

**CHAPTER 3**  
**A CLOSER LOOK:**  
**PERSPECTIVES OF SELECTED FARMERS AND RANCHERS**

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**INTRODUCTION**

This portion of the Community Food Assessment reports on in-depth interviews with agricultural producers.<sup>1</sup> The interviews were designed to get a richer, more detailed description of perspectives from participants about the challenges and benefits of agricultural production in Missoula County than was possible with a phone survey, thereby illuminating some of the thinking and feelings underlying our survey results. Thirteen farmers and ranchers from around the county participated in interviews during February and March of 2004.

Overall, participants expressed a wide range of views on many of the topics we discussed, reflecting differences in their individual needs, assets, and experiences. Despite the variability, the analysis suggests several important themes. Below, I summarize these findings, beginning with factors that participants report threaten their operation's long-term viability. This is followed by a discussion of factors that contribute to participants' ability to continue farming or ranching for the long term and an overview of the conservation techniques practiced by participants. I then highlight participants' views about growth and development in Missoula County, which leads into a discussion about farmland protection. The final two sections cover participants' thoughts about local marketing and the creation of a countywide agricultural task force.

**METHODS**

Interviews ranged in length from 45 minutes to 1.5 hours, and were conducted at the homes of the study participants. Of the 13 interviews, 11 were tape recorded and transcribed verbatim; extensive notes were taken on the other two. A fourteenth study participant declined an interview, opting instead to send a letter detailing some of her challenges. Two potential participants initially agreed to participate in an interview to be scheduled at a later date, but I was never able to reach them again to conduct the interview. Thus, the study reported on here consists of 14 participants: thirteen in-depth interviews and one letter.

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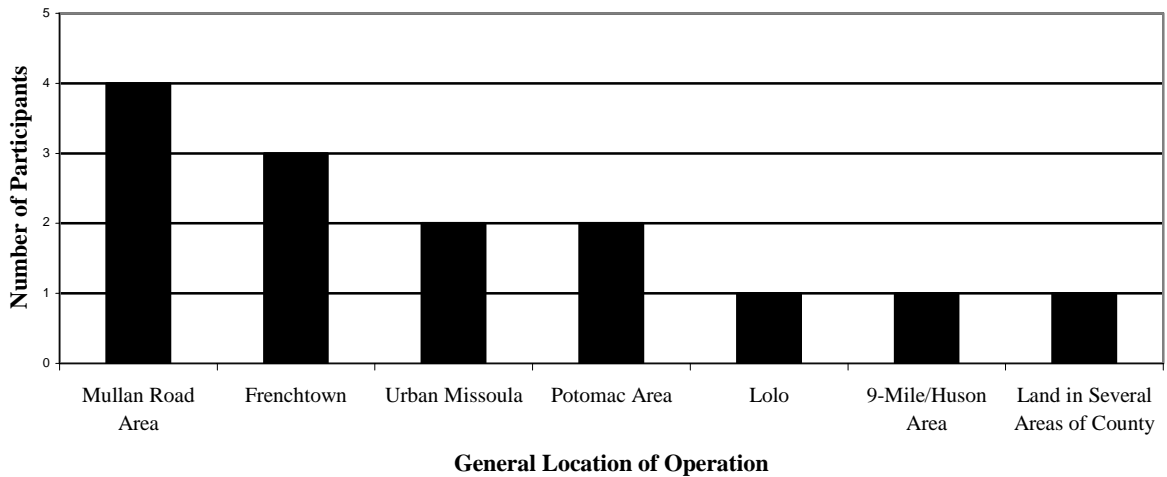
<sup>1</sup> The research presented here is part of the author's Master's Thesis research. For a more detailed discussion of the findings and context, see: Hinsley, L. (2004). *"Left for dead" or "hope on the horizon?" Perspectives on the future of agriculture in Missoula County*. Master's Thesis. Missoula: University of Montana.

I selected participants from the Community Food Assessment’s master list of agricultural producers in the county, which was assembled from many sources. Many interviewees were suggested to me either by virtue of their location in the county, or their perceived willingness to talk about these issues, regardless of their particular viewpoint. In addition, my goal was to hear from different types of producers, in terms of crops or livestock raised, and geographic locations in the county. Eleven of the participants were male, while three were female. Table 1 illustrates the crops and/or livestock grown by the study participants; Figure 1 shows the general locations of the farms and ranches. Their operations ranged from very small, intensive vegetable production on less than five acres to one of the largest landowners in the county.

