



From Our Own Soil

Highlights from the Benton County Community Food Assessment

Why We're Focused on Food

Food is a basic need. Yet most of us know little about where it comes from, the conditions under which it is produced, and how it gets from field to table. To understand food issues in our community, we need to learn about the entire food system including production, processing, distribution, consumption and recycling of food. One way to build our understanding is to conduct a community food assessment.

What Is a Community Food Assessment?

A Community Food Assessment (CFA) is a systematic, participatory approach to investigating a wide range of local issues and assets related to food and farming. Its broad purpose is to build support for changes to make the community more food secure.

What Is the Benton County Community Food Assessment?

In the fall of 2005, Ecumenical Ministries of Oregon (EMO) initiated a CFA as part of their Interfaith Food and Farms Partnership in cooperation with Oregon State University and the Rural Studies Initiative. Representatives of Ten Rivers Food Web, Linn Benton Food Share, local faith communities, and several other organizations and farms joined a steering committee to ensure community input. The goal of our assessment was to lead to changes that would diminish hunger, build local markets for family farmers, and enhance food security in the Benton County foodshed. The committee focused on the following three questions:

- What successes and challenges do small growers in our region experience?
- What are the barriers to food access for low-income residents of Benton County?
- How do communities of faith contribute to food security and how might they broaden their response to hunger to include supporting family-scale farmers?

The committee also offered suggestions throughout the research process. OSU faculty, EMO staff and graduate students from the Anthropology Department conducted most of the research. Findings from studies with rural residents and farmers conducted in 2004 and 2005 were also incorporated into our assessment. For the full report on this CFA, see www.emoregon.org.



Local Food Production: Talking with Small and Mid-Sized Farmers

Farmland is plentiful in Oregon, though in decline. In the last 15 years, Oregon farmland has decreased by 4%. At the same time, the number of farmers relying on outside sources of income, such as a second job, has increased. In Linn, Benton and Polk Counties, edible crops are in decline as grass seed production increases. Consider:

- The average food item in America travels over 1,500 miles from farm to table.
- Oregon loses over 11,000 acres of farmland every year to development.
- The average age of Oregon farmers is 55 and only five percent are under the age of 35.

Community food security requires that we have farmers and farmland. Therefore, one of the goals of this CFA was to learn more about the challenges and aspirations of growers in our region. We visited 15 farmers on their land and interviewed them to better understand their circumstances. We also incorporated findings of a 2005 survey that gauged farmers' interest in a farm-to-school program.

Overall, Local Growers Want Local Opportunities

"The public needs to undergo a change in attitude so that farmers and farm workers make a good living." Local farmer

Farmers named labor, marketing and pest control as their top challenges and identified several difficulties associated with local marketing, primarily finding customers, selling in a timely manner, and educating consumers about the value of local and organic food.

"People will buy a \$20 bottle of wine or a \$3 Latte, but they still remember what lettuce cost in 1955." Local farmer

Despite challenges, farmers expressed a strong interest in increasing local marketing opportunities. Over half of the 15 farmers we interviewed expressed a strong interest in having a community food processing facility and developing more local markets, especially within institutions (schools, university, hospital, retirement homes, etc.). In another survey of 27 farmers, 70% said yes or maybe to having extra capacity for a farm-to-school program.

"We would like another local marketing opportunity so that we do not have to go to Portland." -Local farmer

Of the four farms we examined in depth, all were involved in local marketing through farmer's markets, farm stands, community supported agriculture and buying groups. These farms also contributed to food banks and gleaning groups.

"Our customers see the farming practices we use. We're going beyond the organic certification standards." -Local farmer

Recommendations: Supporting Local Farmers

- On an individual level, make a commitment to purchase more of your food directly from local growers; read labels in the grocery store and choose locally grown products.
- Encourage institutions to purchase locally grown food. Schools cafeterias, university dining halls, the hospital and corporate offices represent potential markets for local growers.
- Conduct a feasibility study for a food processing facility that emphasizes growing, processing and eating local food.

Hunger and Poverty: Talking with Low-Income Residents

Community food security is a condition in which all community residents obtain a safe, culturally acceptable, nutritionally adequate diet through a sustainable food system that maximizes community self-reliance and social justice.

