

**LOCAL AND REGIONAL FOOD SYSTEMS IN NEBRASKA:  
BEST PRACTICES AND CASE STUDIES**

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## Introduction

Nebraskans spend nearly \$5 billion annually on food and 90 percent of that money leaves the state. There exists, however, an opportunity and a need to create comprehensive regional food systems in Nebraska that include farming and community gardening, processing, storage, distribution and transportation, and food access. The opportunity comes from a current positive attitude toward local foods and the growing national emphasis placed on food security, health and the environment.

While neither full-blown local nor regional food systems have yet to become part of Nebraska's landscape, there is interest in local foods as demonstrated by national research and the increased number of farmers markets, food stands and grocery stores selling locally grown items. The critical first step toward making this change is to gather important baseline information from consumers, institutions, retail outlets and farmers and ranchers in Nebraska to determine what barriers and opportunities are in place and what the capacity and interest of Nebraska's farmers are to meet the demand for locally grown food.

Regional food systems can address critical issues for rural communities by creating wealth and jobs in rural communities with the potential to repopulate rural areas. A strong regional food system would positively impact rural communities as the system would continue to grow, adding opportunities in processing, storage, distribution **and** transportation.

A project in partnership with the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, the Center for Rural Affairs (CFRA), and the Nebraska Sustainable Agriculture Society, and funded through grants from the Federal State Marketing Improvement Program (FSMIP) of the Agricultural Marketing Service of USDA and the North Central Regional Center for Rural Development seeks to identify the prospects and challenges of creating a regional food system in Nebraska. This report outlines best practices we uncovered during this project and provides nine case studies from interviews we conducted of individuals, organizations, and institutions involved in the production, marketing, and usage of local food.

For purposes of this survey, "local food" was defined as food and food products that are produced or processed locally and are not brought in from outside the state. "Regional food systems" was defined as efforts to build more locally-based, self-reliant food economies so Nebraskans don't send 90 percent of their food dollars out of state.

## Best Practices

From the project surveys and focus groups, we developed the following best practices for development of local and regional food systems in Nebraska. These were offered by consumers, producers, institutions, and our own analysis and observations.

- Participation in Farm to School Program. Schools that participate in the Farm to School program are able to connect with local farmers while providing local, healthy food to their students.
- Connection with existing and historic projects and programs (see, example, the Norris Public Schools case study below).

- Growing community support, especially in urban areas, is critical to the growth of local and regional food systems. Small, rural areas have a limited customer base, but where feasible urban areas provide a willing, wealthier, and interested customer base for locally produced food items.
- Expansion of institutional sales (e.g., schools, restaurants, hospitals, jails, etc.) is also a method to grow local and regional food systems. Institutions, even in the small communities, serve a lot of food. But institutional sales bring with them a host of challenges, particularly in providing a consistent quality and quantity of food.
- To make the most inroads to consumers, entities that sell local food products (farmers markets, for example) need to recognize the purchasing convenience most consumers have become accustomed to. Consumers commented on the hours and location inconvenience of farmers markets, which may mean more business training is needed for those operating farmers markets.
- Business training and business technical assistance for farmers have shown to be practices that can address the issues consumers expressed about their purchasing experiences. Producers interested in expanding their local food production also stated technical assistance issues involving labor, infrastructure (processing and lockers primarily), basic business skills and finances are the most needed.
- Purchasing connections between producers and institutions help institutions get started with the process of using more locally grown foods. Institutions benefit from local purchasing connections and a process of identifying local foods and potential sources.

## Case Studies

The following pages represent case studies of nine interviews that were done for this project. These case studies contain several best practices based on the experiences of the interviewees.

## Nebraska Food Cooperative

The Nebraska Food Cooperative (NFC) has connected local consumers and producers since 2005. NFC's business model since its founding is to sell to individual retail consumers. In interviewing Shannon Moncure of NFC it was learned that NFC is considering expanding into the institutional market. However, that takes time and money, both in short supply among NFC and its members, particularly given NFC's cooperative legal structure which makes grant funding less available.

NFC is an online year around farmers market. NFC's goal is to connect growers of sustainably produced food and products with consumers who wish to purchase them. NFC's consumers are predominantly individual retail buyers and households.

NFC has found that in eastern Nebraska production is not yet meeting interest. Several institutions, particularly restaurants, are interested in purchasing from local vendors. This is not necessarily due to sustainable farming practices, but because locally grown food items are a draw to customers. Placing the farmer's name on a menu, for example, appeals to local customers. Enhancing quality (taste, for example) is also a reason NFC has found for institutional interest in their products.

