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The University of Montana

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“LEFT FOR DEAD” OR “HOPE ON THE HORIZON?”
PERSPECTIVES ON THE FUTURE OF AGRICULTURE
IN MISSOULA COUNTY

by
Libby Hinsley
B.A. Guilford College, 1999
Presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of
Master of Science
The University of Montana
November 2004

Approved by:

[Signatures]
Chairperson
Dean, Graduate School

[Signature]
Date
ABSTRACT

Hinsley, Libby M.S. October 2004

“Left for Dead” or “Hope on the Horizon?” Perspectives on the Future of Agriculture in Missoula County

Chairperson: Neva Hassanein

Scholars and activists suggest that our global food system incurs detrimental costs for society. Moreover, although farmland benefits communities in many ways, its conversion to developed use is rapid across the US. An effort to re-localize food systems is touted by many as the most effective way to counter the negative impacts of the global system and move toward community food security. Yet few scholars integrate farmland protection into food system re-localization efforts. This study fills a need for research on how these issues intersect in a particular place, namely Missoula County, Montana.

The overarching research question is: What can be done to preserve viable farming and ranching in Missoula County in the context of increasing growth and development? Through in-depth interviews with thirteen farmers and ranchers and a review of land use planning in Missoula County, I explore the range of perspectives on growth, development, farmland protection, and long-term farm viability among select producers and suggest available options for action toward protecting farmland and agricultural viability, and hence, long-term community food security.

Study findings illuminate challenges to the future of local agriculture as well as strategies for keeping it alive. National and international agricultural trends, such as low economic return and high cost of production, take on particular significance in the context of Missoula County’s increasing growth and subsequent demand for development. Rising property values make it more desirable for producers to sell land for development and exit an already-tough economic market. Thus, many local farmers and ranchers feel agriculture here has been “left for dead.”

Most respondents support farmland protection. Using tax dollars is the most supported method for doing so. They support voluntary, rather than regulatory, methods of farmland protection, reflecting an allegiance to private property rights that must be balanced with the broader public good. Despite barriers to food system re-localization efforts, most respondents see strong prospects for successful local marketing. Ultimately, a deep love for their land and way of life keeps many participants going to find “hope on the horizon” that a bright future for local agriculture awaits.
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CHAPTER ONE
OUR STARTING POINT

Where are we, then? We are embedded in a global food system structured around a market economy that is geared to the proliferation of commodities and the destruction of the local. We are faced with transnational agribusiness whose desire to extend and consolidate their global reach implies the homogenization of our food, our communities, and our landscapes. We live in a world in which we are ever more distant from one another and from the land, so we are increasingly less responsible to one another and to the land. Where do we go from here? How can we come home again?


The Missoula County Community Food Assessment (CFA) project is a first step in answering the questions posed by Jack Kloppenburg and his colleagues. Broadly stated, the CFA aims to describe the agriculture and food system in Missoula County, Montana, to outline how residents can move toward long-term community food security, and in some way, to figure out how we might come home again. Community food security is “a condition in which all community residents obtain a safe, culturally acceptable, nutritionally adequate diet through a sustainable food system that maximizes community self-reliance and social justice” (Burton et al. 2002, 5). Community food security is complex, involving many issues from agricultural production in the fields to food consumption at the table. As such, the CFA project approaches the issue comprehensively, acknowledging the inherent connectedness of seemingly disparate elements of the food and agriculture system. The CFA explores food access and other consumption concerns alongside agricultural production and long-term farm viability.
The CFA project began in the spring of 2003, when faculty and students from the University of Montana Environmental Studies Program and Social Work Department organized a steering committee from the larger community to work together to take a comprehensive look at food and agriculture in Missoula County. The group then worked with University students to conduct research on many aspects of food and farming here. Students involved in the project are primarily working at the graduate level and come mainly from the Environmental Studies Program and the Social Work Department.

The partnership between Missoula County community members and the University of Montana—something I like to call “communiversity”—is the basis for this project. It is designed to inform and create change around real life issues facing this particular place—that is, how to move Missoula County toward community food security. Our steering committee represents 15 different organizations or interests from the surrounding community involved with the local food and farming system. It includes farmers, County extension, a public health official, a planner, anti-hunger advocates, conservationists, and others.

University students have also played a key role in this project. Under the guidance of the faculty and steering committee, students have carried out much of the data collection and analysis. During the fall of 2003, 21 students were involved in researching and compiling secondary data for an “indicator” report that documents changes over time for various aspects of Missoula County’s food and agriculture system—Our Foodshed in Focus—as well as a resource guide to food and farming organizations—Grow, Eat, and Know (Hassanein and Jacobson 2004b; McMinn et al. 2004). These reports constitute “phase one” of the CFA project. This group of students was also heavily involved in
creating research tools designed to collect primary data from agricultural producers and consumers in the County for “phase two” of the project. During the spring semester of 2004, several students continued working on “phase two.” I have personally been involved in the CFA since its inception and through data collection and analysis.

Through a variety of methods designed to learn about the perspectives of many Missoula County residents, “phase two” of the CFA attempts to answer two specific research questions formulated by the steering committee. The first is to understand the concerns of residents of various income levels regarding food quality, cost, and access, as well as transportation to food outlets and eating behaviors. Second, the project aims to understand farmers’ and ranchers’ perspectives regarding what it will take to maintain long-term farm and ranch viability here. An important component of the latter question is agricultural producers’ attitudes toward population growth and the accompanying increase in development of agricultural land in the County as it relates to long-term farm and ranch viability. Results of “phase two” have also been published in a report called *Food Matters* (Hassanein and Jacobson 2004a).

Participants in the CFA developed three research tools for gathering the perspectives of Missoula County’s agricultural producers. First, the agricultural research team used a telephone survey to obtain the perspectives of as many producers as possible. The phone survey focused on barriers and assets for farm and ranch viability; however, it also asked questions regarding growth and development in that context. Second, the research team conducted a focus group interview with a group of Hmong producers in order to identify some of the concerns and assets of those particular farmers. Lastly, we developed an in-depth interview guide to be administered to a smaller sample of
producers in the County. These interviews focus more thoroughly on participants’ perspectives on growth and development as they relate to agricultural viability. I have taken on this aspect of the agricultural research as my master’s thesis project.

The overarching research question of this thesis is: What can be done to preserve viable farming and ranching in Missoula County in the context of increasing growth and development? To answer this question, I investigate the following sub questions:

1) What is the range of perspectives on growth and development and its impact on long-term farm and ranch viability among select agricultural producers in Missoula County?

2) What realistic options exist in Missoula County for addressing farmland preservation and long-term farm and ranch viability?

By exploring both sub questions, I am able to synthesize the perspectives of farmers and ranchers with my own perspective about available options for action in order to formulate a set of recommendations.

As will become clear, a variety of factors influence the thirteen farmers and ranchers who participated in in-depth interviews for this study. These producers find themselves in a global, industrialized food system that impacts them and their communities in profound ways. “Food system” refers to the full range of processes that brings food from the field to the table. It includes food production, processing, distribution, retailing, consumption, and waste. The difficult economic situation created by our predominant global food system for local producers compounds the effect of recent local trends in population growth and the associated pressure on agricultural lands for development to accommodate that growth. Many scholars claim that efforts to rebuild
local food systems, through local consumption of locally produced agricultural products, may be critical for the survival of local producers and in turn, for ensuring long-term food security in particular places.

My approach begins with the understanding that effective farmland protection is a central component of building local food systems. In areas experiencing rapid growth and development, such as Missoula County, maintaining farmland is more and more difficult due to the increasing property values that go along with increasing growth. In such a situation, farmland protection must go beyond preserving particular parcels of land from development. Maintaining or enhancing the economic viability of producing food on farmland is also a key piece of the farmland protection puzzle. Faced with increasing property values, it seems unlikely that farmers and ranchers will keep their land in agriculture if they are unable to make a living doing so.

Effectively addressing these complex issues requires understanding the experiences and perspectives of farmers and ranchers. Thus, this study explores participants' views about specific farmland protection methods, such as conservation easements and agricultural zoning, as well as indirect methods for protecting farmland through increased economic viability of agricultural production. As it turns out, many groups and individuals in our community have important roles to play for ensuring that we keep farmland and viable agriculture here for the long term.

The following chapter outlines concepts and issues that scholars are working with that underlie and set the context for this study. It includes a look at our dominant global, industrial food system and its impacts on local farmers and communities. It also looks at arguments for a shift toward re-localization of food systems to preserve local
communities, environments, and ultimately, long-term food security. I also briefly explore notions about the meaning of private property ownership, as this topic comes strongly into play when I discuss study participants’ views about farmland protection. Chapter Three rounds out the context for this study by describing recent local trends regarding agriculture, growth and development, and Chapter Four describes the study methods.

Chapters Five and Six present the findings from in-depth interviews with thirteen Missoula County farmers and ranchers concerning challenges to and strategies for keeping local agriculture alive, respectively. In Chapter Seven, I attempt to bring relevant themes together from my research to envision how, at multiple levels, Missoula County can take steps toward farmland protection, local farm and ranch viability and long-term food security. These issues intersect in interesting ways in the particular context of Missoula County, leaving open the question of what the future holds for agriculture here. Study participants have a range of perspectives on the issue. While some think agriculture has been “left for dead” in Missoula County, others see “hope on the horizon” for a bright agricultural future.
CHAPTER TWO
A GLOBAL JOURNEY IN SEARCH OF LOCAL STRATEGIES

National and international trends toward industrialization and globalization since World War II have influenced farming everywhere, including here in Missoula County. As the following literature review suggests, many scholars and activists have recognized that the current industrial agriculture system is destructive to environmental and public health, as well as long-term food security and that it can encourage farmland conversion in local communities. They suggest that building local food systems is the most effective way to counteract these negative ramifications of the global, industrial food system. Moreover, they suggest that we pay close attention to the characteristics of particular localities and design re-localization efforts accordingly, advocating a place-based approach.

Farmland protection is a critical component of localizing food systems, yet it poses significant challenges, particularly in areas experiencing rapid growth and development like Missoula County. There have been a number of studies conducted on farmland loss and strategies for farmland protection based on farmers’ and ranchers’ perspectives, shedding light on some of the complexities surrounding these issues. Yet, advocates for food system re-localization have only recently begun to recognize the central role of farmland protection in their efforts, integrating these two areas of study (Lyson et al. 1999). These scholars have called attention to the processes of our changing agriculture structure and how they intersect with increasing development. There remains, however, a need for further study of the relationships between re-localization and
farmland protection in a particular place. This study addresses the need for further research on integrating farmland protection with a vision for food system re-localization by looking at a particular place, Missoula County, to see how all these issues intersect, and to see if building a local food system here makes sense, given place-specific circumstances and the perspectives of farmers and ranchers expressed during interviews with me.

The Global, Industrial Food System

Since the early part of the twentieth century and particularly since World War II, agriculture has undergone a structural shift toward industrialization and globalization that impacts agricultural communities and individual farmers' abilities to make a livelihood off the land. Production in this system is driven by the overriding goals of maximizing productivity and economic efficiency; as such, agriculture has become increasingly mechanized, standardized, and dependent on expensive off-farm inputs such as commercial fertilizers and chemical pesticides. (Barker 2002, Lyson et al. 1999, Heffernan 2000, Kloppenburg et al. 1996, Mander 2002, McMichael 2000, Norberg-Hodge 2002, Richard Olson 1999, Strange 1988). In this industrial food system, farm labor is often replaced by capital-intensive machinery. Not surprisingly, the cost of production has increased steadily for farmers, as the amount of money they spend on inputs such as machinery, synthetic pesticides, and commercial fertilizer continues to rise.

The goals of economic efficiency and maximum productivity have moved agriculture largely to monoculture production designed for export in the global
marketplace rather than local consumption (Kloppenburg et al. 1996). Monoculture production refers to raising the same crop on large acreage, rather than a diversity of crops and varieties. This type of production has been behind much of the destruction brought about by our global, industrial system (Altieri 2000, Mander 2002, Barker 2002). Monocultures standardize production, but they also standardize the food available for consumption. Norberg-Hodge explains:

Although this sameness suits the needs of transnational corporations, which profit from the efficiencies of standardized production and standardized consumption, in the long term a homogenized planet is disastrous for us all. It is leading to a breakdown of both biological and cultural diversity, erosion of our food security, an increase in conflict and violence, and devastation of the global biosphere (Norberg-Hodge 2002, 59).

Along with monoculture's devastating impacts on diversity of various sorts, monocultures provide an ideal environment for crop pests, which are typically treated by applying toxic chemical and petroleum-based pesticides (Altieri 2000, Norberg-Hodge 2002). Our heavy dependence on chemical pesticides has detrimental environmental and public health impacts (Altieri 2000, Carson 1962, Steingraber 1997).

Industrial agriculture has also become increasingly centralized and economically concentrated. For example, food is raised on increasingly large tracts of land, and power and ownership of the means of production has concentrated into the hands of a few large and powerful corporations (Lyson et al. 1999, Heffernan 2000, Henderson 2000, Kloppenburg et al. 1996, Mander 2002, McMichael 2000). “Agriculture since 1950 has been characterized by large decreases in the number of farms and farmers, and a corresponding increase in average farm size…” (Lyson et al. 1999, 182). Farms that tend to succeed in this system are large scale and are centrally located near large-scale
processing facilities in order to maximize production volume and reduce costs through proximity to processing and manufacturing opportunities (Lyson et al. 1999). They are not necessarily located in close proximity to consumers. In addition to production, processing, distribution and other sectors of the food system are increasingly concentrated. For example, “Forty percent or more of the processing of all agricultural commodities in the Midwest are controlled by the four largest firms” (Heffernan 2000, 65).

Increasingly centralized and concentrated production, processing, and distribution systems spur the decoupling and distancing of production from consumption, so that many of us do not know exactly where our food comes from. The concentration of power and ownership of the means of agricultural production not only puts more profits into fewer hands, but it also puts more control over pricing in the hands of increasingly large, multi- and transnational corporations who own an increasingly large percentage of the system of agricultural production, such as farm inputs, processing, and distribution systems. U.S. farmers’ share of the consumers’ food dollars has been on the decline, while the input and marketing sectors’ share of the food dollar has soared. Lyson et al. explain,

Farmers in 1910 received about $0.41 of the consumers’ food dollar; in 1992 they received only $0.09. The money in agriculture is made in the input and marketing sectors, and it is in these sectors that large corporations completely dominate, and strive to increase even further their share of the food dollar (Lyson et al. 187).

Due to concentrated economic power and policies promoting cheap food, farmers lose significant control over the price they receive for their products. Although the cost of production has increased in recent decades due to the high cost of off-farm inputs and
machinery, the prices farmers receive for their products have not risen in tandem. In an increasingly competitive global market, this dynamic makes it particularly difficult for farmers to maintain a livelihood from agriculture.

Food typically travels to us through a global agricultural marketplace that has no allegiance to any particular nation, much less a particular community. The control of the food system by transnational corporations means we are able to eat fresh fruits and vegetables year-round in the North because of extensive production networks. On average, food changes hands thirty-three times between the farm and the table (Guptill and Wilkins 2002). It travels an average of 1,300 miles to get there, (some might argue that is a conservative estimate), relying on large quantities of increasingly scarce and costly fossil fuel to transport food long distances (Kloppenburg et al. 1996, Perkins 1999). Lyson et al. explain that many times, we end up shipping food across the globe needlessly:

In 1995, U.S. farms produced $186 billion worth of crops and livestock, of which $55.8 billion was exported. In the same year, the United States imported almost $30 billion of agricultural products. Only 28% of the imports were classified as noncompetitive, i.e., crops such as bananas that cannot be grown in the continental United States (Lyson et al. 1999, 193).

We depend on a global food system that some claim has met the goals of productivity and economic efficiency (Altieri 2000, Lyson et al. 1999). “From a strictly economic standpoint, it is a fact that Americans spend less of their disposable income on food than any other society… However, cheap food has hidden costs” (Lyson et al. 1999, 186).

When we begin to uncover some of those hidden costs, we can see that the global food system is actually quite fragile. “How ‘efficient’ is the global economy when it means transporting around the world staple foods that could just as well be produced for
local consumption?" (Norberg-Hodge 2002, 62). Long distance transport of food becomes increasingly costly as we lose access to cheap fuel sources, whether due to political or natural situations (Daniels and Bowers 1997, Lyson et al. 1999, Olson and Olson 1999, Olson, R. 1999,). Through this system, we incur huge environmental, social, and economic costs to communities across the globe. Perhaps the most frightening cost is that our dependence on the global, industrial food system threatens long-term community food security.

Dependence on long distance food shipments make residents vulnerable to disruptions, as evidenced by the panic buying in food stores in advance of hurricanes or other weather problems. A highly centralized and integrated economic system is also vulnerable to global crises such as oil embargoes or a Wall Street meltdown (Lyson et al. 1999, 200).

Our global, industrial food system is tenuous. If the enormous fuel, transportation, or chemical input aspects of this system were to fail, very few communities would have the resources available to feed themselves (Lyson et al 1999). One particular resource communities would need in order to feed themselves is, of course, farmland, and as it turns out, farmland plays several important roles in communities.

The Importance of Farmland to Local Communities

There are several reasons why farmland is important for local communities, including aesthetics, ecosystem functions, and food security. An individual’s decision to convert his or her land to development impacts the surrounding community by removing scenic and aesthetic values from the landscape. The loss of farmland also often means the loss of the ecosystem functions, or services, provided by open space. Farmland loss also impacts future community members by reducing the amount of land available for food
production in that community—something that may be vitally needed down the road (Daniels and Bowers 1997, Lyson et al. 1999, Olson, R. 1999).

If communities lose nearby farmland for development, they lose a certain element of community character along with it (Libby and Stewart 1999, Olson, R. 1999). Converting farmland to development significantly changes the visual make up of a place, and this impacts how people in a community identify themselves.

Americans have lately been expressing a strong desire for a greater sense of community, of belonging to a place. Too many cities and towns look like Anywhere, USA... Hopefully, by protecting farmland and open space, a community can maintain a character—an appearance and a feeling—that makes it distinctive (Daniels and Bowers 1997, 259).

If we understand farmland as a central element to our community character, then protecting farmland from development may take on more importance to farmers and non-farmers alike. If we appreciate farmland as part of what defines and distinguishes our particular places, then we will naturally understand local farmers and ranchers as critical to our community’s character too. Moreover, in order for any farmland protection scheme to be successful, farmers must feel valued by the community. Valuing farmers, farmland, and a distinctive community character are all factors in preserving the aesthetics and sense of belonging for people in their local communities.

Farmland does more than provide a community with distinctive character. It also works somewhat “behind the scenes” to enhance and protect a community’s surrounding ecosystem functions. Open lands such as farmland help filter water and air for an area, and they also provide waste assimilation and biodiversity (Olson, R. 1999). In the case of farmland, the ecosystem functions it provides may well be tempered by the particular way the land is managed. For example, if land is being farmed in a way that uses heavy
chemical and petroleum inputs, then it might contribute to water and air pollution rather than shielding a community from it. It is important to note, however, that in some cases, farmers and ranchers practice techniques that attempt to mitigate any adverse impacts of their production on the surrounding ecosystem—a topic that will emerge in my study.

In addition to the community character and ecosystem functions provided by farmland, communities may very well need their surrounding farmland for food production, now and in the future. Communities here and around the world that lack productive farmland due to climate, topography or other reasons, may come to vitally depend on those communities that do have productive farmland available (Olson and Olson 1999). As Daniels and Bowers explain:

Farmland protection is a local and regional issue that could have national and even global importance in the long run. By allowing so much farmland to be developed without protecting the best remaining land, Americans are taking a risk with their ability to manage growth and, perhaps in time, with the nation’s food supply (Daniels and Bowers 259).

