited that Kuhn has come a long way since the start. We walked through the washing and processing house as a truckload of freshly picked zucchini was packed and sent off for delivery. "We sell in 10 states on average each year, and pumpkins are our biggest crop. Two large chains comprised half of our total sales," Kuhn says. "We also sell to our local guys and local peddlers and would like to grow that business, but we can't make a dead switch and keep the farm. If we could, we'd like to have a route going through western Kansas and hit a loop to sell to those smaller markets."

To sell at such a scale requires growing at a large scale, hiring at a large scale and dealing with a large amount of paperwork. Kuhn has 190 acres under production, and his largest pumpkin and watermelon fields, each 50-plus acres, are planted under center pivot. Kuhn manages 29 employees during pumpkin time, which grows from 12 employees earlier in the season. Two employees work full-time, year-round. In the first week of June, eight H-2A program workers were employed on the farm, living in provided housing. (The H-2A Temporary Agricultural Workers program, sometimes referred to as "visa hiring program," allows U.S. employers who meet specific regulatory requirements, including housing, to bring foreign nationals to the U.S. to fill temporary agricultural jobs.)

"The number of visa hire will increase as the season progresses. This is our 11th year hiring through the visa hiring program. We don't really have other farmers nearby who hire through the program," Kuhn says.

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Sustainable Food and Farming News

The Fifth Agricultural Revolution: Restoring the World's Soil from a Geologist's Outlook

By Tom Parker

David Montgomery candidly admits that some of the statistics, studies, summaries and slides he uses during presentations were extreme examples of agricultural soil degradation and loss, and the pivotal role it played in the demise of civilizations both ancient and, unless corrective measures are taken, our own. "That's why I use them," he said with a wry laugh. Montgomery spoke at the Kansas Rural Center's annual Food and Farm Conference held November 16 & 17 in Wichita attended by over 200 people interested in the local and regional food economy, and natural resources and the farming practices that protect them.

The picture he painted was bleak, but when he asked his audience whether they would prefer to live on Earth or Mars—the former shown as a blue-and-green globe, the latter a lifeless planet of red rocks and shifting sands—it seemed an exaggeration meant to provoke levity or shock.

It in no way trivialized the seriousness of his charges. Since the dawn of agriculture, soil degradation was implicit in the collapse of Mesopotamia, Neolithic Europe, Classical Greece, the Roman Empire, Easter Island, Syria, Libya and parts of China and the United States, and the pace has quickened. One-third of the world's arable cropland has been taken out of production since the 1940s, another third is on track to be lost in the very near future, while at the same time the world's population is expected to grow by a third.

The juxtaposition of the two planets suddenly seemed more prophetic than frivolous.

Montgomery, a University of Washington professor and author of "Dirt: The Erosion of Civilization" and "Growing a Revolution: Bringing Our Soil Back to Life," was one of several keynote speakers at the conference. Other speakers included Anne Biklé, co-author with Montgomery of "The Hidden Half of Nature: The Microbial Roots of Life and Health," and Mary Hendrickson, Rural Sociology Associ-



David Montgomery, author of a trilogy of books about the history of soils, civilization and degradation, soil and microbial health, and the revolution in the soil health, who spoke at KRC's annual conference in Wichita, November 17, spoke with farmers after his presentation.

ate Professor, University of Missouri who spoke on creating community wealth through local food systems.

Montgomery's presentation, "Growing a Revolution," explained how as a geologist studying erosional processes that shape landscapes, he came to appreciate not only soil but the role that

farming plays in both the destruction of the world's soil and how it could help reverse the process. For the first half of his career, soil was the stuff covering up all the things he was supposed to be looking at. About ten years ago, he began questioning its effects on ancient civilizations while writing "Dirt." He scoured the library for studies and dissertations, searched soil-degraded wastelands in Italy, Greece and other places looking for evidence of intensive farming in the distant past, and consumed every piece of literature he could find on the subject. Erosion

did indeed play a role in the demise of civilizations, he concluded, but the real villain was not deforestation, as all the textbooks implied, but the plow.

"It wasn't the axe, it was agriculture that followed deforestation," Montgomery said.

"Why was that? If you cut down trees, they grow back. You have to actively endeavor to keep them off the land. And that's when you start to lose topsoil over the course of generations.

It's not what I thought I was writing about when I started writing the book."

There was no real data at the time for measuring the sediment flux coming off Roman fields or the water quality

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in Greek rivers, but by triangulating with archaeological studies and with a lot of extrapolation, he came up with quantifiable numbers that have been verified by more recent data. For conventional tillage-based erosion rates from small fields in the developing world to large-scale mechanized operations in the developed world, the median rate was about a millimeter and a half per year. “At that pace, it takes just 20 years to lose an inch of soil,” he said. “That’s fast.”

