

Kansas Rural Center 2020 Town Hall Summary
Regional Food Systems Resilience
By Rick McNary

The Kansas Rural Center held four virtual town halls during the Covid-19 pandemic to capture the significant shift in consumer interactions with rural producers. The first in the series was, “Regional Food Systems Resilience.”

This town hall examined the three basic components of a food system: production, processing and distribution.

During the early part of the pandemic, empty grocery store shelves illuminated a failure in each of these three parts of our once-reliable food system. For many Americans, empty shelves at a grocery store was a new phenomenon. However, the agricultural community brought a sense of calm and hope to a fearful public.

Consumers in cities found hope in producers in rural areas. The gap between rural and urban suddenly collapsed as thousands of urban dwellers began purchasing directly from farms and ranches. For those who adapted, this direct-to-consumer market prospered people in rural areas. In addition, consumers began to know the farmers who grew their food.

The education and relationship between consumer and producer happened naturally. Producers answered simple questions and consumers discovered how producers grew and processed the food we eat.

This first KRC Town Hall introduced us to four such producers.

The purpose of the Town Hall was not only to learn from these producers as they told their remarkable stories, but to identify positive outcomes, bumps in the road, new business opportunities and how to continue the momentum of this new type of economy so as to revitalize rural Kansas.

Panelists

Moderator: Gabe Spurgeon - owner of South Baldwin Farms near Ottawa and President of the Kansas Specialty Crop Growers Association

Donna Pearson McClish - Common Ground Producers and Growers in Wichita
Common Ground provides fresh produce to seniors and low-income families, particularly in food deserts.

The pandemic highlighted the gaps in the food system related to providing health care and fresh produce to this population and farmers were called up on to step in and fill that gap. Along with that comes the challenge of providing equitable wages to farmers.

As McClish said, "I tell people, 'You have no idea how much work it takes to get this food to your table.'" However, the end customer has to be able to afford the product.

Common Ground was one of only seven organizations to receive the USDA Urban Agriculture Implementation Project. This project, The Common Ground Mobile Market, will provide fresh produce to food deserts and food insecure areas in targeted urban zip codes in Wichita and Sedgwick Counties. The project will facilitate entrepreneurial projects through job training, use of farm equipment and land, mentoring and other business development assistance to new and beginning farmers.

"It's important to adapt our food systems of the future, not just the present," McClish said. "We will never go back to the way we were. We are in a new phase of history and we must adapt our foods systems to what it's going to look like."

Donn Teske - Farmer and President of the National Farmers Union

Donn is a fifth-generation farmer near Wheaton who was recently featured in Sarah Colt's film, "Disrupted."

From her press release, Colt states, "Donn Teske and his family play a pivotal role in the film, confronting great challenges with humor and grace. In the process, giving the audience valuable insights into what farmers face today, that go beyond the headlines."

Although Teske and his family operated a dairy for twenty years, then moved into organic cropping for a while, the last two years he has been solely focused on his cow/calf operation.

"Covid has shown the vulnerability of the system not only when it comes to livestock, but the industrial opportunity to abuse the system," Teske said. "There is opportunity now with direct sales, but the week spot is the local locker plants and the waiting list."

With the disruption in the supply chain with regards to meat products and empty store shelves, many producers like Teske found a ready market in direct-to-consumer sales. However, the local lockers across the state rapidly filled up with orders of processing of beef and hogs. Many customers are now finding open slots are pushed out as far as the fall of 2021.

Mark Gawron, Cultivate Kansas City

Gawron is with Cultivate Kansas City that is a, "locally grown nonprofit working to grow food, farms, and community in support of a sustainable and healthy local food system for all. We believe that growing and sharing local food nurtures our ability to care for each other and the world in which we live."

According to Gawron, a lot of the work for Cultivate KC is done by small, specialty crop farmers in urban and peri-urban areas. For many of these farmers, the best market has been restaurants in the cities. However, with those closing, that market vanished overnight.

As Gawron states, "Those producers that were able to quickly adapt to technology, getting online sales, beefing up their direct to market footprint and their online footprint were able to increase sales."

Cultivate KC also works with resettled refugees who often don't have the tech savvy but are able to get assistance through their programs.

Another unique opportunity in addition to the online store is the ability of consumers to go to a place and pick up their purchase through a contactless method.

