Across the rural West during difficult economic times, small communities have had to rethink how to build independent, sustainable economies. Rather than trying to attract global companies and warehouse manufacturing jobs, many rural leaders sought to reinvent their communities as “rural tourism” destinations. Others tapped into the “farm-to-fork” trend by offering locally-sourced produce to residents and visitors at regional farmers’ markets and in restaurants.

The city of Fallon in Churchill County, Nevada, has been successful in developing and redeveloping its natural assets. With a population just under 9,000, Fallon has capitalized on its natural surroundings to become an appealing rural tourism mecca. It also has a thriving food hub, made possible in part by surrounding farms. How city leaders have developed and marketed these economic assets may offer lessons to other struggling rural communities.
Their work may also help to address one of the gravest problems facing rural areas around the country: young people moving to urban regions in search of work and career advancement. Fallon has managed to retain and attract younger people, particularly those keen to work in farm-to-fork-related industries. It doesn’t hurt that the cost-of-living in Nevada is much cheaper than in neighboring California, in part because Nevadans pay no state income taxes (though they do pay property taxes.) Additionally, recreational activities, from skiing to off-roading, are popular and plentiful in the region.

Nathan G. Strong, executive director of the Churchill Economic Development Authority (CEDA), notes two areas where Fallon and Churchill County are self-sufficient: agriculture and renewable energy. The county is Nevada’s top dairy producer and home to the Dairy Farmers of America’s whole milk dry powder production facility. Agriculture is Churchill County’s main economic driver, employing nearly 600 people. It is also home to the emerging gluten-free and drought-tolerant Eragrostis tef grain industry. And its triple hybrid power plant, the only one in the world, generates ten times more energy than its residents consume.

Leveraging its agricultural strengths, CEDA founded the Fallon Food Hub in March 2016. The hub promotes local and regional farmers; according to the U.S. Department of Agriculture 2012 Census of Agriculture, Churchill County is home to more farms than any other Nevada county. It also employs nearly six percent of the county’s residents.

The idea behind the Fallon Food Hub was to have paying members support a market selling locally-raised produce, meat/dairy products, and other consumer goods and services. The Food Hub is in Fallon’s Downtown Historic District across from a vacant grocery store. It has been particularly successful because it has brought back groceries to the older part of town where neither grocery stores nor public transportation exist. It has also expanded to sell health and beauty products, as well as value-added products.

Considering that the USDA defines the popularly used term “locally sourced” as any food product distributed within a 400-mile radius, Fallon’s truly home-grown, farm-to-fork industry may be a rarity in the nation. The Food Hub’s executive director, Kelli Kelly, says that while she moved from San Diego to Fallon to be with the man who would eventually become her husband, she found, that as a sous chef, the cornucopia of locally-grown food was impressive. She first worked at Fallon’s Slanted Porch restaurant, which in 2012 was featured on the Live Well Network cable show Food Rush.

Today, the Food Hub is a vital part of the Fallon Downtown Merchants Association. The organization’s membership reasons that with economic revitalization comes healthy residents. Nearly 30% of Churchill County’s residents are diagnosed as obese, nearly nine percent of its adults have diabetes and nearly
30% have high blood pressure – all figures are higher than the state’s average, and possibly reflective of grocery market closures in the area. As of October 2017, the Food Hub could count 116 active members.

While most of Churchill County’s land is arid, some 50,000 acres are irrigated with water from the Truckee-Carson Irrigation District. Until just a decade ago, the main crop grown on the irrigated agricultural lands in Fallon was alfalfa, which would have to be rotated every three to four years with corn, grain, or hay, says John Getto, who operates Desert Oasis Teff. In 2007, Jay Davison, a crop specialist with the University of Nevada Cooperative Extension, studied whether another equally or more profitable crop could be added to the mix, particularly in response to the challenges of farming: prices falling, operational costs rising, drought, and urban areas demanding and siphoning off more water.

Tef requires less water than alfalfa and can be more profitable, Davison found. He began working with 11 farmers in Churchill, Lyon, and Pershing counties to develop Nevada’s first tef crops in 2009. He and his academic colleagues studied tef production, and agronomic and harvesting techniques in Idaho, and returned to Nevada to work with growers on field plantings, fertility management, pest identification, and harvest timing. (http://www.unce.unr.edu/programs/agriculture/index.asp?ID=93)

Nearly a decade later, demand for the grain in the United States exceeds the supply. It is an important source of gluten-free flour and it can also be processed as high-quality horse hay. According to the University of Nevada Cooperative Extension, input costs for growing tef are cheaper than alfalfa and the grain requires a third less water.

“This was all part of a federal program for researching these small acreage crops,” Davison notes. “The farmers here are making about $900 per acre whereas before, with farming just alfalfa, they were lucky to break even. The fact that tef uses significantly less water than does, say, corn, also makes this a very good crop.”

Getto recalls the difficulties of starting a new crop and trying to get federal allowances to spray it with herbicides and pesticides. And there’s now growing competition from growers in Idaho, as well as in the eastern United States, although, he points out, the climate there – tef requires hot temperatures – is unsuitable. Regardless, he’s looking ahead, and says his company will expand in 2018. Desert Oasis Tef now grows, cleans, and sells the tef grain; it will next aim to produce the flour. He is also thinking about branching off into other gluten-free grains.

“Tef production will probably level off,” he says. “So other grains, like buckwheat, sorghum, we’re trying to venture out to those. We know we need to look at other products.”

Aside from the thriving agriculture, it seems there would be little here to attract the random tourist. But Fallon doesn’t see it that way, and more than two decades ago, it started investing in what could draw visitors who would in turn enrich the local economy. According to Jane Moon, the Fallon Convention and Tourism Authority recognized more than a quarter century ago that the natural surroundings could attract visitors. It believed that Fallon and its surrounding area could overcome western Nevada’s reputation as desert landscape to simply drive through en route to
elsewhere. Fallon, either fortunately or unfortunately, sits along Highway 50 and the Nevada stretch of the road is referred to as the “Loneliest Road in America.”

But Fallon today is part of the Pony Express tourism circuit, and the Fallon Convention and Tourism Authority has successfully marketed itself based in part on its proximity to Reno and Lake Tahoe across the Sierra Nevada range to the west. To the east are the Stillwater Mountains and in the Lahontan Valley below, the Stillwater National Wildlife Refuge; further eastward is the Sand Mountain Recreation Area. This “off-roading paradise” consists of sand descendental from the ancient glacial Lake Lahontan that mostly dried up 9,000 years ago, and it attracts enthusiasts from near and far. Some say it is the best Off-Highway Vehicle destination in the United States.

She also cites the Churchill County Arts Council, which this year is putting on its 32nd annual events season, as an engine for attracting visitors – this, she adds, combined with the farm-to-fork movement have led to a quiet yet concrete shift in how both locals and visitors view western Nevada. As Moon puts it, “Farm to fork was already a lifestyle for us. What you see around the nation is the way we’ve lived for years. It’s something embedded in our community.”

Similarly, Strong quotes former congressman John Salazar, who said, “…there is only one thing that can bring our nation down–our dependence on foreign countries for food and energy. Agriculture is the backbone of our economy.”

PICTURED: Kelli Kelly, executive director of the Fallon Food Hub, shows off Hopi Orange Winter Squash grown at a local farm. /E. Zach.