Summit on Food and Ag Yields Hope

By Neva Hassanein

During the Governor’s Summit on Food and Agriculture held in Helena on March 22 & 23, Bruce Smith, a jovial and innovative extension agent from Glendive, quipped, “if we produce some of the best food in the world, why can’t I get any?” The question underscores the fact that only 10% of the food Montanans eat is actually grown here. Most of what Montana’s farmers and ranchers produce on some 60 million acres leaves our state.

And with those shipments, farmers lose much of the value associated with their labor, while processors and other intermediaries reap the profits.

Smith’s question also highlights the fact that about 290,000 of the people who live here often “can’t get any” because they can’t make ends meet. Most of the hungry are working poor who cannot afford the rising costs of living in a state that ranks 45th in terms of median income.

These are just some of the issues that 280 citizens from across Montana grappled with during those two days. People came together from across the state to learn about the problems and to generate ideas for change.

Many of us were struck by the diversity of folks who showed up — from school food service directors to farmers to economic development specialists to restaurant owners and more. The purpose of the summit was to explore opportunities for improving the food system infrastructure (e.g., through in-state processing), to name the barriers faced by low-income people in accessing nutrition, and to identify the changes needed to increase food security and ensure a sustainable and more locally-oriented food system.

A diverse array of speakers talked about everything from how the global food system has come to resemble a “runaway train,” to how a Boys and Girls Club on the Northern Cheyenne Reservation is filling children’s bellies as well as nourishing their sense of belonging and competence through gardening and other strategies. We also learned about how schools, universities, and other public institutions can provide new local markets for our agricultural producers and processors.

But this was not a passive conference. People engaged fully in work groups that generated recommendations for the Governor regarding what should be done to improve the health of our food system. (Continued on page 4)

Missoula County Open Lands Committee Considers Funding

By Jim Cusker

The newly formed Open Lands Committee (OLC) has completed necessary organizational projects and is now actively involved in evaluating and recommending proposals which have requested county funds generated from the passage of the November bond issue for the conservation of key land in the county. In submitting projects for consideration, a landowner first contacts a conservation agency such as The Nature Conservancy or Five Valleys Land Trust. These agencies work to tailor an easement proposal satisfactory to the landowner and which meets the conservation values of the sponsoring agency. The property in question is evaluated at both its “highest and best use” (read: development) and at its continued use as agriculture, timber land, or other approved open space values. The difference between these two appraisals is the value of the conservation easement. The conservation agencies seek to find sources of money to aid in the purchase of the easement and may apply to OLC for the use of county funds to assist in raising the necessary amount.

An agency representative makes a formal description of the proposal at a monthly OLC meeting. A site visit by several committee members is then conducted, and the findings are reported at the next meeting. Each member of the thirteen person OLC evaluates the proposal using a standard procedure approved by the committee. The committee then votes to accept or reject the project. Successful projects are forwarded to the Board of County Commissioners for final funding approval. At its April meeting, OLC will consider final approval on 1) the 3520 acre Sunset Hill property up the Blackfoot River Valley and 2) the 738 acre Circle Bar Ranch near Potomac. It is expected that two additional projects will also be introduced at that meeting. Although the projects submitted thus far involve large acreages, it is anticipated that many proposals featuring small tracts of land but possessing crucial and unique conservation values will be brought forward for funding consideration in the future.
Montana Food System Bills Thrive in 2007 Legislature

By Crissie McMullan
Based on an article printed in AERO’s SunTimes.

Despite a session full of partisan disputes, as of early April Grow Montana’s lead policies have enjoyed landslide victories in committee and floor votes. The wins owe much to CFAC and AERO members who have tirelessly asked legislators for their support. If these results continue, the 2007 legislative session will almost certainly be a landmark start for statewide investment in a Montana-based food system.

