

Building Local Food Systems Through Diverse Agriculture Operations

The cornerstone of a healthy local and regional food system is the production of the food itself.

In Kansas, the conversation has for years further centered on the production of specialty crops – such as fruits and vegetables – grown and sold directly from the producer to the consumer, or through local retail outlets.

According to Ag Census data, Kansas boasts about \$41.7 million in fruit and vegetable sales. But according to the Kansas Department of Agriculture, total economic output accounts for about \$99 million. The potential is for much more than that. Kansas now imports about 95% of its fruits and vegetables, and some argue that Kansas could and should grow much more of what it consumes.

Figuring out how to boost that industry for even more production has been a challenging conversation to have, particularly with agriculture producers who are well-suited to grow large amounts of commodity crops.

Is that changing?

“It is increasingly becoming a conversation within this system,” said Mike Matson, director of Industry Affairs and Development for Kansas Farm Bureau. “Farmers and ranchers will make determinations or decisions related to diversification based on a number of factors, not the least of which is economics. As pressures continue to mount related to growing and producing large commodities, our members are starting to look at other revenue streams.”

Kansas Farm Bureau convened a task force of member producers ahead of its centennial in 2019 to both ensure it is meeting the current and future needs of its members, and to consider areas of growth for recruitment.

The agriculture advocacy organization has had success supporting commodity growers, Matson said – those producing wheat, corn, soybeans, milo, cattle and hogs. They have recently hired a staff member to identify and build relationships with individuals and systems who are growing crops that are not those big commodities, he said.

That work is going well, Matson said, but there is much to be done to build systems to support those producers.

Christy Hopkins, director of Greeley County Community Development and past-president of the Western Kansas Economic Development Alliance, also notes the robust infrastructure that exists for agricultural commodities in her region.

“I think one of the biggest obstacles is not so much that we can’t grow different things, it’s that we don’t know what to do with it once it’s grown,” she said. “The systems are built and established to make commodity agriculture easy to understand. It’s not complex – I grow it, I take it to the elevator, or I bin it and market it later. I don’t think the systems are as well-defined or as easy to understand for the other types of agriculture that we’re talking about.”

Both Matson and Hopkins pointed to farm operations that are perfectly poised to grow large-scale grain crops, but would have to substantially retool their operations in terms of equipment, irrigation and especially labor to switch to growing a product like tomatoes or peppers.

Additional research on the varieties of fruits and vegetables could prosper in western Kansas in particular – and getting that information to producers – could help, Hopkins said.

There may be opportunities for deeper systemic work, she added. Hopkins recently heard a conversation about people in Western Kansas communities feeling like “leftovers” or “has-beens.”

“How do we change that?” she asked. “How do we do anything when we feel stuck?”

Lifting up more stories about producers who are navigating current systems or building new ones would also help, Hopkins said.

“The more we can see local and regional success stories, or ‘how we’ve done it’ guides will inspire others to action or think differently about what they can be doing on their own property,” she said. “I think that’s the key.”

Donn Teske, president of the Kansas Farmers Union, also pointed to opportunities to help specialty crop producers build their marketing capacity. Some of the state’s best-known farms excel at the marketing piece, he said.

“How do we take it mainstream?” he asked.

Organizations such as food hubs or local food cooperatives could help build that marketing capacity, he said. Further increasing specialty crop production would have additional benefits for the environment and for communities as a whole, he added.

