



CENTER *for* RURAL AFFAIRS

FOOD POLICY OPPORTUNITIES FOR NEBRASKA: GROWING HEALTHY FOOD SYSTEMS

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INTRODUCTION

What governs our food system? In the United States, we have a huge array of laws, policies, and regulations at the federal, state, and local levels that, in combination with the effects of the free market economy, affect how food is grown, processed, labeled, and sold, all the way from the farm to your plate. Collectively, this is called “food policy.”

Food policy is very important in our food system. While the marketplace exerts significant influence on food system stakeholders, policy exists to ensure that our food is safe, that consumers know what they’re eating, that farmers reach markets, and that people don’t go hungry.

Smart food policies have potential to create new opportunities for our food systems and our communities. What could we change if we enact policies that make it easier for schools to buy from their local farmers? Or initiatives that build healthier food environments in low-income areas? Or an ordinance allowing dairy goats in town?

With many different policies at different levels of government, food policy can be hard to navigate. Because of this, it can be hard to build better policy and make change. That’s where food policy councils come in.

Food policy councils are composed of groups of stakeholders from across all sectors of the food system, including farming, processing, wholesale, retail, restaurants, public health, anti-hunger, government, and more. Council members come together to study their local food system and develop new policy recommendations that will benefit their economy and the participants in their food system. Food policy councils then interact with local government (in a variety of different ways, depending on the council’s structure) to help make those changes happen.

Food policy councils can exist at many levels: small towns can have them, and states can too. Today, there are local councils operating or developing in almost every state, and statewide councils in 30 states. Coordination between local food policy councils within a state or region brings even more opportunity to develop cohesive policies that benefit farmers, consumers, communities, and others.

“Food Policy Opportunities for Nebraska: Growing Healthy Food Systems” is a project to create a food policy council for Nebraska. The project begins on August 18th with a public event to explore the potential for food policy councils in Nebraska. The evening includes a keynote presentation from Mark Winne, nationally renowned food policy council expert, and a panel discussion with food system stakeholders.

Following this public meeting, a smaller group of key stakeholders representing diverse sectors of our food system and community statewide will begin working towards creating Nebraska state and local food policy councils. This work has the potential to change our food system in ways that make it work better for all of us.

As we move forward, we look to answer the following questions: What are our challenges and opportunities to create a food system that works better for all of us? How do food policy councils function in other states and local areas? What are the potential approaches to food policy work in Nebraska?

This briefing paper, by no means exhaustive, will begin to answer these questions, and to get us thinking about the opportunities and challenges we face in developing food policy councils in Nebraska. The work ahead of us will continue to expand and build upon those answers, moving towards change.

Together, we can build a better food system. Good food policy and effective coordination between our food system's stakeholders will produce strong farms, a resilient food economy, and a healthy future for all Nebraskans.

WHY ADDRESS FOOD POLICY?

Here in Nebraska, we have a number of issues to address when it comes to food and agriculture. Nationwide and in our state, the food system currently favors large-scale food production and processing, with consolidated distribution. But this isn't always a good fit for Nebraska. We're a geographically large state, a largely rural state, a state with small and mid-size farmers who make rural communities thrive. We need a food system that reaches everyone, from dense urban neighborhoods to small rural towns, from urban gardeners to family ranchers.

By addressing key issues in food and farm policy, we have the potential to change our food system, and to make it work better for everyday Nebraskans. Detailed below are some of the issues we can tackle together.

HUNGER/ACCESS

When we talk about food, one of the most important issues we can talk about is hunger. In Nebraska, nearly 247,000 people, or 13.8% of the population, are food insecure, and more than a third of these are children. 5.2% of Nebraskans have very low food security, meaning they too often don't know when or where their next meal will come. These numbers have been rising - in 2001, only 9.9% of Nebraskans were food insecure, with 2.9% very low food security (USDA ERS). Hunger is a complex problem, and not something that a food policy council can tackle on its own. However, food policy can play an important role in improving food security.

