

Looking into the Future of Southwestern Wisconsin

Report on Five Listening/Networking Sessions Sponsored by the Food, Faith and Farming Network

Monroe (Green County)

Fennimore (Grant County)

Viroqua (Vernon County)

Dodgeville (Iowa County)

Richland Center (Richland County)

June 2018



Food, Faith and Farming Network

gives voice to the sacred connections between land and people.

We foster rural and urban relationships and promote earth stewardship, community, spirituality and economic justice through healthy food and sustainable farming practices.

We collaborate with individuals, organizations and faith communities that share our vision.

Southwestern Wisconsin is highly dependent on the agricultural economy and the ag economy has been struggling for the past several years. Commodity milk prices in early 2018 were just over half the price farmers were receiving for their milk in the fall of 2014. Even organic dairy farmers, who have received a premium for their milk, have seen their prices drop dramatically as Wisconsin and the U.S. have experienced an over supply of milk. Meanwhile, input costs for farming (seed, fertilizer, fuel, machinery, cattle, land) have escalated rapidly over the last few years, leaving farmers with thin margins at best and actual economic losses in many cases.

Wisconsin—America’s Dairyland-- has lost nearly 50% of its dairy farmers in the last 15 years (from 16,000+ in 2003 to under 9,000 today...a loss of over 500 farms a year). Dairy farmers aren’t the only ones struggling to stay afloat in tough economic times. Prices for corn, soybeans, pork, and cranberries have also crashed, leaving many Wisconsin farmers on the brink of financial disaster.

In response to this evolving farm crisis, the Food, Faith and Farming Network (FFFN) launched a series of five Listening/Networking Sessions in the spring of 2018. We invited farmers, food producers and rural community members to share their thoughts about 1) assets/strengths in their communities, and 2) challenges/issues they face in their communities. The following locations and dates were chosen with two goals in mind: 1) keeping locations within reasonable driving distances of all residents in Southwestern Wisconsin, and 2) holding sessions in the late winter months when farming activities are at their lowest ebb:

Monroe, WI: February 27, 2018

Fennimore, WI: March 6, 2018

Viroqua, WI: March 13, 2018

Dodgeville, WI: March 20, 2018

Richland Center, WI: March 22, 2018

Penny Molina, a private consultant specializing in local foods and agricultural marketing, facilitated discussions at the five Listening/Networking Sessions. She also met to help plan and organize the events with many local partners, including: UW-Extension, Southwest Technical College, Southwest Wisconsin Community Action Program, Southwest Wisconsin Regional Planning, Vernon Economic Development Association, Landmark Creamery, Circle M Farm, Austin’s Rush Creek Farm, Crossroads Community Church (Monroe), St. John’s UCC (Monroe), Good Shepherd Lutheran Church (Viroqua), Grace Lutheran Church (Dodgeville), St. Peter Lutheran Church (Fennimore) and Richland Center Fellowship/Eagle School and more. Thanks much to Penny Molina for her excellent outreach, organizing, and facilitation on this project and to all our partners-- whether listed above or not--they were most helpful in planning the events and encouraging participation in each location.

A simple meal prepared with local foods was provided at each event (chili and cornbread or chicken pot pie) to encourage participation and idea sharing. Attendance at sessions varied from 18

to 65 with an average attendance of 34. Attendees appreciated the opportunity to share their thoughts and ideas flowed freely at each session.

Our goals were to listen to local residents and network with groups and organizations that can help address the issues surfaced. This report summarizes what we heard at the Listening/Networking Sessions and outlines some initial directions FFFN intends to take in addressing issues raised. We hope this document will trigger discussions about other actions that could be taken to address issues and foster additional partnerships in addressing these issues.

LISTENING/NETWORKING SESSION SUMMARIES

Monroe, WI: February 28, 2018

Assets/Strengths

Active Tourism & Ag Tourism
Good water and soil
Strong concentration of family-scale farms
Strong connected group of female farmers
Farmers in region work well together
Good cheesemaker relationships
Rich and respected agricultural history
High number of organic farms
High cheese and beer production
Green County Economic Development Corp.
Green County Defending our Family Farms
Quality small town living
Good schools
Good recreation
Good gathering places
Close to metro area
Beauty of area

Challenges/Issues

Growing threat of industrial agriculture
Protecting water, air and affordable land
Land consolidation & ownership
Lack of labor and labor policies
Barriers for small ag businesses
State policies thwart local control
Economics of farming i.e. living wage
Hard to start/maintain farmers markets
Lack of appreciation for farmers
Consolidation of dairy/meat/grain processors
Certified kitchens not available
Lack of affordable housing for workers
Lack of affordable healthcare for farmers
Aging farm population/succession issues
Lack of support for innovative ag ventures
Lack of funding for schools and roads
Lack of access to Internet
Brain drain: youth leaving area
Kids in poverty
Empty storefronts
Opioid/alcohol/mental health issues
Urban sprawl into area

