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Kansas Local Food Systems Recommendations

The state established Local Food and Farm Task Force finalized its 2016 report and recommendations early this year. These were presented to the House committee on Agriculture and Natural Resources on February 7, 2017 and the Senate committee on Agriculture on February 8, 2017 by Task Force Chairman, Ron Brown. If you are thinking there are several different reports out there by now, you'd be correct. But all are critically important and all work together paving the way for a more robust food system that creates greater resources for producers, greater healthy food access, and encourage positive economic opportunities.

In late 2014, the Kansas Rural Center published the Feeding Kansas report which laid out seven recommendations for public action to develop assistance for local food systems development. Then in early 2016, the Local Food and Task Force presented over 20 conclusions and recommendations to the legislature which included several of KRC's recommendations and others based on research and interviews with industry experts and leaders. The Kansas Department of Agriculture also held an Agriculture Summit in August, 2016 to hear from Kansas farmers and industry and organization leaders on what opportunities and barriers exist in their fields. Specialty crops were one of the focused issue areas, and the room was packed. Furthermore, several local level food and farm councils have completed food systems analyses that outline the status of their food systems, and strengths and weaknesses.

This year the seven member Local Food and Farm Task Force introduced six new recommendations in their December 2016 report, which target directives that include the identification of financial opportunities, technical support, and training necessary to expand production and sales of locally grown agricultural products; strategies and funding to make locally grown foods more accessible; and factors affecting affordability and profitability of locally grown foods.

The six recommendations include:

- Form a state Local Food and Farm Advisory Board
- Create a Kansas Department of Agriculture Local Food Systems Coordinator
- Establish a Kansas Wine Council
- Support K-State Research and Extension Specialty Crop Positions and Programs
- Establish Kansas as a Specialty Crop Leader by forming a Specialty Crop Council
- Lower state food sales tax to 5.3 percent

· The Task force did an incredible job of identifying and distilling the over 20 recommendations from last year's report into six concise and needed actions to continue local food systems growth in the state.

However, to date the proposed legislation has not been introduced and little legislative action has been seen on these recommendations aside from introduction of Senate Concurrent Resolution No. 1604, which would amend the state constitution to lower the rate of sales tax on food.

The state budget crisis has possibly crippled action on recommendations this year. So what makes all these recommendations so important and why should Kansas (policy makers and advocates) be acting on them now?

The health of Kansas people and the economy are both good answers. But there is also strong, undeniable growing local food demand. More farmers are interested in diversifying existing farms or beginning farming with a focus on specialty crops.

Interest is also high among foundations and a range of other organizations in investing in developing local/healthy food systems. The number of farmer's markets, local food and farm councils, and farm to table restaurants and other retail outlets have also been steadily increasing. Yet, despite Kansas's growing efforts, state support for research, experts, and planning to help grow agriculture industries outside of conventional crops and livestock in Kansas is disparagingly limited.

KRC speculates that advancing local food systems could be a key factor to strengthening the health of the state and local economies and people, particularly in deep rural areas that not only struggle to feed their residents but also to attract young people to stay or move to these areas. Water, and how it impacts our state's agricultural and health environment, is becoming increasingly scarce and has entered this conversation in a big way over the past several years.

We are also entering into predominantly hard economic times in the farming world. Acting on support for local food systems development could be more important now than ever.

Paul Johnson reported in the March 17th issue of KRC's Policy Watch that while 50% of the USDA Food Plate consists of fruits and vegetables (those five servings a day), barely 20% of Kansans meet that goal. While Kansans spend \$770 million yearly on fruits and vegetables, less than \$40 million (5%) is grown locally. As the number of dairies in Kansas has fallen from 5,600 in 1980 to under 400 today and 50 of these dairies have two-thirds of the dairy cattle in the state, there are only 10-12 dairies bottling milk on the farm and serving local markets. Kansas is also down to 75 meat processors/plants that handle under 5% of the meat market in Kansas. Processing of live poultry is only done at a handful of small meat processors while the consumer demand for local, pasture raised chicken continues to increase.

Over the past three years, Kansas has seen a great uptick in the number of local level food and farm councils and task forces across the state along with the State Local Food and Farm Task Force tackling some of these issues. To date there are at least 13 established local councils and 10 emerging councils in every region of Kansas.

Their priorities range from healthy, active living to helping communities increase access to healthy food for all residents to supporting local farmers in growing and marketing their products locally. There is clear, growing action from communities to create systems that help navigate and strengthen healthy food access, local food production and support for healthy people and a healthy economy. But greater technical assistance is identified as a great need at the state level to support these growing local efforts and interests.

All of the food systems reports and recommendations to date are paving the way for more robust food systems that help create greater resources for producers, greater healthy food access, and economic opportunities. However, much work is still needed to let our state policy makers and institutional leaders know how they can help chart the path forward.

Everyday Kansans are the greatest and most valuable voices and we should continue putting that power to work now more than ever. I challenge you to get involved in or support your existing or potential local food and farm council and other local efforts. Call your legislators and let them know what you care about.

As stated in the most recent Local Food and Farm Task Force report, "While we recognize the reality of our state budget, we must continue to show our top level leaders that this is a priority and a need to continue growing the opportunities for this industry in our state."