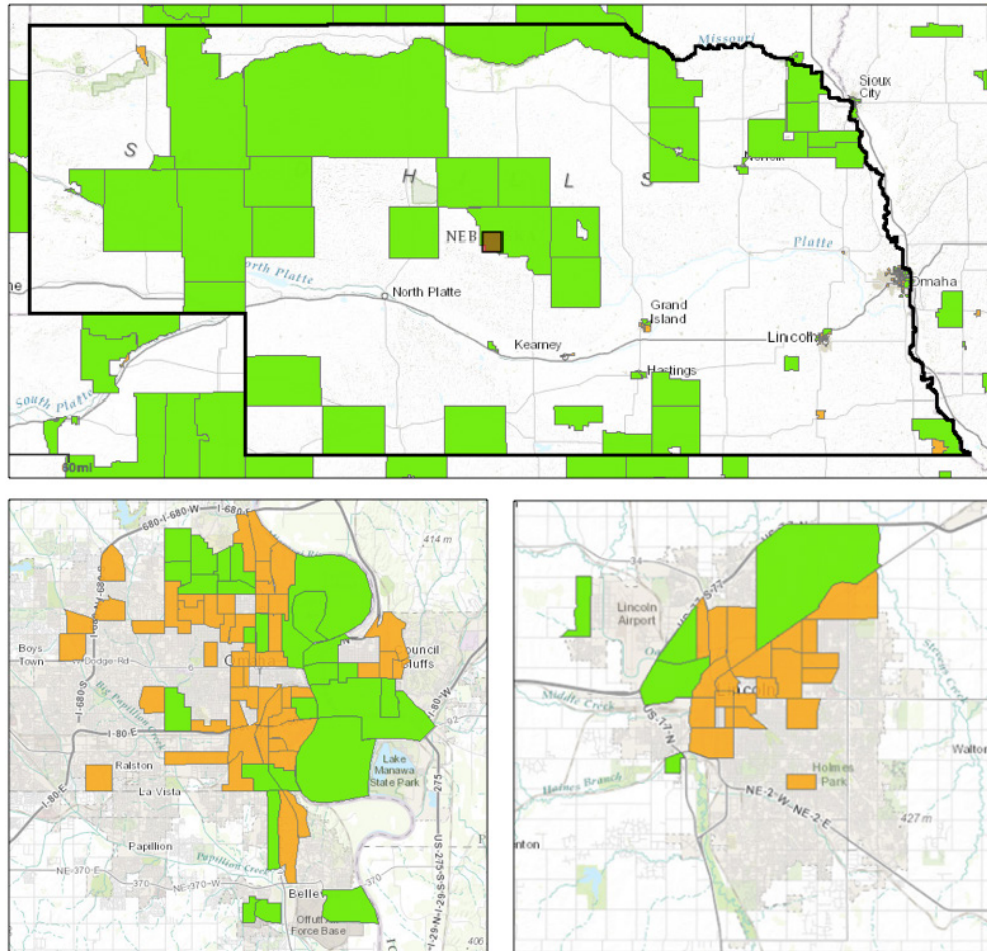
Means to purchase food: Hunger and food insecurity are strongly associated with poverty and the lack of means to purchase an adequate diet. Ensuring that our state's system of emergency food providers and the federal nutrition programs such as SNAP and School Meals are meeting our residents needs as effectively as possible is our first priority. Beyond this we must look to the causes of hunger and food insecurity which means that all our citizens must eventually have sufficient financial resources to purchase food.

Accessibility of affordably priced, healthy food outlets: Nebraska has a large number of "food deserts," both in urban neighborhoods and covering large swaths of rural areas.

The solutions to the problem of inaccessibility often involve better transportation, investment in high quality food outlets, and innovative programs such as mobile food pantries to meet food needs in these underserved areas.

Food information and education: We must acknowledge that even when we have the means and access to purchase food, we may not always make the right choices. More of us are not learning how to select and prepare food healthfully, and too often we are relying on convenient food outlets where healthy food selections are minimal. Good food education, starting as early as possible whether at home or in school, is increasingly necessary to prevent long term health problems that are likely to increase the cost of health care over the course of decades to come.

Map 1



Maps show green and orange areas representing food desert areas statewide, in Omaha, and in Lincoln. USDA ERS.

PUBLIC HEALTH

Food plays a huge role in public health. In Nebraska, 65% of adults are overweight or obese, and among children ages 10-17, 28.9% are overweight or obese. 9.2% of Nebraskan adults have diabetes. Our rates of hypertension, heart disease, and obesity-related cancers have all been rising over the past decades. In some communities in our state, obesity and diabetes rates are far higher.

