

## Grower Cooperatives: Strength in Numbers



Kansas Rural Center's Specialty Crops Workshops  
Stu Shafer, Chair, Sustainable Agriculture  
Johnson County Community College

Grower Cooperatives: Strength in Numbers 2

## History of cooperatives

The first cooperatives were formed in 1844 by skilled trades people in Rochdale, England. The idea was to protect small, local producers from being overwhelmed by large, concentrated industry by focusing on quality rather than quantity, and using the power of numbers for mutual support.

Cooperative ideals appealed to family farmers in the last half of the nineteenth century.

Squeezed by high prices for machinery and transportation and low prices for their crops, farmers banded together in cooperative organizations like The Grange. By the 1870s, the problem of deflation due to fiscal policies pushed farmers toward a more political stance, forming

first the Farmers Alliances which combined productive and marketing cooperation with political organizing. They eventually formed the Peoples Party, which won elections in Kansas and elsewhere and made a serious run at the presidency in the 1890s.



Grower Cooperatives: Strength in Numbers 2

## Mary Elizabeth Lease Kansas Farmers Alliance, People's Party



"What you farmers need to do is raise less corn and more Hell."

Grower Cooperatives: Strength in Numbers 3

## Cooperative Principles

- Membership
  - ✓ Voluntary and Open Membership
- Control
  - ✓ Democratic Member Control (one member, one vote)
- Participation
  - ✓ Member Economic Participation (democratic control of capital, return of surplus to members)
- Autonomy and Independence
  - ✓ Self help organization
- Education
  - ✓ Education, Training, and Information
- Cooperation
  - ✓ Cooperation Among Cooperatives
- Community
  - ✓ Concern for Community

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## Types of Cooperatives

There are several kinds of coops, from workers cooperatives to credit unions. But the two most significant for farmers are:

- ✓ Consumer cooperatives; for example, food coops like the Community Mercantile
- ✓ Producer cooperatives; for example, farmer coops like Kansas Organic Producers
- ✓ CSAs (Community Supported Agriculture) can be either or both

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## What is CSA?

Community Supported Agriculture: sharing the risk between farmer and consumer

- ✓ Started in Japan, Switzerland—shareholder organized (consumer managed)
- ✓ Robyn Van En first in U.S. in 1986—farmer managed CSA
- ✓ Now range from farmers recruiting members to farmer-consumer cooperatives in which everyone works
- ✓ Rolling Prairie Farmers Alliance (RPFA) organized in 1994—multi-farm producer cooperative model that recruits members
- ✓ Peacework CSA in New York and Fair Share Farm in Missouri are member-farmer coops in which workers and customers share management and work

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# Member-farmer CSAs

Original CSAs were organized by members, but American versions have become more farmer organized

- |                                |                             |                               |
|--------------------------------|-----------------------------|-------------------------------|
| Strengths:                     | members                     | levels                        |
| Volunteer labor from members   | Possible capital investment | Training work crews           |
| Stability of core member group | "Social transformation"     | Competition from other models |
| Commitment of members          | Challenges:                 | Convenience society           |
| Engagement of                  | Organizing volunteer labor  | Farmer transitions            |
|                                | Inconsistent experience     |                               |

# RPFA Model: growers cooperative



- Started in 1994
- Incorporated as cooperative (1997)
- Consensus decision making (usually)
- Rotation of officers
- Division of labor in coordination, management
- Multiple delivery sites

# Coordination

Division of organizational labor among growers



- Production Coordinator
- Site Coordinators
- Treasurer/bookkeeper
- Officers
- President
- Treasurer
- Secretary

# RPFA Model: subscribers



- Pay deposit up front
- covers some overhead
- part is refundable at end of season
- Pay per week, collected monthly
- No pre-filled bag or box—tables organized by choices

# Strengths



- Pooled resources
- Experience
- Stability
- Diversity (location, soils, size, experience, etc.)
- Cooperative structure and principles

# Challenges



- Individual production planning—sometimes gaps
- Tensions among grower members
- Turnover—more among subscribers, but some growers too
- Marketing/recruiting subscribers
- Competition

# Questions?



## My ADDRESS

12345 College Blvd  
Overland Park, KS 66210  
[sshafer@jccc.edu](mailto:sshafer@jccc.edu)

## CONTACTS

<http://www.rollingprairiecsa.com/>  
[facebook.com/rollingprairiefarmers](https://www.facebook.com/rollingprairiefarmers)  
<https://www.peaceworkscsa.org>  
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