Fennimore, WI: March 6, 2018

Assets/Strengths

UW-Extension
UW-Platteville
Southwest Technical College
Productive soils
Access to local foods
Strong FFA and Vo-Ag teacher
High concentration of organic farmers
Good stewardship of the land
Largest county in Wisconsin
Land costs: \$3,000 to \$8,000/acre
Good transportation to markets
(Madison & Dubuque)

Viroqua, WI: March 13, 2018

Assets/Strengths

Food Enterprise Center
Viroqua Food Cooperative
Farmers' market
Organic Valley Coop
Westby Coop Creamery
Fifth Season Coop
Cooperative culture
Entrepreneurial culture
Organic farming & four certifiers
Community supported ag farms
Ag tourism strong
Local banks and businesses
Farm to table restaurants
Good hospital/healthcare
Vernon County Land and Water
Valley Stewardship Network
Strong food recovery & hunger relief
Abundant hunting, fishing & wild edibles
Intergenerational farms
Local food & wool processors
Many grazing operations
Sustainable farmers

Challenges/Issues

Young people not committed to farming
Capital required to farm; limits of gifting
Matching land with people wanting to farm
Local gardeners are challenge to farmers mkt
Amish farmers produce at low cost
Perception of farming as poor career path
Urban markets more profitable than local
Education about the benefits of buying local
Getting local foods into local markets
Mentoring of persons wanting to farm
Conventional/nonconventional farming tensions
Lack of market manager as go-between for
farmers and local markets

Challenges/Issues

Loss of local control: State and Federal
Typography hard to farm
Farmers losing milk market
Distance to markets & processing
Lack of ag manufacturing & processing
Dependence on expensive fossil fuels
Inability to set prices for farm products
Discrimination re. Hispanic population
High suicide rate among farmers
Lack of understanding re. farm bill
CALs at UW: focus on corn & soybeans
CAFOs coming into area
Contamination of water
Young farmers getting land & resources
Environmental concerns: floods/drought
Large farms taking over small farms
Lack of skilled & unskilled labor
Lack of representation at State Capitol
Availability of local organic compost
Unfilled Extension Agent positions
Lack funding for infrastructure
Farm subsidies provided without compliance

Amish community
Support for alternative energy
Strong FFA and 4-H groups
Technical college
Cooperative county government
Local media: WVRQ & WDRT
Activism for farming & environment
“Driftless” as a brand
Artistic culture
Scenic beauty

“Get big or get out” philosophy
Corporate support/influence at UW
Monoculture farming: corn & soybeans
Loss of bees and pollinators
Need for community land trust
Need for farm incubators & mentors
Access to affordable community kitchens
Affordable veterinary care
Education about farming as a profession
Communication across sectors: generations;
rural/village; organic/conventional

Dodgeville, WI: March 20, 2018

Assets/strengths

UW Extension & Technical College
Diverse agriculture & people
Community supported ag farms
Farmers markets
Farmers pulling together (community)
Proximity to markets & consumers
Strong big & little businesses
Strong work ethic
Low unemployment
Lack of large urban cities
Renaissance of small towns
Abundance of wildlife
Unique animal and plant life
Creative, resilient people
Moratorium on CAFOs
Resistance to ATC power lines
Churches not afraid to talk about issues
Young urbanites wanting to farm
Artistic people and artistry
Folklore Village
Cultural heritage
Beauty of the Driftless Area
Governor Dodge State Park
Excellent ground water

Challenges/issues

Lack of access to Internet
Movement of CAFOs into area
Lack of local control
Lack of involvement in local meetings
Lack of ag processing facilities
ATC power line slated for area
Greed over need for power line
Lack of size-neutral policies for farms
Losing young people to urban areas
Consolidation of farms; mega farms
Lack of awareness of area
CAFO impact on land and water
People don't know how to challenge CAFOs
Pressure of urban sprawl on land prices
Funding for UW-Extension being cut
Lack of awareness about farm prices
Difficult for young farmers to begin
Need stronger regulations & enforcement
Need governmental support for processing plant
Need affordable community kitchen
Need farmers mentoring programs
Need decent paying jobs & housing
Need for good quality childcare

