

PART I EXPLORING THE VIABILITY OF FARMING AND RANCHING

OVERVIEW

Part I of *Food Matters: Farm Viability and Food Consumption in Missoula County* looks at issues related to agricultural viability. Two of the central research questions of the Community Food Assessment were: What is needed for viable and sustainable, commercial food production in Missoula County? What are the existing assets and barriers to creating a more viable and sustainable production system?

We used several different approaches to begin to answer these questions. First, we reviewed existing statistical data on trends in the County related to agriculture, recognizing that we needed to get a sense of how things have changed here and the current state of agriculture. Much of that review is contained in *Our Foodshed in Focus*, an earlier report of the Community Food Assessment. Here, in Chapter 1, we briefly summarize the key trends, updated with more recent figures, in order to provide context for the next three chapters.

Beyond collecting existing data, we decided to ask farmers and ranchers themselves about the viability of agriculture here, in order to draw on their experiences and knowledge. Accordingly, we conducted a telephone survey of farmers and ranchers (N = 52) in the County. We wanted to hear from producers about their views on the state of agriculture generally in the County; factors threatening and factors contributing to farm and ranch viability; perspectives on growth and development; local marketing; and the possibility of a task force that would promote local markets and agricultural land. The results of that survey are presented in Chapter 2.

Third, to complement the survey, we conducted in-depth interviews with a selected group of farmers and ranchers. Thirteen face-to-face interviews generated rich, qualitative data that illustrates the range of perspectives that producers hold on topics similar to those covered in the survey. While the survey provided a way to reach a greater number of people in a relatively short time, the interviews afforded an opportunity to go more deeply into the relevant topics. Analysis of the interview data is presented in Chapter 3.

Fourth, we recognized the unique and valuable contribution that the Hmong make to Missoula's Farmers' Market. Based on discussions with leaders in the Hmong community, it became apparent that the best way to get the input of these market gardeners was to conduct a group interview (i.e., a focus group) with them. In this case, a focus group with 11 Hmong vendors allowed us to overcome some (but not all) cultural barriers to participation in the research. The results of the focus group are presented in Chapter 4.

Readers should bear several things in mind while reading the chapters in Part I. First, the data collected and reported on in each of the chapters complements the work presented in other chapters, as well as previous analyses of agricultural trends presented in *Our Foodshed in Focus*. Second, much of what is reported here is based on the perspectives, experiences, and knowledge of the farmers and ranchers we spoke with. We did not attempt to evaluate the veracity of their statements pertaining to factual issues, because our goal here was to understand the perspectives that often motivate behavior and influence decision making.

CHAPTER 1

OUR AGRICULTURAL PAST AND FUTURE

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INTRODUCTION

Over one hundred years ago, agriculture in Missoula County developed with the aid of irrigation projects, the Homestead Act of 1862, and the building of the railroad in 1883.¹ Diverse farms and an associated processing industry expanded to meet the needs of the local population and increasingly an export market. Although subject to several economic and climactic fluctuations during the first half of the 20th century, the agricultural industry included orchard fruit and sugar beet processing, meatpacking, flour mills, dairies, wool production, and more.

After the Second World War, technology increased production in the area, farms consolidated, and the average farm size grew to over 1,000 acres by 1969.² In the late 1960s, however, agriculture here began to decline rapidly, as the number of farms dropped and local producers were affected by wider economic changes in agriculture. Slowly most of the processing facilities closed. Indeed, much has changed since the days when Missoula earned the moniker “the Garden City” because of the large gardens and truck farms that used to provide much of the food people in the valley ate.

These changes did not go unnoticed. In the early 1980s, the Missoula Planning Office conducted a study in order to develop a plan to protect and expand agriculture here.³ A fairly comprehensive analysis, the “Agricultural Protection Study” looked at consumption patterns, imports and exports, changes in the farm service and supply industries, opinions of local producers, and various strategies for protecting and promoting agriculture.

It has been over twenty years since farmers and ranchers were systematically queried about their perceptions of the factors that threaten and facilitate the viability of their operations. This Community Food Assessment updates many of the aspects of the 1983 study, and unfortunately, many of the trends noted then have continued and even intensified. The remainder of this chapter provides some context for understanding the perspectives of area farmers and ranchers described in subsequent chapters.

¹ Missoula Planning Office. (1983). *Missoula County Agricultural Protection Study*. Missoula, Montana.

² Hinsley, L., Lewellyn, K. and Seagle, J. (2004). Agricultural resource base indicators. Chapter 2 in *Our Foodshed in focus: Missoula County food and agriculture by the numbers*. Missoula: University of Montana.

³ Missoula Planning Office, Op cit.

LOSS OF WORKING FARMS AND RANCHES

Every five years the National Agricultural Statistics Service conducts a Census of Agriculture throughout the United States. An analysis of trends based on those statistics is presented in *Our Foodshed in Focus*; since publication of that report, the findings from the 2002 Census of Agriculture have been released. As discussed below, the new numbers suggest that earlier trends are continuing. The upshot is, we are losing working farms and farmland.

At first, the idea that we are losing farmland might seem paradoxical since the number of farms in the County has gone up consistently since 1974, which was when it reached its lowest point (310 farms). That was also the year when the Census adopted its current definition of a farm: “any place from which \$1,000 or more of agricultural products were produced and sold or normally would have been sold during the census year.” In other words, the threshold for a parcel being defined as a “farm” is extremely low.⁴

The number of “farms” in Missoula County reached 641 according to the 2002 Census of Agriculture, a level not seen here since 1954.⁵ But fewer than half – only 312 – of those farms had land from which crops were harvested (down from 359 in 1997). Also, 60% of all farms in the County had sales of less than \$2,500 in 2002. Not surprisingly, the total market value of production dropped 2% between 1997 and 2002, to \$8.361 million in 2002 (averaging just over \$13,000 per farm).