The association between healthy plants building fertile soil and healthy soil building fertile plants goes back to the colonization of the continent by land plants, when rich soil began developing. Tillage, he said, undoes that in a single path. “It’s a very effective means of weed control, but it also leaves the ground surface vulnerable to erosion by wind and rain, and that sets the stage for progressive ongoing topsoil loss that can really impact societies over time.”

In the Palouse region near Idaho, he documented areas that lost five feet of topsoil between 1911 and 1961, or about an inch a year. Portions of the Piedmont country from Virginia to Alabama lost four to 12 inches of topsoil over the course of 200 years. The latter was catastrophic because according to journals of plantation owners and farmers there was only about six to 12 inches of topsoil to start with.

“If we can erode a third to all of the topsoil across a region once considered the original breadbasket of the early colonies, and we could do it in

just a couple of hundred years, think what the Greeks could have done with their 1,200-year run in southern Greece, or the Romans in their 800-year run in central Italy,” he said. “Think what happened to Syria and Libya, places where there are Roman tax records of bountiful wheat harvests that today can barely grow anything. It wasn’t the changing climate that did them in, it was the loss of the soil.”

Soil, Montgomery said, is the interface between the geological world and the biological world, the merger of the



Authors, David Montgomery and Anne Bikle signed books and spoke with the participants at the KRC November Farm & Food Conference.

fossil world of dead plants and creatures and the world of living things, of microbes and bacteria and worms and nematodes and other organic matter. Without that organic matter, soil is as dead as the sands of Mars.

Global statistics aside, the topic really got personal when he and his wife, Anne Biklé, bought a house in Seattle.

Biklé, a biologist, saw the lawn as a place to build the garden of her dreams. When they ripped the lawn up, however, they found not rich loamy soil but hardpan glacial till.

“We lovingly call it nature’s concrete,” Montgomery said. “There wasn’t a single worm in it.”

Over the next decade, they added coffee grounds, compost, kitchen scraps, grass clippings, manure from the zoo—anything they could find. They fed the dirt until it started to become soil. The pace of the transformation shocked Montgomery. It also turned him into an incipient optimist in thinking that the fertility of the world’s farmland could not only be rebuilt, but rebuilt remarkably fast.

“Adding organic matter brought back the missing item in soil—life,” he said. “Herein lies both the good news and the bad news: the good news is that we know how to farm in ways that can restrict the loss of soil to a pace that’s close to soil being built. The bad news is that we tend to call those practices alternative agriculture.”

According to a recent study, America’s agricultural soil has lost about 50 percent of its organic matter.

“It’s not because the soil is no longer there,” he said, “but because the soil no longer as fertile as it used to be. It’s been greatly masked by our technology, and the inputs we use. Agriculture is going to have to change this century. This problem is one we can actually fix, and fix remarkably fast and do it in ways that make farmers money.”

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Potential of Community Food Systems continued from page 1...

and social values and is dependent on relationships they trust.

Millennials, those born between 1981 and 1997 surpassed baby boomers in numbers in 2017, and are driving food system changes, as are young families who are concerned about what they feed their children. These consumers are deeply committed to a values-based system and their purchasing habits reflect this.

Demand for locally produced food is on the rise. Purchase of organic food is about 5.5% of the overall food market, and continues to see growth. Food labeled as “natural”, even with its questionable definition, is another category seeing steady growth. Supermarkets are changing to serve the new demands offering more of these food choices.

Definitions of local food vary. USDA has a more regional geographic definition—anything within 400 miles and focusing on short supply chains—food that does not have to change hands very many times. Others claim geographic terms as little as 50 miles or up to 200 miles. What is clearly most important is “knowing the source” and how it is produced. The definition involves proximity, explains Hendrickson, “but also knowledge that it is not corporate.” Trust and transparency is thus a critical factor in defining local or regional food.

According to USDA, local food sales topped \$6.11 billion in 2012. \$3 billion was through wholesale intermediate channels, that tend to do better financially for farms than smaller farms selling direct through farmers’ markets. 42% of schools nationally are participating in the Farms to School program providing fresh local food to school children.

“The question is ‘are we capturing these benefits as eaters, farmers, and communities?’” she asked. The change in the food system is good she explained only if it works for us and if it is not corporate; that is, the benefits are not captured by corporate businesses that extract the profits for far away shareholders. “We need to think about how we want the system to work,” she stated.

Community food systems she explained have different goals than the system organized by profit motivated corporations. Community food systems are place based; they are integrated systems of production, processing, and distribution to enhance environmental, social and community economic goals, benefitting the people and quality of life in the community.