NFC mentioned several obstacles or challenges to their work:

- Difficulty in "keeping it going." NFC is not necessarily a profit making business, but it needs a certain level of profit to plan for emergencies, for equipment depreciation, and to fix and replace things.
- NFC does not have enough money in the bank to plan for such things.
- NFC is not selling enough volume to make the needed profit.
- The public does not want to pay the true cost of NFC's items. That leads to NFC being unable to charge what they need to charge to make the necessary profit.
- NFC is outside the common infrastructure of food distribution. Because of that consumer's minds are set at the price level of the common infrastructure (Sysco, for example).

A major challenge to NFC is community support. According to Shannon, "The community doesn't really support us." Those that do support NFC are very supportive, and have become NFC's "community." However, according to Shannon, "Lots of people give lip service (to purchasing locally produced food), but they are not as involved."

NFC recognizes they need to be financially self-sufficient. However, there are few grant funding opportunities to a cooperative; they are primarily for non-profit entities. Several other organizations and attorneys have stated that NFC would not be able to change from a cooperative to a non-profit. If that is the goal for NFC, it has been suggested NFC should terminate and then open again with a different structure. A non-profit foundation connected to NFC has also been suggested.

Another challenge facing NFC is the need for additional infrastructure to carry out its activities. Shannon stated NFC needs something to pull a trailer – another truck or another reefer. That is another major expense. NFC is also in need of other more professional personnel – another truck driver and a marketing professional. A marketing professional with expertise selling to schools and other institutions is what is needed most according to NFC.

NFC, represented by Shannon, is disappointed that the model NFC is using has not become more of a movement based on values and morals. Shannon mentioned that the NFC model is based on individuals thinking “things need to change, so I will change my behavior.” That just has not happened. Hoping to operate something like NFC mostly with volunteers without expertise in a small state with a smaller percentage of people interested in NFC’s mission is probably not realistic or achievable. Shannon admitted if she had to do this over she would do it as a business, not a cooperative with a charitable goal.

Shannon defined success for NFC as being able to meet their objectives in a philosophically and financially sustainable way. Dual objectives such as this are not easy to achieve, but it is necessary. Shannon offered that all in the local food movement need to be thinking that way.

## **Norris Public Schools**



Norris Public Schools is an accredited K-12 school district located in Firth, Nebraska, approximately 12 miles south of Lincoln, Nebraska. It is a multi-county school district in Gage County, Otoe County and Lancaster Counties.

Nine small communities are within the boundaries of the Norris School District: Roca, Hickman, Firth, Cortland, Panama, Princeton, Holland, Cheney and Rokeby. The Norris School District is primarily rural residential, small town, and agricultural in nature. Many Norris residents are employed in Lincoln. As the Lincoln area continues to grow to the south and east, the population of the Norris District is expected to continue to increase steadily.

The Norris Public Schools have a history of participating in regional food systems. They have been actively purchasing from local producers for the last four or five years. In fact, Norris was one of the original pilot schools for the Farm to School Program. Linda Truscott, who was food service director of the district at that time, shared, “It wasn’t that difficult. Dr. Skretta, the superintendent, heard about the Farm to School Program and wanted me to become active in it, and I did, too.” So they did.

Norris is an example of an extremely successful regional foods project. This success can be contributed to the leadership of both the superintendent and food service director. It was Dr. Skretta’s idea to keep the school’s food dollars within the local economy. Having Linda on board to do the footwork made for a great partnership. Dr. Skretta explains why Norris is a perfect fit for the Farm to School Program:

*We were approached a few years back, by some folks from the University and basically the Extension ag office. They felt like Norris would be a good fit because of the historical importance of ag within the Norris district. We have a strong FFA chapter, lots of students who possess an interest in agribusiness, and understanding on a different level as to the importance of ag on the state's economy and the opportunity for agribusiness. When approached, it meshed really well with existing things going on in our district. It works the best, when you can dovetail it with initiatives of students. Undertaken as its own separate thing, it would be less likely to be successful, but when paired with the raised bed gardens in our elementary school and the greenhouse in the high school, it seemed to fit.... We have the capacity, lots of things in place, to better makes sense of the initiative.*

While the culture of Norris schools is an important component in the success of their Farm to School Program, so is the [way] they implement the program into their education system. Dr. Skretta attributes the success of this program to its embeddedness within the school’s curriculum.