For low-income residents of our region, food security is threatened by competing expenses, namely housing, utilities, transportation, and health care expenses. In 2005, 53% of Benton County households spent 30% or more of their incomes on housing.

"It's hard to pay for food. We have to balance the budget: house first, utilities second, drugs third, food fourth ..." - Consumer

Our region is home to many people who are food insecure:

- In 2002, one in every six families in Linn and Benton Counties depended on food from an emergency food pantry at least once each year.
- Between 1997 and 2005, the number of people relying on food boxes increased by 45%.
- Linn and Benton Counties have 16 emergency food pantries and 14 gleaning groups.

"First of the month, I get my food stamps. Second of the month, we go out and we do major shopping. ... That's got to last us all month." - Consumer

Extensive interviews with low-income rural residents, gleaners, students and clients of food banks showed that low-income people want access to more local fruits and vegetables. We also found that food pantries and gleaning groups were effective channels for distributing locally grown produce.

"My main need is better foods. I don't have savings." - Consumer

What are gleaners? Gleaners are volunteers living at or below 200% of the poverty level. They get leftovers from stores, farmers' markets and fields and receive food from Linn Benton Food Share. They collect and repack food weekly, distributing the boxes among themselves.

"I would buy local if it was available more places and more affordable." - Consumer

Recommendations: Building a Just and Sustainable Food System

- Increase dialogue between local growers and emergency food providers to enhance access to nutritious foods for low-income clients.
- Expand community gardens, gleaning programs, *That's My Farmer* coupons and other local programs.
- Support food stamp access at our local farmers' markets.
- Join Ten Rivers Food Web and create positive changes in food policy and food literacy.

Consumers: Talking with Faith Communities about Their Role in Building Food Security

Faith communities across the religious spectrum provide assistance to economically disadvantaged people and often have a strong commitment to social justice. Congregations sometimes have land that can be converted to community gardens and numerous other assets that offer solutions to food insecurity. The third component of our CFA was to gauge the level of awareness of congregation members while also noting the programs and priorities of their religious communities. We surveyed 352 people in 10 Benton County congregations and found that:

- 50% had vegetable gardens or fruit trees and 70% preserved food.
 - 93% bought locally grown food regularly or occasionally.
- "I am fortunate to be able to afford to buy quality local produce."* - Consumer
- People would like to buy more local eggs, meat and dairy products.
 - Cost was the main reason for not buying local. As with low-income people, middle-income people perceive local food as expensive.

"Local produce is always better-tasting so I don't mind spending more." - Consumer

Perceptions of Cost of Locally Grown Food



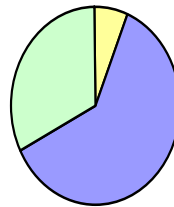
■ LESS EXPENSIVE
■ ABOUT THE SAME
■ MORE EXPENSIVE

- 17% got food assistance.
 - People were interested in learning more about cooking, preserving and growing food.
 - People thought the main problems for farmers were marketing and distribution, just as the farmers did. They did not list labor as a problem, while farmers did.
- "I believe these smaller farms are truly valuable in keeping us in touch with the earth and with the miracle of life."* - Consumer

Faith communities as institutions that aid low-income people:

- All 10 congregations gave aid to low-income populations.
- Three congregations operated food pantries.
- Seven congregations were interested in partnering with farmers and nine congregations had the facilities to do so.

How Serious A Problem is Hunger?



■ Not A Problem
■ A Somewhat Serious Problem
■ A Very Serious Problem

Recommendations: Building Urban-Rural Partnerships within Faith Communities

- Organize a farm stand, harvest festival or local food dinner at your congregation; invite a farmer to share her story or plan a field trip to a farm.
- Start a garden on church property or teach food literacy in your kitchen.
- Incorporate local food into food pantries/boxes, fundraisers, youth projects and celebrations; buy flowers from a local farmer.



For More Information

For more information, contact Liv Gifford at (541) 757-1988, ext. 107, or e-mail lgifford@emoregon.org. To download the full report, go to www.emoregon.org.

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