**Table 1: Crops or Livestock Produced by Study Participants**

<b>Crop or Livestock Sold by Participants</b>	<b>Number of Participants (total = 13)</b>
Cattle	8
Hay	7
Leased for Grazing	2
Grain	2
Organic Vegetables	1
Eggs	1
Conventional Vegetables	1
Bedding Plants	1
Timber	1

**Figure 1: Geographic Distribution of Study Participants**



Using a technique known as content analysis, I analyzed the interview transcripts and letter for relevant themes, coding the data to make it systematically comparable.<sup>2</sup> This allowed me to count the frequency of responses regarding each particular topic, as well as to identify larger themes that emerged. While it is important to note how many participants gave certain responses, the strength of in-depth interviews is that they provide detailed, qualitative data. Quotations are an important part of depicting the perspectives of the study participants. In presenting quotations below, I use verbatim language; however, in some cases, awkward phrases (e.g., “you know”) have been eliminated to make it easier to read. Deletions are indicated with ellipses; numbers in parentheses refer to the code given to the interviewee and the transcript page number.

These data are not to be interpreted as representative of the views and perspectives of *all* farmers and ranchers in Missoula County. Rather, the in-depth interviews enable a deeper understanding of the views and experiences underlying the survey results described in Chapter Three.

## **THREATS TO FARM AND RANCH VIABILITY**

Participants noted that economic and policy-related concerns are among the greatest threats to their long-term viability. When asked what factors most threaten participants’ ability to keep their operations going for the long term, these farmers and ranchers spoke about a wide range of factors. The most prevalent ones, however, were the lack of economic viability of agriculture, policy concerns, environmental conditions, community attitudes, and the impacts of growth and development in the County. Since I devote a later section specifically to development, here I will discuss these other factors.

### **Economic Concerns**

The most common threat, cited by twelve participants, was the lack of economic viability of agriculture, which affects them in various ways. Seven noted pricing, whether it be low prices for commodities or lack of farmer control over pricing, as a major factor influencing viability. As one interviewee explained: “Agriculture is such a loss—an economic loss.... It’s the lack of value of the crops relative to the cost of production... It does not pencil out economically” (#9, 2). Three participants talked about our society’s expectation of cheap food as a problem related to pricing. As one explained: “We’ve got a society that’s used to having cheap food, and that’s not going to change in the near future. You know, if we told everybody in the United States that you’re going to pay three times as much as you

“When I look at the records that my father kept of the prices that he received for his beef every fall, they’re not much higher now.... People that are involved in agriculture today are receiving essentially the same income that they received forty years ago.... It makes it extremely difficult for people to survive” (#3, 2).

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<sup>2</sup> Berg, Bruce. (2004). *Qualitative research methods for the social sciences*. (5<sup>th</sup> ed.). Boston: Allyn and Bacon.

are for your groceries so we can keep our farmers on our land, nobody'd care. They'd say 'No way, we're not going to do it'"(#5, 8).

Another commonly mentioned factor influencing economic viability was the cost of production, noted by six participants. Cost of production included everything from the cost of equipment to the cost of electricity to power an irrigation pump. Four participants specifically spoke about labor costs as a negative factor, stating that they are unable to pay labor adequate wages to keep consistent, qualified workers on their operations. Several respondents noted that the high cost of production in this country limits U.S. farmers' ability to compete on the global market.

"We would love to provide health care, dental, all those things, you know. But we can't because our profit margin is so small... It would be nice to have a real good quality employee that you could keep here for thirty years, and that he's got a light at the end of the tunnel, and benefits... We can't do that" (#8, 11).

Several participants also mentioned the lack of agricultural infrastructure in this area. Missoula County lacks processing facilities that might allow producers to add more value to their crops. In addition, the agriculture support base here is dwindling, they explained, noting the loss of livestock feed outlets and other support businesses that provide for the needs of farmers and ranchers. As one explained: "You have to have support for production... You have to reach farther for your support base. ...Manufactured livestock feed comes from Great Falls or Billings... It doesn't come from Missoula anymore. It used to...because there were two mills in Missoula" (#2, 3).

### **Policy-Related Concerns**

Among the policy-related threats brought up by eight participants, the most often mentioned was a high rate of taxation, whether property tax or estate tax. Another commonly mentioned concern was reduced access to grazing opportunities on public lands, or imperiled grazing opportunities on Plum Creek land due to changing ownership. Several participants expressed concern that weed laws are not being enforced, and that policies are ineffective at preventing the spread of weeds. A couple of others felt that the County Road Department is inattentive to outlying roads, leaving rural farm areas with excessive dust that sometimes impacts production.

"Taxation is extremely depressive to ranching because it takes a high amount of capitalization, and that capitalization is taxed. And as such, it decreases its profitability" (#10, 2).

### **Environmental Conditions**

Eight participants also spoke about environmental or physical conditions they feel make it difficult for them to keep their operations going. These included weeds and other pests, predation by wolves, water availability, climate, drought, and the short length of our growing season.