We know that unhealthy food is a pervasive part of our homes, communities, and institutions, and that unhealthy food contributes to diet-related disease. Our existing food system incentivizes production, sales, and consumption of highly processed, low-nutrient foods. But smart food policy can make it easier to grow, distribute, access, and eat healthy foods. Efforts around the country have helped convenience stores stock fresh fruits and vegetables,

making healthy food more widely available. Policy can assist farmers growing the fresh fruits and vegetables that are a key part of healthy diets. Food policy can even create healthy eating campaigns to help people learn good choices. By making it easier to produce, sell, and enjoy healthy food, food policy can make huge impacts on public health.

FARMING

Food policy affects the way we farm. Currently, much of our nation's and our state's food policy facilitates production in the form of large scale commodity agriculture. Nebraska's economy is highly dependent on commodity agriculture today, but local food is not a part of that agricultural strength. The share of the food dollar spent on local food has dropped from about 30% in 1980 to drastically lower today, despite large increases in agricultural production over

the same period (Nebraska Food Inventory, 1983). Much of the grain Nebraska produces go into livestock feed, and over half of the state's corn and grain sorghum production is destined for ethanol, leaving Nebraska largely dependent on imported food (Nebraska Department of Agriculture et al., 2014).

As our land becomes concentrated into fewer and larger farms, we lose vitality in our rural communities. Research has shown that socioeconomic conditions in industrial farming areas tend to be poorer than in family farming communities (Peters, 2002). When policy focuses solely on large-scale commodity crop farming, we miss an important opportunity to encourage a diversity of agriculture across the state. Food policy has the potential to support small and midsized family farms and beginning farmers. Studies by the Leopold Center for Sustainable Agriculture in Iowa have shown that converting corn and soy acres to vegetable production has the potential to greatly increase the number of jobs supported and income generated per acre of land. By supporting these smaller, diversified specialty crop farms, we ensure a wide variety of local food and the continued viability of rural communities.

Another issue for farmers is land access. With land prices increasing as they have over the past decade, and will likely continue in the

long term, it is very difficult for new farmers (many of whom are growing specialty crops on much smaller plots of land than those used for commodity crops) to find affordable land on which they can farm. For farmers who want to be close to a larger population center and market, land is even more expensive. Policy to help these farmers access land would have a major impact on encouraging new specialty crop and livestock farmers to enter agriculture and grow the local food we all want to eat.

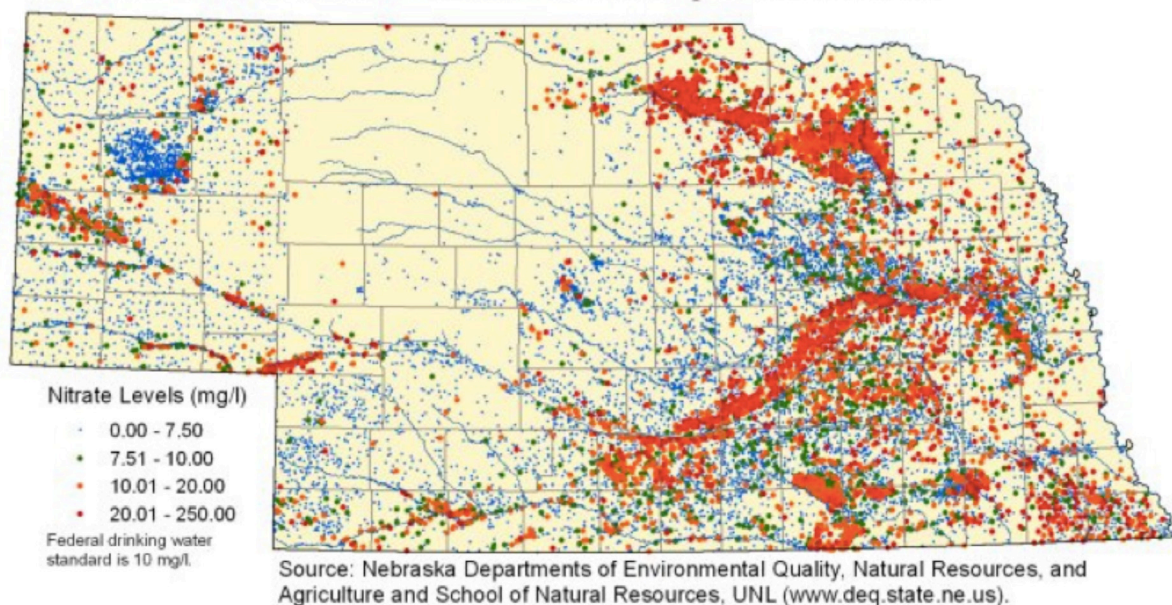
Food policy can also affect urban and in-town agriculture. In many communities, zoning laws prevent urban gardeners from making use of empty space, or town residents from keeping chickens. Simple ordinance changes can safely and easily open up food production to city- and town-dwelling folk across the state, improving food access for all.

