
LOSING GROUND

THE FUTURE OF FARMS AND FOOD IN MISSOULA COUNTY

APRIL 2010

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

A publication of the Community Food and Agriculture Coalition
Go to www.MissoulaCFAC.org to download the full report.

Diverse farms and ranches provide the backbone for working landscapes and local food in Missoula County. A vibrant local food movement has taken hold here over the last decade or so, and there is much to celebrate about its success. Yet, the challenges have become clearer too. In the face of population growth and residential development, one of the biggest hurdles may be saving fertile soil – the irreplaceable medium in which our local food system must be rooted. These changes have made the issues of farmland and local food a major topic of public discourse.

To inform public dialogue and decision making, this report, *Losing Ground: The Future of Farms and Food in Missoula County*, aims to address these central questions:

- What is the state of agriculture in Missoula County, and how has that changed over time?
- Where are our best agricultural soils? How much farm and ranchland has been converted to other uses in recent times? What can we learn from recent subdivision decisions about the patterns of development on the landscape?
- How much grazing land and cropland remain for food production? How can we conserve the necessary resources for food production (especially, land, water, and people)?
- How can the community effectively keep working farms and ranches productive? How can the community build an even more vibrant local food system here?

Key findings related to the state of agriculture and the local food economy:

The structure of agriculture in Missoula County has changed considerably in recent decades. The number of farms has more than doubled since 1974 (to 699), but the average farm size has decreased markedly, as shown in Figure 1. The number of farms that are less than 10 acres has ballooned from 29 in 1974 to 149 in 2007. Also, nearly half of the farms in the County now sell less than \$1,000 worth of agricultural products in a year; about 72 farms generate over \$20,000 in gross sales annually. Taken together,

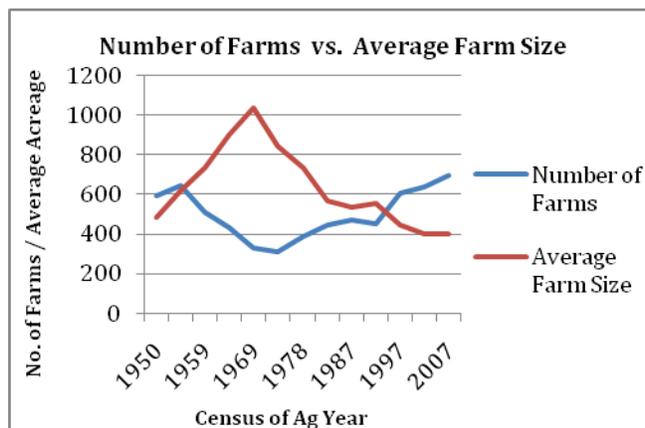


Figure 1: The number of farms has been rising in Missoula County while their average size is down.

these facts strongly suggest that many of the County’s “farms” are primarily rural residences. (The threshold for being considered a “farm” in the U.S. Census of Agriculture is quite low.) To complicate matters, farmers have reached an average age of 60 years old in Missoula County. Many will soon retire, and their land will change hands. Land prices, inflated due to development pressure, often make it difficult for beginning farmers and ranchers to access land and get started.

Economically, farming and ranching are small but important parts of Missoula County’s total commercial output. The market value of all agricultural products sold in Missoula County was nearly \$7.6 million in 2007, with almost \$4.9 million from livestock sales and \$2.7 million from harvested crops. On the consumer end, Missoula County residents spend over \$300 million each year on food. Re-directing more of that to local food and farm businesses will not only support working farms and ranches on the land, but also magnify its financial impact throughout the local economy by keeping our dollars circulating through area businesses. Few other industries have the opportunity to be truly rooted in the land and place.

With the emergence of a strong local food movement, selling into local markets has become a bright spot in the agricultural economy. In the past ten years, the number of farms selling directly to customers has almost doubled. The value of direct sales has tripled. Area businesses and organizations have created and expanded new markets for local food – from Farm-to-School and Farm-to-College, to Electronic Benefits Transfer (food stamps) at farmers’ markets, to restaurants and grocers that feature locally-grown and processed foods. The Western Montana Growers Cooperative has thrived in collectively marketing and distributing wholesale the produce of its nearly 30 grower-members. Missoula’s three farmers’ markets have over 150 vendors.