Can remote rural areas capture the benefits of these emerging markets? “People tend to say this can’t or won’t happen in western Kansas or in small towns,” she said. But she pointed to her hometown in Nebraska population 341, where she admitted maybe 10% of the population cared about a local food system, which she pointed out is not really different from metro areas. Through community relationships and collaboration, her small hometown created not only a community grocery store to serve the community, but a much-needed child care center.



Mary Hendrickson, University of Missouri Sociologist, spoke about community wealth and how local and regional food systems can boost the local economy and create resilience.

“Maybe in the Plains you’ll need a more regional approach,” she offered, “but community food systems are about where you are and how you are going to improve your place.” Such developments are really about comprehensive community wealth creation, she explained, which impacts far more than just food.

Community wealth involves financial capital (i.e. credit, loans etc.) but it also depends on social, political, cultural, human and natural capitals. Social, political, and cultural

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Potential of Community Food Systems continued from page 12...

capital all involve lots of citizen engagement and relationships. Human capital means education, training, and capacity building. Protecting soil, water and the environment is all part of natural capital, protecting it and respecting it, and we don't talk about it often enough. "This is one that will come round to bite us soon," she warned, "if we don't pay more attention to it."

Wealth she explained is not just about how much money is in your portfolio or how much money is tied up in land or land prices. It is about people and relationships, and broader ideas of well-being and what makes a place wealthy. Community wealth is also about ownership and control in these places, and lasting livelihoods.

In Kansas and elsewhere the examples of the community capitals (social, political, natural, etc.) at work can be found in the development of local food councils, community grocery stores to serve both rural and urban food deserts, and collective action among farmers in marketing co-ops and food hubs, and in the information sharing among cover crop/soil health building farmers.

"Our economic model of prioritizing financial wealth has compromised all other wealth creation on multiple scales," Hendrickson explained. "But wealth is the sum total of our assets – natural, social, cultural, human etc. - that we own as a society."

"If you have higher natural, social and human capital, the community is more immune to shocks and has more resilience," she explained. Resilience is the capacity of the system to absorb shocks and bounce back—whether these are natural shocks like floods, fire and drought, but also the economic shocks of industries leaving or not able to serve the community.

She pointed to an example from North Carolina where hurricanes last year decimated the region's farming community and the food infrastructure. The first milk on store shelves was from a local grass based dairy with on farm bottling.

"How we participate in the changing food system and how we organize to capture its benefits is critical and is up to us," she concluded. "We want to capture the benefits in a way to create comprehensive community wealth and that we adopt a broad-based idea of wealth and all of the kinds of capital."

Hendrickson also spoke in Lawrence, Kansas, at last May's "Harvesting Opportunities in Kansas Symposium: Building Community Wealth Through Food and Farming". Presentations from the symposium are available at <https://www.douglas.k-state.edu/community/harvesting-opportunities.html>. Presentations from the KRC conference including a video of Hendrickson's talk are available at www.kansasruralcenter.org.

KRC conference speakers, panels and workshops following the keynote focused on topics ranging from community food to soil health to farm transitions and succession to diversity in Kansas.

Conference sponsors included the League of Women Voters of Kansas, Eastern Kansas OCIA Chapter, Green Cover Seed, Center for Rural Affairs, Kansas Agricultural Mediation Services, Kansas Alliance for Wetlands and Streams, Kansas Chapter of the Sierra Club, Graze the Prairie, Audubon of Kansas, Women for Kansas, No Till on the Plains, Central Plains Organic Farmers, Kansas Farmers Union, The Land Institute, Kansas Forest Service, American Ag Credit, Socially Responsible Agriculture Project, Service-member Agricultural Vocation Education Corp (SAVE), Kansas Black Farmers Association, Westar Energy, Kansas Center for Sustainable Agriculture and Alternative Crops; Kansas SARE, Kansas Permaculture Institute, Kaufman Seeds, Blue River Hybrids, and Kansas Natural Resource Council plus several individuals.

For a complete listing of upcoming Kansas Rural Center events and activities, as well as a number of events that other organizations will be hosting in the near future, please visit the Events Calendar on our website -
<http://kansasruralcenter.org/calendar/>.

State Policy News

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“The farm is Good Agricultural Practices (GAP) certified and strives to be compliant with the Food Safety Modernization Act (FSMA). GAP, required by many grocery chains to sell into their stores, is a voluntary audit that verifies that fruits and vegetables are produced, packed, handled, and stored in adherence to the recommendations made in the U.S. Food and Drug Administration’s (FDA) Guide to Minimize Microbial Food Safety Hazards for Fresh Fruits and Vegetables. FSMA is a separate regulation overseen by the FDA, which includes a specific set of on-farm practices that must be met. By January 26, 2020, any farm where the average annual monetary value of produce the farm sold during the previous 3-year period is more than \$25,000 and does not qualify for any other exemption, will be required to be compliant.”