We cannot know how much farmland our communities may need to provide for future food production, and we cannot know when we will need it. We do know that undoing development is difficult and costly, so much so that, practically speaking, farmland conversion is irreversible (Olson and Olson 1999, Libby and Stewart 1999). Despite the many benefits of farmland to local communities, and despite the conversion of farmland being essentially irreversible, we continue to convert farmland to developed use across the nation at what seems to be an astounding rate.
Farmland Conversion

In a 2002 study, the American Farmland Trust reported that America loses two acres of farmland every day and that the nation converted more than six million acres of agricultural land to developed use between 1992 and 1997 (American Farmland Trust 2002a). Data collected in the study was based on the USDA’s “prime farmland” designation as well as the American Farmland Trust’s own unique farmland definition. The study also found that we lost farm and ranch land 51% faster in the 1990’s than we did in the 1980’s, and every state is losing some of its best farmland. The study connects farmland conversion to trends in growth and development, suggesting that the nation’s food supply is increasingly in the path of development as well over half of our fruits, vegetables, and dairy products are produced in urban-influenced areas threatened by sprawl development. It also suggests that wasteful growth and development patterns, rather than increased growth itself, is responsible for the situation (American Farmland Trust 2002a).

National trends in farmland conversion serve as an important backdrop for bringing particular localities into view. Some scholars and activists see the loss of local farmland in particular communities as one of the many hidden costs of our current global food system due to the obvious financial pressures on growers and the less obvious dynamics of producer-consumer distancing. Because farmers are rarely able to exert control over the prices they receive for their products in national and global markets, and because production costs have risen disproportionately to pricing, it is often difficult to make a living from agriculture. In rapidly growing areas, a high demand is often placed on farmland for development to accommodate that growth. This demand can send
property values soaring. Coupled with the typically low economic return in agricultural production, high property values can spur already-struggling landowners to convert their farmland for development.

Perhaps surprisingly, the distancing of growers from consumers inherent in the dominant global food system as discussed above can also impact local farmland conversion. Because most consumers do not rely on local farmers for their food production, non-farmers in many communities may not see a need to preserve local farmland (Lyson et al. 1999, Olson, R. 1999). “The decoupling of a population from local land as their food source reduces their incentive to protect their farmland from development” (Lyson et al. 1999, 202). Without a clear connection to or dependence on local farmland, it may be difficult for residents in a particular community to understand that they have a stake in protecting that land. That understanding is what could spur concern and even action at the local level to support local producers.

In a global food market, most people see no relationship between their local landscape and their food supply. Direct links between farmers and consumers can alter this perception, and provide a strong motivation for protecting that landscape... (Olson, R. 1999, 71).

Dynamics of local-level land use decisions cannot be separated from the larger context of the global food system. What occurs at the international and national levels profoundly impacts the decisions people make at the local level within their communities and even within their households. In turn, particularly in the case of farmland conversion, land use decisions made by local people impact communities in ways that are sometimes irreversible. Hence, understanding how to maintain farmland in a particular place requires a close look at various food and agriculture-related dynamics in that place, something already central to arguments for food system re-localization.
Food System Re-localization

Despite the negative ramifications of the industrial food system on local farmers and communities discussed at the beginning of this chapter, many analysts remind us that there is room for action and see hope for positive change. As Kloppenburg et al. claim, “We need to see that farmers, consumers, and local communities are not simply victims or pawns and that they are capable of resistance and regeneration” (Kloppenburg et al. 1996, 39). Recognizing that local communities are not only acted upon by the larger forces of national and international agriculture, but that they also have power to act in response and in resistance is important in beginning to create change. How, and on what level should we work to create change? Indeed, it seems that action at multiple levels simultaneously—local, state, national, international—is important. However, many scholars suggest that the most effective and long-lasting resistance and regeneration must happen locally through re-building local food systems (Lyson et al. 1999, Henderson 2000, Kloppenburg et al. 1996, Kloppenburg and Lezberg 1996, Matheson 2000, Norberg-Hodge 2002, Olson, R. 1999, Perkins 1999).

The term “re-localization” is often used to describe such efforts because most communities at one time depended far more heavily on local agricultural production for their food needs than they do today. Advocates for food system re-localization do not suggest that we go back in time; rather, they suggest that we move forward once again into an economy that operates on a human scale and that benefits producers and consumers alike. It is also important to note that to talk about local food systems is difficult, as ‘local’ means different things to different people. Some may define ‘local’ as
a County, a state, or a region, often depending on the characteristics of the place in question. In Montana, I generally think about local food as food that was raised in the state. In a more densely populated part of the US, however, I might think about local food as food that was raised in a specific region of the state, or even in a specific County. Hence, it is often desirable that ‘local’ be defined loosely so that its meaning can be adapted to the needs and characteristics of particular places. Regardless of its specific meaning for a place, however, a local food system is one that reduces or eliminates the often enormous distance between producers and consumers.

The foodshed concept can help us envision what it means to re-localize our food systems and move toward community food security. The idea of a foodshed is similar to the idea of a watershed. It provides a way to geographically envision the way food moves into and out of our communities, and helps us begin to see how the many aspects of our food system are connected to one another (Kloppenburg et al. 1996, Kloppenburg and Lezburg 1996, Olson, R. 1999). “Recognition of one’s residence within a foodshed can confer a sense of connection and responsibility to a particular locality” (Kloppenburg and Lezberg 1996, 95). Just as feeling a part of a watershed spurs many to take action on behalf of their communities’ water quality, among other things, the concept of a foodshed can serve to spur action with regard to our food and agricultural system because it can give us a context within which to work. More importantly, the foodshed reminds us where we are. Instead of supporting the transformation of our local communities to ‘Anywhere, USA’ like our global, industrial food system does, the foodshed helps us value and work to maintain what is unique about our particular places.
Localizing food systems is no easy task. A key element is establishing connections between local producers and consumers through direct marketing venues such as farmers’ markets, community supported agriculture (CSA) programs, buying clubs, institutional local food purchasing, among others. It also includes re-establishing local value-added processing facilities and distribution systems so that local producers can market products directly to local consumers, thereby bypassing the long line of “middle-men” and holding onto a greater share of the food dollar. In turn, higher profits for producers selling locally could ease the financial struggle of agriculture, potentially allowing them to hold onto their farmland and keep it in production.

Montana

Not surprisingly, agriculture in Montana has followed the same trajectory as most other places in the past half-century or so. Production here has become increasingly specialized and geared toward export into a global market. But this was not always the case. Montana has a rich agricultural history, and despite the relative dearth of variety in the major crops currently produced in the state, we know that a more complete and well-rounded production has historical precedence here. As Nancy Matheson explains,

In 1950, seventy percent of all the food Montanans ate was grown in-state… Montana produced a nutritionally complete diet year-round… Today, only fifteen to twenty percent of our Montana-grown food is consumed in-state—pretty unbelievable for a state that grows sixty million acres of food (Matheson 2000, 39).

With so much land in agricultural production in the state, it seems that Montana is ripe for a thriving local processing and distribution system. Yet, large-scale production of a few major crops for export coupled with the availability of inexpensive fuel has led
Montana to ship the raw commodities to larger processing facilities that are often out of the state. Once again, this was not always the case. Matheson (2000) explains,

Food processing was Montana's number one employer in the 1930's and '40's... Now most of our food processing is gone, exported along with the bulk raw commodities that—since the 1950's, when transportation got cheap—have dominated Montana's production agriculture (Matheson 39).

Clearly, Montana has not escaped national and international trends towards agricultural industrialization and globalization; nor has it escaped the threats the global food system brings to local communities. For example, the American Farmland Trust estimates that five million of biologically and culturally important ranchlands are currently under severe pressure from development in Montana (American Farmland Trust 2002b). Like others, Montana's farmers and ranchers are often at the whim of those powerful entities that control pricing, and this leaves many of our state's producers struggling financially. This, in turn, places their farm and ranchland at risk of conversion for development as the demand and financial rewards for conversion increase.

**Integrating Farmland Protection and Food System Re-localization**

Maintaining local farm viability on one hand, and preserving local farmland on the other hand, are fundamentally connected. Moreover, these are both essential components of building a vibrant local food system. At a minimum, a local food system requires land on which to grow food, and the people who grow food must be able to make a living doing so. Lyson et al. explain that it makes sense for communities to embrace both goals simultaneously:

One way to preserve farmland in the United States...is to increase the amount of food and agricultural products that are produced and marketed
locally. Land that might otherwise be taken out of farming because it cannot profitably produce for the global marketplace can be kept in production because it serves the needs and tastes of local consumers. (Lyson et al. 1999, 206).

In places restricted agriculturally by climate, topography, or other biophysical properties, protecting farmland and building local food systems may indeed be difficult or impossible. There is no doubt that localizing food systems will look different in different places, and some communities may have more opportunity for doing so than others.

Once again, this points to the need for a closer look at how farmland protection and localizing the food system intersect in this place. Given many scholars’ view that re-localization efforts are a primary way to counter the detrimental impacts of the global industrial agriculture system on local farms and communities, and given the rapid pace of farmland conversion in this country, it is important that both be explored simultaneously in search of a successful strategy for preserving local farmland, farm and ranch viability, and in turn, long-term community food security. Furthermore, it is important to consult those on the ground who know these issues best, namely farmers and ranchers, for their perspectives on the interplay of growth, development, farmland protection, and re-localization efforts. Below I review studies conducted on farmers’ and ranchers’ perspectives about development and farmland protection. Although these studies do not address development and farmland protection along with building local food systems in great depth, they are useful. Many of these studies shed light on an important component of my study by exposing the complexities of farmers’ and ranchers’ experiences of and perspectives on increasing development in their areas. My study can add to this body of research by coupling farmers’ and ranchers’ perspectives on development and farmland protection in this place with their perspectives on local marketing as a way to rebuild the
local food system and provide an indirect, economic and market-based method of farmland protection.

Farmers and Ranchers' Views about Development and Farmland Protection

Research conducted elsewhere on agricultural producers' attitudes toward development and farmland protection measures suggests that Missoula County is at a critical point with regard to agricultural land, and in turn, maintaining agricultural production. Increasing population and development in the County indicate it is time to encourage the ability of agricultural producers to stay on the land for the long term. There are several findings here relevant to my study.

First, development seems to feed on itself, having a momentum such that as development increases, the rate of development also increases (Daniels and Bowers 1997; Zollinger and Krannich 2001). This has been attributed to rising land values in areas experiencing increasing development. In turn, rising land values may influence farmers’ willingness to sell their land (Isreal and Gillis 1990; Liffman, Huntsinger, and Forero 2000; Rowe et al. 2001; Zollinger and Krannich 2001). Micro-geography might also influence a farmer’s willingness to sell his or her farmland. Several researchers suggest that as actual developments come closer in physical proximity to a particular farmer, the likelihood of that farmer selling his or her land increases (Daniels and Bowers 1997). A study conducted by Isreal and Gillis in 1990 found similar results. A mail questionnaire was completed by 153 current farmers and 96 farmers who had recently stopped farming in five Pennsylvania counties chosen for their proximity to growing metropolitan areas. The goal of the study was to understand reasons farmers leave
agriculture in areas experiencing growth and development. Among other findings, the study found that farmers located next to a development were more likely to leave farming, other factors being equal (Israel and Gillis 1990). In other words, development has momentum, and if a community waits until extreme pressure threatens agricultural land before attempting to preserve it, it can be too late (Israel and Gillis 1990; Lyson et al. 1999; Daniels and Bowers 1997).

Second, studies suggest that as population increases in an area, public support for land protection also seems to increase. This might be explained by many factors. According to a 1992 mail survey of 210 planners in the Northeast conducted by Pfeffer and Lapping (1995), as urbanization proceeds, public demand for the preservation of the rural character of the area grows. Their study sought to understand the level of support for purchase of development rights (PDR) programs in rural/urban fringe areas of the metropolitan Northeast and how support differs between the general public and farmers. In PDR programs, farmers voluntarily sell the development rights in exchange for development restrictions placed on their land, and the programs are generally funded through public means including government bonds (Pfeffer and Lapping 1995).

Interestingly, this study used the perspectives of planners to gauge the sentiments of the public and farmers regarding issues of land preservation. Despite the methodological limitations of their approach, their study suggests that increasing public demand for land preservation as population increases reflects an attempt for many residents to create an ideal rural lifestyle. The study also found, however, that the greater the drop in farm numbers in an area, the less interest the public has in purchasing development rights. The researchers presume this to reflect a loss of hope in preserving the existing uses of the
rural landscape in those places where it seems too far gone already (Pfeffer and Lapping 1995).

Studies also suggest that new residents tend to value agricultural land for quality of life reasons, such as the aesthetic values that give a place its unique character, as discussed earlier. Often, newer residents are the most vocal proponents of farmland preservation. New residents may also demand more services and infrastructure, however, and may be willing to raise taxes, putting more pressure on farms that cannot afford higher taxes (Daniels and Bowers 1997; Lyson et al. 1999). Here in Missoula County, as the population has increased substantially, so has the amount of land set aside for conservation through easements. “By 2001, there were 21,884 acres of land in conservation easements in Missoula County, representing 7% of the private land in the County” (Missoula County and City of Missoula 2002, 2-46). This trend is expected to continue. Although the rise in conservation easements may or may not be attributable to “newcomers,” the increase does at least coincide with population increase and may indicate a rise in public demand for the preservation of the County’s rural character.

A third observation from previous scholarship is that private property rights is a central issue for farmers and ranchers in the context of development, yet the extent to which this impacts farmer and rancher support for land conservation measures varies. I will discuss some tensions surrounding private property rights in further detail shortly. But in brief, some researchers suggest there is a tendency for farmers to oppose land-use planning or conservation measures in defense of their private right to manage their land without restrictions (Bultena et al. 1981; Rickson et al. 1990). They think that conservation measures, such as conservation easements, may interfere with future
abilities to profit from the sale of farmland (Bultena et al. 1981; Zollinger and Krannich 2001). Accordingly, increasing urbanization may lead to a greater likelihood that farmers will sell their land because rising land values present lucrative opportunities (Pfeffer and Lapping 1995).

Some studies have shown, however, that in many places, there is some level of farmer and rancher support for land-use planning and conservation. A 1979 survey of 441 Iowa farm operators found 77% of the participants to generally favor land-use planning, but many more were “mildly favorable” than were “very favorable” (Bultena et al. 1981). Some research suggests the greatest support for farmland conservation comes from farmers who are in the least viable position to sell or develop their land (Bultena et al. 1981). Conversely, others suggest farmer support for conservation is highest when the pressure for conversion of farmland is most intense (Bultena et al. 1981; Pfeffer and Lapping 1995; Zollinger and Krannich 2001).

While there is disagreement regarding conditions under which farmers tend to support farmland conservation, there is agreement that when there is producer support for land protection, preferential taxation is the most supported method. Preferential taxation—keeping farmers’ and ranchers’ property taxes lower than the standard tax rate—received a 61% approval rate in the 1981 study by Bultena et al. The same study found a 91% rejection rate of governmental policies requiring mandatory compliance, reflecting that in general, farmers tend to prefer voluntary and local scale methods (Bultena et al. 1981; Israel and Gillis 1990; Zollinger and Krannich 2001). Voluntary measures might include conservation easements, purchase of development rights, or transfer of development
rights, all of which depend on a landowner’s decision to preserve his or her land rather than a municipality’s decision to regulate land use and development.

Fourth, although the conversion of agricultural land to non-agricultural uses is an important factor in the context of population growth and development, preserving agricultural land is not, on its own, sufficient for preserving agriculture in particular places. Echoing the sentiments of Lyson et al. regarding the connection between farm viability and farmland conversion, Israel and Gillis (1990, 4) state, “…Policies to protect farmland from development are sometimes incorrectly assumed to also be policies protecting farmers from the pressures of development.” Their 1990 study in Pennsylvania, discussed earlier, ranked former farmers’ reasons for leaving farming (Israel and Gillis 1990). Among the 96 former farmers who completed a survey, the number one reason given for leaving farming was lack of farm profitability. The second reason was that farmers could make more money by selling their land, and 89% of the current farmer participants believed they could make more money by selling their farm than by farming it. Other key reasons noted for leaving farming were lack of available labor, difficulty obtaining credit, and increases in property taxes (Israel and Gillis 1990). Because the challenges of growth and development are diverse, policies to ensure viable farming must move beyond preserving agricultural land. Farmers without the necessary labor and the ability to earn a living will not be able to continue farming, despite the fact that their land may be protected by one of the various conservation measures. This is the issue I hope to explore in more depth.

These findings have several implications for Missoula County. Because the County still has a large amount of farm and ranchland, now is an important time to ask
agricultural producers their views and concerns about development. One study suggests that, “future research should also focus on studies of farmers in areas not yet experiencing rapid urban growth…” (Zollinger and Krannich 2001, 60). Although Missoula County is experiencing rapid growth, it is not yet a booming metropolis. Hence, understanding the concerns of producers who currently farm and ranch here will be valuable in designing a realistic strategy for maintaining farm presence and viability here. Moreover, studies show that farmers’ attitudes toward development are by no means monolithic. They vary from place to place. “By learning more about the factors that are pertinent in a farmers’ decision to continue farming, more effective policies and programs can be developed to help farmers survive the pressures of development in rapidly growing regions” (Isreal and Gillis 1990, 1). In order to envision how agricultural land and viable agricultural activity in general, may continue here in Missoula County, it is important to ask the farmers here. The effectiveness of any attempt to preserve farmland depends on farmer and rancher support. “You must work with farmers and learn to understand farming from their point of view if you are to be successful in advocating farmland protection” (Daniels and Bowers 1997, 23). As I mentioned earlier, re-building local food systems is place-specific; the process will look different in different places. This study will help to outline a strategy appropriate to our place. Not surprisingly, one of the key pieces to the re-localization puzzle concerns private property rights.

Private Property Rights and the Common Good

Just as several of the studies reviewed here identify private property concerns as central to farmers’ and ranchers’ perspectives on development and farmland protection,
these issues are central for many of the producers I interviewed. In any discussion of increasing land values, farmland protection, and other land use controls, the topic of private property rights is sure to arise, given the fact that these issues are in the forefront of public debate. “As a public issue, private property has enjoyed more attention lately than it has at any time since the 1930’s” (Freyfogle 2003, 1). As a reference point, and as a way to understand my study participants’ perspectives, it is helpful to briefly explore some of the key tensions in our notions about what it means to own property in the US.

Discussions about private property rights strike a sensitive chord for many people, evoking heated discussions and arguments. An individuals’ freedom to do whatever he or she pleases on land he or she owns seems to be a common understanding of what it means to own land. On the other hand, our popular understanding of land ownership also involves some level of landowner responsibility for the good of the community as a whole. Hence, at first glance, there is an inherent tension in the very notion of property ownership: Does private property function as a private good or a public good? Does it inherently provide a mixture of public and private goods, and if so, what degree of each?

In the context of farmland protection, one might ask: How much regulation ought to be enforced to protect farmland from development? Does the community’s long-term need for food production outweigh an individual’s right to develop land he or she owns?