Key findings related to agricultural use and soils:

Fertile soils take thousands of years to develop. Good soil is not just dirt; it is our most underappreciated, least valued, and yet essential resource. Regardless of the changes we see in our fast-paced, modern lives, we still depend on fertile soil to keep us alive. Knowing how much agricultural land has already been converted to other uses – and what remains available for food production – is a difficult task. Here is what we learned to better understand current and historic uses of working farm and ranchlands:

- Since 1986, almost 29,000 acres of farm and ranchlands have been converted from agricultural use (cropland, grazing, and wild hay) to non-agricultural use. That’s 1,443 acres per year on average (shown in Table 5).
- Since 1974, the number of cropland acres harvested has declined by over 13,000 acres, an average of 394 acres a year and a drop of 44%.

| MDOR Productive Ag Land Classification | 3-Year Average 1986-88 | 3-Year Average 2006-08 | Change over 20 Years | No. Acres Converted Per Year on Average |
|---|-------------------------------|-------------------------------|-----------------------------|--|
| Irrigated Crop Land | 17,588 | 15,123 | -2,465 | 123 |
| Non-Irrigated Crop Land | 5,796 | 2,655 | -3,141 | 157 |
| Grazing | 108,502 | 87,196 | -21,306 | 1,065 |
| Wild Hay | 9,210 | 7,253 | -1,957 | 98 |
| Total | 141,096 | 112,227 | -28,869 | 1,443 |

Table 5: Productive agricultural lands by use in Missoula County, change over time, according to the MT Department of Revenue (MDOR). The acres for each category of agricultural land were averaged over three years at each end of the 20-year spectrum (1986-88 and 2006-08). This reduces subtle year-to-year fluctuations and more accurately reflects the net change.

- Roughly 80% of the lands containing the best agricultural soils have been subdivided into parcels smaller than 40 acres.
- About 87,000 acres of grazing land remain. There were over 108,000 acres in the mid-1980s.
- About 16,000 acres of cropland are still used to grow and harvest crops (about 12,000 acres of those are irrigated). These lands are likely available for continued production.

Although we have lost a lot of ground in the last few decades, Missoula County still has enough agricultural land for working farms and ranches to remain an important part of our economy, culture, landscape, and place. Yet, as seen below, there are compelling reasons to act now to protect this finite resource.

Key findings regarding development patterns on the agricultural landscape:

State law, as well as local regulations and policies, mandate that local government consider the impacts a subdivision might have on agriculture and agricultural water users when they review a proposal to subdivide land. For decades, the adverse impacts of subdividing farmland have largely been regarded as incremental. In response, CFAC participated in the subdivision review process in 2008 and 2009, and commented on 25 proposals regarding their potential impacts to agriculture. As the following list of findings indicates, the incremental losses have added up.

- From 1990 to 2009, almost 22,000 acres were subdivided in the County, over 90% of which were outside the City of Missoula.
- Even during the recession of the last two years, local government approved subdivisions on 2,250 acres; roughly 1,400 of these were on farm and ranchlands.
- Neither the City nor County have clear guidelines about how to ensure new developments mitigate their impacts to agriculture, making the subdivision review process unpredictable and ineffectual when it comes to protecting the agricultural lands with the best potential.
- Of the 25 subdivisions CFAC commented on in 2008 and 2009, we found that 13 would have substantial impacts to agriculture, dividing 570 acres of highly productive farmland. All 13 were approved. For every 6 acres of exceptional farmland converted to residential uses, just 1 acre was left for agricultural production (see Figure 10).
- The sub-regions within Missoula County that have the best agricultural lands often face the greatest development pressure.
- Conservation easements have proven to be an important tool that has been used with some success to protect valuable lands. Yet, only 4% of the County as a whole is in conservation easement. Roughly 25% of those protected lands contain soils classified as agriculturally important.

Farm and ranchland – often of the best quality and within agrarian communities – is permanently lost at the point of subdivision. The City and County of Missoula’s existing planning tools do not have the capacity to address this challenge alone.