While the outreach and implementation of local foods are executed through the food service director, who gets them onto the student’s plates, simultaneously, curriculum is implemented by the School Health Council. At Norris, Jane Hansmeyer, is the Council Chair and in that role, it is her responsibility to meet quarterly or more, to develop the classroom integration with what food service wants to do with Farm to School. It is this philosophical link, which makes the program educational.

Accordingly, the Farm to School program is an opportunity to further educate about health and nutrition literacy, the school wellness policy, and beyond that to connect to agribusiness, agronomy, and science. According to Dr. Skretta, science at the elementary level looks at the

farm-to-table connection for the younger kids. Through Family and Consumer Science, Jane Hansmeyer links information to students in her class as well as to other lead teachers (grade level 5th grade, special area teachers, science teachers at middle school, etc.) and they are able to use that information and/or products and link them to classroom learning. The leadership model at Norris connects the food service director to local producers while the health Council Chair ensures there is a classroom connection.

As mentioned, this successful farm to school program begins at the hands-on level, where the food service director is in charge of finding local foods to fit into the menu. Linda Truscott, food service director at the time, did much of the original footwork in finding farmers to supply the lunchroom. She shared, "I found a bunch of websites with producer information and would call and ask them if they had anything for me. I would also go to farmers' markets and ask, but farmers were scared at first that they wouldn't have the supply." She wondered about the program's success in the beginning due to a lack of producer participation. "They didn't know that they could provide for only one school or even a single taste testing for one grade. They would say, "we don't have that much. I think I scared them off".

Linda took an active role in educating and working with farmers in order to ensure local foods made the table. Linda would meal plan first and then call to see if the farmers had anything to fit her meals. If they would contact her, she would work them into the meal plan. Linda explained, "I went online and got the farmers who were registered, and I would contact them and ask if they have peaches or cucumbers, or whatever it was they were advertising online. One time a farmer called me: she had eggs and had kids in school. She learned what I was doing from my newsletter, so she contacted me and we started buying the eggs from her. I would call and say, I need 30 dozen eggs (or whatever number I needed). She would deliver them to me. The watermelon guy would call and deliver, too. Basically, it is me calling around. It would be nice if the farmers would create a list of things they have and call."

Along these lines, Linda shared a few issues that need addressed. Her biggest issue has been finding farmers to supply the food. She hasn't had a problem with finances, but needs the names of people she can contact, so she doesn't spend so much time looking for different producers. Spending less time researching would make her more efficient.

Dealing with local farmers and whole foods can increase the amount of time and labor spent on preparing lunch, as some of the foods need processing. It is much easier to open a container than to cut a melon and put it in the bowl. Lunchroom staff can be a big obstacle in implementing farm to school programs. Linda shared that some of her staff was not supportive at the beginning of the program, saying, "We just don't have time to do that." In response, Linda told them, "Yes, we do." Having a supervisor that was passionate about the program, who would help find easier and quicker ways to prepare local foods helped the staff to "come around." This leadership from Linda as well as the support from her superintendent has helped Norris succeed in supplying local foods to the students of Norris.

## Columbus, Nebraska, from a Farmer's Perspective



Lanette Stec and her husband, Larry, own a diversified farm outside of Columbus, Nebraska. They are the third generation of her husband's family to live on this farm. In talking about how they came to participate in local foods, Lanette shared her viewpoint:

*A change of thinking in our direction coupled with commodity prices, helped us to change what we were doing. When we decided to change things on our farm it was out of necessity, and out of this necessity we learned what we were doing wrong and our philosophy changed. We switched from commodity crops to direct marketing our own food. As a family, eating around the table was important. The value we placed upon food blossomed into sharing it with others.*

When Lanette and Larry bought this farm from the family they started making changes: they moved to Certified Organic, began grazing animals, etc. They own 80 acres with the farmstead, but continue to farm Larry's mom's land. They have two LLCs: Erstwhile Grain (for the organic row crops) and Erstwhile Farm (for the pork and eggs).

While Lanette and Larry have a vegetable garden and do sell some veggies, their predominant sales come from pork and chicken eggs, particularly the direct marketing of their pigs. They are very diversified, direct-marketing to consumers, selling in one restaurant, a couple of stores, and through the Nebraska Food Cooperative.