There is plenty of disagreement about what constitutes the best answers to these questions. As Allen Olson (1999, 99) comments, “Few subjects produce such impassioned argument as does government regulation of private land use... Agricultural land has been at the forefront of much of this debate.” The balance between the rights of the individual and the rights of society is a central point of tension spurring such heated

In “The ‘Shift to Privatization’ in Land Conservation: A Cautionary Essay,” Sally Fairfax and Leigh Raymond (2002) explain two notions of property ownership helpful to understanding this tension: the instrumental and the intrinsic conceptions. The instrumental conception of property ownership, attributed largely to the thinking of Morris Cohen, sees property as a political device that can be used to further the collective goals of society. Under this notion, property is always subject to modification by government regulation or other means as the needs of society change over time. On the other hand, the intrinsic conception of ownership, attributed to the work of John Locke, sees property as a natural, or pre-political right. In other words, it serves specific individuals, and the government functions primarily to protect those individuals’ rights rather than to restrict them in favor of the needs of society (Fairfax 2002, 606).

Similarly, in his book, The Land We Share, Freyfogle (2003) outlines two conceptions of property ownership: the ecological or community conception and the industrial or developmental conception. “For generations, Americans have drawn upon these alternative images when talking about private property and debating what ownership ought to mean” (Freyfogle 2003, 38). The ecological vision of property ownership aims to protect lands and communities, and to encourage bonds between residents and their place in a collective sense. On the other hand, the industrial or developmental vision of ownership is more aggressive, emphasizing opportunity and the owner’s freedom to act without restriction for personal gain.
The distinction between the instrumental versus intrinsic, or the ecological/community versus industrial/developmental views of property ownership shows that there are, and have long been, disagreements about the appropriate role of property ownership within society. The balance between these two conceptions of ownership likely shifts back and forth as on a pendulum, depending on the values of the people who make up society at any given point. “Ongoing change is itself an important element of private property considered as an institution. Far from being static, the rights and responsibilities of ownership form an evolving, organic institution” (Freyfogle 2003, 28). One challenge for our current society might be to decide in which direction we want to shift the current balance between the rights of the individual and the rights of society in order to achieve the goals of community food security.

Several scholars believe that recent decades have seen the property pendulum swing in the direction of individual rights and away from a tolerance of land-use controls, or at least those who would support that shift have been very vocal (Fairfax and Raymond 2002, Freyfogle 2003, Olson, A. 1999). It seems that as the property pendulum swings into the arena of individual rights over community rights, we place our communities and landscapes at risk of irreversible damage from unwise land use. I agree with Eric Freyfogle, who claims,

Few ideas have bred more mischief in recent times, for the beauty and health of landscapes and communities, than the belief that privately owned land is first and foremost a market commodity that its owner can use in whatever way earns the most money (Freyfogle 2003, 1).

In our market-driven society, the lure of short-term individual profit from land development may easily translate into the abandonment of the public interest in land conservation for future needs.
Despite the recent shift toward rights of the individual, some scholars emphasize that owning property has historically involved a deep responsibility of individual landowners to the needs and rights of society (Fairfax and Raymond 2002, Freyfogle 2003). Charles Geisler (2000) asserts that the distinction commonly made between “private” and “public” land is inaccurate. He believes the line between public and private is blurry, and that these distinctions are always at interplay. For him, property taxes are one illustration of the idea that even when someone owns property “privately,” the public retains considerable influence over its use. As he says,

> Property taxes are a rent paid to the public sector by long-term ‘tenants’ of the private estate. The right to use one’s land, inhabit it, and stay put are all contingent upon paying this rent to the public landlord. The private owner may contest the assessment, but failure to pay eventually means eviction—a sobering reminder of who ultimately owns ‘private’ land (Geisler 2000, 70).

Property taxes, among other regulations, are clear signals that established norms around private property include a significant degree of public interest. Sally Fairfax and Leigh Raymond (2002) echo Geisler, pointing out that despite a seemingly strong support for the “privateness” of property of recent years, land-use controls such as planning and zoning have long been and remain an important part of the culture of property ownership.

Freyfogle (2003) goes further and argues that, aside from the concern for public good built into existing laws and land-use conventions, there is a practical reason why property ownership should defer to the needs of society in his view. “A community has a far longer life than any human owner and therefore has concerns about future productivity and the land’s lasting health that individual owners may not have” (Freyfogle 2003, 27). He argues that individual ownership is temporary, but a society’s
need for a productive landscape continues indefinitely. Practically speaking, therefore, society as a whole has a much larger claim on any given piece of property.

Because Freyfogle believes that property ownership is a fundamental responsibility to the common good, he argues that incentive programs that financially reward landowners for conservation or other practices that benefit the public are counterproductive. In his view, such programs send the message that landowners who protect the needs of current and future citizens go above and beyond the responsibilities of landownership, whereas for him, such practices simply are the responsibility of landowners (Freyfogle 2003). He warns against taking this route in our evolving conception of property ownership. “So entrenched is the idea that landowners everywhere have a right to develop, and so economically valuable are many development rights, that rethinking this issue is not easy. But it needs to be done” (Freyfogle 2003, 241). Although he acknowledges the financial pressures for landowners to develop their land in sometimes irreversible or damaging ways, like others, he feels that a recent resurgence of advocacy for individual private property rights could prove harmful to the long-term health of our landscapes and communities. It is up to communities to figure out how to support smart land uses in the face of sometimes overwhelming pressures to develop and to find the balance between individual liberty and the common good of property ownership.

This fine balance seems to come to a head particularly around the issue of “takings” (Fairfax and Raymond 2002, Olson, A. 1999, Geisler 2000, Runge et al. 2000, Freyfogle 2003). A “taking” occurs when private property is taken from a landowner by the government for public use without compensation, and it is prohibited by the Fifth
Amendment to the United States Constitution, which states, “...nor shall private property be taken for public use without just compensation” (Olson, A. 1999, 124). For example, this means that if a governmental body takes land through the use of the power of eminent domain, it is required to compensate the landowner based on the fair market value of the land.

In addition to the clear instance of the use of eminent domain, however, the further concept of a regulatory taking was born in 1922, when Supreme Court Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes stated in a takings decision that if “regulation goes too far, it will be recognized as a taking” (Olson, A. 126). Of course, what it means for regulations to “go too far” has since been the topic of much debate (Fairfax and Raymond 2002, Freyfogle 2003, Olson, A. 1999). The idea of a regulatory taking implies that when mandatory land-use controls diminish an individual’s property value, for example by prohibiting or restricting development of the land, that individual may be entitled to compensation by the government for loss of property value. Hence, there is a seemingly disputed line between allowable regulations and those that “go too far.” Conceivably, a regulation implemented on behalf of the public’s current and future need for farmland may be challenged as a taking. Ensuing lawsuits could make such regulation prohibitively expensive, particularly for financially strapped local governments.

The significance of our understanding of what constitutes a taking cannot be overstated. It continues to be defined and redefined based on the values held by society (Freyfogle 2003). With far-reaching implications for current and future generations, the ever-shifting definition of a taking is largely a political question regarding “the relative weights assigned by the community to preserving the public goods associated with farmland on
the one hand and maximizing private property rights on the other” (Olson, A. 1999, 124). Despite the potential constraints on land-use control posed by the concept of regulatory takings, Allen Olson (1999) and others remind us that zoning, among other controls, is still constitutionally defensible as a means of regulating land use. “Regulations may still reduce the value of property without effecting a taking. The question remains, by how much” (Olson, A. 1999, 128). Different people will undoubtedly give different answers to the question of how much is too much regulation.

At bottom, the question seems to be the same as it has been for much of our country’s history: How can we balance a respect for the needs of current and future generations with an individual’s liberty to act without restraint in regard to her property? Is a strong responsibility for the needs of society an inherent part of what it means to own land? Or, should society compensate individual landowners who respect those broader needs, implying that they go above and beyond what is inherent in land ownership? The tensions explored here are a significant theme throughout this study, and they are integral to our community’s challenge of protecting farmland from development in order to provide the potential for community food security.

**Conclusion**

As many scholars and activists have shown, most of our food is produced, processed, and distributed through a global food system that maximizes economic efficiency and productivity through mechanization, concentration and centralization, and expensive off-farm inputs such as commercial fertilizers and chemical pesticides. This system leads to enormous economic costs for many producers as well as social, health,
and environmental costs for society. It can also contribute to farmland conversion at the local level. Although farmland serves important roles for local communities, including for aesthetics, ecosystem functions, and food security, it is rapidly being converted across the country.

Many critics of our global industrial food system argue that the most effective way to counter the negative impacts of the global system on local communities is through efforts to localize food systems. They emphasize that re-localization efforts should be place-specific, addressing the unique needs and circumstances of particular places. Little research has been done, however, to connect food system re-localization efforts with farmland protection efforts in particular places. Other studies conducted on farmers' and ranchers' perspectives about development and farmland protection inform my study because they illuminate some key themes involved with these issues. This study will add to this body of research by including producers' perspectives on food system re-localization efforts, namely local marketing of agricultural products, as a component of a successful local farmland protection strategy. In Missoula County, the balance of private property rights and the common good emerges strongly as one of the particular challenges this community will face in addressing long-term community food security.
CHAPTER THREE
UNDERSTANDING THE CONTEXT OF HOME

A look at recent trends in growth, development, and agriculture in Missoula County will help place this study in context. In addition, it is helpful to understand the land use planning environment and tools at the disposal of Missoula City-County officials and planning staff regarding growth, development, and the protection of agricultural lands.

Agriculture and Growth Trends in Missoula County

Agricultural production in Missoula County has changed in various ways in the past fifty years (see Appendix A). According to the U.S. Agricultural Census, the number of farms in the County has increased a total of 8% since 1950, and farm numbers increased by 5% in the most recent years, from 608 in 1997 to 641 in 2002. Much of this increase is explained by an increase in the number of small farms under 100 acres. Most striking, the number of farms with 10 to 49 acres has increased by 141% since 1950, from 95 to 229. In addition, the number of farms between 50 and 99 acres in size has increased by 72%, from 43 in 1950 to 74 in 2002. Although the number of farms less than one hundred acres is on the rise, Missoula County has far fewer large farms than it did fifty years ago, and the average farm size in the County is also on the decline. Farms between 100 and 499 acres have decreased by 34%; farms between 500 and 999 acres have decreased by 52%; and farms 1,000 acres and over have decreased by 33% since 1950.
The average farm size in Missoula County has decreased by 16% from 482 in 1950 to 403 in 2002. In the recent years between 1997 and 2002, the average farm size decreased by 9%, from 443 to 403 acres (USDA Census of Agriculture).

Despite the increase in farm numbers in the County, we must look more closely to understand how those farms contribute to food production. Although the number of farms reached 641 in 2002, fewer than half of those farms (only 312) had land from which crops were actually harvested. This number was down from 359 in 1997. In other words, it appears that Missoula County is losing working farms. It is understandable that the total market value of agricultural production also dropped during that time—by 2%—to average just over $13,000 per farm (USDA Census of Agriculture). Hence, while on paper it may appear that production is increasing due to an increase in farm numbers, on the ground we know that production, and in turn the market value of local agriculture, is decreasing significantly.

Total acreage in agriculture in the County dropped from a high of nearly 397,000 acres in 1954 to 262,000 acres in 1974, a drop of 34%, but seems to have remained relatively stable in the years since 1974 in the vicinity of 250,000 acres, or about 15% of the County's land area (USDA Census of Agriculture). The total farmland acres in the County, however, can be a bit misleading. Despite there being 258,315 acres in agriculture in the County in 2002, it is important to note that over half of those acres are woodland. Only about 17% of the County’s total farmland acres are in cropland, and only about 29% of them are in pasture. In 2002, only 22,290 acres (8.6% of the total farmland in the County) was harvested cropland. Moreover, this harvested cropland in 2002 represented a drop of over 20% from the 28,045 acres harvested in 1997 (USDA Census
of Agriculture). Understanding the number of acres that are actually harvested in Missoula County paints a clearer picture of the County’s food production. The numbers show that although the number of farms here is technically increasing, the average size of farms is decreasing, and most importantly, the total amount of land in working farms is dropping. ¹

Missoula County’s agricultural trends of increasing farm numbers, particularly small farms, and decreasing average farm size are strikingly different from the national trends towards larger and fewer farms since around the time of World War II. There are a number of possible explanations for this discrepancy. It is possible that there truly are more small farms in this County where farmers are producing food; however, it is also possible that increasing numbers of landowners are claiming farm status for tax purposes, even though they may not be commercial food producers. Importantly, changes in the acres of harvested cropland in the County tells a more complete story than does the total number of farmland acres in the County, since most farmland acres are woodland and are not used for food production at all.

One of the limitations of using agricultural census data is that it is impossible to fully understand the story told by the data. The current definition of a farm, used since 1974 in the Census of Agriculture, is “any place from which $1,000 or more of agricultural products were produced and sold or normally would have been sold during the census year” (USDA Census of Agriculture). This definition makes it quite easy for a

¹ All 2002 Census of Agriculture figures are available from www.usda.gov/nass/. It is important to note that the 2002 census publication has a different approach than previous censuses in that it adjusts for incompleteness at the County level. The 1997 and earlier censuses were also incomplete, but the adjustment was published only for the state as a whole rather than for particular Counties. In contrast, the 2002 census re-published the 1997 County data to make it comparable with the 2002 data. The adjusted 1997 numbers are used here for all comparisons with 2002 figures (and in Appendix A); however, data prior to 1997 are not adjusted for incompleteness at the County level.
landowner to claim farm status, although this is not sufficient for agricultural property
taxation rates. In turn, this makes it difficult for us to know whether the increase in small
farm numbers found in the census reflects an increase in the number of food-producing
farms or an increase the number of “hobby” farms. It is possible, for example, that some
of the larger food-producing farms or ranches may have been subdivided into smaller
parcels where new landowners enjoy hobby farming. It is important to keep in mind that,
while census data tells us a lot about agriculture in the County, it cannot tell us
everything. Moreover, at the local level, documents that map agricultural land for
purposes of taxation include forest land, also making it difficult to measure the
conversion of agricultural land used for food production.

Alongside changes in agriculture, the County is experiencing demographic change
in the form of growth. According to the 2002 Missoula County Growth Policy, the
County’s population increased by 22% between 1990 and 2000, compared with a
statewide increase of 14.7% over the same period (Missoula County and City of Missoula
2002). The greatest proportion of population increase in the County over the past 10
years has occurred in the rural sub-area, including the Lolo region, Ninemile/Frenchtown,
Potomac/Seeley, and Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribal lands. These areas outside
the city of Missoula had a 46% increase in population, relative to their previous
population levels (Missoula County and City of Missoula 2002, 2-7). According to the
most recent census results, the city of Missoula edged out Great Falls as the state’s
second largest city (Wilmot 2004). Although it is impossible to know precisely what will
happen in the future, growth in Missoula County is expected to continue. "The Montana
Department of Commerce estimates that Missoula County’s population will increase by
31.6% to 126,040 between 2000 and 2020” (Missoula County and City of Missoula 2002, 2-7).

Trends in population growth in the County gain significance when placed in the context of subdivision; that is, dividing up larger parcels of land into smaller ones. Between 1990 and 2000, over 10,000 acres in the County were subdivided. Areas that were previously in agricultural production are among the most common areas to have seen this subdivision and development activity (Missoula County and City of Missoula 2002, 2-6). It makes sense that agricultural lands may be prone to subdivision and development; for, flat valley areas have the richest agricultural soil and they are also among the most desirable for development due to their topographical features.

Interestingly, while most of the County’s land is in state, federal, corporate (e.g., Plum Creek), or Tribal control, the 19% of the County’s land area under private, non-corporate ownership is also concentrated in the valleys (Missoula County and City of Missoula 2002, 2-4). Valley land, having already experienced heavy subdivision in the 1990’s, seems ripe for further development.

Development of agricultural land is a key issue for the County’s agricultural production future, because as land becomes more valuable and desirable to developers, farmers and ranchers may generate less profit from their work on the land relative to the potential profits of selling the land. Development is also a key issue for the County’s ability to achieve long-term food security, because as Missoula County loses agricultural land to development for other uses, the County’s potential for local food production and consumption of local food decreases. How farmers and ranchers perceive development as a factor in their farm’s long-term viability is the central question explored in this
research. Understanding Missoula County farmers’ and ranchers’ attitudes about growth and development will be valuable in understanding how the County might protect agricultural land, and the ability of farmers to raise crops on that land, for the long term.

**The Land Use Planning Environment in Missoula County**

To further understand the opportunities and barriers to farmland protection in Missoula County, it is helpful to review the state and local context for land use planning. The state of Montana provides authorizing legislation to local governing bodies regarding land use planning. Several of the most relevant pieces of legislation pertain to local growth policies, subdivision regulations, and zoning. State law requires that counties adopt a growth policy to be used to guide growth and development at the County level. The Montana Code, however, states that a growth policy is not a regulatory tool and that, “A governing body may not withhold, deny, or impose conditions on any land use approval or other authority to act based solely on compliance with a growth policy” (Montana Code Title 76, Chapter 1, Part 605). Instead, counties are to use tools such as subdivision regulations and zoning ordinances to implement the growth policy.

Title 76, Chapter 3, Part 102 of the Montana Code provides a statement of purpose for the state’s guidance of local subdivision regulations. Some of the intents listed as the purpose of subdivision regulations are to:

- promote the public health, safety, and general welfare by regulating the subdivision of land;
- prevent overcrowding of land;
- require development in harmony with the natural environment;
- promote preservation of open space;
- promote cluster development approaches that minimize costs to local citizens and that promote effective and efficient provision of public services;
• protect the rights of property owners

It is important to note that the state’s intent regarding local subdivision regulation is to protect many of the values associated with agriculture. These statements of purpose include a clear value for open space, the protection of the natural environment, and the protection of healthy communities. In addition, subdivision regulations are also to “protect the rights of property owners,” indicating a balance between private rights and the protection of the common good.

In addition to providing statements of purpose for subdivision regulation, state law guides localities about how to review subdivision proposals. Title 76, Chapter 3, Part 608 of the Montana Code mandates that local jurisdictions review subdivision proposals based on certain criteria. One criterion pertains to the subdivision’s potential effects on agriculture and agricultural water user facilities. The law further recognizes that in some cases, a proposed subdivision could present impacts that are unacceptable and that therefore block the approval of the subdivision (Title 76, Chapter 3, Part 608). Here, state law authorizes localities to deny a subdivision proposal if it poses immitigable impacts to agriculture, but does not specify how a locality is to calculate or measure impacts to agriculture.

State law also grants authorization to local jurisdictions to implement zoning ordinances in Title 76, Chapter 2, Part 201 of the Montana Code. This law indicates that zoning is acceptable “for the purpose of promoting the public health, safety, morals, and general welfare” of its citizens.
Missoula County Growth Policy

Missoula County’s current Growth Policy was adopted in 2002 in accordance with Montana state law. Although the Growth Policy is not regulatory, it “provides guidance for subdivision regulation and review. All planning and community development decision making should be in accordance with the Growth Policy” (Missoula County and City of Missoula 2002, 1-1). The document is essentially the latest in a long series of updates to City and County planning efforts that have taken place over the past several decades.

The Growth Policy applies equally to all areas of the County and is therefore necessarily broad in scope and general in application. While the Growth Policy gives guidance for the entire County, it is the regional or issue plans that provide specific guidance through land use designations, design and development guidelines, and recommendations for specific action steps (Missoula County and City of Missoula 2002, 1-1).

In a sense, the Growth Policy is the “umbrella” document for many existing planning documents, giving broad guidance on how Missoula County should grow and develop.

The Missoula County Growth Policy contains a wealth of guidance on farmland and agricultural preservation. In fact, many of the document’s guiding principles, which serve as the foundation for identifying specific planning goals and objectives, relate in some way to agricultural preservation (Missoula County and City of Missoula 2002, 3-1 and 3-2).