### **Community Attitudes**

Although many factors threaten participants' ability to keep going, five participants mentioned one that is different in that it does not necessarily impact them materially or financially. That factor concerns changing community attitudes toward agriculture. The participants who raised this issue noted the difficulties that come with the fact that many of their neighboring landowners are no longer farming or ranching, resulting in a loss of their sense of agricultural community. As one put it: "The support system—the neighbors that are around you, doing the same things, kind of support each operation. That's dwindling away. And people with different interests like the area, but they don't necessarily like cows" (#2, 2).

"I think the new neighbors don't value agriculture...and they make it difficult for you to run your operation. We're all the time having to spend time defending our right to be here. And the attitude of the community has changed. There's no community" (#2 wife, 5).

Growth brings in many different types of people with different interests, and these farmers and ranchers feel many newcomers are not friendly toward agricultural practices. One felt that many people do not understand the financial difficulties of farming and ranching, and an unfortunate result is that sometimes the community looks upon ranchers who need to subdivide land for development as greedy.

Some participants sense that agriculture has been "left for dead" here in Missoula County—that it is simply on its way out the door as the community changes. This sense is intensified by the fact that many feel the younger generations are not interested in staying in agriculture.

"It's hard to teach somebody to lose money and still survive. So I don't think we've got long to go, and we'll all be gone in Missoula County, anyway" (#11, 3).

### **FACTORS CONTRIBUTING TO FARM/RANCH VIABILITY**

Working off-farm, selling to local markets, and reducing production costs are key factors mentioned as contributing to participants' long-term viability.

#### **Off-Farm Jobs**

When asked about factors that contribute to participants' ability to keep their operation going for the long term, the factor most often mentioned was off-farm employment. Eight participants spoke about the fact that income from sources other than their agricultural operations makes it possible for them to stay in production.

"When my father passed away, I took over...but I had an outside source of income...That's really the only way that the operation could continue" (#3, 2).

### **Local Markets**

Five participants noted market considerations that facilitate their operations' long-term viability. Most of these producers mentioned dedicated and accessible local customers. One talked about the importance of finding a niche for the local market, and another expressed pride in the quality of his product, something that aids in his local marketing success.

“We’re close to town, and that makes it easy to deliver things. We have easy access to restaurants and stores and the farmers’ market. It’s a great farmers’ market. Mostly, there are good markets” (#7, 2).

### **Reducing Production Costs**

As discussed in the previous section, issues surrounding the cost of production emerged as a primary negative factor for many participants. Some cost of production issues, however, also emerged as positive factors for a few respondents. One producer talked about the fact that his operation is less labor intensive than in the past, due to better machinery, better communications, and better communication technology. As he put it: “It doesn’t take near the physical labor to do the job that it did thirty years ago” (#2, 3). Two interviewees mentioned the fact that they do not purchase expensive commercial fertilizer, a practice that keeps their costs down. In addition, two participants mentioned that environmental or physical conditions were on their side, citing good soil and good water for production.

### **Other Factors**

Respondents mentioned several other positive factors. Two view the agricultural property tax rate as beneficial, and another has placed a conservation easement on his property, something he feels contributes to his ability to keep his operation going for the long term. Another participant noted that he is encouraged to continue ranching

“We’ve just not fertilized. ...We’re not getting some of the yields that maybe some of the other places in western Montana...are getting, but our input costs are much lower. And so, I think overall we’re better off” (#5, 4).

by being able to watch his land value appreciate in the meantime. Lastly, a substantial number of participants spoke about personal factors, such as a love for the farming lifestyle, playing an important role in keeping them going for the long term. These are discussed after the following section.

## **CONSERVATION PRACTICES**

Mention of techniques designed to maintain environmental quality and sustainability on the farms and ranches of interview participants was prevalent, showing that at least these particular farmers and ranchers in Missoula County try to be stewards of the quality and health of our agricultural resources. Environmentally sustainable practices reported by participants include attention to water and soil quality and reduced chemical use.

### **Water Conservation**

Six participants have taken steps on their land, sometimes out of economic necessity, to conserve water and protect its quality through improved irrigation systems and ditch designs. Four have taken measures to protect creeks and creek side vegetation, either by fencing off riparian areas, creating streams to keep cattle off the main creeks, or by installing fish screens on irrigation systems so that fish stay in the creeks.

“We fenced off the riparian area... The cattle like to trample the banks as they go down to the water, and that’s highly destructive to the vegetation along the river... The results are highly promising and the vegetation is coming back beautifully” (#3, 9).

### **Soil Quality**

Practices pertaining to soil quality and health are also typical of study participants. Through careful grazing practices, crop rotations, and erosion control methods mentioned by eight participants, farmers and ranchers are protecting the long-term production capacity of their land, often offering many side benefits to the larger community.