SB 328, Montana Food to Institutions. Sponsored by Senator Don Steinbeisser (R) from Sidney, this bill allows public institutions more flexibility to buy Montana-produced food through an optional exemption in the Montana Procurement Act. The University of Montana’s Farm to College Program, which has already spent nearly $1.6 million on local and regional food products, inspired SB 328 because of its benefits to farmers, ranchers, and consumers. “You’ve all heard of national food safety scares—with beef a few years back and most recently with spinach,” UM’s food service director Mark LoParco testified before the Senate Agriculture committee. “Those scares didn’t affect my operation. I knew exactly where my food came from.” Grow Montana’s team of AmeriCorps VISTA volunteers, known as FoodCorps, also shared successes and challenges of creating farm to cafeteria programs at the university and public school levels. These real-life examples, along with a wide spectrum of supporting organizations convinced the committee to unanimously approve the bill. Both the Senate and the House then followed suit, sending SB 328 to the Governor’s desk for approval.

SJ 13, Interim Study of Value-added Food Production. Senator Frank Smith (D) from Poplar carries this bill which creates an interim study committee to research and propose solutions for value-added food processing in Montana. Along with most of the major agriculture organizations, the Montana Department of Agriculture encouraged the Senate Agriculture Committee to vote yes on SJ 13 as an important step toward revitalizing Montana’s food processing industry. The bill sponsor championed the bill by describing how beans produced in his region of Montana travel to Texas for processing. “We then bring 1,000 pounds a month back to Montana,” Senator Smith said. “There’s something wrong with this picture.” The entire Senate Agriculture Committee agreed. Later, 47 of 50 Senators voted to send SJ 13 to the House, and the House Agriculture Committee has given its unanimous vote as well. One more round of votes on the House floor will then land this bill in front of the Governor as well.

Representative Jill Cohenour (D) from East Helena sponsors HJ 17, which encourages more meat processing in Montana by removing the federal ban on interstate commerce of state-inspected meat. This state resolution urges state congress to act. Strong leadership from Montana Farmers Union, a new Grow Montana steering committee member, brought another round of broad support from the agriculture community. The unison of enthusiastic testimony led Grow Montana lobbyist Linda Gryczan to call the hearing before the House Agriculture Committee a “love-fest.” The only lament came from Rich Liebert, rancher and AERO member who sent his endorsement via email, “It’s calving season right now. I’d love to be there, but the cows are more demanding.” The House voted 84-15 in favor of sending HJ 17 to the Senate, and the Senate Ag Committee gave it a unanimous endorsement. HJ 17 now just needs one more set of votes from the Senate and a signature from the Governor to become law.

Though these early successes are certainly encouraging, we must continue to actively promote these bills until they are actually signed by Governor Schweitzer. Even a potential 2007 legislative sweep for Montana’s food and agriculture is just one of many steps needed to build a Montana-based food system. The work of CFAC is equally important to make on-the-ground changes and develop innovative models. Only together do we have a realistic chance to create a fair, sustainable, Montana-based food system.

CFACts
Did you know ……

- In a typical year, the Farm to College program at the University of Montana, Missoula - by buying locally the ingredients of a hamburger and french-fries meal - saves 43,000 gallons of fuel and spares the atmosphere millions of pounds of CO2.
- Montanans spent over $3 billion on food in 2003, with roughly 15% of that total spent on Montana-produced food. If we sourced 30% instead of 15% of our food in-state, an additional $450 million would go directly to our food producers.
- Another way to look at it is if each household in Montana spent just $10 a week on Montana-grown food products, we would re-direct $186 million dollars each year to local farmers and ranchers.
From Cafeterias to Capitol Hill

By Ariel Bleth

The 2007 National Farm to Cafeteria and Farm Bill conference, held in Baltimore, Maryland this March, was attended by Bonnie Buckingham and Ariel Bleth of Missoula’s Community Food and Agriculture Coalition. This conference brought together over 400 participants from across the nation who are working to strengthen community food systems and affect change in the upcoming Farm Bill legislation. Two days of the conference were devoted to showcasing innovative farm to cafeteria projects being undertaken at schools and colleges across the country, as well as the policy opportunities and barriers that affect their ability to succeed. Two of Montana’s efforts were highlighted during panel breakout sessions. One session shared findings from the research recently conducted by Dr. Neva Hassanein and 10 graduate students, of the Environmental Studies program at the University of Montana, Missoula. This research looked at the economic, social and environmental impacts of the university’s Farm to College program. In addition, Grow Montana’s project, Food Corps, was highlighted as a unique collaborative grassroots effort to develop farm to institution programs.

