

## A community food assessment to create a more sustainable and robust food system

### AT A GLANCE

Community food assessment guides food system reform in Blaine County.

### The Situation

The U.S. food system is a complex set of interactions that include food production, processing, distribution, consumption, and food waste and recovery. As consumers have increased demand for locally produced food, so have questions regarding how the food system works and what are the limitations to consumers, farmers and the environment. In order for researchers, policy makers, consumers, and farmers to understand the gaps and limitations of their food system, a *community food assessment* is a tool to document and visualize a local or regional food shed. Community food assessments first start by convening a community conversation, second by collecting primary and secondary data, and lastly identifying and implementing food initiatives by the community and a steering committee. As a result, food system change across the nation is first starting at the individual community level and spreading.

### Our Response

In 2014, the Hunger Coalition, University of Idaho Extension and 25 other community organizations conducted the Blaine County Community Food Assessment (BCCFA). Under four working themes, Production, Consumption, Food Security, and Food Waste & Recovery, the researchers collected qualitative and quantitative data to visualize the Blaine County food system. Using a USDA toolkit to guide the process, the team first started with a community



Food assessment leading local food system change for the health of Blaine County, Idaho. Photo by Michael Stern.

conversation, followed by focus groups, interviews and a community-wide mail out survey. Following the yearlong assessment, the collected data was summarized and compiled in a 35-page final report and presented back to the community in the fall of 2015.

### Program Outcomes

Under food production, the team documented that the biggest barriers to Blaine County producers include the climate, access to land, access to outside markets and a lack of infrastructure for processing, packaging and storing products. This barrier is most severe with the protein industry, where the closest USDA inspected meat-processing facility is over three hours away. For food consumption, the survey indicated that food is valued by Blaine County citizens in the following order: affordable, healthy, tastes good, food that is grown in a way that is good for the environment, convenient to prepare, local, GMO free and organic. These results helped the team recognize

consumer preferences and barriers to consuming local, unprocessed foods.

Under the theme food security, the survey indicated that Blaine County has a food insecure population of 14 percent, compared to the 11 percent calculated by Feeding America data in 2013 for Blaine County\*. The survey helped confirm that the combination of high national meal cost and high cost of living data for Blaine County results in constrained food budgets for many residents. For food waste and recovery, the team initiated dialogue with the city disposal services and a local composting business. Both entities are open to future curbside composting but admit that initial high cost investments are currently prohibitive.

As a result of the BCCFA, the Blaine County Food Council was developed and is directed by the University of Idaho Extension office in Blaine County. Based on the BCCFA, future action items for the council and the community include the following:

- Expand community gardens for food insecure groups.
- Increase education for consumers on how to cook with fresh fruits and vegetables.
- Implement a “buy local” campaign to help increase awareness and procurement of locally produced food.
- Increase home composting education.
- Work with groups and policy efforts to expand processing capabilities for south-central Idaho.

Overall, the community of Blaine County is taking one step in the right direction to help move a shared vision to collective action for a more robust and sustainable food system. These types of local efforts acknowledge the power of change necessary for federal level food system reform; all of which, better recognizes the interactions between food production, diet, public health, human rights and ecosystems.

#### References

\*Feeding America 2013 Food Insecurity, <http://www.feedingamerica.org/hunger-in-america/our-research/map-the-meal-gap/2013>  
ID\_AllCounties\_CDs\_MMG\_2013.pdf

## FOR MORE INFORMATION

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