



Harvesting Opportunity in Kansas

A Symposium on Building Community Wealth Through Food and Farming



Following Up On the May 2018 Symposium

Compiled by the Kansas Rural Center

Written by Sarah Green

August 2019

Local and Regional Food Systems in Kansas: Harvesting Opportunities to Build Momentum

In late May 2018, a group of Kansans convened at the University of Kansas School of Business in Lawrence to talk about local and regional food systems and how they relate to building community wealth.

Participants represented all four corners of the state, a significant feat given Kansas' diverse agriculture practices and existing market structures.

There were farmers, ranchers, processors, economic development professionals, people representing agriculture advocacy organizations, bankers, cooperative extension, local health and wellness groups, and more. There were people representing non-profits, foundations, and community development groups. There were residents of both rural and urban communities with all levels of knowledge and experience in food and agriculture issues.

These Kansans met new people, shared a meal sourced from local producers, learned from each other, and considered the information provided by speakers from states such as Colorado and North Carolina, as well as staff from the U.S. Department of Agriculture in Washington, DC.

After the symposium, participants reported that they made new connections that helped them with their work. Some even reported that they saw local and regional food system work through a new lens.

Over a year later: where are we now?

The Kansas Rural Center, along with Douglas County Extension and the Douglas County Food Policy Council, collaborated to put together a series of stories to follow up on the Symposium. The symposium's organizing team engaged Sarah Green, a writer based in Wichita with an interest in food, agriculture and community development issues, to report and write the stories, which were collected in the spring of 2019. They offer an in-depth look at the opportunities and challenges to building, maintaining and growing local and regional food systems in Kansas including:

- Diversifying agricultural operations to include more fruit and vegetable production to sell locally;
- Building relationships in the food system;
- Making good connections with community members and policymakers; and
- Opportunities for financing and investing to grow and expand Kansas food and agriculture businesses.

These stories are being sent out across the state, and are available on KRC's website (www.kansasrural-center.org) and on other websites.

The Harvesting Opportunities Symposium was partially funded by The American Farmland Trust, USDA – Agricultural Marketing Service, the Douglas County Food Policy Council, K-State Research and Extension, the Kansas Rural Center, Douglas County E-Community, the Sunflower Foundation, Douglas County Community Foundation, Douglas County Farm Bureau, Kansas Farmers Union, Kansas Alliance for Wellness, Growing Growers Kansas City and the Community Mercantile.

Building Local Food Systems Through Diverse Agriculture Operations

The cornerstone of a healthy local and regional food system is the production of the food itself.

In Kansas, the conversation has for years further centered on the production of specialty crops – such as fruits and vegetables – grown and sold directly from the producer to the consumer, or through local retail outlets.

According to Ag Census data, Kansas boasts about \$41.7 million in fruit and vegetable sales. But according to the Kansas Department of Agriculture, total economic output accounts for about \$99 million. The potential is for much more than that. Kansas now imports about 95% of its fruits and vegetables, and some argue that Kansas could and should grow much more of what it consumes.

Figuring out how to boost that industry for even more production has been a challenging conversation to have, particularly with agriculture producers who are well-suited to grow large amounts of commodity crops.

Is that changing?

“It is increasingly becoming a conversation within this system,” said Mike Matson, director of Industry Affairs and Development for Kansas Farm Bureau. “Farmers and ranchers will make determinations or decisions related to diversification based on a number of factors, not the least of which is economics. As pressures continue to mount related to growing and producing large commodities, our members are starting to look at other revenue streams.”

*The cornerstone of a healthy local and regional food system
is the production of the food itself.*

Kansas Farm Bureau convened a task force of member producers ahead of its centennial in 2019 to both ensure it is meeting the current and future needs of its members, and to consider areas of growth for recruitment.

The agriculture advocacy organization has had success supporting commodity growers, Matson said – those producing wheat, corn, soybeans, milo, cattle and hogs. They have recently hired a staff member to identify and build relationships with individuals and systems who are growing crops that are not those big commodities, he said.

That work is going well, Matson said, but there is much to be done to build systems to support those producers.

