

Kansas Rural Center Summary of 2019 Town Hall Meetings



Summer 2019

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Special Thanks

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KRC's annual town hall series is a part of KRC's Civic Agriculture for Civic Health and Integrated Voter Engagement Initiatives funded by the Kansas Health Foundation. In 2019, the town halls were also partially funded by Humanities Kansas.

KRC's mission is to promote the long-term health of the land and its people through research, education and advocacy that advance an economically viable, ecologically sound, and socially just food and farming system.

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Introduction

In 2019, the Kansas Rural Center held its sixth series of town hall meetings across Kansas to inform Kansans on food, farm and rural issues, facilitate community conversations, and motivate action. As in past years, the emphasis was on what is needed to address these issues at the local, state, or federal level with emphasis on what people and communities can do locally to build a better future.

From July through September 2019, KRC hosted five such meetings in Emporia, Wichita, Garden City, St. Francis, and Kansas City. 250 people came out to listen and offer their perspectives.

In 2019 for the first time, KRC included two major urban cities (Wichita and Kansas City, Ks.) in order to gain understanding on the similarities and/or differences between rural and urban perspectives regarding food, farm, and rural issues. We placed the conversations within the context of the general decline in rural Kansas communities and the farm economy, the challenges in our food system for both rural and urban alike (in the Wichita and Kansas City meetings), and the challenges of our changing climate and energy future. At the same time, energy and support for local/regional food systems, soil health, and other community efforts that help address some of these challenges are increasing across the state.

Based on dialogue and feedback from participants at meetings, KRC identified components of a vision for the future and developed recommendations for a more resilient food, farm and energy future in these four categories:

- Local/Regional Food and Agriculture
- Rural Revitalization
- Water, Conservation and the Environment
- Energy

Background

The challenges facing rural Kansas and agriculture are well known: population loss including an exodus of rural youth leaving an aging population behind; an aging farmer base with fewer young farmers entering the field; limited health care providers and loss of rural hospitals; closing or consolidation of rural schools; declines in food access whether due to closing grocery stores or loss of social service offices; the downward trending farm economy; and a general lack of economic opportunity. Farms also face the ramifications of greater consolidation within agriculture. At our urban meetings, we acknowledged similar issues with food access and availability and lack of decent paying economic opportunities, concerns about resource issues and how food is raised, and climate concerns. Both rural and urban areas all face environmental challenges impacting our natural resource base (i.e. water quantity and quality, soil health, air quality, etc.)

The above problems or factors lead to not just a lack of prosperity but a lack of resilience to unexpected disasters like flood, drought, fire or other weather extremes, and to a lack of resilience to outside forces like general economic recession. In addition, increased attention to climate change, energy needs and renewable energy has many Kansans, both rural and urban, thinking about how their lives are and will be affected.

As Kansans, we are responding to these changes whether we realize it or not. Farmers and ranchers are changing farm and livestock production practices to regenerate soil, protect water quality, and sequester carbon. Consumers are changing food buying habits or diets. Rural and urban citizens alike are adopting energy efficiency in homes and businesses. We are thinking more about our transportation systems and how we get to work or travel. Counties and communities are addressing road and bridge repairs from flooding damage or planning for future construction or maintenance. How we adapt to a changing climate (or at a minimum to increasing weather extremes), a changing energy future, and our food and farm system is integrally tied to our individual and community well-being.

Similar to the Governor's 2019 summer Town Hall meeting tour which examined the question of "what does rural prosperity look like to rural Kansans?", at each KRC Town Hall KRC asked participants to answer three questions about our food and farming future:

- 1) What is the vision or change that you want to see for a more resilient future?**
- 2) What are three things that need to be addressed that would advance that change/vision?**
- 3) What policies, or actions at the local, state or national level do we need to advance the vision for the future we want?**

A panel of farm, food and energy leaders started each meeting with brief comments on the above three questions, followed by an open community conversation. A condensed list of issues, topics and comments from the town halls can be found in the appendix. The following reflects the vision and comments, and recommendations KRC developed from all of the meetings.

The general theme running through all the meetings was "diversify, decentralize, connect and communicate" to get the future we need and want.