“We try to leave a third to half of our grass every year. It holds the snow better, it controls the weeds better, and if you get a dry year, you’ve got some residue from the years before to get you through. One of the rewards of that to conservation is, you’ve got some cover for the birds to nest in the next spring. There’s something for the elk and the deer to winter on because you’ve got some stuff sticking out of the snow. Those kinds of things help everybody” (#5, 5 and 22).

### **Chemical Use**

Study participants also employ practices that limit their use of chemicals, commercial fertilizer, and antibiotics. Among the eight participants who mentioned minimizing their use of chemicals, several use no chemical pesticides or commercial fertilizers at all, and others minimize the use of these substances whenever possible. Several have tried alternative methods for pest control, such as biological controls and strategic irrigation practices. Still others avoid using hormones and antibiotics during cattle production.

“I prefer not to ever have to use chemicals to get rid of the weeds. ...Every so often, every so many years, I turn my ground. I plough it up, and I plant oats and peas. And that seems to be a good, you know, buffer or off season crop that puts nitrogen back into the soil” (#12, 14).

## DECISIONS REGARDING KEEPING LAND IN AGRICULTURE

Given the range of factors influencing participants' ability to keep their operations going for the long term, I asked them to describe how they make decisions regarding whether they will keep their land in production. These farmers and ranchers tend to base this decision on either economic or personal reasons, and often both. Many noted it is not an easy decision to make. In other words, economic considerations balanced by personal commitments to the land and to a way of life are key factors in the often-difficult decision about whether to keep land in agriculture.

"It sometimes feels like a big boat anchor around your neck. You wonder sometimes why you're doing it, because...we're not going to see any benefit of our labor for a long, long time" (#5, 1).

### Economic Reasons

Six participants talked about economic influences on their decision to continue farming or ranching. Three of them indicated that they plan to keep their land in production as long as they can afford to do so. One reported that he keeps his land in production to watch it appreciate in value until he sells it for profit. Another reported that she's been forced to develop her property due to financial considerations, and portions of it will remain in production only if subsidized by the development through homeowners' associations or some other way.

"It only stays in agriculture... to watch the appreciation of the land... The only paycheck you get on ranching is when you sell the ranch" (#10, 2).

### Personal Reasons

Although financial reasons weighed heavily in decisions about whether to keep land in production, ten participants mentioned personal reasons. Seven of those indicated that it is a sacrifice to keep their land in agriculture, because it would make more economic sense to sell or subdivide it. Many, however, feel strongly that agriculture is the best use of their land, and they want to keep their land in production. One respondent's sense of responsibility is connected to his family's long history on the land.

"The biggest thing that weighs on my mind is that you have his grandfather, my grandfather, my dad, and now me. And I don't want to be the one that goes, 'Okay, let's just cash out, put the money in the bank' and you know, live high off the hog... I feel a sense of responsibility... If you think about all the blood, the sweat, the tears...the child death...cold winters, hot summers, the Depression, two World Wars, all those things. That weighs heavily on me" (#8, 13).

Another said that despite the hardships of farming and ranching, he feels that many farmers hold onto hope that conditions will improve, and that is what keeps many on the land. This same participant, as well as several others, spoke about the fact that they simply love the work and the lifestyle of

farming or ranching. As one put it succinctly: “I support the ranching. The ranching does not support me” (#10, 1).

## IMPACTS OF GROWTH AND DEVELOPMENT

When asked about factors that threaten their ability to keep their operations going for the long term, eight participants discussed development as a significant factor. These responses generally had to do with impacts of increasing land values and simply having more people live nearby. Growth and development impact participants by increasing land values and creating conflicts with neighbors, among other concerns.

### Increasing Land Values

For several, the high cost of land has made it impossible to purchase additional land to expand production. Sometimes those land values make them feel like their best option is to sell their land and get out of production. As one put it: “There’s not room for growth. All the ranchland is so inflated in price that you can’t afford to buy more land...” (#5, 2). As another explained: “You know, the best crop you can raise on a ranch in western Montana in this location is one acre with a house on it” (#8, 2).

“A lot of guys say, ‘I’m land rich, and cash poor.’ And all that means is that I’m sitting on a lot of land that’s worth a hell of a lot of money, but the only way I’ll ever get it is to sell it” (#5, 12).

### More Nearby Neighbors

In addition to the high cost of land that goes along with growth, several participants mentioned the more immediate impacts of development in their vicinity, including an increasing number of neighbors, some of whom are not friendly to agriculture. One described physical damage to his property resulting from adjacent developments.

“Subdivision encroachment...causes more trespass, roaming dogs.... Increasing numbers of elk and deer and decreasing wildlife range due to subdivision cause loss of forage for income-producing livestock” (#14, 1).