More than a conference, "From Cafeterias to Capitol Hill" was an opportunity to change the nation's farm and food policies in line with the needs of our children, our communities, and our environment. The conference brought together leaders who are working for policy change - from the inclusion of farm fresh products in institutional meals to federal policy that supports family farms and encourages good nutrition for everyone. Skill building workshops on lobbying and policy communication prepared attendees for the final day, when members of the conference met with their elected representatives in Washington.

The conference’s primary organizer, the Community Food Security Coalition (CFSC), is one of over 350 organizations calling for Farm Bill reform (of which The Community Food and Agriculture Coalition is one). Core issues include:

- Reauthorizing and expanding the USDA Community Food Projects Competitive Grant Program to $60 million, allowing for mandatory funds to support community food security innovations, adding specific uses of funds to meet the urgent need to supply healthy local foods to underserved markets.
- Pursuing policy changes to allow for geographic preferences and increased flexibility for school and institutional procurement of local and regional foods.
- Investing $45 million in infrastructure that would enable local and regional producers to supply products to underserved and institutional markets.
- Supporting the Community Food Systems Reinvestment Act, a bill which covers all the major priorities of CFSC in addition to urban agriculture, farmers' market support, EBT at farmers' markets, and others.
- Expanding the Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Program, a vehicle for nutrition education and promoting healthy eating habits.

For more information on key issues, talking points and tips for talking to your legislator, see: www.foodsecurity.org/policy.html#FFPPnow.

NEW RESEARCH SHOWS ....

The nutritional profile of kiwi fruit grown organically is healthier than conventionally grown fruit, American researchers have reported. Interested in more details? Read article at http://www.foodnavigator-usa.com/news/ng.asp?n=75280&m=1FNU3278c=fhmkbwrywtxjc Source: Journal of the Science of Food and Agriculture. Published on-line ahead of print.

Montana access card users can now purchase local, fresh foods by utilizing their food stamp benefits at both of Missoula’s Farmers Markets!

Beginning May 2007, Montana access card users can enjoy …

- On-site market assistants to provide instructions on use of card
- Purchasing edible plants and seeds to grow edible plants
- A variety of food choices while supporting the local economy
- Celebrating Missoula while meeting their neighbors and farmers
Yes, sign me up to receive the Missoula Community Food Digest bi-annual newsletter.

Name: _____________________________________________________________________________________

Address: _____________________________________________________________________________________

mail to: Community Food and Agriculture Coalition, 219 South Third Street West, Missoula, 59801
Raising Voices for Food Security

By Chris Rugeley

What is food insecurity? Is it what we hear in the United States all too often: that some people are just lazy and don’t work hard enough; that if they just pulled themselves up by their bootstraps, they would be able to climb out of poverty and put food on their own tables? “So we’re told,” says University of Montana Social Work Professor Maxine Jacobson. “And so we’re expected to believe. But after listening to people in the community that experience food insecurity everyday, a different picture emerges.”

Community voices have been the focal point of the Finding Solutions to Food Insecurity (FSFI) project, a grassroots research project Jacobson is involved with that is guided by community members who have experienced food insecurity and hunger. FSFI began in September of 2005 and is part of a larger effort to make Missoula County more food secure for all of its residents. More specifically, it aims to uncover and dismantle the barriers that people with low incomes face in their efforts to access healthy, nutritious food. FSFI researchers have interviewed administrators from assistance and service programs across the county. They have planned and held town hall meetings to better gauge the effects of cost of living issues on people’s ability to be food secure. And they are preparing to administer surveys to direct-service staff and clients at organizations that provide food assistance.

When asked what the FSFI project hopes to accomplish, Jacobson had this to say: “We’re looking to create a comprehensive picture of what’s working for people, what’s not working, and how we can collectively address food insecurity in Missoula County. We hope our research challenges common perceptions of poverty in the US and shows that policy can be more effective if it is informed by people who have first-hand knowledge of food insecurity.”

For more info on the FSFI project, contact Chris Rugeley at rugeleychris@hotmail.com

Summit on Food and Ag Yields Hope  (Continued from page 1)

The ten topical work groups included farm viability, food processing, food distribution, food security, institutional market, education and curricula, consumer education, marketing, development of cooperatives, and policy. The Summit steering committee is reviewing the lists of ideas generated, and will be developing a full report to send to the Governor soon.

