



The Southwest New Mexico Food Policy Council

Thinking Regionally, Acting Locally



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FoodPolicyNetworks.org
Creating Opportunities to Strengthen Food Systems



Image: TVC's garden harvest destined for their food pantry



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Time, space, and population density are three elements of our lives that become dramatically enhanced when we enter rural America. After driving for more than an hour at 70 mph down an arrow straight country road in southwestern New Mexico, I was perplexed by the fact that not only had I seen so few homes, but I was still in the same county! In those beautiful, wide-open spaces where the cattle greatly outnumber the people, one doesn't need a highly developed food consciousness to ask the question, "Where do people get their groceries?"

Food access as well as food insecurity and food production are concerns now being taken up by a growing number of food policy councils emerging across rural America. Though densely populated areas of the country face similar issues, the physics of time, distance, and human proximity present rural America with a decidedly different set of challenges. The four New Mexican counties that hug the Arizona and Mexican borders – Luna, Hidalgo, Grant, and Catron – that I journeyed through contain a scant 62,000 people spread across 17,300 square miles. By comparison, the states of Maryland and Delaware have a combined 6.9 million people packed into 14,400 square miles.

There are consequences to living in places where people are few. In Luna County, for instance, a Senior Meals on Wheels volunteer must drive for an entire day to deliver food to 12 separate homebound seniors. Residents of Catron County must drive up to one-and-a-half hours to get to a

full-service grocery store, while people living in Hidalgo County's 3,000 square miles (bigger than Delaware) are only served by one supermarket.

It may be glib to say that rural areas contain less of the good things and more of the bad things, but the numbers often suggest that story. State-wide, New Mexico's metro areas have a poverty rate of 14.5 percent, but its rural areas are at 17.7 percent. Silver City, located in Grant County and the four-county region's largest population center, derives a dubious benefit from one of the largest open-pit mines in the world. While their well-paying mining jobs rise and fall with the price of copper, toxic residues carried in the form of air-borne particulate matter and groundwater pollution are persistent facts of life (and sometimes death). And due in large part to the paucity of many basic necessities and good work oppor-

tunities, rural areas are losing population, especially the young, and the remaining population is growing older and in need of more services.

But there are places in America that are even more rural than rural. Hundreds of counties, mostly found west of the Mississippi River, carry the designation of “Frontier.” Though it’s a term

distant voices. And among the region’s food and health advocates I spoke to, the prevailing sentiment was the “metrics” that grant-making foundations employ for measuring impact don’t favor rural areas. To put it simply, grants to low-density population areas don’t generate the large numbers of “service units” per dollar spent that metro areas do.



Members of the Southwest New Mexico FPC gather for their June meeting.

that evokes images from a nineteenth-century America, it is based on criteria developed by academics and government agencies that designates a place with very low population density. Its criteria also include significant distance and driving times to health services and commercial market areas. Suffice to say that frontier counties have the fewest people and the greatest gaps in the availability of goods and services. As one local food activist put it, “Even our dumpsters have less food in them than other places.”

Fewer people per jurisdiction have political and funding consequences as well. In our system of governance, the more people you have within specific boundaries often translates into more political clout. Because the combined population of all U.S. frontier counties represents only two percent of the entire country’s voters, it goes without saying that the federal and state governments have to turn up their hearing aids to detect those

Except for a small portion of Grant, all four counties that have joined together as the Southwest New Mexico Food Policy Council are frontier. This is a good part of the reason that the National Center for Frontier Communities, based in New Mexico, has provided “backbone” support for this regional coalition. The other big reason is simple political math – four low-population counties working together have more power and resources than any one of them alone.

The NCFC came into existence in 1997 to focus on the limited access to basic services in frontier counties. But like many health advocates, they soon realized that food deserts (the American Rural Sociological Society has identified over 800 rural food desert counties) were associated with poor health outcomes. This awareness eventually brought them squarely into the food system camp where they began exploring the multiple links between diets, agriculture, health, and declining rural economies.

According to Susan Wilger, NCFC’s Director of Programs, about a year’s worth of planning work with representatives from all four counties preceded the final development of the regional food policy council. “Fortunately, there were existing councils, coalitions, and agencies in all four counties who were interested in working together,” she told me. “We developed some governing by-laws including how we make decisions (at least one voting member from each county must be

present for the food policy council to take a position – electronic voting is allowed), and then put together a list of program and policy priorities.”

Susan and the planning team didn’t have to reinvent the wheel. About five years ago a coalition of groups working on health issues in Grant County received a three-year Robert Wood Johnson Foundation “Healthy Kids, Healthy Communities” grant. A portion of the funds and a significant amount of resources went into forming the Grant County Food Policy Council which operates under the auspices of county government. The Council’s experience and the wisdom of one of its founders, Alicia Edwards, also the Executive Director of The Volunteer Center, a Silver City non-profit food organization, gave the nascent regional food policy council lots of “lessons learned.”