### Development Trends: Positive or Negative?

I asked participants if they thought recent trends in increasing growth and development are positive, negative, or neutral for their *particular* operation. Many participants were able to list several positive aspects of development trends as well as listing negative aspects. Thus it appears that the issue is not clear-cut. Overall, eleven participants gave negative responses, while five gave positive responses. I then asked them if they thought those trends are positive, negative, or neutral for agriculture in the County *in general*. While several could see both positive and negative aspects of development for agriculture in general, ten participants gave negative responses, and two gave positive responses. Eight participants, however, spoke about the inevitability of these trends, expressing a resignation of sorts to the perceived fate of Missoula County agriculture.

“I think it’s inevitable. If the growth is going to go west and you’re in the path, economically you’re going to be forced to sell it, or subdivide... Thirty years ago if you’d asked me if I would have done this, I would have said no. But as you get older and see the handwriting on the wall, you either move, or uh, join in, and we’re just trying to stay with what we have” (#13, 7).

## COUNTY’S ROLE IN DEVELOPMENT AND FARMLAND PROTECTION

Eight participants expressed the view that in general, the County government does not respect agriculture, and instead makes things difficult for farmers and ranchers trying to make a living here. As one put it: “They just have a mindset, they don’t *care* about agriculture” (#1, 3). Five participants feel that development is not handled well by the County. A few of these respondents feel that the County is simply not doing the right things; others noted specific areas, such as public participation, in which the County could improve the way it deals with development issues.

### County’s Involvement in Protecting Farmland

When asked whether they think Missoula County is currently doing too much, the right amount, or too little to protect farmland from development, participants gave a range of responses. Many perceive that the County is doing nothing to protect farmland from development. Furthermore, five participants discussed their view that the County is permissive to development, sometimes bending over backwards to appease developers, regardless of other considerations. These five participants felt the County should do more to protect farmland.

“I don’t think the County is doing anything to protect farmland, as far as I can see... I would say if anything, the County is permissive in encouraging development of land” (#6, 4).

A few participants disagree, however, claiming that the County should not do anything regulatory to protect farmland. Four participants felt like the County should not do anything to protect farmland, claiming that is not the County’s proper role. Only one participant felt that the County is already doing too much to protect farmland from development.

“Personally, I think they’re doing too much, because they’re dictating to everybody...what they can and can’t do with their land, and I think that’s wrong” (#12, 8).

### Suggestions for Change

Several participants offered suggestions for how the County might approach development issues differently or better. One suggested distributing water rights on land that has been subdivided back to farmers in that area so they can use the water. Several others

complained that County leadership lacks long-term vision, feeling that the County needs to address central planning issues such as the long-term carrying capacity of this area. A couple of participants felt strongly that farmers and ranchers themselves ought to play a significant role in the creation of subdivision and zoning regulations for the County. Some think the County should offer greater incentives for farmers and ranchers to keep their land in production and out of development.

“I think that people need to look at Missoula and figure out, how many people can live here without totally ruining—you know, in fifty years, is there going to be any water left? Any air to breathe? ...Are we going to be on fire? I think that some of those issues need to be addressed” (#7, 12).

## **VIEWS ON FARMLAND PROTECTION STRATEGIES**

Given the increasing growth and development in Missoula County, it is important to understand farmers’ and ranchers’ views about protecting farmland from development in general, as well as specific methods for doing so. Seven participants clearly feel it is important to protect farmland from development for the long term. Only one person said outright that farmland protection is not important. Several others expressed more ambivalent views on the subject, or did not have an opinion on it.

### **Tax Dollars for Farmland Protection**

Participants hold a wide range of views regarding specific farmland protection methods. For example, when asked whether they would support the use of tax dollars such as a bond, to raise money for some type of farmland protection program in Missoula County, eight participants said yes, while only three said no. Several participants expressed doubt that the public would support such a measure, regardless of their particular opinion about it.

“I don’t know that I could say what the next generation is gonna need or do. I know they’re gonna need farmland somewhere, but I don’t know whether it’s in Missoula County, or whether it’s in Brazil, or whether it’s in Argentina or Australia” (#3, 7).

### **Agricultural Zoning**

Another method discussed was countywide agricultural zoning. Nine participants oppose agricultural zoning, while three support it. Many cited the importance of private property rights as central in their views about zoning. Others noted a range of drawbacks to zoning, including the feeling that having one’s land zoned for agriculture would make it difficult to borrow money. The constraints of agricultural zoning were also raised as a reason for many to disapprove of it. These farmers and ranchers feel they need the flexibility of not being zoned for agriculture. They believe

“To zone land and take away development rights is absolutely wrong” (#9, 9).

this would place their economic well-being in the hands of others. A couple of participants also mentioned that agricultural zoning could take tax revenue away from badly needed services. For these reasons and others, many believe agricultural zoning is unlikely to be supported here by the public or by policymakers anytime in the near future.

