

# BUILDING A **DEEP-ROOTED LOCAL FOOD** SYSTEM

A FOOD SYSTEM ANALYSIS FOR DOUGLAS, JEFFERSON AND  
LEAVENWORTH COUNTIES IN KANSAS

Northeast Kansas has a rich agricultural heritage, one that has mirrored the national trend towards centralization and globalization of our food supply. Recently, we have seen an emerging trend as consumers in our region seek out locally-grown foods. From the phenomenal growth in farmers' markets in our region to a growing interest in Farm-to-School programs, members of our community care

about the food their families eat, and the region they call home.

To explore this growing demand, we are taking the first step—understanding how our local food system currently works. The goal of this report is to identify the challenges and opportunities for a successful and sustainable local food system in Douglas County and our surrounding region.

## **THE QUESTIONS WE ASKED IN OUR ANALYSIS**

How does the food we eat today make it from the farm to our plates?

How much food does our region produce for export?

How much could be locally grown and consumed?

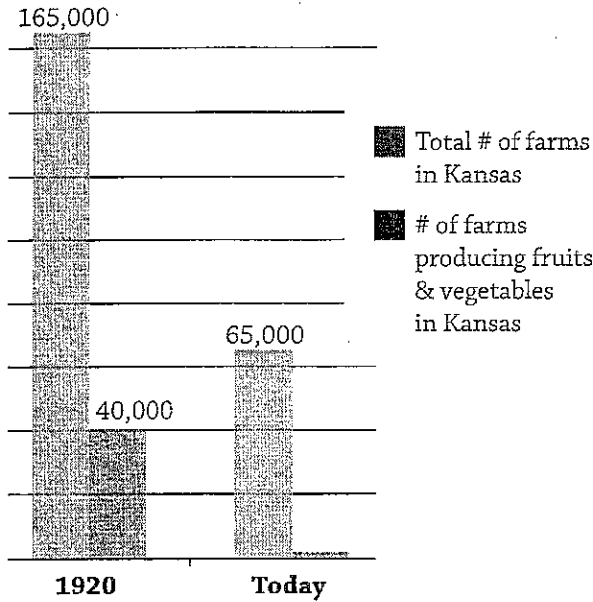
How much do we currently spend on food?

How do our food purchases impact our health and economy?

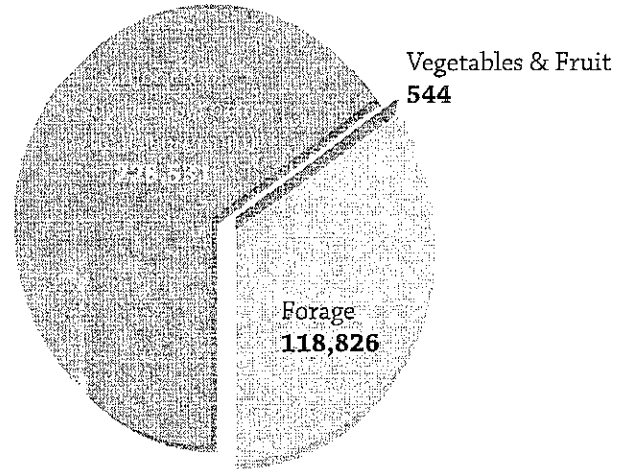
Do all members of our community have access to wholesome food?

Could our food choices actually help shape a robust local economy?

# KEY FINDINGS



Production (in acres) by Crop



## HISTORIC TRENDS

In 1920, Kansas had more than 165,000 farms. Forty thousand of these farms produced fruit and vegetables for sale. Today, these numbers reflect a dramatically different agricultural reality: By 2007, the number of farms in Kansas had dropped to 65,000, only 473 farms statewide were producing vegetables for sale, and only 432 had land in orchards.

The face of farming in our communities is also changing. Of the 1,040 farmers in Douglas County: only 35% are employed full time on the farm, 65% claim off-farm employment as their main income, and the average age of our farmers is 58.5 years.

## NATURAL RESOURCES

The combination of the tricounty area's rich soils, climate, precipitation, and even terrain make it well suited for agriculture. We have thousands of acres of prime farmland (Class I and II soils), that can support nearly all cultivation practices, including the more nutrient-intense production of fruit and vegetable crops. These fertile soils are concentrated near population centers in our counties, and therefore, experience development pressure from our growing cities.

## PRODUCTION

The land in our three counties is primarily in cropland and rangeland, with the dominant crops being soybeans, corn, forage, and wheat for export or animal feed. Beef cattle make up the vast majority of livestock produced. The 386 acres of farmland in our tricounty area devoted to vegetable production represent less than 0.1% of total crops.