“Alicia Edwards is a visionary,” was how Susan described the dynamic leader of The Volunteer Center. A tour of the Center’s state-of-the-art community food facility reveals just how creative Alicia is. Complete with a half-acre of vegetable gardens, over 70 fruits trees, community meeting and kitchen space, and an emergency food pantry, the facility is also a reflection of deep community support. “Some amazing things happen in this city,” Alicia commented deflecting the spotlight back on the community. “If people believe in your work, they’ll support you.” (In that regard I was particularly struck by one act of small town charity from a clothing thrift-store called “Single Socks” which has donated over \$188,000 to anti-hunger work in Grant County since 2009.)

While Alicia acknowledges that the building and well-tended gardens provide important services and healthy food to the community, she also sees their work as a practical and programmatic demonstration of what a vibrant local food system – one supported by robust public policy

– can look like. Since food policy councils often debate – and occasionally trip over – the question of whether to do food program or policy work, a rough synergy of sorts has been created between the Center, the Grant County Food Policy Council, and now the Southwest New Mexico Food Policy Council.



Youth activity at The Volunteer Center

Everyone, in effect, understands their role: The Center offers a wide range of helpful goods and services that support the development of a sustainable and secure local food system; the Grant County Food Policy Council works with County government to ensure supportive public policies (at the council’s urging, the board of county commissioners recently agreed to purchase a \$150,000 chipper to aid the County’s composting initiative), and the Southwest New Mexico Food Policy Council harvests the power and resources of four counties to research regional needs and organize more effective advocacy strategies.

As an example of how region-wide research and advocacy can work, Alicia tells me about the challenges of feeding a growing number of food insecure people in under-resourced rural communities. On a monthly basis a truck loaded with donated food from the Road Runner Food Bank (New Mexico’s statewide food bank) literally pulls

up to a wide spot in a Catron County road where 100 or more people may have been waiting for up to three hours. Without the benefit of buildings or infrastructure of any kind, a local church group unloads the truck and distributes the food immediately to the waiting families. The truck leaves empty; nothing is leftover nor stored; the recipients go their own ways, and the same thing will happen on the same day the following month. “How crazy is that?” is how Alicia punctuates the story’s end.

Experiences like this augment data that has been gathered from a health assessment conducted by the regional food policy council. Among the areas the assessment is exploring is the quality and quantity of food that is distributed by the region’s dozen or so food pantries. With this information at hand Alicia and Susan hope to alter the formula that currently governs the distribution of TEFAP food commodities. This is important because TEFAP, which is made up of federal government commodities and distributed by the State of New Mexico Food and Nutrition Services Bureau, is generally acknowledged by emergency food providers to be nutritionally superior. But rural food advocates contend that the current formula does not take into account the relative need, lack of access, and limited infrastructure of these four southwest counties. If the state administrators agree with them – and so far they seem inclined to listen – the change will give a much needed injection of dietary health to thousands of lower income frontier families.

“The handful of people doing stuff in Hidalgo County...are in this room”

You learn a lot about a place when you sit and listen to people tell their stories. This was certainly the case inside the Hidalgo County DUI Building, the June meeting site for the Southwest New Mexico Food Policy Council. Entering a public facility ominously named for those who violate New Mexico’s driving and drinking laws makes one feel a little uneasy. Though none of the county’s 5,000 residents know me, I still pull my visor cap

down over my eyes to conceal my identity...just in case. But once inside I am greeted by a beautiful potluck lunch of fajitas and happy (but sober) people, some of whom have driven an hour-and-a-half to attend the meeting.

Amidst the chatting and chewing, the meeting’s discussion revealed how people pull together to solve problems, not only because they want to but because they have no choice. Emily Shilling from the Southwest Council of Governments reminded everyone that the rates of food insecurity among children and elders in the region were increasing, and that obesity was a problem. While most people nodded their assent, Cristy Ortiz from the Hidalgo County Food Coalition pointed to the progress being made from expanded farmers’ market programs (e.g. “Double-Up Food Bucks” for SNAP recipients), new AmeriCorps volunteers, and better coordination between food pantries and schools, all of which had connections to public policy and/or the work of the food policy council. To reinforce Cristy’s remarks, Michele Giese from the New Mexico Health Department attributed the region’s five new mobile food pantries (monthly emergency food drops like the one described above) to the work of the regional council and Susan Wilger.

Several public officials were present or represented including the office of U.S. Senator Martin Heinrich and Lordsburg’s Mayor’s office. Hidalgo County Commissioner Darr Shannon, whose family has been ranching in the county for 125 years, was passionate about how much work needs to be done in Hidalgo. She reiterated the concern that “children here are going to bed hungry,” but made it clear that there are limits to what the county can do about food. She reminds the group that the “county’s roads and housing are in poor shape, and we have parts of the county without clean drinking water.” Darr emphasized that she loves the people and the place, and that while she owns a ranch, she maintains that, “no one owns the land; we’re just here to take care of it.” Sporting conservative Western attitudes that sometimes cast the federal government as the Evil Empire, Darr fully embraced the local solutions that were being discussed by the regional

food policy council and its members. She was particularly enthusiastic about a growing New Mexico movement to open community kitchens. “I really want a community kitchen to work here!” she proclaimed.