Christy Hopkins, director of Greeley County Community Development and past-president of the Western Kansas Economic Development Alliance, also notes the robust infrastructure that exists for agricultural commodities in her region.

Building Local Food Systems Through Diverse Agriculture Operations continued from page 2...

“I think one of the biggest obstacles is not so much that we can’t grow different things, it’s that we don’t know what to do with it once it’s grown,” she said. “The systems are built and established to make commodity agriculture easy to understand. It’s not complex – I grow it, I take it to the elevator, or I bin it and market it later. I don’t think the systems are as well-defined or as easy to understand for the other types of agriculture that we’re talking about.”

Both Matson and Hopkins pointed to farm operations that are perfectly poised to grow large-scale grain crops, but would have to substantially retool their operations in terms of equipment, irrigation and especially labor to switch to growing a product like tomatoes or peppers.

Additional research on the varieties of fruits and vegetables could prosper in western Kansas in particular – and getting that information to producers – could help, Hopkins said.

There may be opportunities for deeper systemic work, she added. Hopkins recently heard a conversation about people in Western Kansas communities feeling like “leftovers” or “has-beens.”

“How do we change that?” she asked. “How do we do anything when we feel stuck?”

Lifting up more stories about producers who are navigating current systems or building new ones would also help, Hopkins said.

“The more we can see local and regional success stories, or ‘how we’ve done it’ guides will inspire others to action or think differently about what they can be doing on their own property,” she said. “I think that’s the key.”

Donn Teske, president of the Kansas Farmers Union, also pointed to opportunities to help specialty crop producers build their marketing capacity. Some of the state’s best-known farms excel at the marketing piece, he said.

“How do we take it mainstream?” he asked.

Organizations such as food hubs or local food cooperatives could help build that marketing capacity, he said. Further increasing specialty crop production would have additional benefits for the environment and for communities as a whole, he added.

“Local production feeding the community is the safest, healthiest, system, and is needed desperately,” he said.



Building Local Food Systems Through Relationships

Of all the components of local and regional food systems, the production of relationships might be one of the most important.

Relationships are critical for producers who choose to market their product themselves, either directly to a consumer at a farmers' market or directly to a wholesale business, said presenters at the 2018 "Harvesting Opportunity in Kansas" symposium in Lawrence.

In fact, said Debra Tropp, a former deputy director with the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Agricultural Marketing Service's Marketing Service who spoke at the symposium, it may be more important to know a producer than to be concerned with the number of miles the product traveled to a purchaser.

"Local food is about transparency and relationships," Tropp said, "not so much about geography."

Of all the components of local and regional food systems, the production of relationships might be one of the most important.

Relationships are a key part of any successful business, "whether it's agriculture or watchmaking – it doesn't matter," said Cherie Schenker, owner of the McCune Farm to Market grocery store and Schenker Family Farms in southeast Kansas.

"You form a relationship with customers, producers, and vendors, and those are relationships that you build on," she said. "And customers want to put a face on the product they are buying."

Schenker has built relationships with other local producers for years.

"We know who's growing what for the most part in our area," she said. "We interact with them at extension meetings, at farmers' markets, and meetings (like Harvesting Opportunity in Kansas) and more. We're not just forming relationships, we're forming a community, and that gives you potential resources to draw on."

They already knew, for instance, a local producer who could teach a recent sauerkraut class at their grocery store. And that producer didn't just have the skills to make sauerkraut, but also grew the cabbage used in the dish.

"When you can teach someone how to utilize food in that way, it creates another connection," Schenker said. "I think education is a huge, huge, huge part of connecting agriculture to consumers. The easiest way to educate someone is through their stomach."

Building Local Food Systems Through Relationships continued from page 4...



Rebecca McMahon, a horticulture agent for K-State Research and Extension-Sedgwick County, helps producers build the relationships they need to grow their businesses. In Sedgwick County, that also means helping facilitate conversations between the urban world of the state’s largest city – Wichita – and also the rural world of Sedgwick County, populated in large part by diverse agriculture operations.

The conversations help build not just individual businesses, but also build communities, she said.

“It is very clear, from ‘Harvesting Opportunity’ and other meetings and resources that the rural communities that are thriving have found ways to capitalize on the urban resources closest to them,” McMahon said. “The rural communities that are declining are the ones that don’t have those urban relationships.”