Chris Schramek with High Plains Food Coop in Rawlins, County

The High Plains Food Coop utilizes farmers in a corridor along Highway 36 northern Kansas, southern Nebraska and into Colorado to provide a unique delivery model of food to residents in and around Denver. Transportation systems gather the products from the farmers in this food shed then take them to Denver.

As their coop grew, they noticed they were getting shoved out of the market by companies who sold door-to-door, so they adapted to this system. As a result, they are able to obtain loyal customers who subscribe for regular deliveries. This adaptation has caused a 3-fold increase in their business.

Panel Takeaways

Each participant was asked these three questions:

- In ten years, what does farm resilience look like?
- Do you have ideas how we get to the future?
- How are multi-generations going to survive?

Chris Schramek

- Focus on integrating soil health and public health. For many consumers, they don't understand the food they eat is a result of good soil. Educating consumers about soil health as it relates to public health is a real need.
- Commodities must pivot to regenerative farming practices. While there are many farms that are adapting, there is still need for more.
- Enhancing the cooperative models and food sheds. As they have discovered in their coop, the power of people coming together in regions and under one umbrella helps to provide a better market.

- Utilizing technology to increase food safety is a key to future expansion of rural prosperity in food systems. It's much easier to track food supplies thanks to technology.

Mark Gawron

- Major threats are loss of soil, impending rainfall and snowpack on coastal markets. The extreme weather patterns, especially with flooding, has had significant impact on the loss of soil through run off.
- Multi-generational farmers have a built-in advantage of combing the big draw of technology in our society to be practically applicable on the farm.
- More educational workshops and conversations need to happen, but the pandemic has really impacted this because people can't gather in public like they used to and many don't have the broadband access to do it online.

Donn Teske

- How to keep the farm in the family? He's the fifth generation on the farm and wants his children to continue.
- How do we do agritourism? Most farmers are not used to interacting with consumers and, while there is new opportunities, there are also need for education for farmers as to working in the component of agritourism.
- The threat of climate change and the disappearance of Ogallala aquifer is real, yet it is encouraging to see solutions being made with farmers to mitigate those concerns.
- Relationships need to be developed between farmers and consumers that is more than just a government program; there has to be real financial benefit is direct sales.

Donna Pearson McClish

- How does my family pass on the farm? Our parents began our 50 years ago and our challenge is passing it on to the next generations.
- Covid-19 has caused us to look at the future of how it should be, not necessarily how it is right now. It has exposed our weaknesses but provided opportunity to plan for the way it should be.
- Farmers, families and food can create unity in a community and should be more proactive in making that happened.
- With restaurants closing, local producers are more interested in selling locally but helping that market development and teaching farmers how to interact with consumers is critical.
- We need be able to deliver products directly to the consumer and the integration of technology, transportation and infrastructure will help.

Summary

The pandemic introduced new threats as well as new opportunities. The temporary collapse of production, processing and distribution in our global food system gave rise to an enhanced direct-to-consumer economy. This increased opportunity is key to rural prosperity.

Although the divide between urban and rural America has increased for the last two centuries with more than 80 percent of the population living in cities and less than 20 percent living in rural areas, the pandemic has caused a reuniting of these two groups.

Farmers who sell direct-to-consumers have a new opportunity to ensure the economic sustainability of their farms. Farms that adapt to this shift will provide sustainability for their farms and blaze new trails for local and regional food systems that, as McClish says, “Farmers, families and food can create unity.”

SWOT Analysis of Food System Resilience

Strengths	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Direct-to-Consumer sales provides higher ROI ● Relationships are built as consumers meet the farmers ● Education of how food is produced, processed and distributed is happening
Weaknesses	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Production – increased demand also means increased labor <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ How does the producer keep up? ○ What about equitable wages ● Processing <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Large processors abuse workers ○ Small processors limited capacity ○ Cold storage for specialty crops ○ Added value difficult to scale ● Distribution <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Farmers markets shut down ○ Consumers reluctant to go out in public
Opportunities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Door-to-door delivery ● Contactless pickup ● Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) ● Subscriptions ● Online sales ● New or expanded business opportunities
Threats	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Government regulation with meat processing plants ● Workers in plants being overworked ● Climate change ● Ogallala aquifer depletion

Additional Resources

Kansas Rural Center On Youtube

(<https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCLHfd8ooMjd4vhuDrRT0Lbg>)

KRC Town Hall on Regional Food Systems Resilience on Youtube

(<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XC-W3jRUSkw&t=1945s>)

KRC Farm Tour: Grazing Plains Farm

(<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=l-s82llqC8U&t=4s>)