Richland Center: March 22, 2018

Assets/strengths

UW Extension Agricultural Agent
Sense of community
Diverse topography, soils and crops
Wineries and cranberry bogs
Proximity to larger urban markets
Great healthcare
Community gardens
History/traditions of farming
Diverse agriculture: small/large/Amish
Many churches (22)
Entrepreneurial spirit
Growing tourism & ag tourism
Hardwood forestry industry
Health Coop (Richland Fit)
Cooperative human service projects
Friendly, welcoming people
UW-Richland Center
Good grazing possibilities
Low unemployment
Large ag & industrial base
Ag is #1 industry in county
Pine River recreational options
Strong ministerial association
Class A trout stream
Growing number of B & Bs
Maple syrup production
Frank Lloyd Wright building

Challenges/issues

Workforce shortage
Need more & younger people
25-40% of kids & seniors in poverty
Isolated elderly without access to food
Conventional/organic ag divide
Loss of youth; out-migration
Healthcare professional shortages
Conservative attitudes
Housing shortage
Food desert; lack of food markets
Absentee land ownership
Lack of on-going economic development
Lack of high speed Internet
Need to invest in future
Limited restaurants & income to support them
Limited overnight lodging for visitors
Lack of marketing for area
Commuters work here, then go home
Need for inclusion of Hispanic population
Concern about immigration issues
Low income makes business start-ups hard
Need locally sourced food in restaurants
Need active Chamber of Commerce
Need tiny housing to attract young people
Need promotion/development of silent sports
Need farmers market as meeting place and
market for local produce

COMMON THEMES AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

It's clear there are numerous Assets/Strengths in each of the five meeting locations. There are rich traditions as well as pride in local histories and culture. But, there are also numerous Challenges/ Issues identified in each of the meeting sites. Some of the Challenges/Issues are unique to the meeting sites, but there are common themes that can be identified as well. Our organization—the Food, Faith and Farming Network—is especially concerned about the following common themes that emerged from our Listening/Networking Sessions:

- The current farm economic crisis
- Transitioning farms to the next generation
- Providing young farmers access to land and resources
- Providing mentors to new/young farmers
- Food deserts in small, rural communities
- Local farmers access to local food markets
- Need for skilled farm and non-farm labor
- Need for agricultural processing facilities
- Fostering communication between agricultural sectors
- Lack of access to the Internet
- Need for affordable rural housing
- Low incomes and poverty in small, rural communities

We will be meeting this summer and reconvening a group of partners this fall to make decisions about action steps as a follow-up to our Listening/Networking Sessions. Our actions need to match our organizational mission and the top priorities that came out of the Listening/Networking Sessions. It's likely that we will be using our limited funding to staff projects in one or more of the following areas that surfaced in the sessions:

1. Establishing farmer's markets in small, rural communities: While some communities currently have farmers' markets, others do not, and these communities have found it difficult to establish or maintain markets over time. Providing technical assistance in this arena could be most helpful for improving farm income, providing local and sustainable products to community residents and helping small, rural communities to survive and thrive.
2. Helping local farmers gain access to local food markets: Local restaurants, grocery stores and institutions (schools, hospitals, nursing homes) find it easier to purchase food from suppliers that can offer products throughout the year and at predictable prices. But, this is extremely frustrating for local farmers who would like to crack these local markets. Providing technical assistance and mediation in this arena could be helpful to area farmers, restaurants, grocery stores, institutions and the community as a whole.
3. Helping to create local food systems in small rural communities: It could be helpful to develop one or more models for local food systems that include farmer's markets, community supported agriculture, local foods in local restaurants, grocery stores and institutions, as well as mechanisms for local farmers to be paid for excess products and for excess products to feed hungry people. Providing technical assistance and marketing could be helpful to area farmers, restaurants, grocery stores, institutions, consumers who are currently experiencing food insecurity, and the wider community.

4. Helping to transition farmers to the next generation: There is currently a crisis in creating the next generation of farmers in Wisconsin: many farm youths are not interested in farming and young people who do want to farm find the barriers to entry very difficult (the cost of land, cattle, and machinery is high, and it is difficult to create financial arrangements that work out for retiring farmers *and* entering farmers). Providing consultation in this arena can be very time-consuming, but it could help retiring and entering farmers and help create a new generation of farmers in Wisconsin.
5. Fostering communication between agricultural sectors: It became clear in offering the Listening/Networking Sessions that there are tensions between agricultural sectors in local communities: tensions between older and younger farmers, between conventional and organic farmers, between small and large farmers, and between Amish and non-Amish farmers. Some of these tensions might be eased by bringing the various sectors together to share stories and increase understanding between the sectors.

As we stated at the onset, Southwest Wisconsin is highly dependent on the agricultural economy. If we want vibrant, rural communities, we need to find ways of addressing these issues in the agricultural arena. We hope this document will trigger discussion about actions we might take—hopefully, in partnership with other groups—to address these issues. Please let us know what you think...you can reach us at <https://foodfaithandfarmingnetwork.org>