National childhood nutrition act holds potential for Montana farm to school programs

By Lauren Amato

In the spirit of spring, Farm to School projects seem to be sprouting everywhere you turn. In Missoula, ground was broken for the newest school garden at Lowell Elementary; at the PEAS farm, children are getting their hands dirty and honing their future farming and gardening skills; in classrooms, students are learning about what it takes to grow their own healthy foods; and in the lunchroom, fresh, local produce is making its way back onto lunch trays after a long winter.

Missoula County Public Schools (MCPS) Farm to School has served as a model for farm to school programs across Montana for the past four years. From the Flathead to the Bitterroot and from St. Regis to Glendive, the number of schools joining the farm to school movement continues to grow. In Somers, students have feasted on local eggs raised by a sixth grade classmate; in Victor and Hamilton, students not only enjoy local fare on their lunch trays, they also learn to grow their own food in school gardens. In Greenfield, the food service director-slash-rancher serves up her grass fed beef in the cafeteria.

Taking notice of Montana’s increasing interest in farm to school, MCPS Food and Nutrition Services director Valerie Addis and the Missoula Farm to School program decided the time was right to host a meeting for school food service staff, growers, distributors, processors, and community organizers from Missoula and Ravalli counties this past February. The goal of the meeting was to find ways in which all parties could work together to increase the amount of healthy, fresh local food served in school cafeterias.

One of the major results of the meeting was a serious interest in pursuing policy change to improve schools’ capacity to purchase local foods.

At the 4th National Farm to Cafeteria conference in Portland in March, it was clear that Montana is mirroring a national

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Development review must include impacts on agriculture

By Jim Cusker and Paul Hubbard

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No one disputes the role fertile soils play in providing food for our burgeoning population. Increasingly removed from our rural origins and accustomed to grocery store aisles lined with produce harvested from around the world, we assume there is no reason to be concerned for our future food security. A reality check, however, reveals the national and global sparsity of highly productive soils.

Unfortunately, the land containing these priceless soils is also the easiest to develop. Over the past 30 years, much of western Montana’s productive fields and pastures have been permanently lost to creeping residential sprawl. That loss is a serious threat to the future food security of our local citizens and the world community as well. As shipping costs escalate, the case for preserving our agricultural land becomes even more compelling.

But who should speak for farm and ranchland conservation?

What venues are appropriate for those voices to be raised? What strategies should be in place to address this problem?

In a Missoulian guest column (March 12), Ryan Morton of the Missoula Building Industry Association implied that it is inappropriate to consider a proposed development’s potential impacts to agriculture as part of a subdivision review process. But Montana state law both requires such careful consideration and enables local governments to modify or deny a subdivision for

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Development review must include impacts on agriculture

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its adverse impacts to agriculture. If subdivision review is the public process that ensures developments do not damage the fabric of Montana’s wild and human communities, it is mandatory that a subdivision’s adverse impacts to agriculture be addressed and minimized through this process.

Morton, however, is correct that subdivision review alone cannot save agricultural lands. Subdivision review has its limits, as both a reactive and piecemeal approach to planning. The city and county of Missoula urgently need a variety of planning tools and policies n both carrots and sticks n that 1) comprehensively protect the most productive agricultural lands; 2) provide predictability for developers, planners, policy makers and consumers; 3) facilitate producers’ access to agricultural land; and 4) respect the interests of agricultural landowners and the equity built into their land.

Beyond proactive land use planning, systemic economic development strategies need to support the region’s farms and ranches, and ensure that families of all income levels have access to fresh, affordable food. That’s why the Community Food & Agriculture Coalition works to create and expand markets for local foods, and a chef grower initiative to place the region’s fields and pastures on restaurant menus. CFAC runs Land Link Montana, a program to help farmers and ranchers access agricultural land, and advocates for planning policies that will keep food and farming in Missoula County’s future. In short, a comprehensive food system requires fertile landscapes, farmers working the land and markets that provide good food to consumers along with a decent income to producers.

Economic development and land use planning tools should both conserve and support a matrix of farms and ranches across Missoula County— including hay fields and pastures, small farms near towns, and larger farms and ranches in rural areas. The diversity of these lands is the bedrock for a vibrant food system with a variety of farms, ranches and foods. Effective growth management will discourage leapfrog developments in rural, agrarian communities; encourage density in the urban core; and conserve the most productive lands in the urban fringe, while building houses on less productive soil.