“We had started selling to bigger wholesale customers who required us to get GAP certification in order to keep them as a customer,” Kuhn says. The certification is managed by one of Kuhn’s full-time employees, who also oversees bringing in a GAP auditor. This year the auditor came from Texas, so the farm pays for travel and lodging expenses on top of its certification fees each year to maintain certification and its wholesale clients. Other years the auditors have come from Kansas City, Missouri. Some of the tracking requirements include a sign-in for handwashing outside of the walk-in cooler and portable bathrooms and handwashing in the fields. Currently, the GAP certification that Depot Market uses and FSMA are not completely

aligned on the requirements, each with its own processes and bookkeeping stipulations.

This year the auditor came from Texas, so the farm pays for travel and lodging expenses on top of its certification fees each year to maintain certification and its wholesale clients. Other years the auditors have come from Kansas City, Missouri. Some of the tracking requirements include a sign-in for handwashing outside of the walk-in cooler and portable bathrooms and handwashing in the fields.

To accommodate orders by the semi-truckload, Kuhn and his team manage 12 hoop houses, the majority filled with tomatoes: “about five varieties, one house has indeterminants.” (Indeterminate tomato varieties tend to have a longer fruiting season but their fast, continuous growth habit requires trellising and pruning in a hoop house setting.) One of the hoop houses is filled with raspberries (“a great retail crop through frost”), and one with cucumbers (“as profitable as the tomatoes”).

“We have our hoop houses located in a spot with some wind protection, which is key for this part of the state. For us, the bigger the house, the better. We put removable ends on them so we could run a tractor and farm straight through,” Kuhn says.

His watermelon field is planted with rows of wheat between the rows of melons to operate as windbreaks. The weeds are kept down with herbicides, a pre-emergent and then post-emergent applied with a shielded sprayer. For the pumpkins, “We have been working on a no-till program. Two years ago, our cover crop didn’t burn down

fully and the pumpkins came up with weeds. We probably spent \$40,000 hoeing them free, with as many as 18 hoes swinging at a time. The pre-emergent timing is key to preventing that sort of disaster.”

Kuhn’s fields are nestled among conventional row crops, but he hasn’t yet experienced damage from spray drift. “We haven’t been hit with drift yet, but it scares me. A group of specialty crop growers in our area, including us, put an ad in the paper about how the use of Dicamba can destroy our crops and our income,” Kuhn says. “The loss of one of our fields of pumpkins would be devastating, so especially with Dicamba, we’re nervous. We have crop insurance, but it doesn’t cover loss to spray drift.”

Kuhn says he doesn’t plan to keep growing the operation. “We are trying to switch to play smaller ball, and sell more locally and on farm.” He has his reasons. “Up until this year, we were paid a premium for being local by most of our larger wholesale customers. They ended that this year. While their marketing is local and organic everywhere, they are pulling away from local farmers, even those of us they have worked with for years,” Kuhn says. “On top of that, they make a lot of demands of us farmers, such as needing us to be in their bookkeeping systems. We pay to be in their systems. This is an additional revenue stream for them. That on top of the GAP certification makes it expensive to continue to work with them.”

The consolidation of the larger chain warehouses has not been kind to grocery stores in western, rural Kansas.

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“Dillons, AWG and Wal-Mart are the main outlets and their warehouses have been consolidated over the last five years. West of us, they only have one warehouse. They’re in a bad way. If you could make a delivery route work, then you could have fresh produce in the smaller grocery stores to keep customers excited and keep those smaller stores open. It will only get worse as it consolidates,” Kuhn says.

Some changes are happening to help make the transition to being smaller and more local again. The farm has brought on Mark Stadler, who is a full-time farm manager helping making some of these transitions. This year is the first year the farm is trying trellised thornless Natchez blackberries. They planted 300 bushes, the first farm in North Central Kansas to try this method of growing for a you-pick target market. The farm also planted 8 acres of asparagus intended for retail markets.

These types of innovations are not readily available in education materials for growers across the state, however; a fact not lost on the Kuhns and Stadler.

“We want to teach others how to do specialty crops and teach some of the topics where extension used to be in operation,” Kuhn says. “When I was a student at K-State, I studied apples under a full-time pomologist. Students today don’t have that opportunity.

Today, the extension specialist Cary Rivard is one of the only resources people know of to turn to, and he’s great, but the needs extend beyond his capacity. We need to bring more

people in to share expertise, especially in the western half of the state.”

After visiting with Kuhn, it feels that the specialty-crop market is gearing up for some big changes and big decisions. What is the type of market people want to access, and what type of farmers do growers want to be?