Lanette emphasized that a very small amount of customers actually come from her general area of Columbus. “I can’t really get enough local purchasers, here in Columbus, as there is in Omaha and Lincoln,” she said. Erstwhile provides the meat portion for a CSA provided by Omaha’s Tomato, which has over 1,000 members. Right now, the local foods scene in Columbus is basically the Farmers’ Market. Lanette admits that the Farmers’ Market is not her venue of choice. She explains, “Anything that leaves the farm is already sold. I am out here getting the ground ready, taking care of animals, setting up processing.” This leaves little time for the delivery and further marketing of her products.

The farm is currently self-sustaining with the direct-market customers. Lanette states, “We have never needed a loan; we have always been able to support ourselves. We are a little bit different because we had the organic row crop to support us while the direct marketing got going. It would be different if we didn’t have an income to fall back on.” Grants may be necessary or helpful in the future, as they hope to expand. Lanette plans for more of a “full-plate offering” from Erstwhile farm in the years to come. When asked specifically about the future direction of her farm, Lanette shared,

*The future of our farm looks to be even more diversified than we already are. We are at a spot where we are not quite sure where we are going, so there are things yet to be decided. When [Larry’s mother] passes we have no desire to buy [her land]. We want to become more sustainable on a smaller amount of land. We are looking into planting berries, some fruit trees, and more perennials such as asparagus, etc. We have laying hens and the pens, so might add some broiler chickens. That is the direction. We took [the farm] from conventional to organic, medium size, and keep downsizing to where we can handle a smaller portion to support us. We have a lot of people in our area that think we are weird and crazy.... We do sell some veggies, but not that many. We grow veggies for ourselves, but the garden keeps getting bigger, so I keep selling our overflow. I took the GAP certification, but I am not as knowledgeable in handling veggies and packaging. That area is the least amount of my knowledge for what we do. What I see myself doing more, with the licensed kitchen, is preserving. This would extend our season and I would prefer that way rather than extending the season with a high tunnel. Although that may change, too, if my son comes to join the farm.*

Lanette states that her most pressing need is gaining knowledge and funding for her future direction, for planning an orchard and berries and everything related. This is a whole new entity on the farm, and they need to learn about how to get it started. Those will be their big goals for the next year or two. They have also thought about adding bees, but don’t know anything about them, so that lack of knowledge will be a pretty big hurdle, she thinks. Lanette also shared that with preserving, every single can you preserve has to be sent to UNL to check it, and so it gets expensive. With food there is always licenses, you have to have an off-site kitchen, and as mentioned, the canning is another thing. “There are a lot of legalities that make a big difference

on what you are doing. All of which cost money.” Another issue of importance to Lanette is learning how to best structure an exit strategy: how to pass things on, but maintain an income. She questions, “ how to plan for adding our son to the business while planning for retirement. How do we move aside and move along to the next stage of life: retirement. We need to have a plan for the future on how to pass it on.”

When asked about what obstacles she faces in order to keep her farm going, she had two answers. The first was workload. Like many other rural towns, it is becoming harder and harder to find help on the farm. This is partially due to the demands of outdoor work, but also due to its seasonality or part-time nature. Lanette says there are just not as many kids around to work in the summer. They are all growing up and eventually move away. “The very biggest obstacle was being scared of getting out there with my face and my name and what I had and what I did. To go public was so hard... probably because we were already the odd ball,” Lanette admitted. When asked what success is for her, Lanette said, “Making a profit, of course, but also success for us is sharing. We are passionate about what we do and how we do it on our farm, so sharing that passion and knowledge with others to really learn about food. The profit is nice, but it is not everything.”

In comparing Lanette and Larry with other local farmers, they have had some advantages. The single most advantageous factor being land; they had land in the family, which they were able to farm and to purchase. Another advantage is their organic row crops, which have helped to supplement their income as they changed their farm philosophies and practices. The sale of local food is not without its challenges, though. Columbus, like many rural towns, is beginning to “dip their toes” into local foods. As mentioned, they have a thriving Farmer’s Market and are in the process of extending this market year-round. This locally-minded change may or may not be a gradual process, as there are a lot of confinement operations in the area. Lanette shared that one day she was on the Columbus Community Classifieds Facebook page to explain what her farm does and what they had to offer. “I did not saying anything bad about conventional farming. I never do, but someone came back and said ‘just go to the store because farmers don’t put anything bad in their meat.’ What we do is a bit off the beaten path, so it is seen as odd in our area. We don't try to say confinements are bad, but people take offense anyway.”

So, finding a local market with enough consumers to sell to, finding the knowledge and funding to expand operations, and challenging an established industrial agriculture culture are all things to work on.

To further explore the Columbus area, we spoke with Erin Frank of The Darlin Reds Farm.

