

Stories across the Food System

Highlights from the Southeast Oregon Community Food Assessment 2009



Orchard in Harney County, Oregon

Why Food?

Southeast Oregon faces many unique challenges. Harney and Malheur Counties are the two largest counties in the state; dominated by a harsh and varying climate, isolated mountains and communities, great distances and few people. The region struggles with some of the highest poverty rates in the state of Oregon, with both children and elderly being particularly vulnerable groups. Outside of the population centers of the Burns-Hines area in Harney County and Nyssa, Ontario and Vale in Malheur County, most people live far from grocery stores or food pantries. This isolation and the lack of a local food system infrastructure paired with persistent poverty and unemployment that plague the region make food insecurity a critical issue faced by many people throughout southeast Oregon.

What is a Community Food Assessment?

A CFA tells the story of what is happening with food in a community using varied and diverse methods. It is a powerful tool to explore a range of food system issues, to provide opportunities for broad community involvement and to create positive, lasting change. A CFA highlights the strengths of a food system and uncovers the weaknesses. It can help strengthen the connections between different sectors and provide communities the opportunity to build more stable, sustainable economies that in turn create food security.

Is Food Available, Accessible and Affordable?

This project is designed to gather unique perspectives and insights from individuals across the food system. Our goal was to answer the question, “is food available, accessible and affordable?” From October 2008 to July 2009 interviews were conducted with individuals throughout southeast Oregon and several communities in southwest Idaho. Additionally, six focus groups were conducted in Malheur County in the communities of Jordan Valley, Nyssa, Ontario and Vale. The information gathered from these interviews and focus groups revealed strengths and weaknesses in the regional food system. For more information, see the full report *Stories across the Food System*.

“Without our agricultural economy, we would be nothing.” Dan Joyce, Malheur County Judge

Agriculture in Southeast Oregon

Farming and ranching are fundamentally important to the economic, social and cultural fabric of southeast Oregon. The region is deeply rooted in its agricultural history. Many of the first white settlers to the region established successful ranches. Over the years agriculture continued to grow in importance and today it is the second largest employment sector in both Harney and Malheur Counties.

The completion of the Owyhee Dam in 1932 created an extensive irrigation system that made the area an important vegetable growing region. This huge public investment turned 118,000 acres of Malheur County and southwest Idaho into highly productive farm land.

Malheur County has more acres planted in **dry onions** than any other county in the U.S. It has the most **cattle and calves** in Oregon and is in the top 2% nationwide. It is second in value of **livestock, poultry and their products** statewide and in the top 5% nationwide.

Harney County has the most acres in **forage land** in Oregon and is ranked third in the number of **cattle and calves** statewide. Both of these indicators rank in the top 4% of all counties nationwide.

Malheur County Farms, 2007

1,250 farms on **1,170,664** acres

BY THE NUMBERS Average farm size **937** acres, median farm size is **101** acres

77.0% of land is in pasture

Average age of operators is **56** years

Males operate **89.6%** of farms

11.6% have a minority operator

Estimated value of farm land and buildings was **\$1,028,826** per farm

Average market value of products sold per farm was **\$245,436**

Average production expenses per farm were **\$152,498**

Average net cash income was **\$40,308** per farm

Average government subsidies were **\$4,814** per farm

“We’re not considered rural, we’re considered isolated. The western part of the state, they don’t want to claim us. Idaho don’t want to claim us. So we’re on our own.” Jordan Valley focus group participant

The People of Southeast Oregon

Isolation is a way of life for many people in southeast Oregon. What is most concerning about this is most of the rural communities do not have the capacity to grow their own food nor do they have a grocery store or emergency food pantry. Lack of jobs and livable wage jobs was an issue that was repeatedly raised. Stories of frequent sacrifice were shared; people forgoing health care, rent, utilities and food on a monthly basis to make ends meet.

In January 2009 Harney County had the highest unemployment rate in Oregon at 19.7%, an increase of 7.1% from the previous January.

Five of nine school districts in Harney County reporting free and reduced-price lunch numbers have at least 72.7% of students eligible. South Harney and Diamond School Districts have the 5th and 6th highest eligibility rates of 199 districts statewide. In Malheur County five of nine districts have at least 65.6% of students eligible.

Distribution of emergency food boxes in the region has increased by 79.5% since 2004. There is one food pantry in Harney County and six food pantries in Malheur County.



Malheur County Demographics

BY THE NUMBERS

- 31,135** people live in the county
- The median age is **36** years
- Minorities are **6.5%** of the population
- 27.7%** of the population is Hispanic, the **2nd** highest percentage statewide
- Median household income is **\$37,432**, the **3rd** lowest in Oregon
- Per capita income is **\$21,137**, the **2nd** lowest statewide
- The average wage per job is **\$12,000** less than the statewide average
- Unemployment was **10.9%** in July 2009
- 17.6%** of the county lives in poverty and **26.3%** of children live in poverty, the **4th** highest rates in Oregon
- In 1999 **11.6%** of elderly lived in poverty, the **3rd** highest rate statewide
- In May 2009 **6,594** people received food stamp benefits
- 3,278** children received food stamp benefits in May 2009
- In the last year **10,188** emergency food boxes were distributed

Food System Strengths and Weaknesses

The climate in Malheur County is favorable for growing fruits and vegetables. The hot, dry summers provide excellent conditions for growing a great variety of crops. Harney County has a harsher climate and lesser access to irrigation, although there are several isolated valleys that have favorable conditions for growing fruits and vegetables. There is also geothermal activity that creates microclimates well suited for food production.

Recent interest in and emergence of community gardens and farmers’ markets is a positive sign. These community-based food projects are important as they provide opportunities to increase individual and community food security.

Fruit and vegetable processing, storage and transportation are strong sectors of the agricultural economy in Malheur County. While this infrastructure supports producers and large businesses in the industrial system, there is little access to processing and storage for small-scale producers.

The lack of local USDA-inspected meat processing facilities remains a critical issue. Ranchers must ship their cattle to facilities far from the ranch, affecting both the cost of production and quality of the product. This is a difficult and complicated issue, yet solutions do exist. A small poultry processor in New Plymouth, Idaho has successfully overcome the barriers. It works with small, local producers and will become a USDA-inspected facility this fall.

Opportunities in Our Food System

We hope the opportunities outlined here will generate a dialogue about the future of food and agriculture in southeast Oregon; increasing public awareness and leading to the creation of a more food secure region.

- 1** Creation of a multi-stakeholder coalition that addresses individual and community food security and the needs of the agricultural community.
- 2** Increase public awareness and education of food and agriculture-related issues and opportunities.
- 3** Create connections that build a food system that is supported by and benefits local producers, processors, retailers and consumers.
- 4** Increase and maintain access to a stable food supply in underserved areas, particularly in Harney County.
- 5** Increase access to healthy, fresh, locally-grown food throughout the region, particularly in rural communities and food insecure populations.
- 6** Support existing community-based food projects and encourage the development of new projects.

For More Information Contact: Southeast Oregon Regional Food Bank at 541.889.9206 or go to communityfoodforum.wildapricot.org to download the complete report.