Perhaps the most telling comment came from John Allen, a New Mexico State University Extension agent for Hidalgo County and a member of the Hidalgo Food Coalition and regional food policy council. Noting how challenging it is to work in low-density places, he said, “There’s really only a handful of people doing stuff in Hidalgo, and most of them are in this room,” gesturing to the 20 or so people seated at the table. His remark elicited vigorous vocal affirmations.

Yes, John was teaching some nutrition classes in the public schools, but the county does not have a single “farm to table” restaurant, and healthy food at any of the existing restaurants is almost non-existent. Yes, there were some large farms in the county, but most of them were producing hay and corn for New Mexico’s factory dairy farms, and it was difficult to get these farms to produce fruits and vegetables for local markets. But in spite of these shortcomings, John made it clear that he and his family were committed to staying in Hidalgo and doing what they could to improve things.

Rural places may not have enough people to do everything that needs to be done, but the people working on food and farming issues are strong, smart, and committed. By turning “smallness” to their advantage where access to decision makers is easier, progress can be made if and when resources are available and people work together. Linking health and food, for instance, has been a powerful marriage that is already bearing offspring. And to the extent that connection can find a partnership with economic development, the marriage can prove even more fruitful.

Another lesson that rural America has learned is that no matter how good their people are, they need help from the outside. Forging substantial bonds with nearby counties, state advocates, and federal officials are the actions that will

multiply their fewer hands many times over. The Southwest New Mexico Food Policy Council has done this by forming a regional council, working closely with the New Mexico Food and Agriculture Council, and building strong ties to federal officials.

Working together should be rewarded and incentivized; at the very least it shouldn’t be so hard to collaborate when doing it well can yield substantial results. Collaboration may not come any easier to rural communities than it does to metro areas, but the imperative is greater. Though the spirit of self-reliance and the proverbial bucket brigade may be woven into the fabric of rural America, its residents know that by the time the cavalry arrives it could all be over. Food system and food policy work are excellent places to hone a community’s collaboration skills – the benefits come quickly and often with real impact. Attention should be given to building this capacity, which in today’s world is a critical survival skill. Not surprisingly, funding, training, and technical assistance will perhaps go further in rural America than it would elsewhere for the simple reason that the consequences of not working together could very well be dire.

The Southwest New Mexico Food Policy Council at a Glance:

- ▶ *Mission: Promoting policies and mobilizing resources and infrastructure that guarantee healthy, affordable food through local, sustainable agricultural economies for everyone in Hidalgo, Luna, Catron, and Grant counties*
- ▶ Formed in 2014 after a year of discussion and planning
- ▶ Operates independently under its own by-laws without any formal attachment to government
- ▶ While the membership is still a little bit fluid, there is a formal “member roster” of 20 people and 2 staff people from Southwest Center for Health Innovations which is affiliated with the National Center for Frontier Communities
- ▶ Most members are drawn from various county health organizations, government entities, county food councils and coalitions, and various food system sectors; since meetings are open to the public, local officials and other individuals not formally identified with the council are encouraged to (and do) attend.
- ▶ The council does not have any formal corporate or tax status but the NCFC is their “backbone” organizations and receives and administers grants in order for the council to pursue its work
- ▶ Current priorities and related activities: 1) complete a four-county health impact assessment; 2) with a grant from USDA complete a food hub feasibility study; 3) Investigate how the region’s water policies (e.g. The Interstate Stream Commission) affect food security – preliminary review suggests they want regulations that favor small farming and backyard gardening; 4) Engage the New Mexico Food and Nutrition Service to improve commodity foods distribution within the region; 5) opposed New Mexico Human Services Departments plans to tighten work rules for the state’s SNAP recipients; 6) work closely with the New Mexico Food and Agriculture Policy Council to increase funding for the state Farm to School Program (\$450,000 in recurring funds secured), create a \$400,000 “Double-Up Bucks” program for SNAP recipients at the state’s farmers markets (funds secured), and support funding for community kitchens. 7) Development of a resource guide for small growers/ranchers.
- ▶ Funding: The food policy council does not have dedicated sources of funding for its core work. Funding for projects such as the health impact assessment and the food hub feasibility study come from various sources, and a portion is used to provide the “backbone” support for the council. Finding regular funding to support general operating costs remains a challenge. A proposal to approach each of the region’s four counties for a small annual appropriation is being considered. Funding for the development of the Hidalgo County Food Coalition and initial regional collaboration work came from the American Association of Retired People (AARP) from 2012 to 2014; the Health Equity Partnership (funded by the Kellogg Foundation) funds the health impact assessment; a USDA Local Food Promotion Grant funds the food hub feasibility study; the Con Alma Foundation (a New Mexico-based health foundation) is providing two years of support for the food policy council