The county and city of Missoula plan for transportation, water, drainage and waste systems n all important functions of a viable community. It’s now time to plan for a food system, which will provide for the long-term food security and agricultural legacy of western Montana. When it is no longer practical to ship food across the world and back, our kids and grandkids will judge our actions today. They will either blame us or thank us, because once farm and ranchland is gone, we won’t get a second chance.

City approves Chickasaw, protecting some farmland … sort of.

After a year of public process and multiple subdivision designs, Chickasaw Place made it out of the Council Chambers with the City’s stamp of approval. In the end, City Council made significant progress in protecting some of the best farmland, but undermined the integrity of the Agricultural Parcel with last minute modifications.

To recap, some of Missoula County’s most fertile soil blankets the entire Orchard Homes property, and there is plenty of irrigation water with both a ditch and well. Ideally, the whole property would be a 9.4-acre farm. But the landowner had other plans, the City decided to annex, and the best case scenario was conserving the best farmland within the property.

Missoula’s Office of Planning and Grants (OPG) recommended protecting the three most productive acres by creating an Agricultural Parcel with a minimum width of 290 feet. CFAC endorsed this recommendation, and thanks to CFAC members writing their city councilors—well over 30 emails filled the City Council’s inbox—conserving the three best acres for agriculture became a major priority for the Council.

Under pressure from the developer, City Council allowed a quarter-acre lot to be placed on top of the best farmland, so that the developer could sell the Ag Parcel as part of a residential property. Dave Strohmaier and Jason Wiener attempted to return the Ag Parcel to a configuration designed for food production rather than a large lot residence. No other city councilors supported the motion to remove the quarter-acre lot from the best farmland—even as they up-zoned the property by four-fold.

Is this really progress? Yes and no. Yes, because the City Council finally required the conservation of farmland. No, because the subdivision as approved was poorly designed at the eleventh hour. For now, advocates for a sustainable food system know that this is part of a long journey to conserve farmland in a way that actually bolsters our long-term food security.
2009 Montana Legislature full of ups and downs for food and agriculture bills

The 2009 Montana Legislature was particularly captivating for sustainable agriculture proponents. While there were not as many agriculture-related bills this session as in the past, the bills that were put forth commanded a great deal of attention from Montanans and from people across the entire United States.

HB 445, Montana’s Farmer Protection Bill
By Kiki Hubbard of Grow Montana

News of a simple bill to protect farmers traveled far from Montana’s capitol this legislative session. It wasn’t for its merits, though, but rather how a dinner hosted by Monsanto may have swayed Montana legislators to kill it.

House Bill 445, sponsored by Representative Betsy Hands, sought to protect the privacy and property rights of farmers. The bill was straightforward. It said that seed companies had to get farmers’ permission before entering their fields and that the Department of Agriculture could be present as a third party to collect duplicate samples. The bill also stated that if farmers inadvertently acquired patented plant material—say, via pollen or other means outside a farmer’s control—they could not be held liable for patent infringement. Seems fair, right?

Not so, said Monsanto, the world’s largest seed company. After the bill easily passed the House, the seed giant and a partner industry group took the Senate Agriculture Committee out to dinner to make its case for why the committee should vote against the bill.

The dinner is an example of Monsanto’s political power and dominance in American agriculture, and in itself reflects the need to level the playing field. This is precisely what House Bill 445 sought to do, in a small but important way.

Monsanto has sued more than 100 farmers in 27 states for patent infringement and hundreds more are investigated each year and sign confidential settlements out of court.

We’re fortunate that Montana farmers haven’t been targeted with intrusive patent investigations that violate property and privacy rights. But we can learn from farmers in other states who have—and that is exactly what House Bill 445 was about.

Indeed, Montana wasn’t alone this legislative session in trying to pass this kind of bill. Three states introduced similar bills in 2009 and four states already have these laws in place, including our neighbors in North Dakota.

At the end of the day, Monsanto’s dinner only reflects the power some corporations wield in the marketplace and politics.

The publicity around this dinner served as a source of embarrassment for some of the committee members, and, consequently, a reminder of what Montanans expect from their lawmakers: an honest, public dialogue in the wide-open spaces we treasure. And that should include the Capitol.

HB 583, Funding for Montana’s Food and Agricultural Development Centers

In a year when the budget was tight and competition for funds was tough, advocates for a Montana-based food system achieved a hard-earned victory. HB 583, passed in one of the final days of the session, will provide $250,000 over the biennium to four existing food and agricultural development centers—also known as “bio-product innovation centers”—across the state. The funds will help the centers continue to provide technical assistance to food manufacturing and alternative energy entrepreneurs in Montana. With the cry for value-added local foods growing louder every day—from consumers, schools, restaurants, and other institutions—these centers hold tremendous potential for economic development in both urban and rural communities by ensuring that more of the state’s food, agricultural, and energy dollars circulate in Montana.

