

Guest Column

The Missoulian, September 9, 2007

Sprouting Innovation through Community Food Projects: Critical Farm Bill Program at Risk

Neva Hassanein and Jan Tusick

While enjoying delicious Dixon melons or juicy peaches from Paradise, feel good about the fact that you're supporting local farmers at the same time your taste buds are in ecstasy. Those of us who care about the many benefits of eating food grown closer to home can rejoice not only in those tasty fruits, but also in the vibrancy of the local food movement in western Montana. Indeed, a host of exciting initiatives seek to build a more sustainable, secure, and equitable food system here.

Notably, many of those initiatives have been made possible by funding from an innovative federal program now seriously at risk in the current draft of the Farm Bill. Hopefully, you and Montana's Senators Baucus and Tester will help.

Congress first authorized the USDA's Community Food Projects Competitive Grant Program in the 1996 Farm Bill. Since then, grants to non-profit groups and local governments across the country have enabled citizens to develop solutions to food, nutrition, and agriculture problems from the ground up. Consider a few local examples.

One of the very first grant recipients was Garden City Harvest, leading to the 1997 establishment of Missoula's much-celebrated PEAS farm. In the Rattlesnake Valley, University of Montana students grow food for community members, producing over 20,000 pounds of nutritious, organic produce for the Missoula Food Bank each year. A network of community gardens also allows citizens of all income levels to raise food for themselves.

A 2002 grant enabled the Lake County Community Development Corporation to expand the Mission Mountain Food Enterprise Center in Ronan. Over 60 area farmers and food entrepreneurs use the certified facility to process foods, adding value to their products and making them available year round. The grant also helped launch the Western Montana Growers' Cooperative, which provides a wholesale marketing and delivery service for its 18 farmer-members. This vital service makes it much easier for area restaurants, schools, and others to order and buy local food.

In 2005, a partnership of university researchers and non-profit groups received a grant with multiple objectives. First, the multi-stakeholder Community Food and Agriculture Coalition advocates for protection of our agricultural lands, nurtures the Farm to School Program in Missoula Public Schools, educates the community, coordinates a "Buy Fresh, Buy Local" campaign in area restaurants, partners with others to make it possible to use electronic benefits (food stamps) at farmers' markets, and more. Second, an action-research project to "Find Solutions to Food Insecurity" seeks to uncover and dismantle

the barriers to accessing affordable and nutritious foods in Missoula County. Third, the North Missoula Community Development Corporation started a cooperatively run grocery to provide high-quality and often local foods at an affordable price. The grant subsidized 200 co-op memberships for low-income people. Lastly, through the “Real Meals” program women meet monthly to prepare meals together and learn cooking skills, abilities that many consumers no longer have.

What solution-oriented projects will we pursue in the future? What new partnerships will link our rural and urban areas? Unfortunately, we may not find out. In its rush to pass a Farm Bill, the US House of Representatives did not provide *any* funding for Community Food Projects, one of USDA's highest performing but relatively low-cost programs (\$5 million annually).

Now it's up to the US Senate, which is writing its own version of the Farm Bill. Our senators can play a leadership role in ensuring that this grassroots approach to problem solving continues. Senator Baucus serves on the pivotal Senate Agriculture Committee, and Senator Tester, a life-long farmer, has consistently advocated for sustainable agriculture. They need to hear from us.

There's a litany of bad news when it comes to food and agriculture today, but the hopeful signs of change are nearly always associated with citizen initiative, collaboration, and funding from Community Food Projects. In these days of multi-billion dollar federal programs administered by clunky bureaucracies from the top down, it is rare to find programs that only spend a few million dollars and encourage local people to find their own answers. That's the kind of self-reliance that we Montanans pride ourselves on.

We encourage you to ask Senators Baucus and Tester to step up to the plate and ensure that Community Food Projects are funded in the Senate version of the Farm Bill.

Neva Hassanein is a professor in the UM Environmental Studies Program and a member of the Community Food and Agriculture Coalition.

Jan Tusick directs the Agricultural Enterprise and Cooperative Development Program at the Mission Mountain Food Enterprise Center in Ronan.