Navigating the waters of wholesale versus smaller, localized markets—and establishing the proper distribution channels and fair regulations—will play a key role, along with creating the path for farmers to learn new techniques and connect with peers to make the (likely) necessary changes to build a sustainable, ecologically diverse food and farming system.

Jennifer Kongs is a freelance writer with Bark Media in Lawrence, Ks. who produced this story as part of KRC’s Specialty Crop Block Grant funded by the Kansas Department of Agriculture through USDA’s SCBG Program.

KRC Monthly Grazing Calls

Join other grazers from across the state of Kansas in a telephone conversation with grazing management experts Dale Kirkham, Gary Kilgore and Keith Harmony on the second Monday of each month, from 7:30 to 9:00 pm.

Hosted by the Kansas Rural Center, these informal discussions cover all aspects of grazing management. The calls are held on the second Monday of each month.

Dial: 1-877-304-5632

Enter: 300 346 2424#

For more information please contact Dale Kirkham at 620-344-0202.

KRC Offers Weekly Policy Watch E-Updates

KRC is once more offering weekly summaries of the Kansas State Legislature’s activities including bills introduced, testimony, calendars and background analysis. KRC’s policy analyst Paul Johnson will monitor the Legislature and report on critical issues and provide timely information on a range of issues including agriculture and food related topics, state budget (including education finance) and tax policies, energy and water policy, and social services issues.

KRC also includes information on how to contact your legislator, additional resources available on key topics, and informs you of any opportunities to learn more about the legislative process or specific educational meetings on key topics.

KRC will also cover federal farm bill progress and provide information and analysis via our membership in the National Sustainable Agriculture Coalition.

If you receive Rural Papers and have provided us an e-mail address, you automatically receive Policy Watch. For information on how to sign up for Policy Watch and Rural Papers, contact Mary Fund at mfund@kansasruralcenter.org, or go to www.kansasruralcenter.org/donate.

Sustainable Food and Farming News

Lessons Learned continued from page 8...

Growing Over Cover: A Kansas Specialty Crop Grower's Guide to Cover Crops is the latest publication in the Kansas Rural Center's series of grower guides for fruit and vegetable growers in Kansas. The guide is now available for download on the KRC website, and a limited number of hard copies are available by contacting KRC.

Growing Over Cover was prepared with funding from the Kansas Department of Agriculture through the Specialty Crop Grant Program at the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) through Grant No. 16-SC-BGP-KS-044.

The guide is the third in a series of specialty crop guides prepared by the Kansas Rural Center in collaboration with Kansas State University Extension. The first was Growing Under Cover: A Guide to Poly-tunnel Options that outlines the choices available for low and high tunnels, and how to select the right plastic tunnel or hoop-house option for you. Available at <http://kansasruralcenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/12/Growing-Under-Cover-0-FULL.pdf>.

What's Right About Kansas continued from page 7...

"There's no better time to come back to a rural area because of the flexibility it offers and the quality of life," Mahin said. "Access to technology has leveraged all that."

Several panelists felt that though Brown's article highlighted the perils of commodity farming, it didn't go far enough to recognize alternative methods farmers are using to go forward. Swaffar sees agricultural conservation practices reversing many of the ecological damages caused by conventional farming, and injecting hope among the state's farmers.

"The folks I work with are very excited about dirt, though we don't call it that anymore," he said. "It's soil. And soil is more than a growing medium—it's a living organism." Five years ago, he said, you wouldn't have heard the term 'soil health,' but now it's mainstream. Why? Because it turns farmers into biologists, and biologists are excited to see the soil come alive. For farmers, that translates into reducing input costs and being able to grow more than just wheat and corn and sorghum.

"Now that they see the capabilities, they're thinking well beyond traditional commodity crops," Swaffar said. "We're seeing changes in the soil and in communities."

For McClish, food and food production are the driving forces of rural sustainability, and nowhere are they more critical than in food deserts like rural Wichita and surrounding com-

munities. Common Ground Producers and Growers began in 2014 after a friend asked McClish to provide fresh vegetables and produce to a low-income senior center where people had difficulty getting to the farmers' markets. When other centers got word of it, they asked to be included. The company now serves 33 sites and several rural counties surrounding Wichita, through a network of growers and producers, and continues to expand. "Our motto is, 'all are fed, no one is hungry,'" she said.

The experience taught her that food is an economic stabilizer and could contribute to the expansion and resurgence of family farms. "Rural Kansas can rebound," McClish said. "We do good with adversity. We're all looking at the same problems but we have different ways of solving them. Food is the basis of relationships. We can make this work together."

Beardon also lives in a food desert in Southeast Kansas, and knows firsthand the importance of food for community growth. After a local farmers' market folded, Beardon spearheaded a campaign to restructure the market. In the spring of 2010 it reopened with more than 60 vendors, 27 of whom were there for the entire season.