- First Guiding Principle: “[Planning] tools used by the City, County, and other governing bodies should reflect the values of the citizens they serve and effectively accomplish the goal to a) protect critical lands and natural resources, and b) enhance human resources and the valued characteristics of our communities.”
- Second guiding principle: “The right to a clean and healthy environment is fundamentally important.”
Third Guiding Principle: "Economic and social well-being is tied to the quality of the natural environment. Long term economic stability and a high quality living environment should not be sacrifices for short-term economic gain."

Seventh Guiding Principle: "Respect for private property rights is fundamentally important."

The first three guiding principles embody a commitment to protecting natural resources and preserving community character, both of which pertain to farmland, among other resources. The Growth Policy's guiding principles outlined above also point to an understanding that our economic well-being depends on how well we preserve our natural resources. Lastly, the Growth Policy establishes potentially conflicting principles by expressing clear concern for the common good and private rights simultaneously, as indicated by the seventh guiding principle.

Specific goals and objectives follow from the Growth Policy's guiding principles, and several of them suggest the importance of farmland protection. Perhaps the strongest language in support of farmland and agricultural protection is in the general objectives for development pattern and land use. An objective regarding development is to:

- "Encourage the continuation of agricultural and forestry operations and protect them from adverse impacts of urban development. Distinguish between urban and rural land use patterns in land use decisions related to agriculture. Support local sustainable agriculture" (Missoula County and City of Missoula 2002, 3-3).

Later, two relevant goals regarding the economy appear:

- "Encourage economic development to occur in ways that conserve and enhance natural and human resources" (Missoula County and City of Missoula 2002, 3-4).
- "Manage growth to maintain and enhance the economy of Missoula County to support a diverse population, strong community, and healthy environment" (Missoula County and City of Missoula 2002, 3-4).

While these goals and objectives show clear support for agriculture in the County's Growth Policy, the meaning of several key phrases is likely debatable. For example,
“adverse impacts of urban development” to agriculture might mean different things to different people. Furthermore, the Growth Policy gives no specific instructions on how to “support local sustainable agriculture,” although this is a key aspect of the development goal noted above.

It seems clear that the Missoula County Growth Policy incorporates a strong value for maintaining the rural character of the County as well as preserving agricultural activity. Accordingly, in principle, certain types of agricultural activity could be encouraged or developed here to meet the economic and environmental quality goals noted above. The protection of farmland from development can also help enhance and build upon the local farm economy in a way that contributes to the long-term health and security of the community as a whole and ensures the continuation of open space and ecosystem functions provided by farmland. Although these goals are incorporated into the Growth Policy, it may not be used to regulate land use in the County. Tools such as subdivision regulations and zoning ordinances are the regulatory means by which governing bodies may implement the values contained in Growth Policies. As the Growth Policy states, “Regulatory tools are adopted by governing bodies as requirements. Governing bodies use policy tools to show commitment to a particular direction or course of action” (Missoula County and City of Missoula 2002, 4-1).

Local Subdivision Regulation and Review

The subdivision regulations adopted by Missoula County adhere to the requirements set forth in state law, and they embody a sense of value for agricultural land. One of the County’s subdivision design standards, which are requirements for
subdivision proposals, is to “Preserve natural, scenic, cultural, or historic features. The subdivision shall not result in the destruction, loss, or damage of significant natural, scenic, cultural, or historic features” (Missoula County and City of Missoula 2000, 24). Farmland arguably represents natural, cultural, and historic features, all of which subdivisions are required to preserve through this design standard.

An interesting development design tool available to developers or subdividers is the planned unit development (PUD). The purpose of a PUD is to allow:

creativity in subdivision design using a concept which clusters development, so that the cost of installing and maintaining roads, water and sewer lines and utility services is minimized while open space, the natural terrain including natural drainages and vegetation, and unique natural features are preserved to the maximum extent possible (Missoula County and City of Missoula 2000, 58).

One of the criteria for designation as a PUD is that the subdivision must preserve productive agricultural land, open space, or riparian areas. (Missoula County and City of Missoula 2000). Importantly, this is only one of several criteria, not all of which must be met by each PUD. In order to promote the use of residential PUD’s, the County provides density increases for those developments in its zoning ordinance (Missoula County and City of Missoula 2001). Through its design standards and the planned unit development tool, Missoula County’s subdivision regulations offer support for farmland protection.

It is unclear, however, the extent to which these supports are effective measures at actually preserving agricultural land in the face of increasing subdivision and development. Subdivisions—and by default, long-term land use decisions in the County—are reviewed one plat at a time, rather than on a landscape or a cumulative level. Such a piecemeal approach to land use decisions makes it impossible to measure the cumulative impacts of development to agricultural resources, and it makes it very
difficult for governing bodies (i.e., City Council, Board of Commissioners) to deny a subdivision for its impacts to agriculture at all. For instance, one subdivision may have minimal impacts to agricultural production and the cultural and historic characteristics of the land; however, numerous subdivisions to agricultural land taken together would present a more compelling justification for subdivision denial. Despite these limitations, the limited zoning in the County (discussed below) leaves subdivision review as the only practical regulatory land use tool available to those governing bodies that make land use decisions.

**Local Zoning**

Zoning is used by jurisdictions to designate different types of land uses and to avoid competing uses of land occurring in the same area. Missoula County has a zoning ordinance that outlines a pyramidal zoning framework encompassing varying density and land use zones (Missoula County and City of Missoula 2001). Despite the existence of a zoning framework, it is important to note that, “Most of the County is not zoned and the majority of the zoned property within the County is located in and around the Missoula urban area” (Missoula County and City of Missoula 2002, 4-2). There is actually very little zoning in Missoula County. The zoning that we do have assigns maximum residential density for various land use districts, including multiple scales of residential density (Missoula County and City of Missoula 2001). There is no exclusively agricultural zoning in the County, although agriculture is encompassed in the existing “open and resource” zoning designation.
Courts have consistently upheld zoning as constitutionally permissible, and in theory as well as in the County's planning documents, zoning is an available regulatory tool for protecting farmland from development here. The legal basis for zoning is the police power, which grants governing bodies the authority to promote the health, safety, morals, and general welfare of its citizens through the establishment of laws (Olson, A. 1999). Agricultural zoning is one way to promote the health, safety, and general welfare of citizens in Missoula County because by protecting farmland through agricultural zoning, the County could protect our ability to produce food into the future. In turn, our general welfare depends on long term-food security. One could also argue that, beyond food production, the public welfare also depends on other farmland functions, such as ecosystem processes and open space.

Given the controversial nature of zoning and a high degree of public opposition to it, it seems unlikely that Missoula County will implement more aggressive agricultural zoning in the near future. Public support for laws or regulations designed to implement farmland preservation policies is one measure of their success (Olson, A. 1999, 104). Perhaps in the future, public sentiment regarding zoning here will change, bringing this tool greater potential for use. Until then, Missoula County will need to rely on other tools to address the farmland protection values found in the Growth Policy.

**Land Use Protection Tools**

Beyond regulatory tools, voluntary tools exist to address farmland protection. Among those theoretically available to the County government are purchase of development rights (PDR) and transfer of development rights (TDR) programs. PDR
programs basically allow local government bodies to purchase development rights or restrictions from landowners of select pieces of property in order to restrict future development of that property. The landowner maintains ownership and use of the land in ways that are consistent with the goals of the particular PDR program. Funding for PDR’s can come from such sources as bond initiatives, grants, and public matching funds programs (Missoula County and City of Missoula 2002, 4-7). In order for a PDR program to be implemented here in Missoula County, the local government would need to raise sufficient funds and employ sufficient staff to manage the program. In a situation where the County struggles to fund its schools, it is unlikely the County will have the resources for a PDR program without raising the money through an avenue such as a bond initiative. This remains, however, a potentially useful tool at the disposal of the County government.

Notably, legal “development rights” are conferred through zoning. Due to the lack of comprehensive zoning in Missoula County, it is important to keep in mind that there may not be legal rights attached to much of the County’s land. Hence, a PDR program here would not necessarily purchase the legal development rights attached to specific parcels of land. Instead, the government could potentially purchase development restrictions, or easements, on individual property. If the County were to implement stronger zoning in the future, a PDR program might become more applicable use of the legal rights to property conferred by such zoning.

A transfer of development rights (TDR) program is another tool available to local governments. TDR programs are similar to PDR programs in that they involve selling or otherwise eliminating development rights on select pieces of property to ensure they will
remain undeveloped. Instead of selling those development rights to a local government body, however, a landowner in a TDR program would sell those rights to a developer in order to develop another piece of property in another area of the County. As the Missoula County Growth Policy explains,

TDR programs typically use zoning to allow owners of land in areas called sending districts to sever the development rights from their property and sell, or otherwise legally transfer, those rights to owners of property located in specified receiving districts, where higher intensity of development is preferred (Missoula County and City of Missoula 2002, 4-4)

In order for a program like this to be effective here, Missoula County would need clearly defined “sending” and “receiving” zones. Once again, since there is minimal existing zoning to designate appropriate sending and receiving zones in Missoula County, a TDR program here would not likely be effective at protecting farmland from development. Nonetheless, if Missoula County implements more extensive zoning in the future, a TDR program could become a more useful tool for protecting farmland from development.

Conservation easements, which I will discuss in greater detail later, represent another tool available to Missoula County residents who want to protect their land from development. Similar to a PDR program, conservation easements place restrictions on the development of a particular piece of property, while the landowner maintains ownership of the land. The value of a conservation easement is generally the difference between the development value of the particular parcel and the agricultural value of that parcel. Easements are typically held by a private non-profit organization, rather than by a local governing body. Among the limitations of using conservation easements, non-profit organizations must raise sufficient funds to purchase or otherwise compensate landowners for restrictions on their property. Often times, such funding is limited, and
priority land areas must be established by easement holding organizations, potentially leaving some interested landowners without the opportunity to place an easement on their property. Nonetheless, there are local non-profit land trusts who manage conservation easement programs, and hence, this tool is theoretically available to landowners here.

A Lesson from Gallatin County

Missoula County is not the only place in Montana being impacted by growth and development, and it is helpful to see that localities are creating ways to deal with these issues. Faced with the same struggle to balance growth, development, and farmland protection, Gallatin County, Montana passed an open space bond in 2000 that aimed to help protect the County’s agricultural lands, among other lands. Similar to Missoula County, Gallatin County has experienced rapid growth and development activity in recent years, with more than 17,000 acres of farmland having been divided and developed in the 1990’s (Trust for Public Land 2001). The bond passed in 2000 designated $10 million to preserve open space through outright purchase of land and the purchase of conservation easements on property (Gallatin County Open Lands Board 2000).

The bond passed with a 59% margin, creating the state’s first countywide PDR program (Trust for Public Land 2001). Interestingly, however, the measure received the greatest support from town voters, but lacked such strong support in the County’s rural areas (Associated Press 2004). Nonetheless, the Trust for Public Land asserts,

The measure’s success was attributed to a thorough and democratic process led by a diverse coalition of local interests. Farmers, ranchers, conservationists, and other community leaders studied the options carefully and sought public input before a measure was drafted. Public support was confirmed by a poll, and the county commissioners
unanimously referred the measure to the ballot (Trust for Public Land 2001).

Gallatin County has already spent $6 million of the bond money to purchase conservation easements and pay for a 100-acre park (Associated Press 2004). Missoula County can look to Gallatin County for one model of farmland protection; of course, such a program here would require a thorough process of public participation and support.

**Conclusion**

Trends in agriculture and growth in Missoula County over the past several decades help to set the stage for envisioning where the community can go from here. Even as the County undergoes a significant increase in population that is expected to continue, the number of acres in agriculture in the County has remained relatively stable. The increase in small farms in the County raises interesting questions about how much food is actually being produced here, given the overall loss of large farms. Understanding tools available for local land use planning, including the Missoula County Growth Policy, subdivision regulation and review, zoning ordinances, and non-regulatory tools helps identify available strategies for farmland protection.

Given the limited ability of the local government to aggressively protect farmland from development through explicit land use planning techniques, it is important to ask who else in the community can play a role in farmland protection. Perhaps the task of protecting farmland from development is not one that ought to rest solely on local governing bodies, but ought to be spread around to others in the broader community in various ways. Moreover, as we have heard from other scholars, perhaps farmland
protection depends on far more than the protection of individual parcels of land, but could require a re-invigoration of the local farm economy. These are issues I will discuss in more detail in Chapter Seven.
CHAPTER FOUR

METHODS FOR GATHERING PERSPECTIVES

I conducted in-depth interviews with thirteen farmers and ranchers from around Missoula County during February and March of 2004. Interviews ranged in length from forty-five minutes to one and a half hours, and were conducted at the homes of the study participants. During three of the interviews, a family member joined in for all or part of the conversation, and comments of family members are noted as such. Of the thirteen interviews conducted, eleven were tape recorded and transcribed verbatim. For the two interviews that were not tape recorded and transcribed, I relied on my own notes taken during and after the interviews for analysis. Two potential participants initially agreed to participate in an interview to be scheduled at a later date, but I was never able to reach them again to conduct the interview. One potential participant declined an interview, opting instead to send a letter detailing some of her challenges. In general, my findings report on the thirteen interviews I conducted, but where appropriate, I will include this participant’s perspectives from the letter, noting when I do.

Sample

I selected study participants from the Community Food Assessment’s master list of agricultural producers in the County, which was assembled from many sources. Many interviewees were suggested to me either by virtue of their location in the County, or their perceived willingness to talk about these issues, regardless of their particular viewpoint. In addition, my goal was to hear from different types of producers, in terms of
crops or livestock raised, and geographic locations. While acreage was not a question I asked participants to disclose, their operations ranged from intensive vegetable production on just a few acres to ranches in the thousands of acres. Most participants, however, own hundreds of acres of land. Due to my interest in how farms and farmers are experiencing development, many participants come from more rapidly developing areas in the County. Including the letter participant, eleven of the participants are male, while three are female. Tables 1 and 2 describe the sample, not including the letter participant, in more detail below.

**TABLE I: Crops or Livestock Produced by Study Participants**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Crop or Livestock Sold by Participants</th>
<th>Number of Participants Total=13</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cattle</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hay</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leased for Grazing</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grain</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organic Vegetables</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eggs</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conventional Vegetables</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bedding Plants</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Timber</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**TABLE II: Geographic Distribution of Study Participants**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>General Location of Operation</th>
<th>Number of Participants Total=13</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mullan Road Area</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frenchtown</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Urban Missoula</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Potomac Area</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9-Mile/Huson Area</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Land in Various Locations</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

55
While the sample size of thirteen in this study is relatively small, it is important to note the significance of each study participants’ viewpoints. Many study participants belong to families that have farmed and ranched here in Missoula County for multiple generations, and hence, these families often exercise considerable influence in the community. In addition, while acreage owned by study participants varies greatly, one participant stands as one of the County’s largest landowners. As such, this study contains the perspectives of decision makers (some of whom possess significant power) who could significantly impact the course of Missoula County’s land use and agricultural future.

In addition, as mentioned in Chapter One, this study compliments a telephone survey of agricultural producers, also conducted in the context of the Missoula County Community Food Assessment Project. The telephone survey, while not as in-depth as the interviews reported on here, includes a much larger sample size of 52. Furthermore, the data from the telephone survey strongly concur with data collected here (see Hassanein and Jacobson 2004a). Thus, the two studies compliment one another and provide a broader picture of farmers’ and ranchers’ perspectives to the overall efforts of the Community Food Assessment.

Data Collection and Analysis

A semi-standardized interview technique allowed me to consistently ask each participant in this study the same set of questions while remaining flexible enough to probe further for richer data and follow individual digressions where appropriate (Berg 2001). My interview guide (see Appendix B) consisted of twenty-seven questions covering a variety of topics, including:
• History and overview of operations
• Factors that threaten long-term farm and ranch viability
• Factors that facilitate long-term farm and ranch viability
• How decision is made to stay in agriculture
• How growth and development impact individual and community agriculture
• Farmland protection strategies
• Prospects for local marketing
• Environmentally sustainable practices

Using the technique of open coding for content analysis, I analyzed the interview transcripts and letter for relevant themes (Berg 2001). With this technique, I assigned each topic discussed in the interviews a category name. For each category of data, I gave each relevant response, comment, or statement made by participants a specific code. For example, if two participants gave a similar response to the same question, each of their responses would have been given the same code. This allowed me to count the frequency of responses regarding each particular topic, as well as to identify a range of responses and any larger themes that emerged. While it is important to note how many participants gave certain responses, the strength of in-depth interviews is that they provide detailed, qualitative data about a relatively small sample. This data is not representative of the views and perspectives of all farmers and ranchers in Missoula County. Rather, in-depth interviews enable a deeper understanding of the views and experiences of these particular farmers and ranchers.

In addition to conducting in-depth interviews with thirteen farmers and ranchers in Missoula County, I conducted a document review. By reviewing relevant state and local land use laws, regulations, and ordinances, I was able to create a sense of the land use planning options available to Missoula County in the context of farmland protection.

These two data collection methods compliment one another. My own perspective—built
from personal experience, concern, and knowledge of the local land use planning environment—is tempered by the powerful perspectives and stories of study participants shared through in-depth interviews. Participants’ perspectives are coupled with my perspective, as both data sets influence my recommendations for action. The methods of data collection I employ help to answer, or at least explore, my central research question: What can be done to preserve viable farming and ranching in Missoula County in the context of increasing growth and development? The following sub-questions serve to direct my interviews with farmers and ranchers, as well as my review of the planning environment in Missoula County:

1) What is the range of perspectives on growth and development and its impact on long-term farm and ranch viability among select agricultural producers in Missoula County?

2) What realistic options exist in Missoula County for addressing farmland preservation and long-term farm and ranch viability?

With these questions in mind, I went out and asked farmers and ranchers working on the ground in this particular place to talk about how increasing growth and development impacts them and their communities and their thoughts on farmland protection. Importantly, I also wanted to go out and ask participants about their perspectives on building local food systems through local marketing as a strategy for farmland protection and long-term farm viability, understanding the need to integrate these goals at the local level. In Chapters Five and Six, I present the findings of my research.
Limitations of this Study

Despite the strengths and benefits of this study, there is room to expand on and strengthen it. As discussed above, this study is based on a relatively small sample size. While complimented by other components of the Missoula County Community Food Assessment, my study could be stronger with a larger sample size. Furthermore, my sample does not include any members of the Confederated Salish and Kootenai tribe, and such participants would bring an important perspective to this study which is currently lacking. In addition, in-depth interviews with County officials and other community members, as well as producers, would lend strength to this study. This study reports on the perspectives of thirteen farmers and ranchers, coupled with my own perspective. Incorporating a wider range of types of study participants would create a broader understanding of how various community members in Missoula County perceive the prospects for long-term farm and ranch viability, farmland protection, and food system re-localization.
CHAPTER FIVE

CHALLENGES TO THE FUTURE OF LOCAL AGRICULTURE

To better understand the perspectives of farmers and ranchers on farm and ranch viability, I spoke with study participants about a wide variety of topics during our interviews. In the next two chapters, I present the findings of my study. Chapter Five focuses on challenges to the future of agriculture in Missoula County as discussed by study participants. First, I present the factors that they perceive to most threaten their ability to keep their operations going for the long-term. This is followed by a look at their views about growth and development in the County. Chapter Six addresses strategies discussed by study participants for keeping agriculture alive in Missoula County.

Throughout these findings, I use pseudonyms to refer to individual study participants in order to protect the confidentiality of their identities. Readers should also bear in mind that what is reported here is based on the perspectives, experiences, and knowledge of the farmers and ranchers I spoke with. I did not attempt to evaluate the veracity of their statements pertaining to factual issues, because my goal here was to understand the perspectives that often motivate behavior and influence decision making. Quotes are verbatim, except that awkward phrases have been removed to make it more reader friendly; deletions are indicated with elipses.