Toward a Common Vision

A resilient food and farm future for Kansas will include a local/regional food economy and farming system that focuses on feeding ourselves and our neighbors as much if not more than on “feeding the world”. Our food and farming system will be based on agro-ecological practices that build or regenerate soil health and reduce reliance on fossil fuels and pesticide use, and help us not only adapt to a changing climate but offer solutions to those challenges.



It will include greater local and regional production of food and energy, and encourage related businesses, which will help repopulate rural communities, and offer economic opportunity to both rural and urban communities alike.

It will embrace change-- economically, socially, culturally and environmentally-- and engage all stakeholders in regular communication and community conversations. Citizens will have stable, meaningful livelihoods in communities where we recognize our common values are not just about profit, but quality of life, and respect for diversity. The relationship between rural-urban communities will be recognized as inter-dependent and symbiotic, realizing that we need each other to work together to create resilience to future disruption and conflicts.

The following recommendations are based on cumulative input from the town halls, and were developed by KRC for state policy makers as well as individual citizens to help identify key points for advocacy and action.

Recommendations

Local/Regional Food and Agriculture

Building a sustainable local and regional food economy to focus on feeding ourselves is important to food security. This does not mean we do not have global and national supply lines. However, these can be disrupted by an increasing number of things (weather extremes of drought or flood, or other natural disasters, disease outbreaks, border or political conflicts, etc.) Creating more resilient production and sources of food locally is common sense. Production of fresh fruits and vegetables closer to where they are consumed also brings healthier food to more people, and economic opportunity to growers and communities that can be an important means to revitalizing rural Kansas.

- 1) Establish an appointed State Local Food and Farm Council to advise on needs and development of local/regional food system as well as food insecurity issues.
- 2) Establish a position for a statewide local/regional food systems coordinator to help facilitate agency, organization, and producer and community connections.
- 3) Advocate for state and federal programs that incentivize agro-ecological and climate friendly farming practices that build soil, protect water and air, and create resilience.
- 4) Remove major barriers to value added production such as adopting size appropriate rules and regulations for the cottage food industry, and provide education on the current rules and regulations concerning marketing and small scale processing.
- 5) Provide farm succession or farm transition planning education and resources to access unique opportunities in land and markets.
- 6) Encourage individuals and families to buy from farmers and ranchers adopting regenerative or sustainable practices including organic, or buy their products from local businesses to support the local/regional food economy.
- 7) Explore alternative structures for owning land and farming operations with diverse enterprises. For instance, land trusts and cooperative farms are increasing land access for beginning and existing farmers in some communities across the country.
- 8) Support regional food hubs that can aggregate individual farm production for marketing, storage and distribution.



Recommendations

Rural Revitalization

Rural population loss including an exodus of youth and an aging population and the continuing decline of rural communities is a decades old story in Kansas and other rural areas of the country. An aging farmer population and consolidation of farms into fewer farms plus the current downward spiral of the farm economy contribute to this overall decline. Health care, education and job opportunities are serious challenges in rural areas. Increasing the number of farmers, creating new business and job opportunities, improving access to land and the resources necessary to start a farm or business are necessary to retaining youth, attracting new people, and maintaining current residents. Cultural and social constructs hold back rural communities by not appearing to welcome changes that may be necessary to attract and maintain population, especially youth. Community conversations and conscious efforts to create a more welcoming environment are necessary.

Recommendations:

- 1) Identify major barriers to youth and adults remaining in Kansas, especially rural Kansas and develop recommendations for community/economic development.
- 2) Support a bi-partisan Gubernatorial/Legislative Committee on Affordable Housing that submits annual reports and develops policy recommendations and creates a rural affordable housing plan.
- 3) Develop programs and incentives that support local and regional food system opportunities for community/economic development. The Office of Rural Prosperity (ORP) should include a focus on how to connect food and rural economic development.
- 4) Identify and support recommendations/policies/incentives that encourage rural and urban food systems connections, relationships, and development. (i.e. what resources urban communities can contribute to helping rural food systems thrive and vice-versa)
- 5) Establish a beginning farmer skills and training program that will assist the next generation of farmers, offering education, mentoring, and resources.
- 6) Support expansion of Medicaid which will help protect rural health care and rural hospitals.
- 7) Support adoption of a universal health care or single payer plan. The current health care system is too expensive and does not ensure good health care for enough people.