### Conservation Easements

Another method for protecting farmland is the use of conservation easements, where a landowner sells or donates restrictions on his or her property that limit or prohibit development. Only one of the study

“The conservation easement programs, that’s what’s going to keep us here” (#5, 13).

participants currently has a conservation easement on his property, and several others have explored the possibility. Eight participants showed either full interest or potential interest in placing a conservation easement on their property at some time, yet four do not think they would ever be interested in a conservation easement for their property.

Six participants think conservation easements are typically too restrictive for the landowner or their heirs. Six participants also think easement programs only benefit wealthy landowners who are in a financial position to make

“Conservation easements are instilling your ideas upon the future. Those people in the future should have *their* opportunities to make their decisions. We have no right to be making decisions for generations down” (#10, 6).

use of the tax breaks that landowners often receive in return for a donated easement. As one put it: “I need to go out and get a job as a doctor or a lawyer and make two hundred grand a year to take advantage of that tax break” (#8, 8). Much for this reason, seven participants think that actually paying farmers and ranchers for their easement, rather than asking them to donate the easement for a tax write-off, is a necessary condition for conservation easements to be effective farmland protection mechanisms here. As one explained: “I know of ranchers that would gladly put their place in a conservation easement if they could get enough money for it” (#8, 7).

### County Management

Under conservation easement programs, development restrictions on a piece of property are typically held by a non-profit, land trust organization. I asked participants what they would think about the County managing a program like that, acting as the holder of development restrictions on property.<sup>3</sup>

Every respondent to this question was opposed to the County managing such a program. Even those participants who think farmland protection is important do not think the County is the appropriate agent to actually manage a farmland protection program. Nine participants do not trust the County to manage such a program. As one put it, “From what I see of the County’s management of all this development, I don’t think I’d even

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<sup>3</sup> Such programs might include transfer of development rights or purchase of development rights, both of which have been used elsewhere. The question was posed in a general way to get at what people would think of such a role for the County.

trust ‘em getting into something like that” (#4, 23). For some, their opposition to County management stems from a belief that it would not be a priority for the government. Others do not see the County as a good steward of its own land and business. Also, because “political climates change” (#5, 19), they question the stability of such a program. Four participants feel like the County simply does not have the resources such as money, personnel, and expertise, needed to manage such a program.

### **A Role for the County**

Where some participants do see the County playing a role in farmland protection is in the arena of raising money and supporting organizations involved in farmland protection that have the appropriate expertise to manage such a program. Several participants suggested that the County could prioritize the most productive farmland for protection. For example, one recommended: “If where we are right now is really good soil...maybe this is a place where they should think about conserving some of it” (#7, 12).

“I think if the County wants to get involved with the conservation easement process, the way to do that is to be financially supportive of the organizations that do it” (#6, 6).

Some interviewees suggest that smart in-fill development could help ease development pressure on farmland throughout the County. One respondent felt that if the County lowered property taxes for producers, there would be no need to spend millions of dollars on open space, because we would have our open space in surviving farms and ranches. Another called for strong incentives for development that would be clustered and for incorporating open space and agriculture in it.

“I think to provide incentives for cluster development, for preserving open space, for preserving agriculture...is exactly the way to go” (#9, 9).

### **Beyond Farmland Protection: Economic Factors**

Some noted that regardless of whether farmland is protected, farmers and ranchers must still be able to make a living on the land, indicating that protecting farmland is only one piece of the farm viability puzzle.

“If you put an easement on a piece of ground, right next to Missoula—say it’s the highest value farmland—and it’s still not economically able to be operated as a farm, what have you accomplished?” (#2, 9).

## LOCAL MARKETING: PROSPECTS AND BARRIERS

Understanding that farmland protection is only one tool available to support farmers and ranchers, I asked participants about local marketing as a way to keep local operations economically viable. We discussed the prospects for local marketing in the area, as well as a variety of benefits to producers, consumers, and the community in general.

### Positive Prospects for Local Marketing

When asked if local marketing of agricultural products could be an effective way to support local farmers and ranchers, ten study participants saw good prospects for local marketing. Many noted that increasingly, citizens here and elsewhere are thinking more carefully about where their food comes from, and making more informed purchasing decisions to buy locally and organically raised food.

Several respondents also noted that Missoula County residents in particular seem interested and willing to purchase locally-raised food. The two respondents who primarily market their goods to local consumers indicated that they enjoy and depend on a very loyal local customer base that includes individuals, restaurants, and some grocery stores.