Because of her role with Extension, McMahon is often the first call from individuals, non-profits and businesses looking to start markets or find markets in which to sell their product.

One concept that could elevate those connections and build deeper, more sustainable relationships is that of the “value chain coordinator,” an individual who is tasked with working in all aspects of the food system to make connections, to provide education, and to leverage resources.

Investing in such a person, McMahon said, could elevate all of the existing work in her local and regional food system.

“Building that capacity is so important,” she said. “For a municipality, or any organization, even a county Extension office, if they want to be involved in local food system work, it’s important to have someone who understand that building those relationships is their job.”

Building Local Food Systems Through Investment

Growing local and regional food systems will require investment of all kinds – capital, capacity, and time. Becca Jablonski, an assistant professor and a food systems extension economist at Colorado State University who spoke at the 2018 “Harvesting Opportunity in Kansas” symposium, gave a handful of examples of the economic impact of these businesses. For instance, farmers’ markets have been shown to boost nearby businesses during the times they’re in operation. The markets can also act as incubators for related businesses.

Food businesses aren’t the only focus for Network Kansas, the State of Kansas’ entrepreneurship office. They are a new area of attention, however, with the 2018 rollout of the Kansas Healthy Food Initiative, a public-private partnership that provides financing and technical assistance to new and growing food ventures.

“Prior to the Kansas Healthy Food Initiative, Network Kansas lived in more of a general sense of small-business entrepreneurial development,” said Imagene Harris, director of Strategic Partnerships & Impact Investment for the organization. “Having more focused education around the food system and how it interacts with community development, economic development and entrepreneurs has been really interesting.”

Harris and Tiffany Nixon, manager of Referral Center Operations for Network Kansas, both attended the Harvesting Opportunity in Kansas Symposium in 2018, just a few months after the Kansas Health Food Initiative launched.

The initiative is designed to serve all parts of the food system, Harris said, from production to distribution to even the end of the “food cycle” dealing with food waste.

Rural grocery stores have been among the program’s first participants, receiving combinations of loans and grants to build or maintain stores. The initiative hopes to recruit other businesses as well.

“This work has been very important in rural communities,” Harris said. “Going forward, we are talking about how we can be more intentional about supporting all of the pieces of the food cycle.”

Network Kansas serves rural and distressed urban areas of the state, Nixon said. They match beginning and growing businesses with resources, education, assistance and sources of capital. Their referral center receives about 300 calls a month from entrepreneurs in various stages of starting or growing businesses.

They continue to search for new partnerships. Nixon said she met a staff person from the Kansas Department of Health and Environment at the Harvesting Opportunity symposium.

“We are connected with KDHE already, but this person was in a different bureau” than their other contacts, Nixon said. “I met with him after the meeting, and he started including me on a list letting people know about grants for communities. Now I know of other grants that are being sent to local health departments or economic development offices. I share the information with the team, and keep it on hand for referrals.”

For more information about the Kansas Healthy Food Initiative, visit kansashealthyfood.org.

Note: Sarah Green, who wrote this piece, has provided input on the Kansas Health Food Initiative as a member of its advisory board.

Building Local Food Systems Through Conversations

Local and regional food systems are promising areas of economic development and growth.

That's the premise of the "Harvesting Opportunity" publication from the St. Louis Federal Reserve Bank, and the related "Harvesting Opportunity in Kansas" symposium that took place in Lawrence in 2018.

Economic development is important, but there are additional benefits to communities and overall community development in considering these food systems, said Marlin Bates, director of the K-State Research and Extension office in Douglas County.

There has been sustained work in recent years in Kansas to study and understand barriers and opportunities that could help producers, processors and consumers, Bates said, pointing to the Kansas Rural Center's 2014 "Feeding Kansas" report and the work done by the state's Local Food and Farm Task Force from 2014 to 2016.

Those efforts, along with others in the years since, have been helpful to keep momentum going towards increasing the production of and markets for local food, he said. But they may not be the activities and intensity to achieve substantial results.

"We all like to believe not just that the work we are doing is good, but that it's the right work, and that it's sufficient," Bates said. "We aren't doing enough."