Recommendations

Water, Conservation and the Environment

Building soil health through adopting farming practices based on agro-ecological principles is critical for the future of our natural resource base and its productivity. This will help not only with improving, protecting and maintaining soil health, water quality and quantity, nutrient cycling, and production of nutrient-dense foods, but will help us adapt to climate challenges of drought and flood, extreme heat or cold, and more.

Recommendations:

- 1) Create and adopt a State Climate plan.
- 2) Pass state legislation to establish soil health as a critical component in all state conservation programs. Information hearings could be a good step toward recognizing the importance of soil health in all our state programs regarding resources.
- 3) Support policies and programs that provide education on regenerative/sustainable practices, and help producer/land-owner transitions, and maintain these practices.
- 4) Support increased funding to the State Water Plan Fund. The water plan includes a wide range of water quality protection, water supply, and conservation programs developed to ensure future needs are met. \$8 million per year is the annual goal, but we have failed that for many years.
- 5) Support stronger pesticide protections. Ensure new rules and regulations on noxious weed law is an open public process, and support integrated pest management practices including non-chemical weed control methods, better applicator record-keeping, farmer education, farmer to farmer mediation and support that helps all farmers address existing and emerging pesticide concerns.
- 6) Support updating state pesticide law to address drift and drift protection; urge research and education curriculum at state universities into non-chemical weed and pest controls.



Recommendations

Energy

Climate and energy issues and weather extremes will greatly influence the future of farming and food in Kansas, and the health of rural (and urban) communities. They will impact how we farm and raise food and what the related businesses and services needed will be. Greater awareness of our energy needs including energy efficiency and the alternative or renewable energy options that are affordable and accessible are critical. Communities need to facilitate education and information to better understand options and needs.

Recommendations:

- 1) Create and adopt state energy efficiency standards; Support state energy efficiency program and goals which can lower demand and individual household costs, and create jobs.
- 2) Develop education programs for communities to facilitate education and information to help citizens better understand options and needs and make decisions regarding energy planning.
- 3) Develop a Kansas Energy Plan, and a Climate and Health Plan. Enact aspects of these within local community and/or regional planning.
- 4) Establish an independent Kansas energy office engaged in planning for the future.
- 5) Support the Kansas Climate and Health declaration.



Call to Action

The Kansas Rural Center calls for advocacy and action on the recommendations above. All Kansans have a role in making the recommendations above a reality. By talking to your neighbors to sharing your concerns with your policy makers, we can all better understand the shared vision we want for our farm and food future. We especially encourage local and state policy makers to consider these recommendations as policies are created and considered.

In 2020, KRC will host another series of Future of Farming and Food Town Halls to further explore issues, needs, and actions to strengthen our state's resilience. As in past years, participants will have the opportunity for conversation and dialogue to openly share their stories, concerns and ideas. All are invited to attend.

Consider the following as examples of first steps to taking action on the recommendations made in this report:

- Start or join a local food and farm council
- Write a letter to the editor or contact your legislator(s) about an issue you care about
- Attend county commissioner meetings
- Start a community discussion group
- Buy local products from local farmers or ranchers and/or ask your local restaurants or other food retail outlets to purchase from local farmers;
- Attend your local legislator or Congressperson's town halls and ask questions;
- Be a candidate for local office;
- Support or volunteer with a Kansas conservation, environmental or sustainable/regenerative organization.

Appendix

2020 Town Hall Selected Condensed Comments

Key Comments from Panelists:

- Reconnect within our communities.
- Shift from feeding the world paradigm to feeding our neighbors and ourselves.
- Rural and urban people and communities need to acknowledge their interdependence.
- We need to have tough conversations (i.e. politics, religion, etc.) with our neighbors. We need to practice doing this.
- Need farm policy that encourages farming that helps community. Current subsidization of commodity ag does not help community. Current policy encourages the big to get bigger and then props them up.
- Health Crisis is an agricultural crisis. We grow enough food, but we grow nutrient deficient food.
- The money families spend on food and medical care or pharmaceuticals has flipped. We now spend more on pharmaceuticals and health care than on food. And farmers are going broke.
- We grow the cheap stuff and import the expensive stuff. Can we start growing some of the “expensive” stuff? 95% of our food in Kansas is imported.
- We need to understand soil health and human health connections.
- Climate change impacts our health. The future will be based on changes needed to adapt to this.
- We need to increase energy efficiency and increase renewable energy.
- We are borrowing from the commons (air, water, soil) cheap grains grown at any cost are breaking us; we are extracting wealth from the commons for a few to prosper.
- Immigrants to the state come from places where they grew their own food; now they need access to land.
- Know our history. Educate people on how our current economy works and how it can be changed.
- Farm stress is up and financial difficulties are felt by ALL farmers and ranchers. (conventional and sustainable)