While the number of farms is technically increasing, average farm size is decreasing. By 2002, the average farm size was 403 acres, a drop of 9% since 1997. We are basically losing our larger farms, while the number of small farms has increased dramatically. The median farm size for the 641 farms in the County in 2002 was only 42 acres.

Perhaps most striking of all is the fact that the total amount of land in working farms is dropping dramatically. The total land in farms in the County went down 4% between 1997 and 2002 to 258,315 acres. Over half of those “farmland acres” are woodland, with about 17% in cropland and 29% in pasture. Although over a quarter of a million acres is in farms in the County, only 22,290 acres (8.6%) was harvested cropland in 2002. Moreover, harvested cropland in 2002 represented a drop of over 20% from the 28,045 acres harvested in 1997.

⁴ In the Census of Agriculture, the term “farm” also includes ranches.

⁵ All 2002 Census of Agriculture figures are available from www.usda.gov/nass/. It is important to note that the 2002 publication has a different approach than previous censuses. The difference is an adjustment for incompleteness at the county level. The 1997 and earlier censuses were also incomplete, but the adjustment was published only for the state as a whole rather than for particular counties. In contrast, the 2002 Census re-published the 1997 County data to make it comparable with the 2002 data. As a result, the reader may notice that the numbers presented here for 1997 do not match those presented in *Our Foodshed in Focus*, which relied on earlier censuses. The 1997 adjusted numbers are used here for all comparisons with 2002 figures.

Taken together, these trends suggest that many of our smaller farms may be primarily rural residences with agricultural enterprises playing a fairly minor role. There are more “farms” for purposes of the census count. But the total market value of production is on the decline, and a small percentage of our “cropland” acres are actually harvested. In addition, rural areas of the County saw a 46% increase in population during the 1990s (as compared with a 22% increase for the County as a whole). Over 10,000 acres in the County were subdivided between 1990 and 2000, and flat lands previously in agricultural production are among the most common areas to have seen this subdivision and development activity.⁶

LAND USE PLANNING CONTEXT

Rural residential development appears to be having a profound effect on the landscape of farming and ranching in Missoula County, and in turn on the food security of the County as a whole. As land becomes more valuable and desirable to developers, farmers and ranchers may generate less profit from their work on the land relative to potential profits from selling the land. As will become clear in the next three chapters, many local farmers and ranchers are acutely aware of these trends, and they report feeling the effects of growth and development. These development effects are compounded by economic factors currently limiting agricultural viability, as will also be discussed. If development affects farming’s future here, it simultaneously becomes crucial to our long-term food security, as the potential for local food production and local food consumption decreases.

To discuss solutions to these issues, one needs to recognize the context within which land use decisions are made.⁷ The County’s Growth Policy, adopted by the City of Missoula and the County Board of Commissioners in 2002, includes an explicit objective regarding agriculture:

Encourage the continuation of agricultural and forestry operations and protect them from adverse impacts of urban development. Distinguish between urban and rural land use patterns in land use decisions related to agriculture. Support local sustainable agriculture.⁸

Despite this strong language, state law mandates that the Growth Policy cannot be used to regulate land use in the County; rather, it provides guidance for subdivision review.

Regulatory tools – such as subdivision regulations and zoning ordinances – are the means by which counties may implement values expressed in the Growth Policy. However,

⁶ Missoula County and the City of Missoula. (2002). *Missoula County growth policy*. Adopted by the Board of Commissioners and the City Council, August. Missoula, Montana. Retrieved October 11, 2004 from the Office of Planning and Grants website: <http://www.co.missoula.mt.us/opgweb/Publications.htm>

⁷ A complete discussion of land use planning in the County is beyond the scope of this assessment. For a more in-depth review, see the Growth Policy (ibid.) and see: Hinsley, L. (2004). “*Left for dead*” or “*hope on the horizon?*” *Perspectives on the future of agriculture in Missoula County*. Master’s Thesis. Missoula: University of Montana.

⁸ Missoula County and the City of Missoula. Op cit.

subdivision proposals are currently reviewed one at a time, rather than on a landscape or cumulative scale. Such a piecemeal approach makes it hard to measure the cumulative impacts of development to agricultural resources, let alone take those cumulative impacts into account when reviewing a single proposal. Thus, it is very difficult for governing bodies to deny a subdivision proposal for its own impacts to agriculture. Zoning, which designates different types of land uses, theoretically could provide another regulatory tool to protect farmland. However, most of the County is not zoned, and there is a high degree of public opposition to it. In other words, despite the limitations of subdivision review, it is currently the only practical regulatory tool available to local governing bodies.

LOOKING FOR A WAY FORWARD

Missoula County has a long history of agriculture. Despite recent trends indicating the loss of agricultural land to development, there is also a growing interest here (and elsewhere) in re-building local food economies in order to promote community food security, as well as the health of our residents and of the environment. Consumer support for local food is expressed in the survey described in Chapter Six. A reinvigoration of our local food system requires both farmers and farmland. Local government is limited in its ability to aggressively protect farmland from development at this time; therefore, it may be important to look at other opportunities, such as voluntary and market-based approaches. The Community Food Assessment is an attempt to take stock of where we are and to identify some strategies for moving forward toward increased community food security.