One of the major outcomes will likely be the formation of a state Food, Agriculture and Nutrition Council with the mission of promoting the development of a sustainable, equitable Montana-based food system that feeds all Montanans. The thought is that the Council will lead the charge and see that the other ideas generated are developed further and implemented.

I left the summit with a sense that many positive efforts are already underway and that there is much hope on the horizon. As Joel Clairmont of the Montana Department of Agriculture said, “We have to take action ourselves.” Indeed.

To stay in touch with the process, subscribe to Grow Montana’s Food and Ag list serve by emailing Crissie McMullan at cris-siemc@yahoo.com or visit: www.foodandag.mt.gov

Food system sustainability is built on the foundation of human, natural and economic resources. Each of the food system sectors depends on these resources or inputs. The functionality of the food systems is influenced by socio-cultural trends and values; economic factors; local, state, federal and international policies; research and education; and technological advances. Outcomes of the food system impact the viability and stability of each of the food system sectors as well as natural resources and the health of individual, communities and populations.


An executive summary of “Tracing the Chain: an in-depth look at the University of Montana’s Farm to College program” is now available at http://www.growmontana.ncat.org/resources.php
Landowners Excited about Land Link

By Paul Hubbard

As generations come and go, and agricultural land is converted to a “higher use,” western Montana needs to farms and ranches that are both open and working. That means we need people working the land. Thus, we face a unique challenge: how do landowners, who want their land to be farmed or ranched, find someone looking for land to begin or expand an agricultural operation?

The Community Food and Agriculture Coalition has decided to implement a land link program to facilitate this connection between agricultural generations, landowners, and land-seeking producers. Many other states already have these matching services, and we were curious about what some of our farmers and ranchers thought of the idea. Their own words explain it best how the land link might be an important service for our region:

• “Many times when I’m looking for pasture, there’s no resource to find what the hell is out there.”
• “The majority of ag land in the U.S. is farmed by someone other than the owner. A clearinghouse for people to connect is critical: current farmers, wannabe farmers and landowners.”
• “At my age, maintaining fences on 20 acres is tough. And I’ve been approached by developers offering an incredible sum, but if I can keep it in ag status, I’d like to keep it in agriculture.”
• “It could keep land from development, because often landowners don’t see options to keep it in agriculture, even if they want to. When they get too old to maintain the property, they need to see all options.”
• “Landowners can both make money off their land and get it managed. Letting it go to weeds is not an intelligent idea for landowners.”

To request further information or offer a suggestion, please contact Paul Hubbard, pfhubbard@gmail.com.

As a Matter of Fact:

• Locally adapted seed varieties are dwindling. Just 10 companies sell half of all seeds worldwide. In one recent decision, Seminis, the leading U.S. seed supplier, removed 2,000 varieties of commercial seed from circulation.

• Strong corporate control has meant record profits for the leading multinational food corporations, while consumers and producers suffer. Consumer food prices have remained stagnant for the past 2 decades and more than half of all farms in the U.S. reported a net financial loss in the last Census.

• Diversified agriculture from local farms provides environmental benefits such as reduced contribution to climate change, enhanced water quality, and a reduction in soil erosion.

• As of 2006, legislators in nineteen U.S. states have introduced legislation preventing local control of plants and seeds. Fifteen of these states have passed the provisions into law.

• The World Trade Organization (WTO) recently found the European Union guilty of illegally banning the importation of genetically modified foods. The EU had temporarily banned imports in order to first carry out studies to determine the safety of these foods but was forced to lift the ban in early 2006.

• Communities across the U.S. have pursued ways to limit superstores like Wal-Mart in an attempt to maintain healthy competition and strong local economies. In response, Wal-Mart has undertaken strong defensive campaigns, spending disproportionate amounts of money to defeat the bans. For example, Wal-Mart paid over $1 million in an attempt to defeat a local ballot initiative in Inglewood, California, where the vote included fewer than 12,000 people. Wal-Mart was able to outspend its opponents 10 to 1.

• Codex Alimentarius is a set of international food standards that has been integrated with the WTO and is being used to institute globally uniform food safety standards. Codex is a key set of rules that favors powerful global entities at the expense of small, family businesses. The only non-governmental U.S. attendees to the last meeting of the Codex Alimentarius Committee on Food Hygiene were from leading multinational food companies.