Appendix, continued

Key Comments from Participants:

- Change is necessary. We cannot continue on the path we are on. Our food system does not support the farmers that feed it. Continued dependence on chemical solutions and technology (ever more expensive) is not the answer.

- Money in politics is a problem. Transparency in govt. and politics is a problem.

- So much information is available.

What is the right information? How do we know?

- Food deserts in rural counties are a problem. (as they are in some sections of cities)

- Big box stores are removing wealth in both rural and urban communities.

- There is as much isolation today as there was in early settlements in history. We need to do more talking to our neighbors.

- Retirees are leaving (not just young people); not just from farming but from their communities. They are leaving to join their kids in the cities—draining communities of wealth, wisdom and knowledge.

- You have to go after the values” (i.e. it can’t always or only be about profits)

- Health care for all would enable more people to pursue not only farming but to develop other businesses and work opportunities.

- Regional food hubs could help farmers and consumers organize a local/regional food system.

- We need to support farmers and ranchers who are doing the right thing. Buy from those who have changed farming practices.

- Razor thin or non-existent profit margins for farmers (conventional and increasingly for sustainable or regenerative) keep farmers from changing or adopting new practices, and threaten our food security.

- Change current farming model /end the subsidization of the wrong model; need more education for farmers to make a shift and incentivize it.

- Access to land is increasingly a problem. Too expensive.

- Recognize diversity as a risk management approach.

- We need to remove the barriers to value added production.

- One size fits all regulation (in terms of direct marketing, niche markets, or cottage industry) is a disaster for anyone trying to do something different.

Appendix, continued

Key Comments from Participants, continued:

- Sales tax on farmers' market sales should be dropped.
- Lack of information or confusion on "cottage laws" keep some producers from trying.
- Extremes in weather make it harder to farm and/or raise food.
- Need more dollars to educate and train beginning farmers.
- Climate change is a cycle and we have always had these cycles.
- How do we pay for all these things (changes)?
- Public schools could implement use of more renewable energy at school buildings, as a way to teach about it.
- Monoculture agriculture uses too much fossil fuels and chemicals and is bad for the environment.
- People are alienated from nature. Gardens are entry level "drug" to respecting food and farmers and making changes.
- Do we need siting criteria or guidelines for wind and solar statewide?
- Large scale wind and solar will be needed even if every roof has solar
- Our social and cultural constructs are holding us back; they keep people from communicating and working together. How do we change these?
- Develop a shared agenda and vision for food and ag in the region (i.e. get specific how many acres of this or that is needed? How many dairies? How many processors for this population? What can and can't be grown here? Etc.)
- Know history. Educate people on how our current economy works and how it can be changed.
- Climate change and its impacts will increase community frictions. We need to start communicating now.
- Farm stress is up and financial difficulties are felt by ALL farmers and ranchers.
- Acknowledgement of lots of local small urban gardens, community gardens, and activities toward this in Wichita and KC.
- How do we get more farmers to use more of the current programs (i.e. conservation & stewardship, development and marketing, etc.) that would help them with production and profitability? Why don't they adopt the practices that would help them become more resilient?

Appendix, continued

To the question of “What makes you optimistic that this (i.e. food system and farming) will ever be anything but a boutique niche way of living?”

Panelists and participants’ comments:

- Change is necessary, (using the example of pesticides resistance.) We cannot continue on the path we are on. We must change. The side effect of current system is a dependence on technology and chemical solutions.
- Young people’s mindsets have already shifted. A generational shift will move us out of this system. New farmers can’t make the current model work.
- Shift will take place because it has to. Current food system is broken. The money families spend on food and medical care or pharmaceuticals has flipped. We now spend more on pharmaceuticals than on food and farmers are going broke.