It's necessary to have those conversations and the community's interest, input and buy-in to potential ideas to build and maintain the systems, he said.

"The feds aren't fixing food systems, but local food policy councils are," Bates said, referring to the title of a December 2017 story in *The New Food Economy*. "Certainly, we are all culpable, if not responsible, for the way things are. If we recognize that, we have to act on those responsibilities."

Luke Mahin, executive director of Republic County Economic Development and a member of the North Central Kansas Food Council, attended the Harvesting Opportunity in Kansas symposium and found it useful in thinking about how the regional council could be helpful to local food and agriculture businesses.

Some of it, he said, reinforced his current approach to economic development.

"The conversation needs to be asking a farmer what they want to do and what their goals are, instead of the government angle of 'we're here to help,'" he said.



Building Local Food Systems Through Conversations continued from page 7...

Mahin and Bates spoke about the symposium to the Kansas House Agriculture Committee on Jan. 29, 2019, and, more broadly, about some of the efforts to build local food systems in Kansas.

“There’s room to start saying, ‘what if we create a new system that doesn’t replace what we have, but creates alternative routes to get to where we want to go?’”

The committee members asked questions about economic impact and future plans, but they also told stories both during and after the informational hearing about their own experiences with gardens, farms, markets, and local producers, Bates and Mahin said – underscoring the need for those conversations to be part of the bigger narrative.

“If you don’t have a good experience with a farmers’ market or a local producer, it is hard to connect to that value,” Mahin said.

Rep. Jason Probst, a Hutchinson democrat who serves on the House Agriculture Committee, suggests inviting policymakers to farms, markets and other businesses in the food system to help them better understand what’s going well and what could be changed through policies.

Those experiences are helpful to lawmakers to both make progress and to help reduce the likelihood of unintended consequences of policies, Probst said.

“There has to be a way to show (policymakers) that the system in place is in place because of inertia, not because it’s best or because it’s right or because it’s our only alternative,” he said. “It’s that way because we built this infrastructure around a certain way of doing things, whether it’s transportation or food retail, and we perpetuate the systems because they are known, they are manageable, and because undoing them completely would create some upheaval we don’t want.

“There’s room to start saying, ‘what if we create a new system that doesn’t replace what we have, but creates alternative routes to get to where we want to go?’”

Opportunities to engage with local and state government officials took place this summer, Bates said, as Lt. Gov. Lynn Rogers led a listening tour of Kansas communities to guide the work of the newly formed Office of Rural Prosperity.

Building Local Food Systems Through Conversations continued from page 8...

The Kansas Rural Center hosted a series of town hall meetings across the state to consider the “future of farming” as it relates to food, agriculture, climate and energy issues and rural and urban revitalization.

One idea that could help Kansans come together at any time to talk about food system challenges and opportunities is a structured kind of community conversation, Bates said.

TALK Salina has found success with using the National Issues Forums Institute model for its conversations, said Greg Stephens, a co-coordinator and trained facilitator for the organization.

The model has been useful in helping community members have better, more productive conversations about complicated, systemic issues such as immigration, public safety, the surge in opioid use, mental health care and more, Stephens said. Participants review a discussion guide that outlines the topic and the advantages and disadvantages of potential solutions.

The emphasis is not on statistics but stories about lived experiences; facilitators do not rely on subject-matter experts, but lift up the expertise of the people in the room, Stephens said.

“This isn’t about solving problems,” he said. “Problems are solved in stages, and the middle parts of those stages are related to behavior change. When you hear people who are politically different than you telling stories about the same issue, that moves people to start rethinking the surface solutions they’ve come up with.”

Stephens said he wasn’t aware of community conversations about local food that had been organized in this way – but would be a good fit for the National Issues Forums model.

“Food issues, local foods, and food policy aren’t talked about enough in these small communities,” he said. “They are significant, complex issues. I think a lot of people don’t think there are solutions to all this stuff. The solution is for people to start solving problems themselves. It’s not easy, but if it could happen quickly it could have a big impact.”

To read more about Harvesting Opportunities, please visit - <https://kansasruralcenter.org/harvesting-opportunities/>.