Beardon also worked with the county commissioners and the residents of Moran to purchase their grocery store, which now serves customers for 30 miles around. "There are needs out there beyond our imagination, and as an individual you may not think you

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What's Right About Kansas continued from page 16...

can do a lot,” Beardon said. “Keep your ears to the ground and find out who else is interested, put your heads together and just start walking.”

Cooperatives like the Central Plains Organic Farmers Association (formerly Kansas Organic Producers) embrace a different approach by cooperatively marketing certified organic grains, Reznicek said. It is a system that resists corporate capitalism for a system that is ecologically sound, economically viable and socially just. “Because of its social goals and purpose, cooperatives represent a form of social economy, which is a much broader-based economy than the commodity and financially-driven market economy,” he said.

Public schools are one example of successful social economies. They function outside of market support with an unusual level of harmony, he said. The electrification of rural Kansas was another. Farmers contributed their time and machinery to set poles and string lines to reduce the indebtedness cooperatives would have to pay to electrical companies. The same model could be used again.

“That history is worth looking into,” Reznicek said. “The future of healthy rural communities is cooperative.”

To turn the tide of rural depopulation and economic decline, Hendrickson said in her keynote speech preceding the panel, communities are going to have to think creatively and to both identify and invest in capital—financial, social, natural, human, cultural and political. Of critical importance is resilience, the capacity of a system to absorb shocks and bounce back.

“There are different ways of thinking about what makes a community wealthy, but most mean the same thing—ownership, control, lasting livelihoods,” she said. “We need to put all the capitals together to make our food and farming systems resilient to shocks.”

Hendrickson compared the changes facing rural America to the changes farmers face with climate change. “It’s been weird, weird weather, but we’re in something we’ve never experienced before,” she said.

After asking people to identify what makes their community livable, the answers largely centered on its people. “People are engaged in a community and the dedication to its quality of life,” Hendrickson said. “This has to be measured, but nobody measures it. We don’t have a happiness scale, though that might be more important than the gross domestic product.”

Then again, maybe there is a happiness scale that can be measured in those who, in spite of the challenges and difficulties of living in rural Kansas, not only choose to stay, but strive to make them better. If so, Penner wants to be included in that group.

“If you’re rural by choice, I want to be in your tribe,” she said. “We can repurpose these small towns with the things you’re doing. This team we have can really make a difference for our communities to be livable, lovable, visitable, workable, with better health care and broadband, big things, but we have big hearts. And I want to thank Corie Brown for writing that article. I love getting fired up.”

Tom Parker is a freelance writer and photographer from Blue Rapids, Ks. who prepared this article for the Kansas Rural Center.

SAVE THE DATE

Kansas Rural Center

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Sustainable Food and Farming News

The Future from Here continued from page 7...

Like Barnett, Paul Johnson expressed optimism over the election, with caveats. Johnson, policy analyst for KRC, writes weekly legislative update e-reports and monitors the state legislature on environmental, local food and independent family farm issues.

“It’s hard to overstate how different this political landscape would have been if we would have had a different outcome in the governor’s race,” he said, “But at this point I think we have to be pretty clear-eyed about how pragmatic Laura Kelly is going to be, and some of her choices on priorities.”

The farm bill, however, was uppermost in his thinking. “The key that affects land use in our state is the farm bill,” he said. “What drives farm subsidies is what makes the difference in what we’re planting. We only subsidize five crops with our farm bill—wheat, cotton, rice, soybeans and corn. Our farm bill funds feed grains, not food grains. It’s not the diet we should be shifting to right now.”

The House’s version of the farm bill would do away with limits on subsidies that go to the largest farms, he said. Under the current bill, 80 percent of farm payments go to the top 20 percent of the nation’s farms. The House bill would also kill the Conservation Stewardship Program. “It’s the conservation plan for working farms,” he said. “The Senate bill didn’t do any of that. We need to take the Senate choice and move forward.”

(Editor’s Note: The 2018 farm bill passed on Dec. 20 adopted more of the Senate version. See related article this issue)

Zack Pistora’s take on the election was that the real winners were the voters. “We had five percent more turnout than we did the last midterm election,” he said. “That’s 130,000 people. We now have a more representative democracy in Kansas than we did before.”

Pistora represents the Sierra Club on water conservation, hydraulic fracking, energy efficiency, clean energy and other issues at the Kansas State Legislature. He felt that

having a Republican-controlled legislature with a Democratic governorship might make for more bipartisan legislation, and lead to more cooperation.

In his opinion, the key environmental issue facing Kansas is water, and his list was long, from siltation in major reservoirs that supply drinking water, algae blooms that threaten wildlife and recreation, and, at the heart of it, inadequate and inequitable funding for the state water plan. The plan is supposed to collect \$2 million annually from the lottery and \$6 million from the public, but the state hasn’t been putting that money into the plan, Pistora said. Encouraging the governor to reinstate statutory funding for the state water plan fund would be a good start toward rebuilding financial reserves for water issues.