Resources

Key Reports Outlining Recommendations

[Office of Rural Prosperity - 2019 Listening Tour Report](https://www.ruralkanprosper.ks.gov/) - <https://www.ruralkanprosper.ks.gov/>

[Kansas Sampler Foundation - Report of Rural Priorities](#) - Follow link or contact the Kansas Sampler Foundation at 620.585.2374.

[Feeding Kansas \(KRC\)](#)

Key Barriers:

- Inadequate local and state level coordination, planning, and resource allocation to support and sustain Kansas farm to fork food system.
- Lack of regulatory clarity around state level policies that impact the farm to fork food system
- Lack of a central location for finding farm to fork related policy and program information, across government and nongovernment sectors
- Limited information, resources, and protections for the production, handling and sale of fruits and vegetables

Recommendations: see page 23 of report linked above. <https://kansasruralcenter.org/feeding-kansas/>

[Lessons Learned from Specialty Crop Farmers Across Kansas \(KRC\)](https://kansasruralcenter.org/lessons-from-specialty-crop-farmers-publication-available/) - <https://kansasruralcenter.org/lessons-from-specialty-crop-farmers-publication-available/>

- Key Barriers identified: Labor, consumer education, lack of growers, crop insurance, health insurance, land availability, market logistics and infrastructure, finances, and farmer education.
- Key Opportunities identified: Business incubators for farmers, vegetable produce auctions, Food hubs and coops, partnerships with other farms, and land transitions.

[Local Food and Farm Task Force Reports \(2016 & 2017 State of Kansas\)](https://agriculture.ks.gov/divisions-programs/agricultural-marketing-advocacy-and-outreach-team/local-food-and-farm-task-force) - <https://agriculture.ks.gov/divisions-programs/agricultural-marketing-advocacy-and-outreach-team/local-food-and-farm-task-force>

Key Recommendations:

- Form a state Local Food and Farm Advisory Board appointed by Sec. of Ag
- Hire Local Food Systems Coordinator at KDA
- Create K-State Research and Extension Positions Focused on Specialty Crop Production
- Support training to help farmers increase capacity and scale-up production, particularly for specialty crops
- Lower state food sales tax
- Identify and enhance aggregation opportunities

Resources, continued

Other Local Food System Assessments and Reports

Hyperlinks to online assessments and reports are available in the digital format of this report.

[Food Hub Feasibility Study: Northeast Kansas A report for the Douglas County Food Policy Council](#)

Western Prairie Food, Farm & Community Alliance - [World Café Feedback on a Regional Food System H.E.R.O. Planning Project](#)

[Wyandotte County Local Food Assessment](#)

[Riley County Community Food System Assessment](#)

[Allen County GROW Food Assessment](#)

[The Johnson County, Kansas Food System](#)

[North Central Kansas Food Council – Regional Food System Assessment](#)

[Franklin County Food Policy Council Report and Recommendations](#)

[Food System Analysis for Douglas, Jefferson and Leavenworth Counties](#)

[Crawford County Food Systems Assessment & Action Plan](#)

[Harvey County Food & Farm Council Food Assessment](#)

[Shawnee County Food Assessment](#)

Key organizations and programs supporting local food systems

*This is not a comprehensive list but identified several major players in shaping the states local food and farm future.

[The Kansas City Food Hub](#)

[High Plains Food Coop](#)

[ICT Food Circle](#)

[KC Food Circle](#)

[KC Growing Growers](#)

[ICT Growing Growers](#)

[From the Land of Kansas](#)

K-State Research & Extension

[Farmers Markets](#)

[Urban Food Systems](#)

Horticulture Research – [Olathe, John C.](#)

[Pair Center](#)

[Farm to School](#)

[Kansas Healthy Food Initiative](#)

[USDA Rural Development](#)

[Harvesting Opportunities](#)

[Center for Engagement and Community Development](#)

[Kansas Center for Sustainable Agriculture and Alternative Crops](#)

[Kansas Rural Center](#)

[Kansas Farmers Union](#)

[KC Healthy Kids](#)

[Kansas Alliance for Wellness](#)

[Kansas Sunflower Foundation](#)

[Kansas Health Foundation](#)

*Several local level food and farm councils

*Several local level funders