Erin has been involved in local foods for the last eight or nine years. She currently farms and coordinates a community garden and beginning farmer program in Columbus for the Center for Rural Affairs (CFRA). Erin and her business partner run a CSA farm, which grows a wide array of vegetables. These vegetables get delivered to Omaha and Lincoln. They maintain 20-Omaha and 30-Lincoln customers and sell some wholesale. Erin shares that her farm is located between Lincoln and Raymond, a small town northwest of Lincoln. Both she and her partner also work for a dairy farm (Branched Oak farm) and own a couple of acres. She commutes to Columbus to work with the community garden and workshops. Erin explains, “For CFRA I work on the

community garden and Latino farmer project, organizing workshops for groups who are interested in becoming farmers. This project is currently in Columbus and has previously been in Lexington. In Columbus, we are getting a community garden going near a trailer court, doing a winter workshop series and getting some gardeners.”

The community garden has had a lot of community support, primarily from word of mouth, Erin says. “Once they know they support it.” She continues, “The community is super supportive because there is nothing *not* great that comes from it: healthy food, good hobby, how could you not support this?” Accordingly, it has not been difficult to find eager participants. There has been a lot of interest. Erin says, “It is really just a matter of making sure that all of the pieces are connected. As the coordinator, making sure the gardeners know everyone else involved, such as the city workers, so I am not always the liaison.... Taking away barriers, so that it will [eventually] run by itself, by the gardeners. Finding people willing to take on the leadership positions has been challenging.”

The garden and beginning farmer program have been supported by a couple of different grants to get started, but when CFRA steps away it will be funded by the garden plot fees. “We hope that they will be able to pay for everything with fees in the future. It could more than quadruple in size with the area we have.” Erin sees it being “more inclusive with Latinos and with Anglos and that some of the gardeners are upping their production and possibly getting a farmers market stand and participating in farmer workshops. People get a lot out of it.”

When asked about the local foods scene, Erin shared that there already was one community garden and a successful farmers market in Columbus, but there was a need for a second farmers market in town because the first was full. She mentioned other products being available locally as well, such as people with chickens or people selling products direct marketing. There are also some pretty big vegetable growers in the area like Daniels produce.

When asked about obstacles to being a full-time farmer, Erin says that capital is an obstacle. She and her business partner, Margaret, had some savings, but not enough to purchase a greenhouse outright. “You have to start small if going with the resources you have,” she says. Lack of experience is also an obstacle with the level of production they need to make enough money to keep moving forward. Still somewhat of a hurdle are necessary business skills or lack thereof. Business skills such as cash flow projections and accounting principles have been an obstacle. Erin explained, “We went in trying to do a good job but needed more direction there.”

Erin’s farm is 100 percent self-funded. Erin shares,

*We began with personal savings invested into the project. Money that we bring in, we reinvest, not much check writing here (to ourselves). We used FSA (? I may have the acronym wrong) micro loan to get some hoop houses and bigger equipment. Last year was our first year, and we worked non-stop and got paid \$0 for it, but we were able to have some money in the bank at the end of the year. We always pay all of our bills first. If there is excess in June we are going to pay ourselves \$500. Really, for us, most of our expenses are in the late winter: seeds for next year, getting tools fixed, etc. Our ongoing bill is fuel. If we worked it out we would probably be making like a nickel an hour. We*

*both have off-farm jobs: working for the dairy for the land renters and for the CFRA. If I have extra time I can work more and earn more. Margaret works for the dairy and the creamery. We would not be able to do what we are doing without these jobs. Not that it is not possible, but we rack our brains daily trying to figure it out. It is not just farming that is hard. It is just starting a business in general. Changing the way we are thinking and doing things.*

As a farmer, what Erin needs right now is more time, which, of course, is an impossible need to have met. Infrastructure and having a crew and being able to pay people would also be very helpful. Having the infrastructure in place would make progress more efficient: buying a hoop house, having it delivered, having people to put it together, etc. Erin feels like she needs to be learning faster, so growing/increasing her knowledge would also be nice. Success to this farmer would be producing enough quality product and selling it so that she and her partner are able to bring in substantial income from it, for it to be a profitable business. Erin explains, “And we have to be able to pay ourselves. Some of the success would have to be measured in dollars, but quality of life is also important, so no nervous breakdowns, [maintaining] good health, etc.