Factors Threatening Long-term Farm Viability

When asked what most threatens their ability to keep their operations going for the long-term, these farmers and ranchers spoke about a wide range of factors. The most
prevalent ones, however, were the lack of economic viability of agriculture, policy concerns, environmental conditions, community attitudes, and the impacts of growth and development in the County. During many of the interviews, study participants shared views that echo the current economic structure of agriculture in the national and global markets and its impact on local communities.

**Agricultural Economics**

The most common threat to long-term farm viability, cited by nearly all of the participants, was the general lack of economic viability of agriculture, which affects them in various ways. Rosemary, a large-acreage landowner whose family has been on the land for several generations in the Mullan Road area, commented emphatically that, "...Agriculture is such a loss—an economic loss.... It's the lack of value of the crops relative to the cost of production... It does not pencil out economically." This sentiment was common among participants, and many conveyed the same matter-of-fact hopelessness during our discussions. Seven of the thirteen participants specifically noted the issue of pricing—whether low prices for commodities or lack of farmer control over pricing—as a major factor influencing agriculture's lack of economic viability. Kelley, a rancher with hundreds of acres who has placed a conservation easement on his ranch in a quickly developing area of town around Mullan Road, explained,

When I look at the records that my father kept of the prices that he received for his beef every fall, they're not much higher now.... So, people that are involved in agriculture today are receiving essentially the same income that they received forty years ago.... It makes it extremely difficult for people to survive.
These participants show that the economic structure of agriculture discussed earlier, particularly its inherent lack of farmer control over pricing, impacts individual farmers and ranchers in particular places.

Another commonly mentioned factor influencing economic viability was the cost of production. About half of the participants expressed feeling the impacts of increasing production costs—a major consequence of the industrialization of agriculture. George, whose family has ranched for generations on a large acreage near Potomac, explained, “Operating costs, just like any other business just keep escalating, and your ability to produce hasn’t been increased that much, and your ability to get any better price hasn’t kept up with costs.” Cost of production included everything from the cost of equipment to the cost of electricity to power an irrigation pump. Four participants specifically spoke about labor costs as a negative factor, stating that they are unable to pay adequate wages to keep consistent, qualified workers on their operations. As Brandon, a fourth generation rancher near Frenchtown, stated about his family’s very large ranch:

We would love to...provide health care, dental, all those things, you know. But we can’t because our profit margin is so small... It would be nice to have a real good quality employee that you could keep here for thirty years, and that he’s got a light at the end of the tunnel, and benefits... We can’t do that.

In addition to these specific examples of cost of production obstacles, some participants felt that the high cost of production in this country relative to that of less developed countries, limits U.S. farmers’ ability to compete on the global market, further adding to the difficulty of producers to make agriculture an economically viable endeavor. These participants acknowledged that their production occurs within a global economic context
that aims to maximize production volume and economic efficiency rather than farmer livelihoods.

Three participants talked about our society's perceived expectation of cheap food as a problem related to pricing. Shane, a rancher near Potomac whose family moved to the area when he was a young boy, captured this perspective:

We’ve got a society that’s used to having cheap food, and that’s not going to change in the near future. You know, if we told everybody in the United States that you’re going to pay three times as much as you are for your groceries so we can keep our farmers on our land, nobody’d care. They’d say ‘No way, we’re not going to do it.’

He suggested, and a couple other participants might agree, that the price farmers and ranchers receive for their product is directly related to the price consumers pay for food at the grocery store. His view implies that the only way for producers to make more profit is to charge more for food at the checkout line. It is important to remember, however, that the food most Americans eat typically changes hands many times between the producer’s fields and the consumer’s table. Much of the profit in agriculture goes to those stops along the way—distributing, marketing, wholesaling, and retailing, to name a few.

Several participants also mentioned the lack of agricultural infrastructure in this area as a factor contributing to the lack of economic viability of agriculture. Missoula County lacks processing facilities of adequate scale that might allow producers to add more value to their crops. For example, Shane noted that this area used to boast various local processing facilities, but they have dwindled. He said, “We’ve got some small processing plants in western Montana, but they’re very small. And, there used to be a huge one right on Mullan Road that probably processed fifteen, twenty animals a day when we moved here.” He also explained that the current agricultural infrastructure is
such that he must send his cattle to distant feedlots and processing facilities in order to market his product. Because of this, he sometimes becomes disconnected from the knowledge about where the beef he raises ends up. As he explained,

> Now, you know, our calves leave here and western Montana and go all the way to Kansas to be fed, because that’s where they can grow good corn. Or Minnesota or wherever. Then they might get shipped clear from there, clear to Iowa or maybe clear back to Boise, Idaho to be processed. One year, our calves left here, went to Canada to be fed, came back to Boise to be processed... I’d like to get back to feeding our own cattle here and trying to market them locally, because then I can demand all those dollars that are feeding through all these other people.

Feeling the impact of the centralization that has occurred in agriculture in recent decades, Shane acknowledged that with access to adequate local processing facilities, he would glean more profit from his labor, because he would not have to pass his cattle through a long line of different hands, each in turn demanding a portion of the profits.

In addition to processing facilities, other aspects of the agricultural support base are dwindling, as several participants explained. Some noted the loss of livestock feed outlets and other support businesses that provide for the needs of farmers and ranchers. As George reminded us,

> You have to have support for...production. And especially in machinery in Missoula County, the support is gradually going away because there isn’t enough agriculture to...keep machinery dealers in business. So, you have to reach farther for your support base. Manufactured livestock feed comes from Great Falls or Billings... It doesn’t come from Missoula anymore. It used to...because there were two mills in Missoula.

He noted that because the immediate area has lost much of its agricultural support infrastructure, it is more difficult for area producers to locate needed supplies. This can bring inconvenience and increased cost, both of which detract from producers’ long-term
viability. Finally, a couple participants noted debt and difficulty obtaining credit as economic factors that negatively impacted their long-term viability.

Embedded in these participants' views about their long-term economic viability is a keen awareness of larger trends in the industrial agriculture system, including the lack of farmer control over pricing, high cost of production, and centralization of agricultural processing and distributing infrastructure. Many of them understand that national and international forces significantly impact their individual ability to make ends meet, and in turn, that impacts the local community.

**Policy Concerns**

Eight participants raised policy-related threats to their long-term viability, including taxation and access to grazing on public land. Of these, the most often mentioned was a high rate of taxation—whether property tax or estate tax—mentioned by four participants as a negative factor. Ronald, one of Missoula County's largest landowners, explained, "Taxation is extremely depressive to ranching because it takes a high amount of capitalization, and that capitalization is taxed. And as such, it decreases its profitability." Another rancher, Thomas, who lives in a rapidly developing area of town in the Mullan Road area, spoke about his view on the relationship between taxation and the long-term maintenance of farmland in the County. As he said, "...If the property taxes keep going up and up and up, people are going to sell. They just can't afford to pay them." In his view, property taxes play a role in driving agricultural landowners to sell their land for development. Thomas explained:

> When we...took over the operation in 1974, the property taxes were $785, and I thought, 'Well, that's not too high.' And I told (wife), 'When they
hit $10,000 we’re gonna have to change—change something.’ And they hit $11,000 a year... 25% of what we produce. So you’re kind of caught between a rock and a hard place. So you try to downsize and keep the best—basically, we sold the dry land and kept the irrigated because that’s the best ground. It produces the most.

For him, property taxes have caused him to progressively liquidate portions of his land for development in order to maintain the most productive parts of his ranch.

Another concern, mentioned by three participants, was reduced access to grazing on public lands, or imperiled grazing opportunities on Plum Creek land due to changing ownership. One former rancher in the Huson area, Lester, reflected that his dwindling access to National Forest grazing land for his cattle was a primary reason precipitating his exit from ranching. He said, “The problem was I didn’t have the grazing, and the Forest Service cut what I had left—cut it in half.” George, currently in cattle production, acknowledged that the changing ownership of much grazing land in the County adds to his uncertainty about the future. “The changing use of timber land—we use it for a lease system for grazing our cows in the summer, and that ownership is in jeopardy or is changing. So those are all things that are unknowns for the long-term.”

Environmental Conditions

Eight participants spoke about environmental or agroecological conditions that make it difficult for them to keep their operations going. These included climate, drought, and the length of our growing season, weeds and other pests, water availability, and predation by wolves. The most commonly mentioned environmental conditions, noted by six study participants, pertained to our area’s climate, length of growing season, and recent drought. Shane expressed the sentiments of many when he explained, “We always
have frost in June and we always have frost in August. So our options for crops that we can grow is pretty limited.” Brandon echoed this comment but went further in explaining the impact of recent drought on his family’s operation.

...We’re limited...for the crops we can grow in Missoula County, because we only have so many growing days... It’s not like we live in California, which is a desert where they can get, you know, seven to nine cuttings of hay in a year, and we’re looking at two good ones if we’re lucky, you know. And it just seems lately in like the last five years, we’ve had a lot of drought...so we’ve had to cut our herd down because the grass isn’t growing.

Although the area’s climate and recent weather patterns are not things we can easily control or remedy for producers, other negative environmental conditions mentioned by participants might have room for human intervention for improvement.

A couple participants specifically mentioned weeds and other pests as limiting factors to their long-term viability. Jeremy, a small acreage hay producer near Frenchtown, commented with some humor, “I would say the thing that is the biggest factor, negative factor, is I have a couple neighbors to the West that raise knapweed and gophers [laughs].” Several of the producers I interviewed also noted the County’s perceived lack of enforcement of weed laws and general ineffectiveness of preventing the spread of weeds. Jeremy also mentioned lack of available water as a problem for him:

It’s hard to get water. Which is kind of strange to me, because you know, a lot of the property out here has been subdivided or sold into where the people no longer use the water. But they won’t give anybody else water. So we’ve got, in my opinion, a lot of minor’s inches of water in that Clark Fork, or in this river basin, that just keeps on running down to the ocean and never gets used.

For Jeremy, weeds and other pests, as well as the distribution of water rights after land is subdivided, are both factors that could be dealt with differently.
Finally, two participants commented on predation by wolves as a factor that threatens or at one time threatened their long-term viability. One former rancher in the Huson area, Lester, explained that the trouble he had with wolf predation was a major reason he discontinued his operation.

Then the wolves—that turned into a real problem. When they first came in there I didn’t have any problem with them... Then later on, they got more bold. There was more of them and I lost three calves and a yearling steer right there in the yard... It was a constant hassle.

With documentation, Lester was able to receive compensation for his losses from the Defenders of Wildlife organization, although he explained that documenting loss was a difficult task. He also felt like advocates for wolves often do not care or understand how wolves impact the livelihoods of area ranchers. Farms and ranches invariably provide habitat for animals of many shapes and sizes—from insects, bees, and birds to deer, wolves, and in some cases, bears. Particularly here in the West, where we have nearby populations of predator wildlife, the balance between wildlife and livestock on ranchlands can be difficult to strike. Many are working to strike this delicate balance.

State and regional groups such as the Blackfoot Challenge, the Yellowstone to Yukon Conservation Initiative, and the Alternative Energy Resources Organization are working in various ways to build grassroots coalitions between conservationists and agriculturalists, understanding the need for these two historically disparate interests to come together to achieve their respective goals.

**Changing Community Attitudes**

Although many factors threaten participants’ ability to keep going, five mentioned a perceived change in community attitudes toward agriculture, something that does not
necessarily or directly impact them materially. While I was interviewing George, a rancher near Potomac, his wife, Amelia, expressed her frustration:

*I think the new neighbors don’t value agriculture…and they make it difficult for you to run your operation. We’re all the time having to spend time defending our right to be here. And the attitude of the community has changed. There’s no community.*

In a way, Amelia’s experience differs from the trend noted earlier from other studies on farmers’ and ranchers’ perspectives on growth, development, and farmland protection. In some studies I reviewed, it seemed that often, new neighbors can be the most vocal supporters of agriculture (Daniels and Bowers 1997). George and Amelia, among others, noted the difficulties that come with the fact that many of their neighboring landowners are no longer farming or ranching, resulting in a loss of their sense of agricultural community. As George remarked, “The support system—the neighbors that are around you, doing the same things, kind of support each operation. That’s dwindling away. And people with different interests like the area, but they don’t necessarily like cows.” Growth brings in many different types of people with different interests, and several of these farmers and ranchers feel many of them are not friendly toward agricultural practices.

While perhaps new residents tend to be vocal proponents of farmland protection in some places, this may not be the case everywhere. It is also possible that while new neighbors may like the idea of having agriculture nearby for aesthetic reasons, this may not translate into an affinity for the day-to-day realities of living near agricultural operations.

Beyond neighbors’ concerns about “nuisance,” some participants sensed that agriculture has been “left for dead” here in Missoula County—that it is simply on its way out the door as the community changes. This sense was intensified by the fact that many felt the younger generations are not interested in staying in agriculture. Timothy, whose
family has also been in agriculture here for generations and who has been involved in local government, spoke about his hope that his young son might someday want to take over the ranch. But he explained, “It’s hard to teach somebody to lose money and still survive. So I don’t think we’ve got long to go, and we’ll all be gone in Missoula County, anyway.” For Timothy, the lack of desire and financial ability for young people to either continue their family’s agricultural heritage or forge a new one, is a major factor ushering agriculture out the door in Missoula County.

Shane commented on how the community has changed in his time ranching: “We can’t move cows down the County road like we used to, to pastures and that kind of thing, because we’re holding people up to get to work or whatever.” In a sense, he captures a clash of cultures by sharing an image of Missoula County as having one foot in two seemingly different worlds—that of agriculture and that of modern hustle and bustle. Several study participants would argue that Missoula County is slowly taking its foot out of the agricultural world, and they have the sense that they are watching it disintegrate.

**Impacts of Growth and Development on Long-term Farm Viability**

In addition to the lack of economic viability of agriculture, policy concerns, environmental conditions, and changing community attitudes, eight participants discussed development as a significant factor threatening their long-term viability—the most commonly mentioned factor after the lack of economic viability of agriculture. Those who did not name development as a factor include one who is no longer ranching and several others who gain significant income from off-farm employment. Their geographical locations in areas close to the City or further out did not seem to
significantly impact their response. I focus here in greater detail on how growth and
development in Missoula County threatens participants’ long-term viability and provides
a backdrop that influences agricultural production here in many ways. As Shane said,
“Number one is the income, but number two is development.” Participants’ comments
about the negative effects of development generally pertained to the impacts of increasing
land values and the impacts of having more people living nearby their operations.

Increasing Property Value

Of the eight participants who spoke about the impacts of growth and development
in the County as a factor that threatens their long-term viability, half of them spoke
specifically about how the increasing land values that come along with increasing
development influences their operations. For several, the high cost of land has made it
impossible to purchase additional land to expand production. This, in turn, is connected
to an aspect of the lack of economic viability of agriculture. Shane explained, “There’s
not room for growth. All the ranchland is so inflated in price that you can’t afford to buy
more land…” He implies here that perhaps if he were able to buy more land, he could
expand his operation, thereby making it more economically successful. He went on to
explain that if his neighbor were to put his land up for sale, he would not be able to buy it
because he is not able to compete with the development value of the land:

So what happens to that land? It goes into development. Almost always.
Or, to a rich, out of state buyer, and that’s another...huge factor in western
Montana... You know, he’s coming in, and he doesn’t need to make a
living from it, he just wants to own a ranch. So how do you compete with
that? You go to the guy that’s selling the place and say, ‘You know, I can
afford to pay 500 dollars an acre.’ And he says, ‘Well, this guy from
California is gonna pay me 2,000 dollars an acre.’ ‘Well, okay. See ya.’
Here, Shane indicates that the increasing value of land that comes with increased growth and development has far-reaching consequences. Not only does it inhibit many farmers and ranchers from purchasing more land to expand the production of their operations; it potentially changes the make up of agricultural communities dramatically due to wealthier buyers who can afford the cost of land.

In addition to making it difficult or impossible to expand production, sometimes the increasing land values made participants feel like their best option was to sell their land and get out of production. Shane put it this way: “A lot of guys say, ‘I’m land rich, and cash poor.’ And all that means is that I’m sitting on a lot of land that’s worth a hell of a lot of money, but the only way I’ll ever get it is to sell it.” Whether this statement is actually true or not is debatable. There may in fact be creative ways for farmers and ranchers to access more of the value of their land without selling it outright, a topic I discuss in more depth in a later section on farmland protection. Nevertheless, this quote captures Shane’s and others’ feeling of being stuck, in a sense, on an extremely valuable piece of land, from which it is extremely difficult to make a living without selling it.

Brandon echoed this sentiment by saying,

You know, the best crop you can raise on a ranch in western Montana in this location is one acre with a house on it.... You can sell one acre out here for fifty thousand dollars. How many calves does it take to make fifty thousand dollars? ...It would take you two hundred years.

For his family, given the high value of land, it is sometimes difficult to justify struggling to continue their agricultural operation. The economic benefits of ranching hardly compare to the economic benefits of selling their land for development. Fortunately, Brandon, like many others, believes strongly in continuing their agricultural operation, despite the economic incentives to sell created by increasing land values. Several
participants echo the findings of other studies reviewed earlier on this topic by suggesting that increasing land values are indeed a strong force influencing their perceived opportunities and their willingness to consider selling their land.

**Increasing Numbers of Neighbors**

In addition to the high cost of land that goes along with growth and development, several participants mentioned the more immediate impacts of an increasing number of neighbors living in their vicinity, some of whom are not friendly to agriculture. Related to the earlier discussion of changing community attitudes, having more neighbors surrounding agricultural operations presents an opportunity for increased instances of conflict. As one landowner, whom I did not interview, but whose family has an extensive history of agriculture in Missoula County, explained in a letter to me: “Subdivision encroachment...causes more trespass, roaming dogs.... Increasing numbers of elk and deer and decreasing wildlife range due to subdivision cause loss of forage for income-producing livestock.” Not only do increasing numbers of neighbors bring trespass and conflicts between dogs and livestock, but because more and more land is being subdivided and developed, the land available for wildlife forage is more limited. In turn, more wildlife comes to depend on the forage available on farms and ranches—forage intended for livestock. This particular impact of development is one way, beyond predation, in which the tension between wildlife habitat and livestock production may be exacerbated.

Thomas’s experiences were unique among study participants, in that he has had much of his land condemned for City or County projects. He views these condemnations
as one ramification of increasing growth and development in the County, because more population brings with it the need for more public services such as roads. His situation exemplifies the blurry line between “private” and “public” land ownership that I discussed earlier. As he explained,

...We got a letter from the airport saying that they were going to condemn the whole ranch and take it. So, we actually negotiated with the federal government for three years, and they ended up with about 80% of the ranch. But we have leased it back from them for twenty years, so actually the ranch will stay pretty much the way it is, but we don’t own very much of it anymore.

He continued to explain that parts of his land have been condemned not only for the airport, but also for public work on the highway and gas line extension. Thomas did not seem angry about his land being condemned. Rather, he emanated a sense of resignation about his circumstance, so common among study participants: “It’s inevitable. If you’re this close to town, growth is going to come out. So, you know, it’s kind of bittersweet. We have some money to do something with. Instead of being in the land, we have it in the bank account. But it’s not the same.” In his view, if you are in the path of development, you cannot avoid being significantly impacted by it.