ENVIRONMENT

The way we grow food affects our environment. Nebraska's agricultural trend towards monoculture threatens native plants, pollinators, soil, and water resources. But consumers can't expect food to be produced so cheaply that it threatens a farmer's livelihood or forces her to produce beyond the capacity of the natural resources.

Map 2

Generalized Nitrate Levels in Wells Sampled, 1974 - 2006



Map of nitrates in Nebraska's wells - yellow and orange dots indicate levels above federal drinking water standard.

For instance, more fertilizer use can mean faster and more abundant production for farmers. But when runoff and leaching bring nitrate fertilizers into rivers and groundwater, the effects can be dangerous as well as costly. In Des Moines, IA, nitrate concentrations in the Raccoon River Watershed have been rising since 1974, reaching record, and unsafe, levels. The cost of cleanup has been over \$1.4 million so far, with an estimated \$76-183 million in future capital investments required in order to make the water safe to drink again (Des Moines Water Works, 2015).

Promoting more diverse and more environmentally conscious forms of agriculture has both economic and ecological benefits. Policy that incentivizes voluntary conservation must be protected from the funding cuts Congress continues to impose on federal conservation programs. Smart policy and adequate funding can help people keep thriving farms and businesses while preserving the environment for generations to come.

LOCAL FOOD DISTRIBUTION

Our food system is structured to bring food efficiently from where most of it is grown to where most people will eat it. This has resulted in a mainstream system in which relatively few consolidated distributors transport food at great scale from areas with many and/or large-scale producers to areas of highest demand. But that's not a good fit for Nebraska.

Nebraska averages 23 persons per square mile, compared to the United States average of 86 persons per square mile. In large, rural, sparsely populated areas, our highly efficient food distribution system doesn't serve our communities. And across rural Nebraska, grocery stores are closing, often leaving residents to drive hours for their shopping. Since Nebraska's more sparsely populated areas experience a higher rate of poverty than the state's average, this can be especially problematic, with poorer folks having to pay more to get the food they need.

If we are able to diversify our food systems and encourage smaller producers serving local areas, we benefit from fresher food, more income to local producers and distributors, and more vibrant rural communities.

In our current food system, it's difficult to work on a small scale. Food policy solutions can help smaller food producers thrive. Cottage food laws can facilitate small-scale food processing and enterprise development. Alternative distribution methods such as farmers markets, small-town groceries, farm to institution, buying clubs, and food cooperatives can all help connect local producers to local consumers, building a stronger food economy across our vast state.

LOCAL ECONOMY

Currently, only about 10% of the \$4.4 billion dollars that Nebraskans spend on food annually is spent on products grown and processed in the state. Only 1,300 Nebraska farms sell directly to consumers, with sales of \$5.9 million, contributing 0.04% of the total farm product sales in the state. If we were able to shift even an additional 10% of food purchases from imports to locally grown foods, we would bring an additional \$400 million dollars into the state's economy, which would go directly to farmers and food businesses.

Food policy changes can bring economic benefit to local businesses. Increased direct sale of food improves local incomes and overall financial health. In the food arena, economic multipliers of 1.4-3.3x are commonly cited to quantify the benefit to the local economy from local food systems, with small farms providing a higher multiplier than large ones (Metter 2008; Cummings 2009). This means that a dollar spent locally on locally produced food will result in up to \$3.30 dollars of increased local spending as the effect spreads through the local economy. The right food policies can help us make this local food shift, keeping more of our money circulating in Nebraska's economy.

Policies supporting Farm to School programs have a tremendous potential to keep our food dollars circulating locally. Currently, Nebraska is making progress with Farm to School programs (<http://www.cfra.org/f2s>), but we lack the policy support that has paved the way for Farm to School successes in other states. By giving schools incentives to buy locally, Farm to School promotion policies can have great effect: if just \$1 per month were spent on local

food for each of the 292,069 public school students in Nebraska during the school year, we'd be sending \$2,628,621 of school food dollars each year to local producers.