HB 583 was sponsored by Rep. John Fleming, D-St. Ignatius, with the assistance of Grow Montana, a broad-based statewide coalition whose goal is promote community economic development policies that support a sustainable Montana food system.

Calling all photographers!

CFAC is excited to announce our first annual food and agriculture photography contest. This fall, submissions will be judged by a panel of CFAC board members, and winners will be featured in our 2010 Missoula community food calendar. For more information, contact Lauren at (406) 274-0437 or farm2school@MissoulaCFAC.org.

The Community Food and Agriculture Coalition would like to extend a special thanks to all our major donors, sponsors, and members for their continued support:

- The Good Food Store
- Edible Missoula
- Cinnabar Foundation
- New West
- Bullitt Foundation
- Sopris Foundation
- High Stakes Foundation
- Montana Farmers’ Union
- Biga Pizza
- Our dedicated members
CFAC’s members express hope for Missoula’s food future

On a beautiful spring afternoon in mid-April, dozens of CFAC members and supporters arrived at the Downtown Dance Collective, eager to learn more about the Community Food and Agriculture Coalition’s projects and programs, and to find out ways to become involved in rebuilding Missoula’s local food system. During a group brainstorming session, attendees were encouraged to share their thoughts on what they hoped to see from Missoula valley’s foodshed in the year 2025. Below are some common themes and interesting ideas contributed by CFAC’s visionary members:

- Equal access for all Montanans to healthy, fresh, local food.
- A “Land Link” program for gardeners in Missoula.
- Gardens, not lawns!
- A container garden “road show” and more gardening opportunities for low-income people.
- Hundreds of acres of protected ag land.
- A food museum and community experiential learning center that teaches about growing, processing, storing, and appreciating food.
- Community gardens within six blocks of every neighborhood.
- Edible schoolyards at every school!

Farmers market EBT program provides access to local food for all Missoulians as it celebrates its third year!

By Niraja Golightly

Did you know that now you can swipe your EBT (electronic benefit transfer) food stamp, credit, or debit card on a wireless transaction machine at the Missoula Farmers’ Market and the Clark Fork River Market? When you do, you receive the monetary value in wooden tokens to spend at participating vendors’ stalls.

Now in its third year, the EBT program allows everyone who attends the market to purchase locally grown food, as well as participate in a great community environment. It not only benefits people who use food stamp EBT cards, it also proscribes the local economy by increasing vendor sales and keeping federal dollars from the Food Stamp EBT program within Missoula. Before this program was initiated, food stamp cardholders did not have the choice of using them at the markets (because vendors could not swipe the cards) and people who forgot cash were out of luck or had to go to an ATM off-site. Now everyone has the option of purchasing food from the farmers’ market and supporting our local economy.

Wondering what could be for sale this time of year? Expect early spring veggies such as cabbage, broccoli, onions, carrots, kale, spinach; meat and dairy products; homemade salsas, jams, honey, and bakery items, as well as seeds and locally viable plant starts (very important for your home or container gardens!).

And for food stamps EBT cardholders—are you aware that you can use your food stamps to purchase seeds and plant starts? As long as the plants and seeds are food, you can! Need a little gardening help or cooking ideas? Look for Missoula County Extension Service events from 10am-12pm and some free information from MUD on container/small space gardening or seasonal recipes at the EBT swipe booths.

**Five things to know about raising your own backyard chickens**

By Christine Hyde

With the approach of spring, growing and buying fresh local food will no doubt be on many Missoulians’ minds. For some, growing food will include tending a flock of chickens, as permitted by the Chicken Ordinance, passed in 2007 by the Missoula City Council. The ordinance lets residents purchase a permit to own six female chickens, and sets basic guidelines for their care. If you are thinking about getting chickens this year, here are a few things to consider.

First, do you want to purchase your own chickens, or participate in the PEAS Farm egg share? The PEAS Farm, located at 3100 Duncan Drive in the Rattlesnake Valley, sells an egg share at the cost of $70 for approximately 14 weeks. Many of the PEAS Farm hens will be sold to the public in November. If you do decide to buy your own chickens, be sure to consider the cost of purchasing, feeding, watering, and sheltering them.

Second, and this is more difficult than it should be, you need to get a chicken permit. The difficult part is figuring out where to get the permit, so to save you the trouble, here’s the low-down: chicken permits are sold at a window on the second floor of the City Hall, on the corner of Spruce and Ryman Streets. The permit costs $15 and is valid for one year.