Paul, who raises plants and vegetables on a small acreage farm in the urban Missoula area, and whose family has been central in the County’s agricultural history, experienced the impacts of growth and development in another way. Due to his location in a more densely developed area than most study participants, his experience of development has primarily revolved around physical damage to his property resulting from adjacent developments. In one case, contractors working on an adjacent development parked their vehicles on his property, and in another case, a load of gravel
was dumped onto his property. When he was finally able to get the gravel removed, whoever removed the gravel also removed a significant amount of topsoil off his field. He said, "It's a big mess. It stresses me to no end." His proximity to a major traffic thoroughfare has also brought negative consequences. He has had trouble with a snowplow pushing snow from the road directly onto his field, and the rain runoff from the road also causes occasional flooding in his field. As he remarked, "Development issues take a lot of my time and cause me a lot of grief."

Paul expressed frustration because he feels like people generally do not care about the impacts they are having on agriculture or anyone else for that matter. "Everybody can only think of their own job. There's no consideration for others." He may not feel so frustrated about the development occurring around him if he felt his livelihood was more respected. Once again, Paul's experience echoes the findings of other studies on these issues, (e.g., Israel and Gillis 1990), particularly because his proximity to other developments is a primary factor putting negative pressure on his ability to continue his operation. Finally, Shane felt that many people do not understand the financial difficulties of farming and ranching. In his view, an unfortunate result is that sometimes the community looks upon ranchers who need to subdivide land for development as greedy, something that adds to the already difficult situation many producers find themselves in.

**A Closer Look at Development**

Although development came up as the second factor threatening participants' long-term viability, I explored the issue of development in a bit more detail. I asked participants if they think recent trends in increasing growth and development are positive,
negative, or neutral for their particular operations. Many individual participants were able to list several positive aspects of development trends as well as some negative aspects of it. George captures the complexity of how development impacts many producers:

> They’re [growth and development trends] positive in the aspect if you’re borrowing money, you have a better economic base to borrow on. They’re negative as far as your ability to increase the size of your operation. They’re negative as far as dealing with land resources...because you’re competing with other interests.

Thus, it appears that the issue is not cut and dry. Sylvia, a small acreage intensive vegetable farmer, remarked, once again hinting at the complexity of these impacts:

> “There’s more people here and they buy our stuff... I’d rather have less people buy our stuff and not as much traffic when we’re delivering.” Overall, eleven participants gave negative responses, while five gave positive responses.

Brandon’s father spoke about a creative way their family has been able to benefit from development. Without purchasing more land, they are sometimes able to “expand” their operation by leasing additional grazing pasture from new landowners who come into the area. As he explained,

> When I find out that some guy bought two or three hundred acres and he’s gonna put a house on there, I go knock on his door and I say, ‘What are you gonna do with the rest of your land?’ Sometimes they say, ‘We don’t know,’ and I say, ‘Well, you’re gonna have to know because it’s gonna turn to weeds... And we’ve leased quite a bit of land from attorneys and developers and just people who buy a hundred acres of farm ground... And it’s a good deal for us because we don’t hardly pay anything for it. You know, we maintain the ground for them.

This family has found a creative way to adapt to and benefit from increasing growth and development in their area.
Ronald, the largest-scale landowner I interviewed, spoke about development trends as positive for his particular operation. In response to my question, he answered, “Absolutely, they’re positive. That’s what I’m doing—I’m selling my land. It becomes development, and it appreciates.” Interestingly, although Ronald viewed recent development trends as undeniably positive for him personally, he had a different response to my next question, which asked what he thought about these trends for agriculture in the County in general. To this question, he said, “Very negative for ranching because in 1950…we had full time veterinarians doing cow work. Now, one man cannot make a living in the whole area on cows.” Thus, Ronald acknowledged that overall the trends are negative for agriculture, mainly due to the dwindling agricultural support base in the area.

When I asked the other study participants if they think recent development trends are positive, negative, or neutral for agriculture in the County in general, their answers were not completely cut and dry, just as was the case for the previous question about their operations in particular. There were fewer respondents to this question, however, who could name positive aspects of development for agriculture in general. Overall, two participants gave positive responses, and ten gave negative responses. In addition to the positive aspects of increased property value and greater number of people to buy products, Shane mentioned newly paved roads as a positive aspect of development. With increasing growth, some of the previously unpaved roads in his area have been paved, and this has cut down on dust, which was a nuisance in the past.

Although saddened by the loss of agricultural land to development, Kelley understands the difficulty farm families face in trying to make a living from agriculture:
Oh, they [growth and development trends] are very, very negative indeed. But you can’t blame—I don’t blame the people whose families have had a long history of agriculture in the valley for selling land for development purposes because it has been so difficult to eek out a living strictly by means of agriculture over the years. On the other hand, it is so sad, and there has been essentially no attempt whatsoever to limit the growth.

The fact that the issue of development is not cut and dry for many study participants is reminiscent of the tension between private and public interests found in the earlier discussion of property ownership. It seems that while many participants openly acknowledge the detrimental impact development has on agriculture in a broad sense for the community, they also hold tightly to individual landowners’ rights to develop land for personal benefit. The table below summarizes what participants view as the positive and negative aspects of increasing growth and development.

### TABLE III: Study Participants’ Perceived Negative and Positive Aspects of Growth and Development

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<th>Study Participants’ Perceived Negative Aspects of Increased Growth and Development</th>
<th>Study Participants’ Perceived Positive Aspects of Increased Growth and Development</th>
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<td>4 Inability to expand production</td>
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<td>3 Decreased grazing allotments</td>
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<td>2 Loss of productive land and open space</td>
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<td>2 Increased taxation</td>
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<td>1 Loss of wildlife range puts pressure on livestock forage</td>
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<td>1 Disputed water rights</td>
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<td>1 Stress on regional carrying capacity</td>
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* The numbers to the left of the perceived positive and negative aspects indicate the number of study participants who mentioned each. Total N=13.
Inevitability of Development

A majority of study participants, eight, spoke about the inevitability of current development trends, and many expressed a resignation of sorts to the perceived fate of Missoula County agriculture. As Thomas, who has been forced by economic constraints to sell portions of his land for development, remarked,

I think it’s inevitable. If the growth is going to go west and you’re in the path, economically you’re going to be forced to sell it, or subdivide… Thirty years ago if you’d asked me if I would have done this, I would have said no. But as you get older and see the handwriting on the wall, you either move, or join in, and we’re just trying to stay with what we have.

There seems to be a shared feeling that as people continue to move into this area, there is no other option for farmers but to sell land for development. George echoed this view:

As long as people want to come and live here, and as long as people can see more economic value selling property and dividing it up when the need arises…it’s going to be more and more smaller operations and more and more people I guess. I don’t think Missoula County has much future as far as the type of agriculture that…I’ve known in my lifetime, unless it’s part time with a job in town.

Several participants strongly emphasized the inevitability of such growth, and acknowledge that there is limited land area in Missoula to accommodate it. If increasing population cannot all fit into the confines of the Missoula urban area, then it seems logical to some participants that the populated urban area will expand into the currently rural areas. Jeremy claimed, “I think it’s important to recognize that there’s nothing we can do about the fact that, you know, people are gonna move out…people can’t just all live in Missoula.” Lester shared this sense of helplessness in the face of increasing population. “It was a lot more peaceful, I’ll tell you, forty or fifty years ago… As far as agriculture, it’s all negative. But how are you going to stop ‘em?”
Brandon took this perspective a bit further by suggesting that Missoula County is too far gone in terms of development's impacts on agriculture. He thinks instead that we ought to "let this County go," and focus on other places not yet so populated:

I think Missoula's gone beyond the point of returning to rural. I think you're just gonna have to allow it to become an urban area. And the places you really want to protect are those places outside of Missoula County, maybe Eastern Montana. Start working with those places before towns like Big Timber start to grow.

It is interesting that so many study participants (though not all) see little alternative to farmland conversion, given the increasing growth in the County. It is also noteworthy that participants' views about whether current trends in growth and development are positive or negative are not easily defined as either. These issues are complex, and that complexity is reflected in participants' views.

Conclusion

As the findings of this chapter suggest, the challenges to the future of local agriculture, at least for these particular farmers and ranchers, are many. Of primary significance are agricultural economics in the national and international marketplace and the impacts of increasing growth and development at the local level. Other challenges these producers face include policy concerns about taxation, adverse environmental conditions, and changing community attitudes toward agriculture.

The top two challenges discussed by participants—broad level trends in agricultural economics and local level trends in growth and development—intersect in this particular place to create an extremely difficult situation for local farmers and ranchers. Several participants expressed resignation at the inevitability of the negative
impacts of local trends in growth and development. Despite this, several participants were able to identify positive aspects of the increasing growth and development. This ability to find the positive in the midst of difficulty characterizes many study participants as they develop strategies for staying on their land and in production.
CHAPTER SIX

STRATEGIES FOR KEEPING LOCAL AGRICULTURE ALIVE

What strategies might keep local agriculture alive? Here, I explore factors that participants’ view as facilitating their ability to keep their operations going for the long-term, as well as the environmentally sustainable practices they employ, often as a means to save money on production costs. In addition, I discuss participants’ views about farmland protection methods, and the prospects for local marketing as a unique farmland protection strategy. The chapter closes with a brief look at participants’ motivations for keeping their land in agricultural production.

Factors Contributing to Long-term Farm Viability

The aim of this research included identifying factors that facilitate a producer’s ability to stay on the land for the long term so that those things might be further encouraged, as appropriate. When asked about these factors, off-farm employment (most frequently mentioned), market considerations, and reducing production costs were the main ones mentioned.

Off-farm Jobs

According to the 2002 United States Census of Agriculture, approximately 58% of US farmers reported farming as their principal occupation, suggesting that off-farm employment is common across the country. In Montana, about 64% of farmers reported farming as their principal occupation in 2002, down from 77% in 1974. Missoula County
reflects these trends, although fewer farmers in the County claim farming as their principal occupation as compared with national and state numbers. Here, only about 47% of farmers report farming as their principal occupation, although this is up from about 33% in 1997 (USDA Census of Agriculture).

These trends also came to life in my interviews with study participants, as many of them discussed the importance of off-farm employment. Eight of them spoke about the fact that income from sources other than their agricultural operations makes it possible for them to stay in production and "make ends meet." As Kelley explained, "When my father passed away, I took over...but I had an outside source of income...That's really the only way that the operation could continue." During another interview, I asked a Brandon and his father, Pritchard, what factors most facilitated their ability to continue their operation, and my question was met with silence. Finally, Pritchard said, "Me selling real estate." Brandon then reiterated the importance of off-farm employment when he said, emphatically, "Off farm employment! If we did not have off-farm employment, we would probably not be here today."

Off-farm employment appeared to be the most significant factor facilitating the interviewees' ability to continue farming or ranching for the long-term—something directly related to the low economic return these producers experience. Here again, we can see the larger trends in the industrial agriculture system reflected in the day-to-day realities of local farmers and ranchers. The economics of national and global agricultural markets make it nearly impossible for people to make a livelihood solely from agriculture. Although off-farm jobs were cited as positive factors that facilitate long-term
farm viability, one must wonder for how long people will be willing to juggle outside employment with the daily demands of agricultural production.

Local Markets

Five participants talked about market considerations that facilitate their operations’ long-term viability. Interestingly, most of these producers noted dedicated and accessible local customers. As Sylvia, a small-scale organic vegetable grower who sells primarily to a local customer base, explained, “We’re close to town, and that makes it easy to deliver things. We have easy access to restaurants and stores and the farmers’ market. It’s a great farmers’ market. Mostly, there’re good markets.” Due to the small scale and diverse nature of her production, she is able to cater to a local market of individuals, stores, and restaurants, and she enjoys a strong and dedicated market.

Another farmer, Paul, who also sells primarily to a local market, talked about the importance of his finding a niche, but he acknowledged that the market is always changing, which keeps him on his toes: “The market changes. You don’t know what direction to go sometimes in the marketing.” Paul felt he has been lucky to establish a dedicated customer base. He told me of a time when the road to get to his operation’s market was closed due to construction. Despite having to walk a couple blocks to get to his place, his customers came nonetheless, and he fared quite well thanks to their dedication. Similarly, Jeremy expressed pride in the quality of his hay, something that aids in his local marketing success: “I know what I’m feeding my horses... I know they’re getting good hay... And I’m also able to sell a quality product at a fair price, and that’s another reason I enjoy doing it.”
Importantly, the participants who noted good markets as a factor facilitating their long-term viability do not depend on national or global markets for their goods. In a sense, they market their products outside the industrial agriculture system. They sell directly to consumers, and as such, they keep a larger portion of the consumers’ dollar and build relationships with their customers. This reflects that at least in these cases, the suggestions of scholars mentioned previously (e.g., Lyson et al. 1999 and Kloppenburg et al. 1996) can prove beneficial to producers.

**Reducing Production Costs**

As discussed in Chapter Five, issues surrounding the cost of production emerged as a primary negative factor for many participants. Some cost of production issues, however, also emerged as positive factors for a few participants. For example, George talked about the fact that his operation is less labor intensive than it has been in the past, due to better machinery, better communications, and better communication technology. “It doesn’t take near the physical labor to do the job that it did thirty years ago.” Some participants mentioned the fact that they do not purchase expensive commercial fertilizer. Shane explained, “We’ve just not fertilized. ... We’re not getting some of the yields that maybe some of the other places in western Montana... are getting, but our input costs are much lower. And so, I think overall we’re better off.” In addition, two participants mentioned that environmental or physical conditions were on their side, citing good soil and good water for production. As Sylvia succinctly put it, “The soil’s nice.” Many study participants have found sometimes very creative ways to reduce production costs, which is an economic factor that they tend to have greater control over than the price they sell
their product for, particularly in non-local markets. Although those who sell to non-local markets were more apt to talk about reducing their cost of production, the desire to reduce costs was common.

Other Factors

Participants mentioned several other positive factors about their agricultural experience that helps them keep operating for the long-term. Two viewed the agricultural property tax rate as beneficial, hinting at the influence of the “public” sector on private property. Michael, who raises grain on a large acreage in the Mullan Road area, commented, “If this place were taxed as other than an agricultural property, that would be very onerous.” Kelley has placed a conservation easement on his property—something he feels contributes to keeping his operation going for the long term due to the associated financial gains. Ronald noted that he is encouraged to continue ranching by being able to watch his land value appreciate in the meantime, a very different strategy from Kelley’s. Lastly, a significant number of participants spoke about personal factors, such as a love for the farming lifestyle, playing an important role keeping them going for the long term. These motivating factors are discussed in greater detail at the end of this chapter.

Environmentally Sustainable Practices

Participants reported using a variety of techniques to maintain environmental quality, suggesting that these particular farmers and ranchers are stewards of our agricultural resources in Missoula County. Importantly, my understanding of participants’ environmentally sustainable practices is based solely on the interviewees’
self-report. It appears, however, that these local producers are managing their lands in a way that provides multiple benefits for the community. Certainly, long-term food security depends on having farmland and viable farming here in the County. But does it depend on having just any type of agricultural production managed with any techniques? Food security depends on farmland being managed in ecologically sound ways so that productivity and ecosystem functions can be maintained for the long term. We can begin to consider this issue by learning about techniques employed and an underlying interest in environmentally sound practices that already exists here. The most commonly mentioned sustainability practices of study participants pertained to water conservation, soil quality, and chemical use.

**Water Conservation**

Six participants reported that they have taken steps on their land, sometimes out of economic necessity, to conserve water and protect its quality through improved irrigation systems and ditch designs. Shane captured the double-incentive of water conservation techniques by explaining that by changing his irrigation system, he saved money as well as water.

We don’t do it like grandpa did. You know, the old-timers flood irrigated, and... in those days, I guess it was efficient. Today it’s not, because they didn’t have the technology we have today. So we’ve gone to a gravity system. We used to pump our water. We don’t pump our water anymore. It’s all gravity fed through a sprinkler and a wheel line. And a lot of the other ranches are converting as well. And it’s just to cut costs. That’s the bottom line... I should say, that’s the number one reason for doing it. Conservation comes along with that, but I guess the conservation part of it is a benefit because of the fact that we just had to cut costs.
George also talked about the water savings he experienced when he changed his irrigation system to a sprinkler system, which “made a lot of difference.” Pritchard, the father of a rancher I interviewed, shared this sentiment when he said, “Well, we don’t flood irrigate anymore. We use sprinklers, and I think that’s conserving a lot of water. When we flood irrigated, we wasted a lot of water, I know that.”

In addition to improved irrigation and ditch design, four participants have taken measures to protect creeks and creek-side vegetation. Kelley explained his success in fencing off the riparian area of his land: “The cattle like to trample the banks as they go down to the water, and that’s highly destructive to the vegetation along the river… The results [of the fencing] are highly promising, and the vegetation is coming back beautifully.” Others talked about creating streams to keep cattle off the main creeks or by installing fish screens on irrigation systems so that fish stay in the creeks. Shane talked about converting his irrigation ditch to an underground pipe:

When we did convert to the pipe, it’s got a fish screen up at the creek, so the fish stay in the creek. And then when we aren’t using any water or we shut a line off…what water we aren’t using then stays in the creek. So, that was something we did kind of on the conservation side of things.

By converting to the pipe, he not only saved water, but he was also able to help the fish stay in the creek. True to my earlier discussion of the importance of farmland to local communities beyond food production, these participants reported that their management practices preserve water quality and aquatic habitat.

Grazing Practices and Soil Quality

Practices pertaining to soil quality and health are also typical of study participants. Through careful grazing practices, crop rotations, and erosion control
methods mentioned by eight participants, farmers and ranchers protect the long-term production capacity of their land, often offering many side-benefits to the larger community. Shane explained:

We try to leave a third to half of our grass every year. It holds the snow better, it controls the weeds better, and if you get a dry year, you’ve got some residue from the years before to get you through. One of the rewards of that to conservation is, you’ve got some cover for the birds to nest in the next spring. There’s something for the elk and the deer to winter on because you’ve got some stuff sticking out of the snow. Those kinds of things help everybody.

George’s daughter, Marie, explained, “We don’t graze everything to the dirt. We move stuff around and stuff like that.” Brandon practices the same method:

We try and manage our grass by rotational grazing…. I mean, we don’t just have cattle and go, ‘Well, that’s it!’ and let them graze what they want and then when they start chewing down the fence posts, ‘Well, I guess it’s time to move ‘em,’ kind of thing.

Like others, Brandon thinks very carefully about when and where to move his cattle throughout the year in order to maintain the health and productive capacity of his land.

Other participants spoke about erosion control methods. As Rosemary explained, “Years ago there were erosion dams put in to prevent erosion coming down off the clay hills that would go, you know, all the way down to the river. So there’s been quite a bit of preservation.” Sylvia, who is certified organic, explained some of her practices designed to prevent soil loss from erosion and generally maintain the quality of her soil:

I cover crop in the winter—a cover crop that has grass in it to hold the structure down, and a legume to add nitrogen back to the soil. Part of keeping the soil nice for me is just tilling at the proper time. I use a spader instead of a rototiller, and the soil’s got a lot of clay in it, so I have to make sure it’s dry enough. Just doing things at the proper time.
She went on to explain that although she is certified organic, increasing land values in this area that result from increasing growth and development impact her ability to farm the way she wants to for maximum sustainability. As she explained, “To farm really sustainably, I feel like we need to have parts of our field fallow for a couple years, and we don’t really have enough land to do that because land costs too much in Missoula.” With that, Sylvia indicated that sometimes, the ability for producers to conduct their operations in an environmentally sustainable manner is directly related to the pressures created by growth and development.

**Reduced Chemical Use**

In addition to soil and water conservation, many study participants also reported that they employ practices that limit their use of chemicals, commercial fertilizer, and antibiotics. Among the eight participants who mentioned minimizing their use of chemicals, several use no chemical pesticides or commercial fertilizers at all, and others minimize the use of these substances whenever possible. Many participants recognize the environmental degradation that occurs with the use of these materials. As Michael said,

> We’re very careful where we put fertilizer and herbicides... We own a lot of riverfront property here and so we really do take a stewardship responsibility because if everybody...permits a lot of nutrients to get in the river...it can do a lot of damage.