WHAT DO WE MEAN BY FOOD POLICY?

Food policy is the action (and inaction) of governments at all levels that may influence the production, cost, distribution, and consumption of food. Though most of the discussion in this paper as well as the work of food policy councils focuses on how governments can support healthy and resilient food systems, it is also important to note that almost any institution from universities, to hospitals, to corporations can also have food policies.

Food policies can come in many sizes and flavors, and they generally address one specific food system issue such as the need to reduce hunger or the goal of increasing healthier eating. But for the purposes of developing a state food policy council we are talking about the role that many policies can play within a state's food system. This is an important distinction because the food system is made up of many linked sectors such as health, agriculture, and the environment. Good food policy will keep the whole food system in mind as it examines not only how each sector performs, but what its impact is on the other sectors.

This approach also implies the need for greater coordination and cooperation between sectors, both in the public and private realms. Given how large and complex the food system is, to say nothing of how necessary and economically valuable, it's a bit ironic to recognize that no municipality or state has a "Department of Food." Just within state government, for instance, we have the challenge of administering dozens of food-related programs (many of which are federal in origin) and responding to numerous public and private interests across multiple government functions including agriculture, health, human services, economic development, consumer protection, and economic development. Bringing a measure of coordination to that process and finding common ground between food sectors and interests are important tasks of a food policy council.

Lastly, it should be noted that municipalities and almost every state have enacted food poli-

cies in response to growing concerns over their jurisdictions' future food security, the long-term health of their people, and their desire to enhance the productivity and sustainability of their agriculture. A soon-to-be-released report by the National Conference of State Legislatures found that 36 states enacted 91 bills on local food production and food access alone between 2012 and 2014. A survey of municipal food policies carried out by Michigan State University in 2012 found that of the approximately 2000 cities responding to the survey, they had each enacted, on average, three food policies. This impressive harvest of positive government food policies is a strong indication that the public and private sectors are working together to find productive solutions to today's food challenges.

Food policies can be made at the national, state, and local levels. Many times, policies made at the national level are implemented at the state level by state agencies. For example, the food assistance programs listed above are federal programs, but are administered by Nebraska agencies. Food safety codes for restaurants and stores are provided as guidelines at the national level, then developed into each state's own laws, which are often enforced by local health departments.

When working with food issues, it is important to work at the right level of government for each specific action to develop an appropriate policy. Alternatively, sometimes policy can be shaped across levels of government, for instance by helping the state change the way they implement a federal program.

RECENT FOOD POLICY DEVELOPMENTS IN NEBRASKA

At the statewide level, we have seen some action on food policy, with mixed results. The Community Garden Act, a portion of LB175, establishes an application process for community gardens to use vacant public land, creates a community gardens task force, and clarifies regulations for seed libraries. However, despite its important positive impacts for community gardens, LB 175 is a complex bill that does not help Nebraska's food system overall- it was designed to help rural counties recruit large-scale livestock facilities, which can harm rural communities and the environment.

Another proposed bill, LB 558, would have expanded Nebraska’s existing cottage food laws, which allow home-based producers to sell produce, baked goods, jams and jellies, and other “non-potentially hazardous” foods at farmers markets. LB558 would have allowed these home-based producers to sell indirectly to restaurants and stores and directly to consumers, as long as the operations registered and complied with safety regulations, labeled their products appropriately, and sold less than \$50,000 per year. LB558 did not become law.

Other statewide action on agriculture has important implications for our food system. LB176, which did not become law, would have lifted Nebraska’s ban on packer ownership of hogs. The ban is critical protection for independent livestock producers, illustrating how public policy can and should be used to promote and protect independent family farmers and ranchers, providing for a more diverse food system that benefits all society. Moving forward from this challenge on the ban, we must continue to promote smart policy that protects small and mid-sized family farms and ranches.

