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STUDY TRACKS CHANGES IN FOOD AND AG IN MISSOULA COUNTY

University – Community Collaboration Releases First Phase of Food Assessment

MISSOULA – It's late spring. That means many Missoula County residents are planting their gardens, the farmers' market has begun to bustle, and calves are romping in greener pastures. And the labors of a unique collaboration that has focused its attention on food and farming in the County are beginning to bear fruit. Today, students and faculty from the University of Montana and a community-based steering committee representing a range of local interests released the first part of a community food assessment, which is a comprehensive study of our local food and farming system.

"For over a year now, we've been studying the complex web that incorporates all things food – from growing to distributing to eating food – in Missoula County," explained Neva Hassanein, Assistant Professor of Environmental Studies at UM and one of the facilitators of the project. "Today, we're making available to the public two of four reports that will emerge from the community food assessment."

One of the reports, *Our Foodshed in Focus: Missoula County Food and Agriculture by the Numbers*, compiles existing statistical data, primarily from U.S. census reports and other government sources. Seven chapters – authored by UM students – describe patterns in the local food and farming system and how these have changed over time.

"This is the first time anyone has compiled all of these data into one place," according to Helen Atthowe, steering committee member and Missoula County Extension Agent.

"Missoula used to produce so much food, but now it looks like a community that is food insecure and more reliant on food from distant places. We've lost agricultural land over the years, and most farmers and ranchers rely on off-farm income to survive."

"The food distribution network is how food gets to us as consumers. When it comes to processing raw agricultural products, the County has lost much of the necessary infrastructure," explained Jean Duncan, another steering committee member. "Although the retail and the food service sectors appear to be doing fairly well, we don't know to what extent these are locally owned."

“With so many of our residents living below the poverty line, far too many people are struggling to obtain their next meal,” added Aaron Brock of the Missoula Food Bank. “This report shows that many people in need aren’t accessing government food and nutrition programs. That puts more pressure on emergency food sources. While we’ve been able to handle that pressure, food pantries and soup kitchens aren’t a long-term solution to hunger in our community.”

The group also released a guide booklet designed to help residents find out about the organizations, programs and businesses involved in the Missoula County food system. *Grow, Eat, and Know: A Resource Guide to Food and Farming* provides descriptions and contact information so citizens can locate a wide variety of groups. The 28-page guide lists anti-hunger groups, agricultural programs, nutrition education programs, and more. These guides will be made widely available around the County.

“A close collaboration between members of the campus and larger community has been vital to this process,” explained Libby Hinsley, a graduate student who has been involved since the project’s inception. “Over 25 students have worked on this, gaining valuable research skills and contributing to the community at the same time.”

UM students and faculty – primarily from the Environmental Studies Program and the Social Work Department – put together a local steering committee, which guides the food assessment process. The 15 committee members represent a range of organizations and interests, including farmers, County extension, a public health official, a planner, anti-hunger advocates, businesses, and more.

The group is currently analyzing data they collected this spring. Those reports and recommendations will be released in the fall.

Copies of the report may be obtained by contacting Neva Hassanein at 243-6271.

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