

Humboldt County Community Food Assessment Summary

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Because there is a direct connection between healthy food and a healthy community, it is critical to take stock of Humboldt County's agricultural production and distribution as well as the availability of fresh food to low-income consumers.

This Community Food Assessment is a profile of Humboldt County's current food system "from farm to table," and is meant to be a tool for stakeholders—farmers, sellers, consumers and policy-makers alike.

It also is part of a larger project, by the California Center for Rural Policy (CCRP) and funded by the California Endowment, entitled "Addressing Food Insecurity with Dignity." The goal of this project, aside from doing a Community Food Assessment, is to research innovative rural projects addressing food insecurity and to facilitate the creation of a Food Policy Council.



The purpose of this assessment is to provide an overview of Humboldt County's food system and an examination of how well it is serving our community. Community Food Assessments have proven to be an effective way to help establish priorities and actions taken by groups and individuals working on food systems planning.¹ Humboldt County has many organizations working on such issues, ranging from food access to advocating for local farmers. This report provides hard data, identifies food system needs and helps target areas for change. It is intended to be a living document that will be updated as new data emerge.

For this assessment CCRP gathered existing data regarding the different sectors of Humboldt County's food system. We also generated primary data by conducting a small research project mapping the food system's strengths and needs. We are deeply thankful to everyone who took the time to share information with us.

Six months of research into both the availability and affordability of food led to the following conclusions and recommendations about Humboldt County's food system strengths and needs:

STRENGTHS

- Food production, farming and direct marketing are robust.
- A small shift in local consumption can make a big difference in farm incomes and local economic growth.
- The county boasts strong food assistance and food pantry services.
- Interest in expanded local food distribution and processing is growing.
- Nearly 50% of Humboldt County schools have gardens.

NEEDS

- More food stores, and improved transportation to them, are top priorities.
- Fresh healthy foods are not consistently available in geographically isolated communities, and affordable healthy foods are needed all over.
- Women and children are at greatest risk of poverty and food insecurity
- Food is a significant proportion of our waste stream and needs to be addressed.
- Purchasing policies make it hard for farmers to sell to institutions.
- Agricultural leaders need more support and research.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Target communities to increase use of federal food-assistance programs.
- Develop a locally appropriate food culture to encourage healthy eating.
- Connect the low-income community to fresh and nutritious foods.
- Work with ethnic populations to understand food customs and food system needs.
- Conduct more research into the prices and availability of foods offered at stores throughout the county.
- Apply techniques of local food processing and distribution that have been successful elsewhere.

The Food System

The food system can be thought of as the five sectors that take our food from “farm to table:” 1) agricultural production, 2) processing, 3) distribution, 4) marketing and consumption, and 5) waste and recycling. The availability, cost, transport miles and quality of foods are linked to these sectors, determining the foods that end up in schools, stores and hospitals.

The link between healthy foods and a healthy community is strong. According to the American Journal of Alternative Agriculture, “Not only does an adequate, varied diet contribute to individual health, but the way food is grown, distributed and eaten also profoundly affects the environmental, social, spiritual and economic well-being of the community.”²

How well a food system is serving the community is summed up by the term “food access,” representing the availability as well as the affordability of food in a community. Those who consistently have enough food to lead an active, healthy life have food security.

Both locally and nationally, poverty is the chief cause of food insecurity and points to where the need for improved food access is the greatest. Food insecurity is also strongly linked to family structure. Households with children are more likely to be food insecure, with the greatest need being seen in households with children under 18 and headed by a single mother.

Agricultural Production

Local food production includes a wide array of fruits, vegetables, meat, poultry, both cow and goat dairy and a small amount of processed products. While the bulk of food production is conducted on large- and small-scale farms, the county also has community and school gardens and a growing number of backyard gardens and orchards.

In 2008, Humboldt County recorded a total of \$81.8 million for food-related* agricultural production.³ Top sales were of dairy, livestock and field crops. In 2007, there were 852 farms, with 155 of them selling directly to consumers.⁴

An increasing number of producers are converting acreage into organic production.⁵ The county hosts 20 community gardens⁶ and a phone survey found that 42 of our 88 kindergarten-through-12th grade schools have school gardens.⁷

Processing

There are many locally grown, processed and distributed food products in Humboldt County that add a unique character to the local food system. Unfortunately, most large-scale processors import the bulk of their raw ingredients from out of the area. Increased use of local foods would create market opportunities for local

** This amount excludes timber and nursery stock.*

farmers.

Distribution

An inadequate distribution system remains one of the largest obstacles for the development of our local food infrastructure. In particular our community is lacking refrigerated drop-off sites.⁸ There are only a few organizations and businesses that distribute food within the county and carry it out of the region to other retailers.