“I think it’s particularly apparent after the Mad Cow outbreak... We have some huge issues in our food chain, and they’re real.... It’s mainstream now to talk about it... So, with the affluence that’s coming with this development, and with the increase in population, I do think that we can support exactly the type of thing that’s happening at the Good Food Store—you know, Lifeline Meats. ...I think as a community we could do some exciting things” (#9, 12).

**Benefits to Producers.** In conversations about local marketing, many cited benefits for the producer, the consumer, and the larger community. Eight participants noted that local marketing financially benefits the farmer because it brings a premium price (and therefore profits) to the farmer, cuts down on transportation costs, decreases the amount of money spent on fuel, and decreases the environmental impact of using resources to ship food long distances for consumption. For these reasons, many think that local marketing could significantly support farmers and ranchers here.

“All they have to do is look at the Farmers’ Market to realize that selling local produce is tremendously popular” (#3, 9).

**Benefits to Consumers.** Four participants spoke about benefits to consumers of buying local food. These respondents feel that it is important for consumers to understand where their food comes from and how it is grown. One respondent suggested this understanding gives consumers peace of mind about the food they eat. Buying local food was mentioned as an opportunity for consumers to learn about where they live in a new way—through food—and to create valuable ties with local producers. As one put it: “I would certainly [like to] see many more of the people who remain on the land having this closer tie with local consumers so that they’re getting a premium price for their produce. But the people

who buy it are also getting premium produce, and they're able to watch it grow...which I think would be extremely important" (#3, 10).

**Benefits to the Community.** In addition to benefits to individual consumers, two participants brought up the positive impacts of local marketing on the community at large. One participant noted that by selling products locally and thus increasing farm profits, local marketing could contribute to producers' ability to stay on their land, making a connection between local marketing and keeping our remaining farmland in production. Another respondent spoke about the positive impact local marketing could have on our local economy. Buying locally-raised goods keeps money circulating through the local economy. Local processing and marketing also has the potential to create good jobs, something the community needs. In this way, local marketing of agricultural products has the potential to strengthen the local economy and community through a ripple effect.

"Now, if I start feeding out a hundred head of cattle, and so do all my neighbors here... now we're going to need a facility right here. That creates jobs. Right away" (#5, 28).

### **Barriers to Local Marketing**

Participants identified several barriers to local marketing in the Missoula County area, including: limited markets, local processing concerns, and resistance to change.

**Limited Local Market.** Although many participants see benefits to local marketing, many also spoke about the limitations of and barriers to it. Seven respondents perceive the market for locally-raised food to be limited. For example, some view local marketing as an option only for vegetable crops, but not for commodities such as grain. A couple of respondents even think the local market for vegetables is limited, viewing the farmers' market as insufficient to sustain a farmer, although they view it as a positive market to get a producer started. A couple participants noted the difficulty for a small-scale local producer to break into the large grocery store market. Several expressed doubt that consumers would be willing to increase the amount they pay for local or organic food enough to significantly impact farmer profits.

"If you raise grain, you've got to plan on haulin' it to the coast or somewhere. There's no place anymore that takes it in town" (#4, 18).

"There's only a certain amount of incremental money the consumer's gonna pay to get a steak that was grown in Missoula County versus the one that was grown in the state of Montana versus one that was grown where she doesn't even know where it was grown—which is the more typical.... Will people...buy local beef that they think is better? Sure they will, but only to a certain point. How much of that flows back to the farmer? Probably not enough to keep him in business if he's a marginal producer at this point" (#6, 15).

**Barriers to Local Beef Processing.** Several barriers to local beef processing and marketing were mentioned. The main one, raised by six participants, was the lack of nearby processing facilities with the needed level of capacity. Several producers also spoke about the enormous financial risk involved with establishing a local beef processing and packing facility, and the economic difficulty such a facility might have competing with regional or national facilities. To process beef locally, some felt there may need to be local feedlots established where cattle are “finished,” which may not be welcomed by Missoula County residents. In addition, there is concern that local beef production would exceed local consumption. The fact that many ranchers calve at a certain time of year means that our local beef market could have an influx of too much beef all at one time.

“Let’s say the Good Food Store wanted to buy our cattle, and they say we hear you’ve got great cattle’... Now I’d have to hang onto my cattle, maybe take them to a feedlot... and they’d feed them out to 1200 pounds. Then, I would have to take them to a facility like White’s. Now, they can only kill about ten calves a day, so my entire herd is gonna take them a long time to go through. Once that’s all processed, then the Good Food Store can go ahead and buy my meat.... And then there’s the fact that I calf in February and March and the cattle will be ready...next August. So they’re gonna get too much meat all at once.... So it’s just easier for them to order meat in from Pasco every day...and then they can control their inventory.... The only other thing I could do is I could calve all year round. Well then, man, you’re just making me work and work and work...calving every day and I’m up at night” (#8, 25).