Revamping the water usage fee for high-quantity users could finance conservation methods, improvements to water technologies and research for alternate crops, he said. “The more water you use, the more you should have to contribute to the fee,” he said. “Who’s that going to affect the most? Farmers. But we’re just asking for a penny for every thousand gallons. And everybody who’s not a farmer, we’re asking two pennies.” Over the past 50 years, 100 trillion gallons of water were removed from the High Plains aquifer, much of it through agriculture, and in 2013 alone one trillion gallons was used by Kansas consumers, he said.

The midterm election turnout showed that people want more engagement with their legislators, Myslivy said. Unfortunately, many voters have no idea how to go about doing that or what topics to discuss. In each panelist’s opinion, what question could voters ask their legislator to begin the conversation?

“We’re in a period where customers want choices about where their energy comes from and how it’s being used,” Barnett said. “I would ask if they support my right as a customer to put solar panels on my roof, and if so, would they protect my rights to do so?”

“Get to know your legislators and Congressman,” Johnson

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The Future from Here continued from page 18...

said. "Show up at their coffees when they're out an about in their district, keep your issues short and direct."

"What leadership role are you taking for the environment?" Pistora said. "And then ask, what can I do as a Kansas constituent to make sure we lead in an environmental future?"

Myslivy had an answer for that last question. "Attending WEALTH Day at the state capitol is a fantastic way to get connected both to other people who care about these issues and to learn about the organizations in the state who are doing the work," she said. "We'll buddy you up with a seasoned advocate to take you to talk to your legislator if you want, we'll give you fact sheets, questions to ask, we'll do everything you need to be part of the process." The next WEALTH day is March 12, 2019. It is sponsored by Kansas WEALTH (Water, Energy, Air, Land, Transportation and Health). WEALTH is a network of Kansas environmental and advocacy organizations including the Kansas Rural Center.

"Cultivating Climate Resilience on Farms and Ranches" Publication Available

USDA's Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education Program has a new publication, Cultivating Climate Resilience on Farms and Ranches, outlining the new challenges that changing weather patterns pose in agriculture throughout the United States, and what you can do to make your farm more resilient. By understanding the climate risks to your production system and practices that can reduce those risks, you can identify some management steps that will improve the resilience of your farm or ranch to changing climate conditions while allowing you to achieve your other sustainability goals. Go to the link below to find a downloadable pdf of the report or to order a free copy. Go to: www.sare.org/Learning-Center/Bulletins/Cultivating-Climate-Resilience-on-Farms-and-Ranches.



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Sustainable Food and Farming News

Finally a Farm Bill continued from page 5...

Organic Agriculture:

- Establishes permanent mandatory funding for the Organic Agriculture Research and Extension Initiative (OREI), ramping up funding to \$50 million/year by 2023. (For 2019 and 2020 levels will remain at current \$20 million.)
- Reauthorizes and continues mandatory funding for the National Organic Certification cost-share program, which supports transition to and growth of organic production, but also cuts the amount of annual funding.

Beginning Farmers:

- Provides mandatory, permanent funding for the Farming Opportunities Training and Outreach Program. (FOTO). This program combines two training and assistance programs- Beginning Farmer Rancher Development Program and the Outreach and Assistance to Socially Disadvantaged and Veteran Farmers and Ranchers Program.

Commodity Crop and Crop Insurance:

- Improves whole farm revenue protection insurance, a risk management insurance for diversified farms who have been struggling with coverage issues.
- Adds a Local Food Policy to the list of new policies the Risk Management Agency should develop, for smaller specialty crop producers.
- Includes a strong step forward toward ending discrimination against farmers who adopt cover cropping. Not quite enough, but it does make progress toward convincing RMA to include all conservation practices as good farming practices for crop insurance purposes.
- And unfortunately includes a major new payment limit loophole to provide the largest commodity farms in the country with a way to avoid the statutory limit of \$250,000 a year on commodity subsidies. New law allows extended family members are now eligible for payments.

For all the details and links to further explanations, please go to the National Sustainable Agriculture Coalition blog posts at: <http://sustainableagriculture.net/blog/>.

5th Ag Revolution... continued from page 11...

This isn't a theoretical concept or a wild fantasy, he said, but verifiable, fact-based experience from farmers around the world practicing regenerative agricultural principles. From Canada to Costa Rica to Ghana and equatorial South Africa, he toured their farms, dug holes in their fields, and saw transformation on an unprecedented scale. By adopting conservation agricultural practices, farmers in any region of the world were matching conventional yields using far less oil and chemical inputs.

