

KRC Town Halls

In July and early August KRC hosted five Town Hall Meetings across the state asking what do people want the future of food and farming to be in Kansas? What is their vision within the context of a changing climate and extreme weather, economic uncertainties in agriculture, and the growing political divisiveness in our society?

The idea or purpose was to start a conversation, what do we want the future to look like based on a realistic understanding of where we are today? Then we asked two more questions: what are three things we would most like to see addressed to help advance that vision? And what policies or programs could be implemented at a local, state or national level to help move the vision along?

KRC has been cautioned against using the term “climate change”. But with these Town Halls, we decided to hit it head on. We posed the above questions against the back-drop of a changing climate, extreme weather events, and the challenges and uncertainties these bring as we look to the future.

KRC set the context for the conversation with short presentations summarizing the following:

The farm economy is in its 5th year of low commodity prices (due largely to tariffs and international politics), with no respite in sight. Net farm income increased slightly in 2019 but remains 36% below its 2013 peak. Slightly more than half of farm households had negative farm income in the past few years, relying more and more on off-farm income to support the household. (USDA ERS) The depressed farm economy contributes to significant family and individual stress, which was exacerbated this year with extreme weather; heavy rainfall and flooding led to prevented planting and seriously damaged fields (not to mention roads and bridges in rural counties).

Rural communities continue to lose businesses, hospitals or have hospitals facing financial difficulties. An exodus of youth once they graduate high school or college further depresses agriculture and rural communities.

Combine this with the more broadly felt disparities in wealth nationally –i.e. the top 10% own 80% of all the wealth while the bottom 90% own 23%), and the political polarization and divisiveness that pervades the news and ravages civic discourse, the future looks challenging.

But it is not all bad news. Consumer and producer interest and support for local and regional food systems is creating opportunities for farmers and for related

businesses. There is rising farmer interest in regenerative or sustainable farming practices that build soil health, reduce input costs, and provide multiple ecosystem benefits. Political divisiveness, which can make people want to run and hide, is also inspiring more people to engage – at the most local levels, and at the state and national level—in order to have a voice in determining their own future.

Over 250 people came out in five communities which included Emporia, Wichita, Garden City, St. Francis and Kansas City, Kansas, and they were ready to talk.

Bear in mind that KRC attracts mostly those who agree with many of our positions. But these meetings attracted a fair number of people who were new to KRC, who were ready to ask questions and offer opinions. The conversations were different at each community, but each were energizing, thoughtful, and of the “to be continued” variety.

The urban communities of Wichita and Kansas City were included because we wanted to hear if there were commonalities among the urban and rural perspectives, and if there were places where needs, goals and values intersect. Indeed, there were.

Surprisingly, we found only a small number of climate change deniers among attendees, or at least only a small number who were willing to speak up. What was most interesting to us was The lack of direct participant conversation or focus on it was interesting. People were more comfortable talking about the future for food and farming in Kansas and the issues, policies and actions needed to create that future, without acknowledging that these things often hit indirectly on the very things needed to address a changing climate or build resilience.

Each town hall featured 3 or 4 speakers, who primed the pump with ideas, giving short comments to the above questions. Then the evening was turned over to the audience to ask questions and share their own thoughts. Speakers varied at all the meetings but included Jeremy Cowan, KSU, Manhattan; Gail Fuller, Emporia farmer; Rachel Myslivy and Dorothy Barnett, Climate and Energy Project; Linda Pechin-Long, Flint Hills rancher; Tom Giessel, Larned farmer; Bertha Mendoza, KSU Extension, Garden City; Nina & Jeter Isely, Bird City farmers. Aubrey Streit Krug, The Land Institute, Stu Shafer, JCCC and KRC board, and KRC staff Mary Fund and Natalie Fullerton facilitated the discussions.

Below we provide a summary:

Vision:

Diversify, decentralize, connect (or reconnect), and communicate were key words that described the future we need and want.

***Build a sustainable local/regional food economy to**

focus on feeding ourselves and our neighbors, and shift away from “feeding the world”. This is a myth, according to several of the speakers and audience members. Local & regional doesn’t mean we do not have global and national supply lines but these can be disrupted by a variety of things (weather extremes and climate change, border and other political conflicts). We will need greater regional resilience in the future, and decentralizing the food system to include healthier local/regional production and related businesses and services will contribute to that.

***Good communication with our neighbors and within our communities. Currently social and cultural barriers to change of any kind are a concern; communication and crucial conversations are critical to approaching these issues. We need to focus on common values.**

***Involve more diversity in all aspects of our food system, our environment, and our society. Diversity is the basis of ecological farming that will reduce reliance on fossil fuels, pesticides and herbicides, and help us adapt to a changing climate. Diversity of people can also bring rich cultural knowledge to the landscape and communities. As diversity in nature builds resilience, so will diversity in people and ideas.**

***Build soil health through following agro-ecological principles & practices; and embrace regenerative/sustainable farming practices. This will help not only with immediate issues of soil health, water quality and quantity, nutrient cycling, and producing nutrient dense foods, but will help us adapt to climate challenges of drought and flood and more.**

***Develop better rural/urban relationships. In a local or regional food system, the two will not be separated but will develop an interdependency or symbiotic relationship. This too creates resilience to disruption and conflicts.**

Some of the actions and policies that were suggested that will help advance the vision at local, state and national levels:

***Recognize/accept that change is coming— along with economic, social and cultural, changes.**

***Talk to our neighbors and to those who may disagree with us to find common ground and based on values.**

- **Learn from our history.**

- **Engage in community dialogues, sponsor community conversations, and engage in civic activity, volunteer, and lead.**

***Fix the health care system. Have a serious exploration of adopting universal health care. Health care costs including pharmaceuticals ruin too many lives, and prevent people from pursuing education, starting businesses, and changing employers. Costs must be addressed.**

***Buy from farmers and ranchers adopting regenerative or sustainable practices. Or buy their products from local businesses to support the local/regional food system.**

***Support policies and programs that provide education on regenerative/sustainable practices, and help them transition and maintain these practices.**

***Advance clean energy via more renewable energy options (individual, community and developers) and adopt energy efficiency standards. Provide citizens and communities education and information to better understand options and needs.**

***Develop a Kansas Energy Plan, and a Climate and Health Plan. Enact aspects of these within local planning**

***Target subsidies and government programs to agriculture that incentivizes agro-ecological farming practices**

***Develop affordable housing in both rural and urban areas.**

***Enforce greater transparency in policy making.**

***Adopt size appropriate rules and regulations for cottage food industry.**

***Remove major barriers to value added production.**

***Provide beginning farmers education and resources to access land and markets. Including minorities and so**

cially disadvantaged farmers and future farmers.

***Address the barriers to youth (and adults) remaining in Kansas, especially rural Kansas.**

***Build cooperative efforts wherever possible (i.e. use cooperative structures for owning land and farming operations with diverse enterprises, and aggregate production for marketing, storage and distribution (food hubs). This helps create community ties and buy in.**

There were more suggestions—some were very specific such as ending sales taxes at farmers markets, or developing a regional food system plan complete with projected food needs, acres and ability to provide that food, processors needed, or ending rules and regulations that hamper small producers or business development. But the general theme was “diversify, decentralize, and connect or communicate” to get the future we need and want.

KRC will share our summary with policymakers and others working on a new food system and on energy issues, and with those addressing the economic inequities that must be part of any solutions and plans for the future. We urge you

to share this summary with your community and state leaders as well. Above all, we will continue to push the conversation.