Others spoke about the high financial cost of using commercial fertilizers and chemical sprays as a major reason they avoid using them. As George explained, “Well, buying a lot of...commercial fertilizer...or a lot of sprays, or a lot of the techniques in managing livestock are expensive to do. We just don’t do those things.”
Jeremy talked at length about his interest in alternative methods for replenishing nutrients to his soil and eliminating weeds. He said,

I prefer not to ever have to use chemicals to get rid of the weeds. ...Every so often, every so many years, I turn my ground. I plough it up and I plant oats and peas. And that seems to be a good, you know, buffer or off season crop that puts nitrogen back into the soil.

He went on to explain that he does not have a lot of knowledge about alternative methods and is interested in learning more.

I know Cenex sends people out and they do samples of your soil and they’ll tell you, ‘Here’s the fertilizer you need to use to get your soil back to where you want it to be.’ Now, it’s obvious—I think history shows that these fertilizers that you put on your ground are not the best thing for the rivers and stuff, because they get washed down into the river and then you have a lot of moss and stuff. ...Instead of using fertilizers, I’d like to figure out ways to turn your property and rotate your crops and...do the best you can there... I just would like to see more literature or more information on that. ...The University of Montana would be a good source for it...I mean, I’d accept it from anybody, but I’d rather see it coming from the University of Montana than the County of Missoula.

Jeremy’s comment illustrates that at least for him, there is a need for more information and education regarding non-chemical production techniques. Clearly, companies that manufacture or sell chemical products are supplying producers with information suggesting why they should use those products. There may be a dearth, however, of information regarding alternative techniques. Several participants talked about having tried alternative methods for pest control, such as biological controls and strategic irrigation practices.

A couple ranchers I interviewed spoke about the way they care for their cattle by avoiding the use of hormones and antibiotics whenever possible. Lester, who formerly
raised cattle, explained that he never used antibiotics for his cattle, and he thinks that despite the risks, there is a market for beef raised without them:

I think it would be a risk, because of the inspectors and everything else, to start your own small slaughterhouse operation like the one in Ronan. But if you advertised...that it was guaranteed no antibiotics or whatever. I don’t know, some of those big feeders still use antibiotics, but they’ve cut way back. I never used anything... I’d give ‘em a shot of Vitamin A and Selenium when they were first born... but that was all I ever did.

He sees potential for producers who treat their cattle without antibiotics, as he did. It could present a value-added product that could be successfully marketed to local consumers. In other words, this and other environmentally sustainable techniques practiced by study participants might be something to capitalize on in terms of building strong local markets and keeping these farmers and ranchers in business—something that would benefit the community on many levels.

When advocating agricultural preservation in our community, we need to pay attention to the production techniques employed and the impact those have for our long-term health. Perhaps we ought to incorporate an educational component for consumers and farmers alike on available production methods that minimize adverse environmental and public health hazards associated with some types of production. This could be an important role for local agricultural extension agents to play. Food security as defined on the first page of Chapter One incorporates ecologically sound production techniques. Long-term food security depends not only on the availability of food, but also on the health of our working lands, so that they may continue to produce food for generations to come. With the overarching goal of long-term food security in mind, doing what we can to keep local farmers and ranchers on the land may give us the opportunity to influence production techniques in positive ways down the road. Indeed, some argue that local
marketing networks can increase communication between producers and consumers, creating the potential, at least, for that dialogue to precipitate changes in production techniques.

**Study Participants' Views on Farmland Protection**

Given the increasing growth and development in Missoula County, it is important to understand farmers’ and ranchers’ views about protecting farmland from development in general, as well as specific methods for doing so. This is because, as discussed, growth often places increased pressure on farmland for development, and such pressure intersects in an interesting way with farmers’ and ranchers’ abilities to profit from their labor in the first place. Moreover, individual farmers and ranchers are the ones who make decisions about farmland conversion on a daily basis. If the community hopes to maintain farmland for the long-term, we cannot do it without the will and actions of the people who own the farmland. As noted by scholars, a successful farmland protection strategy often depends on the support of area farmers and ranchers (Daniels and Bowers 1997).

It is no question that we all depend on the existence of farmland for our food production. What is less clear is where the farmland on which our food is grown should be located. In other words, there is debate, even among study participants, regarding whether or not farmland ought to be protected here in Missoula County. George addressed this issue when he said,

I don’t know that I could say what the next generation is gonna need or do. I know they’re gonna need farmland somewhere, but I don’t know whether it’s in Missoula County, or whether it’s in Brazil, or whether it’s in Argentina or Australia.
Ronald expressed the view that our farmland should be located wherever it is most economically advantageous: “It is economics. If it is worth more for farmland, it should be farmland. If it’s worth more for people to live on, it should be lived on. It’s economics.” George’s daughter reflected on her view that many people only realize that they want farmland in their own community once it is gone. As she put it, “People don’t realize what they have until it’s gone. When all these subdivisions start coming in…people don’t start to complain until it happens. Something should be done before…” Her view that something ought to be done to protect farmland in our area before it is gone is shared by many of the other farmers and ranchers I interviewed. This perspective is perhaps reflective of the lack of cumulative planning at the County level discussed earlier. The piecemeal approach to subdivision review with respect to the effects on agriculture makes it difficult to see negative impacts of subdivisions until many subdivisions are already in place.

Seven of the thirteen participants clearly felt it is important to protect farmland from development in Missoula County for the long term. Several others expressed more ambivalent views on the subject, or did not have an opinion on it. In explaining why he thought it is important to protect farmland from development here in Missoula County, Kelley said:

There isn’t much farmland left in Missoula County! There’s considerably more in Gallatin County and Flathead, which I think makes the remaining land—the farmland here in Missoula County—all the more valuable. It makes it all the more critical that we do something to retain it.

When I asked Lester if he thought it was important to protect farmland here, he replied, “Yeah, I think so. But I don’t know how you’re going to do it.” Michael echoed this view when he answered my question by saying,
I think it’s important [to protect farmland], but I don’t know how to do it. Most of these farmers or ranchers barely have a nickel to their names by operating agricultural operations, and the only way they’re ever going to have a nickel to their names is by selling their property. So the temptation is enormous, and I don’t know how you’re gonna stop them from doing it.

In this discussion about farmland protection and the landowner’s prerogative to develop his or her land at will, we see the theme of private property rights emerging strongly.

George was reluctant to say outright that he thinks protecting farmland from development here is important. He pointed out that although protecting farmland does seem important, his concern is that landowners’ private property rights be protected. He explained,

In some ways, it’s a thing that you go back and forth on. You know, it’s a resource that most people know that has great value, especially when they need it. [Laughs]... They’re dividing some of the best land...in all these valleys, and putting pavement on it and building houses on it, you know.

Although George clearly sees that the loss of farmland is the loss of a valuable resource to the community, he also feels strongly about protecting the rights of property owners, reflecting the fundamental tension in our country’s notion of property ownership. As he went on to explain,

In a lot of...efforts that are made to save farmland...people that were in those areas have been hurt economically if they didn’t agree... because maybe they eventually wanted to sell, and if it impaired their land values... Some way or another, people’s investments have to be protected...

Ronald was the sole participant who said outright that it is not important to protect farmland from development here. When I asked if he thinks it is important to protect farmland from development, he answered with a stern, “No! No!” While more often than not, the farmers and ranchers I interviewed think it is important to protect farmland from...
development in Missoula County, it is important to note that there are also strong reservations about farmland protection, and even strong dissentions from that opinion.

Several participants, whether they thought it was important to protect farmland or not, went further to describe more nuanced perspectives on the topic, particularly with respect to the role of family-level decision making. Paul, who did not have a strong opinion about farmland protection, spoke about the role of individual personalities and family level dynamics in influencing whether farmland remains in production or is placed under development for non-agricultural uses. He remarked that farmland protection "might be a lost cause." As he continuously threw up his arms in exasperation, he explained his perception that there is a substantial amount of in-fighting in agricultural families in the County. In his view, it seems that the tension between farmland protection and development is one that is ultimately played out in the power struggles and personality dynamics of individual families and households.

Rosemary explained her view that asking whether it was important to protect farmland from development was asking the wrong question. In her mind, we do not need to protect farmland from development, but rather with development. We ought to embrace development and allow the type of development that happens in the County work to support agriculture through homeowners' associations and smart planning. She said,

*I think it’s critical not to say, ‘No development protects farmland,’ because farmland is not economically viable. I think exploring the symbiotic relationships could be phenomenal... When a homeowners’ association is paying for the farm equipment and for the person to operate it and keep it open, and keep the food sources there...when the normal rancher would, you know, totally be at a loss economically with it, then I think you start seeing the positives. So I think there’s a huge relationship to be developed which has never been tapped here.*
Rosemary's perspective raises a new way to think about farmland protection. In a place experiencing rapid growth and development like Missoula County, her thinking could offer a creative way to find solutions to the perceived polarity between farmland protection, on the one hand, and development on the other hand. Her perspective also suggests a potential melding of the interests of the private individual with those of current and future community members regarding who benefits from particular land use decisions.

The County's Role in Farmland Protection

In an effort to gauge participants' perspectives about the County's role in farmland protection, I asked them whether they think Missoula County is currently doing too much, the right amount, or too little to protect farmland from development. This question was posed without specifying what was meant by "Missoula County," and many participants responded with the assumption that the "County" meant the County government, although no one ever specified exactly about whom they referred. To this question, participants gave a range of responses. The most common perception was that the County is doing nothing to protect farmland from development. In some cases, this was perceived as negative, but in other cases, it was perceived as positive. Moreover, their responses illustrate the range of views on the role of government protecting a "public good" on the one hand, and the individual liberties of property owners on the other.
Five participants perceive that the County is not doing anything to protect farmland from development, and they see this perceived inaction as problematic. Kelley said of the County,

"They're doing practically nothing... It is so sad and there has been essentially no attempt whatsoever to limit the growth. There have been developments that have one house per one acre and in practically every instance, they don't use the acre. It grows up in weeds... It's a horrible waste of good agricultural land.

Some of these participants perceive the County to be overly permissive towards development, sometimes bending over backwards to appease developers, regardless of other considerations. These participants feel the County should do more. "I don't think the County is doing anything to protect farmland, as far as I can see... I would say if anything, the County is permissive in encouraging development of land," said Michael. Lester concurred that the County is not doing anything to protect farmland from development: "The County isn't going to do anything. They can't even control the subdivisions. They aren't going to do anything about protecting farmland. That's the least of their worries." Sylvia said the County is not doing enough to protect farmland from development. She reflected on her vision of what could happen here if the County did more in this regard:

"I think that Missoula could—we could provide our own food... We could do so much better not shipping things from so far away. I'd so much rather see our economy be local. And if all these places had farms, we could do a lot... It would be so much better.

Sylvia went on to express the views of several when she complained that the County leadership lacks long-term vision. She and others felt the County needed to address central planning issues such as the long-term carrying capacity of this area:
I think that people need to look at Missoula and figure out, how many people can live here without totally ruining—you know, in fifty years, is there going to be any water left? Any air to breathe? ...Are we going to be on fire? I think that some of those issues need to be addressed.

Those who feel the County is not doing enough imply that the County could do more. For example, Lester’s remark that the County cannot control the subdivisions suggests that the County planning officials and staff have the power to do more to “control,” or presumably deny, subdivision proposals. As I discussed in the background section, however, state law and our local subdivision review criteria leave little room for County planning staff to deny a particular subdivision due to its negative impact on agriculture. In addition, these participants reflect the view that “private” land use ought to be regulated by the government in the interest of the common good of farmland protection.

Although five participants felt that the County is not doing enough to protect farmland from development, four others strongly disagree, claiming that the County should not do anything to protect farmland because that is not the County’s proper role. As Ronald put it, “Missoula County shouldn’t do a damn thing! Let the economics control. If it is worth more for a house site, it should be a house site.” Brandon feels that by not doing anything to protect farmland from development, the County is acting appropriately:

I don’t think they’re doing anything... And then, what *can* they do, you know? Are they going to come in and say ‘Okay, (name), you’re not allowed to subdivide. You must keep it a ranch.’ And then what we do is we just go say, ‘Well, I’ve got five attorneys that say different.’ You know, because it’s a taking... Sometimes governments get it in their minds that they can just regulate whatever they want without paying for it. And, of course, the Supreme Court of the United States time and time again has always sided with private rights.
Once again, Brandon’s remark clearly raises the central issue of private property. In his view, action on the part of the County government to regulate land use in a way that protects farmland from development would constitute a regulatory taking, and this is something he is strongly opposed to. Jeremy shared a similar perspective on land use regulation by the County, arguing that it is already doing too much to protect farmland from development. “Personally, I think they’re doing too much, because they’re dictating to everybody...what they can and can’t do with their land, and I think that’s wrong.” These participants expressed their firm belief that, first and foremost, the right of individuals to do with their land what they please should be upheld.

Thomas offered a slightly more balanced view about the County’s role in protecting farmland from development. Although he agrees with the other participants who said the County should not impinge on individual property rights, he also sees the County as having power to present landowners with more options and in this way, to direct how development happens in the County. As he explained:

People have individual freedoms, and they have to do what they have to do. So, to have the County come in and say, ‘No, you can’t subdivide’—I think that’s not right either. But there could be better planning. If they offered incentives...and say, ‘If you develop this, then you can get this as a tax write off,’ I think they could maybe direct it.

His view suggests that there may be a role for the County to play that is somewhere in between protecting farmland at the expense of people’s rights and allowing development at the expense of a valuable community resource.

Paul declined to comment on how he views the County’s role thus far in protecting farmland from development, but he made an important point about the shared responsibility of farmland protection. In a sense, he found my question about the
County’s role in development to be irrelevant. He views farmland protection as an issue to be dealt with, as he said, by the “community at large,” not by the County government.

In the midst of this discussion of “the County’s” proper role in protecting farmland from development, we must keep in mind that neither my interview question nor study participants’ responses specified who is meant by “the County.” We must also keep in mind the parameters around what “the County” can do to protect farmland from development in terms of land use planning. As discussed in Chapter Three of this paper, County planning officials and staff operate under certain laws and constraints. There are limits to what they can do to protect farmland, for instance, from subdivision. Hence, when participants say the County “should do more” to protect farmland from development, it is important to begin asking, as Paul suggests, what different players in the County can do in this regard, not only elected officials and planning office staff.

**Viewpoints of Study Participants on Methods for Farmland Protection**

There are clearly a variety of viewpoints regarding the need for farmland protection here and the County’s role in protecting it among the farmers and ranchers I interviewed. I also asked study participants to talk about their thoughts on several specific methods available for protecting farmland from development. The methods we talked about included using tax dollars for farmland protection, agricultural zoning, and conservation easements. I wanted to understand which, if any, of these methods these landowners view as an effective approach to protecting farmland in Missoula County. Not surprisingly, participants hold a wide range of views regarding specific farmland
protection methods. Of the three strategies discussed, the idea of a bond to raise money for agricultural land protection appears to be the most popular.

**Tax Dollars**

When asked whether they would support the use of tax dollars, such as a bond, to raise money for some type of farmland protection program in Missoula County, only three participants said no, while eight said yes. Paul responded to my question with a firm no, claiming that he does not support any type of special uses of tax money. Ronald agreed, stating very firmly:

> I can tell you, it’s all a matter of economics. If you make the product that the man works to grow worth enough, he will grow it. If it isn’t, he will do something else with it. We shouldn’t do it with government. ...Economics should drive this—NOT government controls!

In contrast, more participants than not reported that they would personally support the use of tax dollars to raise money for a farmland protection program here, indicating some level of concern for the common good in private property use. In response to my question, Kelley said, “Absolutely. That would be a wonderful way to go.” Also supportive of this idea, Shane acknowledged that the success of using tax dollars for this purpose depends on wider community support: “Oh, that’d be up to the voters and the community... I would vote for it, of course. But, if they want to see this open space stay open space, then they’re probably going to...dip into their pockets. If they don’t care, they’re not.”

Several participants, while supportive of the idea, expressed doubt that County officials or the public would support such a measure. As Lester said in response to my question, “Yeah, I wouldn’t have any problem with that. I don’t think the commissioners...
Brandon expressed doubt that voters in the community would support the use of tax dollars for farmland protection when he said, “Sure, if you can get the other hundred thousand people in Missoula County to vote for it—sure.”

Interestingly, several participants commented on the previous open space bond that raised money to purchase Mount Jumbo and other lands in their thoughts about raising money for farmland protection. Michael expressed satisfaction with the previous bond issue. When asked whether he would support the use of tax dollars, such as a bond, to raise money for farmland protection, he replied, “Very much so. I would say, just as I was in favor of the City raising the open space money to buy Mount Jumbo, yeah, I would be very enthusiastic about that—enormously supportive.” Several others disagreed with him, viewing the previous open space bond issue as a mistake. Shane commented quite extensively on this matter. Because he feels that growth in western Montana is not going to subside, he thinks protecting open space so close to the city of Missoula only creates more pressure to develop farmland in other areas of the County. He explained,

Missoula is the city. And so, what you’re doing, in essence, by protecting the north hills that are just—they’re right there—people can drive five minutes and be in town... All you’re doing is pushing those people out into Potomac, up the Bitterroot, out in the Frenchtown valley, clear up to Seeley, to find their piece of land to build on. Because they’re still going to come. But now, instead of burning a gallon of gas to get to town, they’re burning ten gallons of gas to get to town. Now you’ve...created open space here, but you’ve eliminated it somewhere else... And now, you know, the big issue in town is this infill thing, you know, and I think it’s great. If there’s an open lot in town, put a house on it. It keeps them from building outside somewhere... You hate to see Missoula getting bigger and bigger and bigger, but it’s gonna get bigger and bigger and bigger. Now, do you keep it right here, or do you spread it over the whole County and ruin the whole damned County?”
Shane felt that the particular areas the community chooses to protect as open space could influence the degree of development pressure on farmland in other areas of the County. In a sense, he implied that by protecting open space in town, the County is showing a lack of regard for the maintenance of farmland in the outlying areas of the County. Timothy would agree with this position. He felt strongly that the County overtaxes farmers, and suggested that if the County lowered or eliminated property taxes for agricultural producers, there would be no need to spend millions of dollars for open space. His view is that by lowering taxes for farmers, the County would ensure the maintenance of open space because farms and ranches would be able to survive, providing open space by default. These views show the difficult balance our community, undoubtedly like many others, strives to create among varying “common goods” connected with land use. Relatedly, my discussions with participants about a bond to raise money for farmland protection reveal a potential discrepancy regarding their views on taxation. As discussed earlier, many participants view taxation policy as a factor that threatens their long-term viability. On the other hand, however, many support the idea of taxation specifically for farmland protection.

**Agricultural Zoning**

Another method for protecting farmland that I discussed with study participants was countywide agricultural zoning, where the County planning officials and staff would designate certain areas of the County as “agricultural” areas, meaning those areas may only be used for agricultural production, and may not be developed, unless a variance is obtained. Nine participants opposed agricultural zoning, while three supported it. Once
again, many cited the importance of private property rights as central in their views against zoning. "To zone land and take away development rights is absolutely wrong," said Rosemary. George’s daughter, who joined us for our discussion, commented: "...We don’t want people to tell us what we can do with our own ground, and so thus, we don’t want to tell others what they can do with theirs." Jeremy cited his own distrust of the County as a reason to disapprove of zoning when he said, "I’m not in favor of the County putting down any rules and regulations because I don’t trust them.” These views reveal a desire to protect the “privateness” of property ownership.