Third, decipher the language. In Missoula you are only allowed to have female chickens, so the word you are looking for is ‘pullet’, meaning female chick. The other term you will see is ‘straight run’, which means a mix of male and female.

Fourth, buy your chicks! There are two main options for finding feathered friends here in Missoula. First, you can mail order them, which will set you back between $1.00 and $4.00 per chick. Second, you can buy them in Missoula for around the same price. The Cenex at North Reserve Street has two chick days each spring: once they’re gone, that’s it, so get ‘em while the getting is good. Quality Supply on West Broadway has chick days weekly starting in late March. They have a list in the store of what they’ll get each week, but you’ll have to call each week to find out which day they expect them to get in. Again, they go fast so get there early. Other options include purchasing a PEAS farm chicken, which go home with families in the fall, or buying them off Craiglist, where they frequently pop up for sale. When deciding what kind of chicks to purchase, consider finding cold-tolerant types, and then deciding based on whether you want meat or eggs.

The last thing to do is read the Chicken Ordinance (available online) and plan the care of your flock accordingly. There’s a large variety of shelter structures, care strategies, and feeding plans for chicks to be found in books (including some at the Missoula Public Library) and on websites; you simply have to decide which best suits your needs and the needs of your chickens.

**National act holds potential for Montana farm to school programs**

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The trend—both in the expansion of farm to school and in seeing that in order to have successful programs, there is a glaring need to overhaul the National School Lunch Program (NSLP). One of the central issues of the conference was the enactment of the 2009 Child Nutrition Reauthorization Act. The Child Nutrition Reauthorization Act (CNR) authorizes all of the federal school meal and child nutrition programs. Although the NSLP and other child nutrition programs are permanently funded, Congress reviews the programs every five years through CNR. Each reauthorization presents an opportunity for Congress to improve and strengthen child nutrition programs. The current law is set to expire September 31, 2009, and farm to school and child nutrition advocates across the nation see that the time is ripe for change.

Included in the 2009 Child Nutrition Reauthorization Act are several key provisions that would strongly support the growth of farm to school programs across the nation and here in Montana. Below are a few that would most directly affect Montana’s farm to school movement:

- **Enact $250 million over 5 years, with $50 million mandatory, for Section 122: Access to Local Foods and School Gardens for grants for schools.** This would fund 100-500 projects per year up to $100,000 to cover start up costs for farm to school programs.
- **Increase school food reimbursement rates by at least 35 cents per meal for school districts that achieve excellence in providing nutritious school meals.** School food services operate under tight financial constraints, making it difficult to afford fresh, nutritious foods and cover the necessary operating costs to prepare such meals.
- **Eliminate the reduced-price category for school meals and extend free meal eligibility to households with incomes up to 185% of poverty level.** This will alleviate some pressure on families struggling in these hard economic times; it will also increase the reimbursement rates per student per meal, providing school food services a greater ability to purchase and prepare healthy local foods.

CFAC’s Food Security, Access, and Consumption (FSAC) committee is committed to seeing the Child Nutrition Reauthorization Act passed. If you would like to learn more about ways to get involved or would like to receive action alerts, contact Lauren at farm2school@missoulaCFAC.org.
MISSOULA COUNTY
COMMUNITY FOOD AND
AGRICULTURE
COALITION

P.O. Box 7025
Missoula, Montana 59806

Phone: 406-880-0543
Email: info@missoulacfac.org
www.MissoulaCFAC.org

I want to be involved with the Community Food and Agriculture Coalition to enhance our local food system!

Name(s): ____________________________________________________________
Address: ____________________________________________________________
City, State, Zip: _______________________________________________________
Phone: _____________________ Email: ___________________________________

I am interested in the following issues/activities (check all that apply):

☐ Farmland Conservation  ☐ Farm Transitions (exiting and entering agriculture)  ☐ Food Access Projects
☐ Food Security  ☐ Education & Outreach  ☐ Food & Ag Policies
☐ Farm to School  ☐ Other: ______________________________

I'm setting my dues at:
☐ $35  ☐ $50  ☐ $100  ☐ $250  ☐ $500  ☐ $25 (living lightly)  ☐ Other _____

☐ Please count me in as a Sustaining Member. Enclosed is an additional $100.

Membership dues and donations to CFAC are tax deductible. Tax ID# 81-0362732
Please make check payable to CFAC and mail to: Community Food and Agriculture Coalition, P.O. Box 7025, Missoula, MT 59806
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