Money alone is not a success: staying sane is important.” In order to accomplish these goals, Erin explores the future direction of her farm. She shares, “The future of the farm looks to be versatile and changing as we need it to. Lots more early and late-season growing, extension, crop storage, winter growing. We want to become winter farmers. That is the route that we are going.

Just more volume more months that we are selling, being known in the area and being open to whatever creative brilliance comes our way.”

While Erin Frank’s farm is currently borderline sustainable financially, much like Lanette Stec’s, the expansion necessary to grow her business will cost additional funds. Erin and her partner seem to be covering their cash flow needs, but it is off-farm income that makes it sustainable and able to pay personal bills. This illustrates the financial plight of a small farmer: earning enough money to reinvest into the business while simultaneously paying bills and paying your own salary (hopefully). Along with this is the knowledge or know-how that goes with expanding into new niche markets. This knowledge is often not free, as farmers will need trainings or certifications.

## **Davenport, NE (Challenges)**



Davenport is a village in Thayer County, Nebraska. The population was 294 at the 2010 census.

Harold Stone is creating a complete regional food system all on his own. He owns four acres in Davenport, Nebraska – three of which are in organic alfalfa production to improve soil conditions and the other one is being used to grow fruit and vegetables. He grows all forms of culinary vegetables and herbs and fruit including everything from raspberries to peaches, cherry trees, zucchini, and asparagus – just about anything you can think of. Harold shares,

*I have a greenhouse, so I extend my season. I have a commercial kitchen where I am currently pickling beets and squash. I also make pasta sauces, cater events, etc. The whole foods system is what we have created. We have compost, so any waste we create gets put back on the plants. We have a storefront: a year round, indoor, farmers market with 13 different labeled products, which are certified through the USDA and at the farmers market.*

When discussing the local food scene in Davenport, Harold explained that he started the farmers market on Thursdays, where there is now about six vendors. Other than that there is not a lot going on in the area. There are other local foods options regionally, but they are closer to Lincoln. It is this lack of infrastructure and choice within the community that brought Harold here originally. When asked about how the community is supportive of his endeavors, Harold said the community supports him primarily through the farmers market, but he continues to get more catering gigs. Harold also hosts monthly events, such as outdoor concerts, and the community attends those as well.

Harold's position within the local foods movement is unique. He is a grant writer by profession, so he is able to fund his ideas. Accordingly, he has received primarily USDA funding for farmers market promotion grants. Harold explains, "I have gotten a grant from a banking group, a JOBS grant, a requirement through federal housing fund which allows banks to offer grants for new programs/opportunities for employment. I have gotten two of those. I got one local economic development grant for about \$15,000." Economic Development grants are for just that: developing the economy. Harold used that money to help pay for the building, which had to be stabilized before the commercial kitchen could be put in. "The JOBS grant was for basically creating jobs in the community that I just can't fill," says Harold. He admits that he is a rarity, because he is a grant writer, and has had very few problems in financing his endeavors. If there was one thing Harold could say about funding, it would be that there needs to be more money to upscale. He continues,

*There is a lot of money out there. I don't know how to get a different response with more money. Trying to think of something that could be done differently: they do a good job of researching where the money should go. One thing I can say: I went to a Small Business Innovation Research (SBIR) grant meeting... the USDA has funding for "small farms and economic development in rural communities." In all of the cases that I saw there are really big corporations, and smaller ones, that are using these funds to reduce risk in trying new projects. They are getting \$500 grand to test new products, and they really need to figure out how to get companies the size of mine to upscale.*

Harold has faced other challenges, though, such as going against local culture. Harold elaborates,

*Trying to be organic in an area where everything is so GMO oriented has been challenging. I just took a picture of a crop duster flying about 50 feet above my land coming out of a field. And with a prevailing wind coming from the field... Because the soybeans have the bacteria that kills the beetle in it, those beetles don't go into the beans and my beans have become sacrificial. And it really makes it difficult to grow organically. In other areas it may be easier, as there are some areas that are not ALL corn/bean. The chemicals are just across the street.*

Along with competing with industrial agriculture, Harold's biggest challenge has been labor. He has every piece of equipment that he needs and he would get more if he had labor to get the work done. He needs employees in order to bulk up sales, but has been unable to find anyone (other than one home-schooled teenager). Harold is currently retired and states, "This is my life." He shares that one of his goals is to "Find a farmer and his wife, who are looking for land. I would have everything they would need to start. All of this is set up for someone to work with me to make it happen, and then to make it happen themselves. I cannot do both land and store without my wife being completely retired, so for now we do one piece at a time." The future of this project does evolve. Harold concludes,