Specific practices used by farmers implementing those practices vary wildly, not only region to region but from farm to farm, he said, and need to be adapted to specific settings. "In the standardization of agronomic practices that have happened over the past hundred years, we've oversimplified our understanding of the soil and under-appreciated the ingenuity and creativity of our farmers," he said. "We need to undo both of those things."

From his perspective, the world has gone through four agricultural revolutions. The first, the idea of planting things, changed the course of human society. The second was soil husbandry, of planting legumes and rotating crops—two of the three principles of conservative agricultural practices. The third revolution was industrialization and mechanization in the 19th century, and the fourth was the ongoing biotechnology revolution. Now, he believes, we're on the eve of a fifth revolution based on the prioritization of soil health.

No matter the location, the basic principles are deceptively simple, he said: don't disturb the ground. "That's a recipe for more profitable farms," Montgomery said. "Even a geologist can tell you that."

Montgomery's presentation will be posted on the KRC website.

Sustainable Food and Farming News

Road Ahead continued from page 4...

From 2013 to 2018, SNAP assistance declined from \$471 million to \$299 million with 41,000 children and 62,000 adults losing benefits. The Department of Children and Families must be adequately staffed to assure participation and access to SNAP.

Energy and Energy Efficiency. Kansas continues to falter in researching the opportunities of energy efficiency and providing energy conservation programs. According to the American Council for an Energy Efficient Economy (ACEEE), Kansas ranks just 45th of the 50 states in having utility-based or governmental conservation programs. Kansas is one of just six states that have not developed a statewide energy plan.

The Kansas Corporation Commission has not fully researched the potential for energy efficiency investments compared to expanding power production. By law, public utilities are required to ‘furnish reasonably efficient and sufficient service and facilities’ to obtain their monopoly ‘service area’ status. This law passed in 1933 so it needs to be updated to the 21st century since energy efficiency investments are far less costly than power production today, and the Kansas Corporation Commission mandated to develop a statewide energy plan.

FOOD. Local food production deserves greater discussion. Kansas imports 95% of the fruits and vegetables (\$770 million) consumed in the state. Kansas has a diminishing number of small state inspected meat plants left that might process 10% of the meat consumed in Kansas. Kansas has no commercial-sized poultry plant to process live chickens. Kansas has an emerging local and regional food system sector of both vegetables and fruit as well as meat and poultry needing to be served.

Kansas has a Beginning Farmer Loan Program (hidden away at the Kansas Development Finance Authority) that makes \$4-6 million in loans yearly but could be expanded significantly if properly promoted. In energy Kansas established a 20% goal of electrical power by 2020 from renewable energy, meeting that goal in 2016, with 35% produced renewably last year. Kansas should consider setting local food production goals to keep our food dollars reverberating locally, promote healthier diets that would result in lower medical costs, and offer new enterprise opportunities to farmers.

Also, the State Legislature’s Local Food and Farm Task Force provided two reports (2015 and 2016) for ways the state could enhance local and regional food production and economic opportunities. These reports built on the KRC and partners’ “Feeding Kansas” report of 2014. Progress at the state level was hampered by the state’s economic woes, while people around the state are moving forward. Now it is time to look at all of those again and reaffirm how the state can help accomplish those recommendations and goals to build a local/regional food economy.

Federal Farm Bill. The federal farm bill programs provide a large amount of money to Kansas farmers and agriculture in general. Congress just passed and the president signed the 2018 Farm Bill just before the holidays, and now completing the appropriations process is underway. Too often legislators punt on Farm Bill issues leaving it to our Congressional reps. But this year Informational hearings on the federal farm bill were held in the Senate Ways and Means and House Agriculture committees—a good start to better understanding how this important federal legislation impacts Kansas.

Rural Revitalization is a new committee established this session to focus specifically on rural issues. Rural communities have been declining for several decades. According to population statistics, rural Kansas is bleeding people, especially young people. Schools are challenged with maintaining enrollments. Mainstreets are dotted with empty buildings. Rural hospitals are in financial trouble. Rural grocery stores are dwindling leaving some communities in the heart of farm country as food deserts. There is a lack of affordable housing for those who would stay or return. A number of informational hearings will start the session off as the committee gets it feet under it to begin addressing needs.

KRC once more offers its Weekly Legislative E-Update from the beginning of the session through May or the end of the session and will be covering many of the above issues. The Updates also include Calendar for key hearings, and information on how to contact or identify your legislator. Contact Mary Fund to be added to the mailing list. You can view back issues of the Updates on KRC’s website at: <http://kansasruralcenter.org/category/legislative-policy-watch/>.

(A version of this article was published in Policy Watch #1 Jan. 11, 2019). Contact Paul Johnson at pdjohnson@century-link.net.

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