Of the 3,380 farms in the tricounty area:

- 756 PRACTICE CONSERVATION METHODS
- 135 SELL VALUE-ADDED PRODUCTS
- 36 SELL THROUGH A COMMUNITY SUPPORTED AGRICULTURE PROGRAM

## KEY FINDINGS

### CONSUMPTION & HEALTH

When compared to the USDA recommended servings, tricounty residents are eating significantly fewer fruit, vegetables, and dairy than are advised. Overconsumption of fats and sugars can have serious health impacts – with overweight/obesity rates ranging between 54-62%.

If we compare how much food we currently produce in the area and how much we consume, we find that major gaps appear. In all 24 food categories we studied, only beef, soybeans for oil, corn, and wheat are produced locally in enough quantity to meet our local consumption demands. Significant deficits exist in our current production levels of fruit, vegetables, chickens, eggs and other staples.

### PROCESSING & DISTRIBUTION

Of the state-licensed food processors located in our tricounty area, most process small batches for local markets. We currently lack the capacity for light processing (chopping, packaging, etc.) required to prepare local food for our restaurants and institutions, and the storage and transportation infrastructure to get it there. Instead, most institutions utilize nationwide distributors such as Sysco and US Foodservice, that ship food long distances from other markets to our buyers.

### FOOD SECURITY

Despite being an agriculturally-based state, our citizens are not immune to food insecurity and hunger. In Kansas, more than one in five children under the age of five are growing up with food insecurity. This is one of the highest rates in the U.S. In our tricounty area, over 10,000 residents live in neighborhoods with limited access to grocery stores and healthy food choices.

### ECONOMICS

Agriculture remains a key contributor to our regional economy today. According to the 2007 Census of Agriculture, the total market value of agricultural products sold in the tricounty region was \$135.8 million, only \$1.2 million of which was direct sales to local consumers. Tricounty residents spend \$392 million on food purchases each year, 42% of which is spent at local restaurants and businesses.

54%

OVERWEIGHT/OBESITY RATE

10,000+

RESIDENTS WITH LIMITED  
ACCESS TO GROCERY STORES  
& HEALTHY FOOD CHOICES

\$392 M

AMOUNT SPENT BY  
TRICOUNTY RESIDENTS ON  
FOOD PURCHASES EACH  
YEAR

<0.1%

FARMLAND IN OUR  
TRICOUNTY AREA DEVOTED  
TO VEGETABLE  
PRODUCTION

## RECOMMENDATIONS

From our prime soils to our long history of farming know-how, our tricounty region has all of the raw ingredients to create a deep-rooted local food system. The challenges outlined in this report also point to significant opportunities to grow our local food system in a way that protects our natural resources, provides access to healthy food for all residents regardless of income, improves the health of our citizens, and builds our local economy.

The Food Policy Council recommends seizing these opportunities for a thriving local food economy:

### PLAN

Prime farmland soils are essential for the development of a sustainable local food system in our region. Our planning processes should ensure that prime farmland is allocated for its best and highest use while taking into consideration the needs of all stakeholders.

*To ensure that this high quality agricultural land is available for farming, policy tools and incentives should be developed that are economically feasible for the land owner. City and county ordinances should be revised to remove unnecessary barriers to agricultural activities in and near urban areas.*

### PRODUCE

Currently there are significant gaps between what we are eating today (too many fats, sweets) and what the USDA recommends (more fruits, vegetables, dairy). We also have significant gaps between what we're producing (beef, corn, soybeans) and the other staple food groups we rely on (eggs, fruits, vegetables, other proteins).

*Increasing and incentivizing local production and consumption of fruits, vegetables, poultry, and dairy would help close both gaps - meeting an urgent health need and providing economic opportunity to our agricultural entrepreneurs.*

### PROCESS/PACKAGE

Processing is a key missing link in our food system's economic chain. The lack of food infrastructure enterprises: cold storage, light processing, packaging and small meat processing plants make it difficult for institutions and restaurants to participate in the local food economy.

*Actively attracting food processing businesses to the region and supporting local entrepreneurs will address this missed opportunity. With food sales in our tricounty region totaling \$392 million, substantial potential exists to capture more economic activity with the development of a local food economy.*

### PROVIDE

Food purchases represent a significant percentage of income, especially for the low-income residents in our community. Efforts to build a local and regional food system must consider price impacts, and address areas in our communities where low-income residents lack access to grocery stores (i.e. "food deserts").

*Establishing economic development incentives for grocers who locate in low-access neighborhoods, or who improve existing stores will help address our Lawrence and Leavenworth "food deserts." In addition, supporting the expansion of farmers' markets, community gardens and mobile carts/trucks that sell fruits and vegetables will help provide greater access throughout our community.*

The full text of this report is available at [www.douglas-county.com/sites/fpc](http://www.douglas-county.com/sites/fpc)

This assessment was commissioned by the Douglas County Food Policy Council, a stakeholder council convened by the Douglas County Commissioners in 2009. The FPC serves as a forum for discussion and coordination for community-wide efforts to improve our community's access to local food supply and distribution networks. We represent a wide range of stakeholders in our food system—from agricultural producers to retailers to health and food security advocates.