*I am not looking for a mountain, I am looking for something that is scaled to a community this size. I want to provide enough food for this community and make an impact to national distributors like Sysco. I would like my products to be made of local producers, me being just one of them.*

## **Nebraska College of Technical Agriculture**



We interviewed Dr. Rosati, Dean of the Nebraska College of Technical Agriculture (NCTA) in Curtis, Nebraska, for his views on local food production and what the college contributes. Curtis is a town of 939 in southwest Nebraska. NCTA is a part of the University of Nebraska system. According to its website, NCTA “has a unique mission in the University of Nebraska system. We focus on tangible learning activities and hands-on education relevant to modern agricultural careers.”

Dr. Rosati said NCTA saw the growth in local food initiatives across the nation, and NCTA was interested in supporting local, healthy foods. Part of NCTA’s interest is to teach their students the benefits of local food production so that they participate in it during their time in school and after they graduate in their respective communities.

There are two major components to NCTA’s local food project; students and faculty do the management, promotion and production and offer expertise to growers in the projects. NCTA also provides maintenance to the irrigation system used in the project:

- Community gardens – NCTA oversaw eight plots in 2014. NCTA provided the water for the garden plots. Dr. Rosati said interest in the gardens exceeded NCTA expectations. The gardens turned out not only to be a good initiative to share produce, but a good place to share growing techniques and a generally good social outlet.
- Farmers market – NCTA students set up, advertise, and operate a booth for the local farmers market. In 2014 the market had between four and eight vendors. In 2013 the market was on NCTA campus; in 2014 it moved to downtown Curtis.

A new initiative NCTA is exploring is better linkage between growers and consumers. NCTA is also exploring ways to use local food products in the college food service. NCTA has a beef herd, and the cost of using that for the college food service may actually be less than traditional institutional sources (e.g., Sysco) according to Dr. Rosati. In addition, the quality of NCTA meat is better.

The Curtis community is very supportive of the NCTA initiatives. Dr. Rosati estimated that 65 percent of the community garden support was from the non-college community (e.g., selling, purchasing, volunteering, and donating). For the farmers market Dr. Rosati estimated that 50 percent of the support was from the non-college community.

NCTA has adequate funding at this time to continue its local food initiatives. It benefits from having a captive group (students) of labor and ideas.

NCTA is excited about the future of its local food projects since, as Dr. Rosati stated, “the model will be replicated elsewhere as our students go out into the world into rural and urban communities.”

## Scratchtown Brewing Company, Ord, Nebraska



We talked with Caleb Pollard, an owner and partner in Scratchtown Brewing Company in Ord, Nebraska. Prior to helping found Scratchtown, Caleb was the Executive Director of the Valley County Economic Development organization and the Ord Area Chamber of Commerce. Caleb brings insight into local food products production from his viewpoint as an economic development professional and an entrepreneur.

Ord is a community of 2,112 in central Nebraska.

Scratchtown purchases many of the inputs for their beer locally, but are frustrated that they have to go to other states and other countries to get much of it. Malted grains and hops are the primary inputs that could be raised locally. They are in talks with several local farmers to plant some of their inputs in corners of fields and underused areas of fields. Most hops are not grown in Nebraska, but if the discussions with local farmers generates more local hops production, that will reduce the costs of production.

The majority of Scratchtown's inputs are not local because they are not available locally. They are either underdeveloped or not developed at all. Input production is very labor intensive during labor season, a challenge to a small area.

Caleb commented there is some local food purchasing going on through grocery stores, but not enough awareness of local buying opportunities. Bringing farmers and institutions together to recognize these opportunities and build how they can happen is key. Purchasing locally is vital, according to Caleb, because it will "elevate the prosperity of local folks."

Besides Scratchtown's efforts, other local food production is happening in the Ord/Valley County area. Local produce production and a hydroponic greenhouse source to grocery stores and are active in the area. A local honey producer also sources locally. A farmers market in Ord has been operating during the summer and early fall for six years.

Caleb offered structural market forces as obstacles to local food production. According to Caleb, there is a lack of a local food market and an underdeveloped local food market that act as obstacles. In his opinion, the market exists, but there is not awareness of the opportunities or demand to grow items for local purchase. These structural forces in the market stop a larger local market from existing. One answer to creating a better functioning market is to have more of a market focus on local food production and purchasing and bring more local producers to the table to discuss and structure opportunities.

