

# GROWING A LOCAL FOOD POLICY COUNCIL

By Katrina Van Dis and Dana Martin

Small scale farming in Central Oregon is not for the weak hearted. A short growing season, poor soil, limited rainfall, and isolation from major urban markets add to the challenge of growing food in this high desert region.

But Central Oregon small farm producers have found ways to persevere. Soil is enhanced, irrigation water accessed, and season extenders utilized to protect crops from the harsh climate. These producers found additional support three years ago when a movement to support locally grown food and a sustainable food system began for the purpose of enhancing community food security for the region.

In an effort to better understand the complexities of the food system, a group of committed women working for local organizations came together monthly to discuss food security in relation to local food access for the region. Discussions focused on production, distribution, and consumption and how to bridge the gaps in a disjointed food system. As a first step, WyEast Resource Conservation & Development hired an AmeriCorps volunteer to conduct a Community Food Assessment in coordination with the Central Oregon Intergovernmental Council, Oregon State University Extension Service, and NeighborImpact (the local food bank).

The assessment was conducted in the tri-county area of Crook, Deschutes, and Jefferson counties. The process included the gathering of data through focus groups, dot and farmer/ consumer surveys, and direct interviews with experts in the field regarding food production, access, and viability. Findings

suggested that the majority of small agricultural producers are using direct markets to sell their goods, such as farmers' markets and community supported agricultural (CSA), but have difficulties expanding into the direct markets with food businesses and institutions. Most producers are using off-farm income to remain viable and feel that a lack of government support is an impediment to farm viability.

Options for overcoming these barriers included: regulation reform or a creation of a roadmap of local policies and ordinances; the formation of a cooperative to pool resources and act as an intermediary for distribution; and increased opportunities to connect with consumers such as a produce stand on the Warm Springs Reservation, school field trips, and educational meals at farms and ranches, and recipe hand-outs with CSA's and at farmers' markets to educate consumers on how to use local food products.

In general, suggestions for improving the food security for the region include: recruiting volunteers at food banks; understanding the impact of the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) on the local food economy; improving nutrition in schools, and expanding food safety and skills education courses for the public and low-income residents.

In the fall of 2010, more than 120 participants funneled in from across the state to hear the outcome of the food assessment in hopes of hearing new ideas or collaborating for future projects. Agricultural producers listened to the summary, and



PICTURED: THE CENTRAL OREGON BUY FRESH BUY LOCAL LABEL.

through breakout sessions, were able to bridge the gap and find direct markets with attending food businesses. Overall, the enthusiasm that grew from the Food Summit and from the already snowballing local food movement was the perfect storm for the creation of the Central Oregon Food Policy Council (COFPC).

After the Food Summit and into the New Year, community members further voiced their opinions about the need for food security in terms of public health, food access for low income, farm viability, and consumer curiosity. Monthly meetings throughout the cities of Central Oregon created a cohesive front and collective energy for developing action-oriented outcomes for future projects. Through assistance from a professional facilitator and several long work sessions, core values were discussed and a strategic plan was developed. Though an arduous process, it was a necessary first step in creating a cohesive council.

The Central Oregon Food Policy Council is guided by the following principles:

**Vision:** To lead the effort to achieve a sustainable and just food system in Central Oregon.

**Mission:** To secure the future of the local food system in Central Oregon.

**Core Values:**

Access – Healthy Food Access

Advocacy – Land Use and Public Policy Advocacy

Action – Networks and Knowledge Sharing

With the guidance of a 13-member board of directors representing farmers and ranchers; hunger relief; public health; land use; local government; university; and community at-large for each county, bylaws were unanimously passed which approved the formation of a new non-profit organization. After years of preparation and planning, the COFPC has taken form and is moving forward with programs that meet the stated core values.

A kick-off event for the COFPC was to provide free fresh and local food to Project Connect individuals. This event was a collaborative effort with the Hunger Prevention Coalition to provide nearly 250 families and 200 individuals with free fresh fruit and vegetables. Information was provided on how to use SNAP benefits to buy fresh food at local farmers' markets, common misconceptions about using SNAP, and what foods are eligible for purchase. Oregon State University Extension faculty provided corresponding recipes using the food that was donated to the participants.

Building upon the success of this program, the COFPC partnered with the Central Oregon Intergovernmental Council to conduct a regional marketing campaign titled Central Oregon Buy Fresh Buy Local with the goal of increasing food security and economic opportunities. This is a membership-based program for producers, food businesses, and consumers. Standards for farming, raising, and selling local food are set to provide accountability for everyone. Consumers are engaged and asked to test these standards

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by adopting a business or producer and ensuring the quality of the program. To kick off this program, a Cash Mob event occurred, which encouraged people to gather in support of a small, local business. This event was a hit and precipitated more buy-in from the community.

The COFPC is also involved in public policy advocacy by analyzing current land use laws and providing white papers about land use barriers for food and farming activities in the cities and counties of Central Oregon. This project was a direct outcome of needs of the agricultural community in regards to understanding and overcoming barriers to agricultural land use. As a next step, the council will provide information to government stakeholders in hopes of increasing awareness and knowledge of the needs of the agricultural community.

Although the council is in a nascent phase of life, it continues to capture a broader audience and engage community members that have been on the periphery of understanding a local food system. Because of the strong foundation, defined purpose, and determination of committed members, the Central Oregon Food Policy Council continues to educate people and provide services and activities that benefit the entire community.

To summarize what we are, the following sentence wraps it up: “The COFPC is a non-profit volunteer citizen-based advisory board to Central Oregon which brings together citizens and professionals to address issues regarding healthy food access, public policies, and land use issues affecting food and farming, and provides outreach and education to our community.”●

For more information, visit our website:  
<http://centraloregonfoodpolicy.org/>