**Resistance to Change.** Lastly, two participants talked about difficulties for farmers who want to switch to a more local market for their goods. Local marketing is more labor intensive, it requires new marketing skills, and it takes time to establish new connections, all of which could be barriers. One respondent also pointed out that some farmers might be comfortable with how they have always marketed.

“I guess we’re all comfortable right now. We’re eeking along, you know, and it’s a whole lot easier just to put those calves on a truck and they’re gone... It’s just gonna take a lot of courage to take that step and do it. I think it can be done” (#5, 29).

### **Improving the Prospects**

Study participants offered several suggestions for how local marketing could be encouraged or strengthened here. These suggestions ranged from establishing a local meat processing plant, to cooperating with institutional food purchasers such as schools and hospitals, to garnering the community’s commitment to support local agricultural production through public education.

“A lot of this is consumer driven. In order to support a local economy you’d have to have higher prices per unit in order to make that happen. And I don’t know whether the majority of the consumers would buy stuff at that higher price... It would take a commitment by the community in order to make it work” (#2, 16).

## CONSIDERING A COUNTY AGRICULTURAL TASK FORCE

When asked if they would approve of the creation of a task force that would recommend ways to the County to promote local agricultural markets and preserve agricultural production in the county, most participants expressed some degree of support. Nine participants support the idea, would likely support it, or are unopposed to it. Two participants are undecided, and two oppose the idea, holding that any involvement with the County would be negative. Several respondents who approve of the idea expressed concern that such a task force would lack effectiveness. Four participants' support of such a task force would be dependent on its makeup. Several mentioned the need to include farmers and ranchers on the task force.

“It depends on who’s on it. I don’t think they should all be from the University or all from Extension. I mean, they should include people who know what they’re doing out here... You’d have farmers and ranchers on the panel” (#13, 20).

Many participants offered specific suggestions regarding what such a task force ought to do. These suggestions include educating consumers about where their food comes from, exploring tax-free bonds to promote a local processing facility, and helping create producer cooperatives that connect local producers with local consumers.

“The more the consumers are educated about the food grown by the farmers and ranchers that we’ve got left in Montana, we’d have more demand and more money coming in” (#11, 9).

## SUMMARY

The in-depth interviews with farmers and ranchers around Missoula County suggest that there is a range of perspectives among producers concerning long-term farm viability, growth and development, and other issues affecting the future of agriculture. The voices heard here help to clarify what lies behind the survey findings presented in Chapter 2.

From the perspective of area producers, the major threats to the long-term viability of agriculture here appears to be lack of economic viability, as well as the impacts of growth and development. Key factors contributing to farm and ranch viability include off-farm employment, local market opportunities, keeping production costs down, and water and soil conservation practices. Although economic factors clearly weigh heavy in the decision making of these farmers and ranchers, it is also clear that many are deeply attached to farming as a way of life. These concerns are brought into sharp relief in the context of population growth and development in the area, trends which most (but certainly not all) of the participants viewed as negative and/or inevitable.

In terms of strategies for addressing farmland loss, these producers voiced the most support for using tax dollars, such as a bond, to create a farmland protection program. While about three-quarters of the participants support the use of conservation easements, others see them as restrictive or limited in particular ways. All of the participants were fairly critical of the County government, although they articulated some particular roles that they would like it to play (e.g., supporting land trusts, providing incentives, and prioritizing the most productive lands for agriculture).

Regardless of what programs are put into place, farmers and ranchers still need to be able to make a living from the land. While many benefits to and opportunities for local marketing were discussed, it is also clear that there are a number of obstacles in terms of infrastructure that need to be overcome.

Perhaps the most common theme that emerged is that the future of farming in this county will largely depend on the will of the community, whether it be through consumer demand for locally-raised food or the community's desire to protect farmland through governmental or non-governmental means. Many study participants are clear that agriculture in Missoula County is vulnerable to extremely difficult economic pressures; yet several are hopeful, and even optimistic, that as a community we can maintain a place for agriculture to thrive here. Whatever the future holds for agriculture in Missoula County, many agree that farmers and ranchers ought to play a key role in determining that future.

“For a lot of us, it’s all we’ve ever done. We’d like to stay here. It’s our home. A lot of us, it would break our hearts to see our land subdivided, that we’ve worked so hard on, oh, forever... Most farmers and ranchers don’t want to get rich... Keep them comfortable, and they’ll stay on the land, because that’s what they love to do... Right now, I see there’s still hope on the horizon to keep us here... I think that’s what’s keeping a lot of us here. (#5, 34).