Table 1
HOW DOES POLICY AFFECT OUR FOOD SYSTEM?
SAMPLING OF FOOD POLICIES

Program/Policy	What it does	How it works in Nebraska
Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP)	Also known as food stamps - helps people with low income buy food	Administered by Nebraska Department of Health and Human Services
Women, Infants, and Children (WIC)	Special supplemental nutrition program for women, infants and children	Administered by Nebraska Department of Health and Human Services
Senior Farmers Market Nutrition Program	Provide low-income seniors with coupons that can be exchanged for eligible fresh foods at farmers’ markets, roadside stands, and community-supported agriculture programs	Administered by Nebraska Department of Health and Human Services and Nebraska Department of Agriculture
National School Lunch Program	Provides nutritionally balanced, low-cost or free lunches to children in low-income families	Administered by Nebraska Department of Education
School Breakfast Program	Provides nutritionally balanced, low-cost or free breakfast to children in low-income families	Administered by Nebraska Department of Education
Summer Food Service Program	Ensures that low-income children continue to receive nutritious meals when school is not in session	Administered by Nebraska Department of Education
Commodity Supplemental Food Program	Provides USDA commodity food to low-income elderly persons	Administered by Nebraska Department of Health and Human Services
Specialty Crop Block Grant	Competitive grant program with funding for projects that solely enhance the competitiveness of specialty crops	Administered by Nebraska Department of Agriculture
Value Added Producer Grant	Competitive grant, helps agricultural producers enter into value-added activities related to the processing and/or marketing of bio-based, value-added products	Administered by the Rural Business Cooperative Service at USDA
Local Food Promotion Program/Farmers Market Promotion Program	Competitive grants program that funds direct-to-consumer and indirect sales, support, and promotion of local food and farmers markets	Administered by USDA Agricultural Marketing Service
Community Food Projects	Competitive grants program to promote self-sufficiency and food security, address specific needs, and provide comprehensive, community-based solutions in low-income communities	Administered by USDA National Institute of Food and Agriculture

Table 2
HOW DOES POLICY AFFECT OUR FOOD SYSTEM?
SAMPLING OF ORGANIZATIONS INVOLVED IN FOOD POLICY

Organization	Role
Food Bank of Lincoln (Nonprofit with agency partners)	Provides anti-hunger programs and facilitates SNAP outreach initiatives to low-income children and families in rural and urban areas in Southeast Nebraska.
Midwest Childcare Association (Agency)	Monitors the administration of USDA Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP) in facilities primarily in central and eastern Nebraska. Provides training to professionals in child nutrition, health, safety and physical activities. In addition, provide training in business and management of child care facilities.
Nebraska Appleseed Center for Law in the Public Interest (Non-profit)	Provides support and systematically addresses child welfare, immigration policy, affordable healthcare and poverty issues.
Heartland Food Bank (Non-profit)	Provides anti-hunger programs and facilitates SNAP outreach initiatives to food pantries, emergency shelters and other non-profit partners in Nebraska and Iowa.
Community Action of Nebraska (Association of agencies)	Support anti-poverty and anti-hunger initiatives in their areas not limited to emergency food, SNAP outreach, WIC, employment and family support.
Nebraska Public Health Districts (16 multi-county health departments across the state)	Various county and/or district health districts support various public health issues in their communities. Some examples are tobacco education, fresh fruit & vegetable consumption and other nutrition initiatives, wellness policy, disease education, rural vet coordination pilot, Every Woman Matters health care program, immunizations, obesity prevention and minority health.

This is not an exhaustive list, but rather a starting point to begin thinking about what laws can do to affect our food system. A statewide food policy council would be able to make recommendations for legislation, drawing from a broad range of stakeholders across the food system.

FOOD POLICY COUNCILS

Working from the reasonable assumption that change, access to decision makers, and the practice of democracy itself are easier in smaller jurisdictions, as opposed to say the national government, there are now over 200 food policy councils in the U.S.

Of the 30 councils that operate at the state level, a few are a formal part of state government but many operate independently (usually with strong participation, however, by state government officials). The councils that are a part of state government were either created by their legislature and have statutory authority, or they are a product of an executive order, which means the state's governor created them.

A food policy council consists of a designated set of individuals representing various food sys-

tem sectors within a jurisdiction such as the state of Nebraska. The membership will typically include agriculture, nutrition and health, anti-hunger groups such as food banks, urban garden groups, community and economic development, and various forms of retail and wholesale food distribution. Various degrees of “formality” can govern the membership and participation from electing members to allowing a more fluid form of participation. While there is normally a formally recognized core or governing committee within a council, it can also have a much larger number of member participants who attend meetings, serve on designated committees, and otherwise provide input.

