

### **Panel 3: Regional Implications**

#### **A View from Montana**

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#### **Overview**

Rather than address the entire Rocky Mountain and Great Plains regions, this contribution is based primarily on observations that I have made in Montana, which is part of both of these large regions. Separated into two geographic areas by the Continental Divide, the western portion of the state is in the Northern Rockies and the eastern portion covered by the Great Plains. My perspective is informed by my scholarly expertise in rural sociology, by my involvement in participatory action research, and by my engagement in food systems organizations, programs, and policy initiatives. A place-based approach can foster the development of sustainability initiatives that respond to the unique character of a particular place (culture, history, ecology, economy, politics, and social structure), thereby increasing the likelihood of long-term success.

#### **1) KEY INDICATORS**

**A. Demographic Changes in the Regions.** During the 1990s, many areas in the Rockies experienced net in-migration, especially in high-amenity areas and including non-metro areas. In the process, some of the fastest growing counties in the nation are in the Interior Mountain West (unlike earlier decades). In contrast, many areas in the Northern Plains, including eastern Montana, continue to experience net out-migration. These demographic changes create both opportunities (e.g., for creation of new local/regional markets), as well as threats (e.g., farmland loss), to the development of strong local/regional food systems.

**B. Systems Changes at the Local/Regional Levels.** Efforts to revitalize local/regional food systems constitute a major force for change. To understand the changes that need to occur and that are occurring, one must take a truly systems view – including production, processing/food manufacturing, distribution/marketing, food security, and creation of local markets. There are many indicators at each point in the system. These must be understood in local/regional contexts.

**C. Meaningful Participation in the Food System by Individuals, Organizations, and Coalitions.** This involves:

- Generating broad knowledge of the food system and its facets;
- Sharing ideas with others to clarify issues and discuss values;
- Increasing collaborative action and developing a sense of efficacy among individuals and organizations so that they can/will work towards the public good;
- Building coalitions among organizations/interests to increase citizen power, to expand involvement, and to exchange ideas and knowledge.

## 2) DATA SOURCES

**A. Measures of Demographic Changes.** Reliably tracked through the Census of Population.

**B. Measures of Systems Changes at Local/Regional Levels.** Systems thinking demands understanding dimensions throughout the system. Some key data points include:

Structure of Agriculture/Production Practices: Census of Agriculture has useful data (including relatively new data collection on organics, CSA farms, grazing practices, etc.). Critical problem with definition of what constitutes a “farm.” Community gardens and farms not tracked systematically.

Land use: Reliable and detailed geographically-based data on ag land use and loss is scarce. Typically rely on data generated by state Department of Revenue.

Processing: Food manufacturing establishments and employees (Census of Manufactures). Exports of bulk raw commodities vs. value-added processing (which is key to meeting demand for local/regional foods).

Distribution/Markets: Distribution systems controlled by a handful of companies; some are trying to provide local/regional food to local/regional markets. Establishment of new marketing cooperatives among / for producers to access larger (non-direct) markets. Number of farmers’ markets and CSA (USDA- AMS); number of institutional markets (tracked locally; dollars spent; educational programs).

Food Insecurity: Measured by rates of people living below or near the poverty line; by wages and income (Census of Population; Dept of Commerce – BEA; FRAC). Use of food banks (data available from banks/networks). Use of food security safety net (WIC; SNAP; FRSLP etc.). Access to EBT/WIC/FMNP at farmers markets. Innovative programs that provide fresh produce/meat to low-income people from community based farms.

Values-Based Supply Chains: Need in-depth case studies of values-based supply chains (to describe and analyze the core values, and the structure, function, and outcomes of the chains).

**C. Measures of Meaningful Participation.** Number and health of organizations and initiatives dedicated to one or more aspect of food systems change (e.g., food policy councils; innovative programs). Need in-depth studies using qualitative inquiry to assess degree of meaningful participation by movement actors and organizations. Identify key policy changes secured and initiatives in process (e.g., ag land protection; procurement policies; public/private partnerships to re-invigorate processing; beginning farmer/rancher programs).

### **3) CONDITIONS AND TRENDS**

Like neighboring states, Montana mainly produces bulk raw commodities (wheat, other grains, sugar beets, calves, etc.) and exports them out of state. Rural communities in central and eastern Montana are in decline, as much of the agricultural resource is extracted with little or no value added. Although some neighboring states do more processing, much of that is for industrial production (e.g., Idaho). Commodity agriculture here is highly dependent on government subsidies.

Montana rates first in nation's organic wheat production; second in other grains, peas, lentils, and flax. Overall, Montana ranks second nationally in acres in organic production, but that remains a small portion of all acres planted (the Dakotas also rank high).

Number of food manufacturing establishments dropped dramatically from the 1950s to the 1990s, but there has been a recent increase in number.

Some of the poorest counties in the nation (per capita income) are in the Northern Rockies and Great Plains. Many of those are agricultural.

About 10% of Montanans are food insecure.

Until the recent economic downturn, high-amenity areas of the Northern Rockies have experienced considerable rates of population growth and housing units. This creates threat to agricultural land near cities.

There is an increased interest in local/regional foods. Farmers markets have been on the rise; in the last few years, EBT programs established at several markets. Institutional markets for local/regional have been created at four colleges/universities, two major school districts, as well as numerous more rural community schools. Partnership with Americorps/VISTA places five "FoodCorps" volunteers at institutions to get these markets established and sustained. State passed new procurement law in 2007 making it easier for institutions to purchase Montana grown/processed foods. Institutional markets connect urban and rural Montana, creating opportunities for medium scale food producers/processors (this scale has enabled the UM, for example, to spend 20% of its food budget on local/regional food).

A statewide food policy council and several local councils have been established. Community food assessments have been done in several counties. Governor's Summit on Food and Agriculture held in 2007 with 300 participants.

Examples of values-based supply chains exist in Montana (e.g., Kamut International; Timeless Seeds; relationships between food businesses and the UM).

### **4) STATUS OF OUR KNOWLEDGE (OR IGNORANCE).**

The major trends described above are generally agreed upon and documented. Key data/research needs include:

- Reconsideration of the definition of a farm for purposes of the US Census of Agriculture (it seems to be capturing many rural residences).
- Greater understanding of how economic concentration in the processing industry has played out in particular places/regions.
- Rising interest in local/regional foods is thwarted by loss of agricultural capacity (farmers/ranchers and farmland/ranchland) and by weak processing infrastructure. Need to understand how to overcome these barriers.
- Need in-depth studies using qualitative inquiry to assess degree of meaningful participation by movement actors and organizations.
- Need in-depth case studies of values-based supply chains, which are critical for demonstrating ways of doing business that are based on values such as trust, transparency, and mutuality.