Marketing and Consumption

Studies have found that spending food-related dollars locally doubles the number of dollars circulating in the community.⁹ Shifting consumer purchases by 1% to locally grown products increased local Maine farmers' income by 5%, according to one study.¹⁰ The "Buy Fresh Buy Local" and "Made in Humboldt" campaigns are new branding efforts to encourage support for local farmers, local producers and the businesses that offer locally-sourced foods.^{11,12}

Waste and Recycling

Learning specifics about Humboldt County's food system gives us the ability to influence impacts on the environment. Worldwide, it is estimated that current agriculture and food system practices are responsible for at least a quarter of global greenhouse gas emissions.¹³ We can make changes locally that minimize the negative impacts on the environment, improve individual health and strengthen our local economy by strengthening our local food system.

How well is the food system providing food access?

Humboldt County has a population of approximately 130,000 and the majority of the population accesses locally grown foods through direct farmer-to-consumer markets: farmers' markets, on-site farm stands and community supported agriculture (CSA) shares. At the time of this report there were 11 farmers' markets, 9 on-site farm stands and 8 CSA's. Several of our grocery stores also feature produce, milk and meats from local farms and ranches.

Yet for a significant portion of our population, fresh and local foods are out of reach. In 2008, 12% of the families in our county lived below the poverty line, which was above the California average of 9.6%.¹⁴ As seen in regard to food insecurity rates, household family structure also has a strong influence on poverty rates. Around 17% of families with children under the age of 18 are likely to live in poverty, and it's estimated a shocking 57% of single moms with children below 5 years of age are living in poverty.¹⁵

In 2007, CCRP interviewed food system stakeholders (farmers, grocers, food pantry staff, etc.) in Humboldt, Del Norte, and Trinity County regarding food access.¹⁶ Financial reasons were mentioned most frequently as the obstacle to obtaining fresh and healthy foods. One comment that was typical of many others heard was, "The store that we do have is expensive and the selection is limited, and a lot of people can't afford to buy fresh vegetables." Another telling statement was, "I do food stamp applications 5 to 10 times a week, and 50% or more of the families check 'yes' for the question, 'Will you run out of food in three days or less?' and that's after they already visited the food bank." In terms of solutions, or changes to make in the community, some form of education was often cited.

In 2006, the Rural Health Information Survey conducted by CCRP asked the question, "In the last 12 months were you or people living in your household ever hungry because you couldn't afford enough food?" In some Humboldt County towns as many as 25% of respondents said "yes."¹⁷

There are multiple food assistance programs helping to feed the food insecure members of our community. Currently 11,000 – 12,000 people a month are relying on the county's food bank, a jump from former years.¹⁸ Federal food assistance programs bring thousands of dollars into our economy every year and account for a large portion of the services provided. As of February 2010, there were over 12,000 individuals in the county receiving Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits, almost 50% of whom were children under the age of 18.¹⁹ The Food Stamp Policy Task Force encourages program participation and also the use of SNAP at local farmers' markets.²⁰

This not only enables individuals to purchase fresh and healthy produce, but also to buy plant starts for growing

their own gardens. During the 2009 market season 437 customers utilized SNAP at the Saturday farmers' markets of the North Coast Growers Association, spending a total of \$8,631.²¹

The Women, Infant and Children (WIC) program targets low-income pregnant and post-partum women and children up to age five. In Humboldt County there are over 3,000 WIC participants.^{22,23} There is greater demand than supply for the Farmers' Market Nutrition Program booklets WIC offers, providing \$20 per person worth of coupons once a year for use at farmers' markets.

There are other important Federal food assistance programs that help feed thousands of individuals in our county, but aside from three schools purchasing local foods that are incorporated into their meal plan, we do not know of any of these programs linking participants to local fresh and healthy foods.

What are food system strengths and weaknesses?

At the first Food Policy Council Task Force meeting in March 2010, attendees were asked to participate in a project mapping Humboldt County's food system strengths and needs. The top seven categories that emerged were Grocery Store, Farm, Livestock/Poultry, Community Gardens, Farmer's Market, Food Banks/Pantries and Community Centers and Shelter. Main food system strengths identified fell in the categories of Grocery Store, Farm, and Food Bank/Pantry. The theme of Grocery Store also emerged as the most mentioned food system need, followed by Transportation. In smaller communities, a need for more fresh produce, quality food and overall access to groceries was identified.

In conclusion, the Humboldt County Community Food Assessment covers a wide range of data and hopefully presents the reader with a holistic view of our food system. In addition to providing further details regarding everything mentioned above, the report further reviews several national program and policy models for us to learn from and provides more extensive explanation of conclusions and recommendations.

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