A food policy council (sometimes called a “food council,” “advisory council,” or “food system network”) gathers and analyzes information, makes recommendations on program and policy issues, educates the public about needs, and fosters coordination between sectors.

A food policy council can be thought of as a common table around which food system participants can assess the community's needs, plan for its future, and put forward recommendations. The experience of councils also sug-

gests they are sometimes like a family dining room table where achievements can be celebrated, and yes, where members sometimes bicker loudly. But the critical point is that the food policy council can be that place where important information about the depth and breadth of a food system can be shared, gaps can be identified and analyzed, and recommendation put forward.

FOOD POLICY IN NEBRASKA

LINCOLN: In Lincoln, NE, a process is underway to create a formalized food policy council. In December 2013, Lincoln's Mayor, Chris Beutler, established what is now known as the Local Foodshed Working Group. This group's long-term goal is to research and develop recommendations on setting up a more permanent food policy council or task force. Among other local food and gardening efforts, the LFWG is developing a community food assessment for Lincoln. With a better understanding of how Lincoln's current food system works, how it could work in the future, and what steps it will take to get there, the LFWG will then make recommendations for establishing a food policy council or task force.

METRO OMAHA FPC: The Metro Omaha Food Policy Council appointed its first board of directors in 2013 and serves as volunteer-based group advocating for local food policy in the Omaha area. The group is not officially affiliated with city government, and is in the process of applying for 501(c)(3) status as it continues to determine how best to engage with policy making moving forward. MOFPC's most important success to date has been its role in changing land use policies in Omaha. MOFPC's research, recommendations, and advocacy helped Omaha city planning enact a new policy that allows city land to be used by non-profit organizations for community gardening and urban farming. The project, which has created community growing spaces in Omaha's Prospect Village neighborhood, is moving into its second year.

RURAL COMMUNITY FOOD ACTION: In Nebraska's rural communities, we haven't yet seen formalized food policy council (or we haven't heard about them just yet, but we'd like to!). But what we do see, time and time again, is communities coming together to solve a food problem

and make their local food systems better.

For over 10 years, the town of Cody, Nebraska lacked a grocery store. Residents drove over 70 miles round trip for their shopping. In 2008, the community, the Village of Cody board, the Cody-Kilgore Unified Schools, and others came together to take action. Over 5 years, they researched, developed business plans, raised money, built a straw-bale building, and finally opened the Circle C Market in spring 2013. Students were involved at every step of the process. Today, student employees work in the store, learning entrepreneurship skills as they provide a critical community resource.

When the grocery store in Elwood, Nebraska closed in January 2012, the community took action. Over the course of a year, community members held community meetings, formed a steering committee, decided on a cooperative structure, and completed a heavily advertised membership campaign. Thirteen months after the closing of Elwood's grocery store, the Elwood Hometown Cooperative Market opened for business in February 2013. The community response was overwhelmingly positive from the beginning, and the store is still going strong today.

In Thayer County (building on an earlier program in Morrill County), local beef producers have come together to create a donation program providing local beef for school meals. From producers to grocery store owners to schools, everyone is playing a part in providing children with local meat and teaching the next generation where their food really comes from.

THIS EFFORT

This project is about getting people together to take action to improve our food system in Nebraska.

Statewide action: One potential outcome for this gathering is that this becomes the first step toward creation of a statewide food policy council for Nebraska. Much like the councils in other states, a Nebraska Food Policy Council would have great potential to impact policies on the statewide level. It would also serve as a

hub to coordinate local action, whether by local food policy councils or by communities working more informally. It is important that any food policy council we create for the whole of Nebraska reflect the diversity of our state, including urban and rural representatives, people of all races and Nations and of all income levels, and across all sectors of our food system.

Local action: From this meeting, we aim to spur action for local and regional food policy councils. Food policy works at all levels, and regionally-specific councils can address specific problems for their area alone.

MOVING FORWARD

We hope that this effort begins a movement for

ABOUT THE CENTER FOR RURAL AFFAIRS

Established in 1973, the Center for Rural Affairs is a private, nonprofit organization with a mission to establish strong rural communities, social and economic justice, environmental stewardship, and genuine opportunity for all while engaging people in decisions that affect the quality of their lives and the future of their communities.

change in our food system. Local food production and awareness of our food systems is rising across our nation and our state. By coming together around these key food issues that affect all of us, we can create a healthy, prosperous food system.