Caleb also mentioned the risk aversion that exists in small towns and rural areas. In Caleb's opinion it is incumbent on communities to push others in the community to be less risk adverse in local food systems and "pinpoint and shine a spotlight on successful entrepreneurs." According to Caleb, rural communities need to talk about solutions, and promote solutions that are going right and well. Communities also have to be willing to accept failure, too. "Invest in an appreciation of failure," according to Caleb.

The Ord farmers market is its most successful ever. In 2014 it had the widest offering ever, the most vendors ever, and serving the most consumers ever. One reason is that those involved in the farmers market provided a compelling reason to buy local – saying one is local is not enough.

### **Natalie Kingston, Public Health Solutions**



Natalie Kingston is the Community Development Coordinator for Public Health Solutions (PHS), the local public health agency headquartered in Crete, Nebraska, that serves Fillmore, Gage, Jefferson, Saline, and Thayer counties in southeast Nebraska.

PHS received a grant in 2011 to build a coalition of farmers market managers in southeast Nebraska to raise the profile of eating more healthfully and local. The Southeast Nebraska Coalition started with four markets. In 2014 they were up to 10. The target was young families that have been slow to participate in purchasing at farmers markets. The funding for this effort expired in 2014, but PHS is still dedicated to the initiative. Natalie provides in-kind services to keep the initiative operating and to build leadership capacity for the future.

Natalie stated the coalition initiative has been useful as a learning and capacity building initiative. Most local farmers markets – and nearly all markets in small, rural areas – are managed by volunteers, usually elderly or market stakeholders because there is a need and someone has to volunteer to do it. The coalition brought market managers together to learn from each other, and PHS provided more structure for promotion of the local markets (e.g., signs, flyers, billboards, and media).

Natalie stated the availability of local food in the PNS area is limited largely to the local farmers markets. Some area farmers who sell at the farmers markets do sell produce to local restaurants, but that seems to be the extent beyond the farmers markets (though the Norris school district is in the PNS area; see Norris Public Schools case study).

Natalie stated that the largest obstacle their initiative has is financing. Funding is needed for consistent promotion of local farmers markets. Funding is a challenge for markets located in small, rural areas, and the challenge is made greater by the common market manager turnover caused by retirements with no succession available. Farmers market manager succession is the other pressing issues for local markets according to Natalie. The small, rural areas in which the PNS initiative is focused simply do not have the capacity or leadership to take over market manage duties when someone (usually an elderly manager) steps away from the position.

Local farmers markets, with assistance from PNS, are promoting to their markets to different subpopulations in the communities. Promotion (through market coupons) to women in the area was made possible through funding from the Every Woman Matters program. PNS and markets are working on market promotion to low-income residents, particularly those who receive SNAP benefits.

PNS also developed a local food guide that is distributed at and through local farmers markets, local libraries, and local chambers of commerce. PNS was also an early member and one of the first local health departments to secure buy fresh-buy local designation. PNS received the designation and used their resources to market the logo and promote the buy fresh-buy local idea.

### **Cathy Grauerholz, SugerSand Farms**

Cathy Gauerholz operates SugerSand Farms, a community supported agriculture (CSA) operation near Hershey, Nebraska, in western Nebraska. SugerSand raises and sells blueberries and other types of vegetables and fruit. It is not a certified organic operation, but uses organic principles. Cathy employs three seasonal employees and two high tunnels. Cathy’s farm does not provide enough income to support her family, but according to Cathy it is a “good second income.”

The farm is completely self-funded. Cathy’s major challenge is the farm size/labor debate. She is in the need for labor, but in order to afford more labor she would need to scale up production. Scaling up production may not be financially feasible or cost effective. It is possible she has saturated the market with her produce, and she is not sure there are other outlets for her produce.

The future of her farm is also a major concern. Eventually Cathy would like to step down from operating her farm and pass the reins to a younger farmer, but she does not know of anyone who could be a successor. For example, none of her seasonal employees are looking to make farming their line of work.

North Platte, Nebraska, is the primary population center of the area in which Cathy lives and local food is “becoming a more popular thing to be part of.” Some smaller restaurants in North Platte use local food. The North Platte farmers market is a popular place on Saturday mornings. In general, according to Cathy, people are becoming more aware of where their food comes from.

Cathy’s farm provides her a great deal of personal satisfaction. She feels very successful at the end of a day at the farmers market – serving good healthy food to people and making some money. For more efforts like hers to be successful, Cathy says consumers need to appreciate what it takes to raise the produce they purchase and be willing to pay a fair price.

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