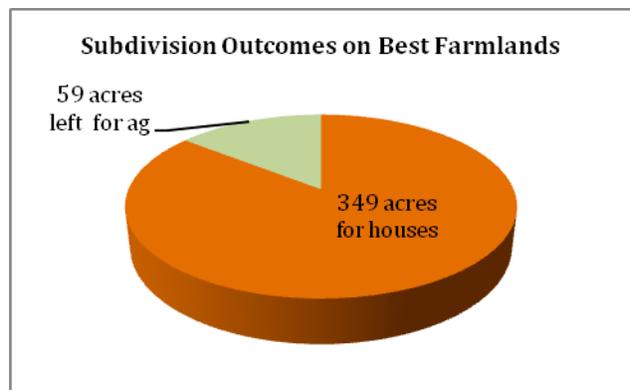


Figure 10: Decision outcomes of 13 subdivision proposals (2008-2009) on the most viable, but buildable, agricultural lands in the City and County of Missoula. Another 160 acres were in the floodplain, and therefore, unbuildable.

Gaining ground: Recommendations for our food future

In light of changing national and global circumstances – population growth, loss of farmland, the finite character of agricultural soils, and the increasing cost of transporting food long distances – Missoula County’s agricultural lands are going to be increasingly vital, and economic opportunities for nearby working farms and ranches will continue to grow. For decades, the community has talked about the importance of agriculture, working lands, and local food. Despite having growth policies that articulate a strong vision to “support local sustainable agriculture” and protect farm and ranchlands from the “adverse impacts of urban development,” the City and County of Missoula lack adequate tools to implement the community’s vision. Local government routinely plans for housing needs, neighborhood character, water supplies, sewage and waste treatment, transportation, wildlife, air quality, and recreation. Specific measures ensure these community needs are met. It is time to do the same for agriculture.

CFAC envisions a comprehensive strategy that protects the local resources necessary to produce food, and re-directs more of the \$300 million Missoula County eaters spend on food each year back to local businesses, such as farms, ranches, processors, distributors, grocers, and restaurants. Taken together, this multi-pronged and community-wide strategy will strengthen Missoula County’s food security and agricultural legacy, even as the population continues to grow.

Recommendation 1: Identify Agricultural Cornerstone Areas that are priorities for farm and ranchland protection in the City and County. Amend the Missoula City/County Growth Policy to enact an Agricultural Cornerstone Plan that encourages the conservation of agricultural resources and discourages non-agricultural development within these Areas. Conserving contiguous areas, where important agricultural soils, access to agricultural water user facilities, and sufficient parcel sizes support viable farming and ranching, will minimize conflicts between farmers/ranchers and their non-agricultural neighbors.

Recommendation 2: Mitigate the loss of important farm and ranchlands by enacting Agricultural Resource Standards in the City and County of Missoula’s zoning ordinances and subdivision regulations. The Agricultural Resource Standards would require permanent conservation of agricultural land that is of equal or greater value in terms of suitability for agriculture and community farms. Agricultural Resources Standards should provide clarity and predictability for developers, area residents, elected officials, and agencies.

Recommendation 3: Identify, evaluate, and activate a broad suite of incentives available to agricultural producers and owners of important farmland. Use incentives to encourage and reward conservation, especially within areas identified as Agricultural Cornerstones. A diverse set of tools, as well as a balanced approach between voluntary incentives and regulatory compliance, is the most effective way to conserve agricultural land.

Recommendation 4: Assist beginning farmers and ranchers in securing land and establishing viable operations. CFAC plans to further develop our Land Link Montana program to help the next generation of farmers and ranchers access land and resources in order to establish successful agricultural businesses in western Montana.

Recommendation 5: Expand the capacity of Missoula’s markets to source locally produced foods and work with farmers and ranchers to assist them in strategically accessing those markets. CFAC will continue to work directly with interested farmers and ranchers in accessing local markets – from schools to restaurants, homes, and beyond. We will also work with our partners to 1) identify opportunities for creating new markets or expanding existing ones, 2) help beginning farmers and ranchers develop clear strategies to capitalize on local market opportunities, and 3) promote markets that make local food available to Missoula County eaters.