The constraints of agricultural zoning were also raised as a reason for many to disapprove of it. Brandon’s father, Pritchard, felt that having one’s land zoned for agriculture would make it difficult to borrow money. As he said,

If you’ve got a ranch and it’s zoned agriculture, and you go to the bank to borrow money, and the banker says, ‘You’re property’s zoned agriculture?’ ‘Yeah.’ ‘Goodbye.’ Ain’t gonna loan me any money. They’re gonna loan me all the money I want on this ranch because they know I can cut it up and pay them back.

Whether or not Pritchard’s perspective is an accurate reflection of banks’ policies, it does reflect his strong sense of being dangerously limited if agricultural zoning were implemented. Other participants felt they need the flexibility that comes with not being zoned for agriculture. George mentioned that he does not want his economic well-being to be in the hands of the zoning board. Agricultural zoning would also take tax revenue away from badly needed services, something mentioned by a couple of participants. “The more you zone land agricultural, the more you lower the tax revenues in an environment where we need tax revenues,” said Michael. Due to these reasons and others, many of
those I interviewed believe agricultural zoning is unlikely to be supported here by the public or by policymakers anytime in the near future.

Despite widespread disapproval of agricultural zoning among study participants, several did express personal support for it. When asked whether he would support countywide zoning, Michael replied,

Sure. I think it's a hard thing to get done in Missoula County, but I'm sure I'd be in favor... The mentality in Montana in general, and certainly in Missoula County, is that a man's land is his kingdom, and within existing constraints, he ought to be able to do whatever he wants with it, and the prospects of implementing tighter restraints I think are remote. But would I be supportive of it? Sure.

Here, Michael blatantly described some of the tension surrounding private property rights that he perceived in area landowners' feelings. Like Michael, Sylvia also thought zoning sounded like a great idea because it might help to slow what she perceives to be rampant development. She said, "It sounds great, yeah. Yeah, I'd love to see more of the land up here zoned to not have a million houses on it." My discussions with participants about tax revenue and agricultural zoning for farmland protection revealed a wide range of views, as well as significant disagreement, on the subject.

**Conservation Easements**

Conservation easements differ from the others discussed in that it is a voluntary measure that is largely unrelated to County government. Conservation easements are essentially when a landowner sells or donates restrictions on his or her property to limit or prohibit development in perpetuity. My conversations with study participants revealed that they hold a range of different views about conservation easements as a tool for protecting farmland from development, some positive and some negative. Themes that
emerged from the discussions about easements included positive aspects of easements, participants’ interest in easements, limitations of easements, and County management of easements.

Positive aspects of conservation easements. Several participants talked about conservation easements in a positive light. For example, Shane believes that, under the right conditions, conservation easements are going to play a major role in maintaining viable farming and ranching in this region for the long term. “The conservation easement programs—that’s what’s going to keep us here.” He believes that agricultural producers are increasingly becoming aware of conservation easements and their potential to offer the financial leverage producers need to continue making their operations economically viable. Rosemary agreed that if used properly, conservation easements are “a strong economic tool.”

For Jeremy, the fact that conservation easements are voluntary is their most positive aspect. He believed that whatever happens to a piece of property should be the landowner’s decision, rather than imposing another individual’s or group’s values onto the property:

I think if the federal government or whoever wants to come in and say, ‘Hey, I’ll give you a tax break or X amount of money if you guarantee to keep this...or promise to never sell it to somebody that will, you know, subdivide it.’ I think that would be...an excellent idea. That gives the owner the option to do what he wants, and...make up his own mind what he wants to do with it. And it he chooses to do that, I think that’s super. If he wants to put his thousand...acres—whatever he has—into a situation where it can never be developed, and get tax benefits or whatever from it, yeah, that’s great.

Jeremy drew a distinction between conservation easements as tools for farmland protection and other tools such as agricultural zoning because he views private property
rights as paramount. For him, any farmland protection method must be congruent with his value for respecting the rights of property owners, and conservation easements seem to fit that description.

**Participants’ interest in conservation easements.** Only one study participant currently has a conservation easement on his property, although several others I interviewed have explored the possibility. Eight participants expressed interest in placing a conservation easement on their property at some time. When I asked Shane if he would be interested in putting his land in a conservation easement, he replied, “Oh yeah. We’re working real hard to find the source.” He felt strongly that if he and other landowners can find the funds to have their easements purchased rather than donated, easements can profoundly contribute to farmland protection and the maintenance of farm and ranch viability. Rosemary replied to this question with a simple, “absolutely.” She further explained when she might make use of a conservation easement on her property. “There’s just a time to use them for tax purposes, and there’s a time not to. And it’s not the time right now, but...it’s definitely on the horizon.” These participants suggested that even though they have a clear interest in conservation easements, the specific circumstances, funding availability, and the timing of the easements will determine if and when they actually put them into place on their respective properties. Lastly, four participants do not think they would ever be interested in a conservation easement for their property.

**Limitations of conservation easements.** Study participants discussed a variety of limitations they perceive conservation easements to have. These limitations include the restrictive nature of easements, inadequate economic incentive of most easements, and the perception that most easements are designed only for the wealthy.
Six participants thought conservation easements are typically too restrictive for the landowner or for the landowners’ heirs. Several participants who expressed a potential interest in conservation easements spoke about the restrictive nature of conservation easements as among their reasons for being tentative about using them. Sylvia balanced her intrigue with the idea of a conservation easement with a common reservation about them. “…It’s nice to save every little patch, but you know, I don’t know that someday we’re not going to need to sell this so we can send our kids to college.” Uncertainty about the future factored into several participants’ hesitancy around the use of conservation easements. In response to my question of whether he would ever be interested in a conservation easement on his property, George replied,

You never know. You never say never, because you never know what the need might be… One generation telling the next that this is never going to be subdivided or never going to be changed from an agricultural base is pretty hard to say, because they don’t know the circumstances that the next generation is going to be under.

George’s concern about the future included a concern that a conservation easement would make it more difficult for him to borrow money on his land. “What it immediately does is you’re left with an operation that has a far less value to borrow on as far as running your agricultural base. You may get enough value from the easement to offset that, but I don’t know whether you would or not.” Shane summed up a common sentiment: “That word ‘forever’ looms huge in people’s minds.”

Aside from the restrictions of conservation easements on future uses of land, a couple participants noted restrictions on current management of land as a factor that strongly discourages them from putting conservation easements on their respective properties. These participants perceived that the rules established by land trusts or other
easement-holding entities for managing property under a conservation easement are often too restrictive for the landowner. Thomas, who had explored placing his land in a conservation easement at length in the past, said, “I would think they’d get more ground if they weren’t so darn rigid.” He spoke at length about his view that land trusts try to be too involved in the mundane management of properties on which they hold conservation easements and thus limit the owner’s rights. Thomas said that some of his difficulties with the land trust stems from his sense that agriculture is often not well understood by these groups. His view is that many times land trusts want to preserve a farm or ranch so that it will stay just as it is, rather than understanding that agriculture is always changing.

We thought that they had a vision in their mind of an old homestead in the 1880’s or 1860’s, where nothing would ever change. It would always stay the same, and we argued and argued that that wasn’t the way it is. Things always change. You need to move fences... You need to change the crop rotation. And to have to go to them with my hat in hand and ask permission just riled me.

By presenting Thomas’s views about the land trust with which he interacted, I do not mean to concur with his opinions. The land trust may well have a different story to tell. What is important is that the experience described by Thomas indicates his feeling that the land trust was difficult to work with and was too restrictive for his liking.

Several participants with potential interest in using conservation easements highlighted inadequate financial gain received for an easement, noting a better return as a condition under which they would put them into place on their properties in the future. Brandon reflected the views of several others when he said, “I know of ranchers that would gladly put their place in a conservation easement if they could get enough money for it.” Brandon has been approached by land trusts in the past, and when asked whether he would ever be interested in an easement, he explained,
Let’s say this ranch is worth a million dollars. It’s not, but let’s just say that it is. And they come in and they say, “We’ll give you 750,000 dollars cash, and we’ll give you 250,000 dollars worth of tax breaks.” Well, we’d probably sign tomorrow...if the ranch were worth a million dollars.

Brandon was not alone. Timothy spoke about his feeling that the only thing that will save agriculture in Missoula County is a conservation easement program that is able to pay farmers and ranchers for their easements. He added, “If they don’t get right on it, there’s no chance.” He conveyed a sense of urgency because he perceives agriculture to be literally dying off in this County. He felt that as the older generation of farmers and ranchers passes away, young people are not replacing them. Overall, seven participants thought that actually paying farmers and ranchers for their easement, rather than asking them to donate the easement for a tax write-off, is a necessary condition for conservation easements to be effective farmland protection mechanisms here.

As a way to explain the perceived need for farmers and ranchers to be paid for their easements, almost half of the study participants raised their concern that, by asking landowners to donate easements, easement programs typically only benefit the wealthy. Generally, wealthy landowners are in better financial position to make use of the tax deductions that landowners receive in return for a donated easement. Many times, landowners must make use of tax breaks within a specified number of years from the date they donate the easement on their property. Often, the value of a donated easement far exceeds the value of the tax benefits that landowners are actually able to take advantage of. Kelley explained:

The value of the property was lessened by placing it in a conservation easement. The difference between the highest and best use, if you want to call it that, and the appraised value when it’s under a conservation easement was considerable. That could be used as a tax write-off over a period of time, and we have done that. That doesn’t work, however, if
your primary source of income comes from the agricultural operation, because you simply don’t make enough money... But because both myself and my wife were employed off from the farm/ranch, we were able to take advantage of that tax break.

In other words, for a landowner who does not make very much money, it can be difficult or impossible to capture the value of his or her tax benefits because during the course of the specified time limit, the amount of money he or she owes in taxes may pale in comparison to the actual value of their easement. As Brandon remarked,

I need to go out and get a job as a doctor or a lawyer and make two hundred grand a year to take advantage of that tax break...I tell you who takes advantage of programs like that, is the very wealthy. Your Ted Turners, your Dennis Washingtons—people who can use the tax break because they’re making so much money in their other things... The person that is ranching for a living—that doesn’t help them.

It seems likely that many easement-holding organizations do not have the funds to purchase conservation easements outright. This means that they do indeed end up working with landowners who are able to donate an easement. Perhaps land trusts could do more to explore ways to make conservation easements work for landowners who are not wealthy.

Four farmers and ranchers I spoke with do not think they would ever be interested in a conservation easement on their respective properties. For several of these participants, this is due to some of the issues already discussed, such as uncertainty about the future, the perception that easements are too restrictive, and negative perceptions of easement-holding organizations. As Lester remarked, “I know enough about it—I don’t want to touch it.” Ronald’s view goes beyond feeling that easements are too restrictive or are simply designed to benefit the wealthy. He simply feels they are wrong, and that they should never be used. When I asked him to comment on conservation easements, he said,
Again, something I am violently opposed to. Conservation easements are instilling your ideas upon the future. Those people in the future should have *their* opportunities to make their decisions. We have no right to be making decisions for generations down.

In Ronald’s view, placing a conservation easement on a piece of property is overstepping acceptable boundaries around what he feels are current landowners’ rights to restrict future landowners’ decisions. Interestingly, some other study participants might argue that rather than restricting future landowners’ options, conservation easements, if used properly, can instead be a way to salvage agricultural production on the land as an opportunity or option for future landowners at all.

**County management of conservation easements.** Under conservation easement programs, development restrictions on a piece of property are typically held by a non-profit, land trust organization. I asked participants what they would think about the County managing a program like that, acting as the holder of development restrictions on property. Every participant who responded to this question was opposed to the County managing such a program. Even those participants who thought farmland protection was generally important do not think the County is the appropriate agent to actually hold and manage easements on properties. As Lester explained, “From what I see of the County’s management of all this development...I don’t think I’d even trust ‘em getting into something like that.”

Nine participants did not trust the County to manage such a program. Some thought it would not be a priority for the County because they did not see the County as a good steward of its own land and business. For example, Sylvia said,

My guess is that it just wouldn’t be a priority for them, and it wouldn’t probably work. Especially in a County that doesn’t have a whole lot of
money. I can't see them putting money towards that, even though I think it's probably more important than a lot of other things.

For others, it was because County politics are ever changing, and with them, the stability of such a program might be questionable.

Four participants felt like the County simply does not have the resources such as money, personnel, and expertise, needed to manage such a program. For example, Thomas explained:

I don't think the County's a very good steward of what they're doing. Look around at all the knapweed and the City parks are full of weeds. They don't have the money. So why would they want to take on more? Who's going to take care of that?

Several others acknowledged that managing a conservation easement program requires a lot of skill and expertise. As Kelley explained,

The County lacks the expertise, and they also lack the personnel that would conduct the yearly monitoring program. It's really not something the County wants to get into. They're not equipped to do that at all. So it would be much, much better to have the land trust such as Five Valleys, which specializes in that, to do so.

Where some participants did see the County playing a role in farmland protection is the arena of raising money and supporting organizations involved in farmland protection that have the appropriate expertise to manage such a program. Kelley expressed his view that the County should try to raise money for farmland protection by explaining,

Interestingly enough, Gallatin County passed a bond issue a couple of years ago with the money received designated specifically for buying conservation easements on farmland in the Gallatin County... That would be a marvelous way to go.
Similarly, Michael believed the County should financially support other organizations already working with conservation easements. As he said, “I think if the County wants to get involved with the conservation easement process, the way to do that is to be financially supportive of the organizations that do it.” Several participants also suggested that the County could prioritize the most productive farmland for protection. “If where we are right now is really good soil...maybe this is a place where they should think about conserving some of it,” said Sylvia. Rosemary suggested that smart infill development could help ease development pressure on farmland throughout the County. “I think to provide incentives for cluster development, for preserving open space, for preserving agriculture...is exactly the way to go.” In this way, the County could play a role in guiding the type of development that occurs—guiding it in such a way that farmland is protected through “smart” development.

**Beyond Farmland Protection**

Like several scholars noted earlier, (e.g., Lyson et al. 1999), some participants noted that regardless of whether farmland is protected through any of these methods, farmers and ranchers must still be able to make a living on the land. This view indicates that protecting farmland is only one piece of the farm viability puzzle. As George explained, “…If you put an easement on a piece of ground, right next to Missoula—say it’s the highest value farmland—and it’s still not economically able to be operated as a farm, what have you accomplished?”
Local Marketing: Opportunities and Barriers

Understanding that the economic viability of agriculture is itself a farmland protection strategy, I asked participants about local marketing as a potential way to keep local operations economically viable. My conversations with study participants turned to the topic of building more locally-based food system here that might be able to better support area farmers and ranchers.

Opportunities for Local Marketing

When asked if local marketing of agricultural products could be an effective way to support local farmers and ranchers, ten participants said they see good prospects for local marketing. Many noted that increasingly, citizens here and elsewhere are thinking more carefully about where their food comes from, and making more informed decisions to buy locally and organically raised food. For Rosemary, this perceived trend suggests that, as a community, Missoula County could channel this increasing consumer interest in food to help support local producers:

I think it's particularly apparent after the Mad Cow outbreak... We have some huge issues in our food chain, and they're real... It's mainstream now to talk about it... So, with the affluence that's coming with this development, and with the increase in population, I do think that we can support exactly the type of thing that's happening at the Good Food Store—you know, Lifeline Meats. ...I think as a community we could do some exciting things.

She was not alone in her view. Kelley echoed her by saying, “All they have to do is look at the Farmers’ Market to realize that selling local produce is tremendously popular.” He saw the Missoula Farmers’ Market at an asset for local producers, as it regularly draws
large crowds of shoppers during the summer. He agreed that increasing numbers of
consumers want to know where their food comes from, and here and around the country,
venues such as farmers markets are gaining popularity. Paul and Sylvia, the two
participants who market their goods to primarily local consumers, indicated that they
enjoy and depend on a loyal local customer base that includes individuals, restaurants,
and some grocery stores. Indeed, several participants also noted that Missoula County
residents in particular seem interested and willing to purchase locally-raised food.

Aside from noting good prospects for local marketing, many participants cited its
benefits for the producer, the consumer, and the larger community. Eight participants
noted that local marketing has the potential to financially benefit farmers. The reasons
cited for this included that it brings a premium price (and therefore more profits to the
producer). Shane explained the way he would like to raise his cattle and market them
locally in order to meet consumer interest in knowing where food comes from and how it
is raised and also to make a better profit from his product:

What I’d really like to do is...have it to where the people come out and
say, ‘Well, I want that one right there.’ And I’m gonna say, ‘Okay, this is
what has been fed to it and everything... Market price today...for that live
fat beef out there is eight cents. But that’s market value for some critter
that you don’t know anything about. So what are you willing to pay me
more for that?’ And I’m probably going to say, ‘I’m going to charge you
ninety cents,’ and they’re going to say, ‘Okay’...or more. See, that’s a
discovery thing. We’ve gotta figure out what peace of mind is worth.

Sylvia, who relies on a local market for her produce, also noted that she feels like
producers could do well providing for the local consumer market:

I think that people have in their minds that farming doesn’t make money.
And I think it can. I mean, there’s...nowhere to get local chickens, there’s
nowhere to get local pesto or local salsa—things that I feel like we could
grow that wouldn’t even be hard, and I feel like people could make money doing it.

Clearly, several participants felt that local marketing could bring premium prices to area producers, but the benefits to local farmers include more than increased profits.

Local marketing also cuts down on transportation and fuel costs, and decreases the environmental impact of using resources to ship food long distances for consumption. When I asked Lester what he thought would be the advantage of selling locally, he said, “Well, your transportation, I guess, is a big advantage.” Sylvia commented on the benefits of avoiding long distance transport of her products. For her, it was important to save on fuel costs for her farm and also for the environment: “We’re not using resources to truck things from California…” Echoing the views of many scholars who support re-building local food systems, (e.g., Kloppenburg et al. 1996; Lyson et al. 1999), these participants think local marketing could significantly support farmers and ranchers here.

Four participants spoke about benefits to consumers of buying locally-raised food. These participants felt that it is important for consumers to understand where their food comes from and how it is grown. From Sylvia’s perspective, buying locally raised food can help consumers know more about where they live, and in a sense, is one way to take care of their community. “I think also it’s sort of an empowering thing. I think people can feel really good about living in a place that they care about and they take care of. There’s a lot of benefits to it.” Kelley spoke about the importance of connecting consumers with the people who grow their food:

I would certainly [like to] see many more of the people who remain on the land having this closer tie with local consumers so that they’re getting a premium price for their produce but the people who buy it are also getting premium produce and they’re able to watch it grow…which I think would be extremely important.
George’s daughter, Marie, lamented that people typically do not understand much about the origins of their food: “Well, people think their food comes from the grocery store. They don’t know where their food comes from.”

In addition to benefits to individual consumers, two participants brought up the positive impacts of local marketing on the community at large. Sylvia noted that by selling products locally and thus increasing farm profits, local marketing could contribute to producers’ ability to stay on their land, making a connection between local marketing and keeping our remaining farmland in production. When I asked her what the advantages of local marketing are, she replied, “Helping keep farmland in farming.” Shane spoke about the positive impact local marketing could have on our local economy. Buying locally raised goods keeps money circulating through the local economy. Local processing and marketing also has the potential to create good jobs, something the community needs. “Now, if I start feeding out a hundred head of cattle, and so do all my neighbors here... now we’re going to need a facility right here. That creates jobs. Right away.” In this way, local marketing of agricultural products has the potential to strengthen the local economy and community through a ripple effect.

Again, many of these participants reflected the connection between local farmland protection and the economics of agriculture in the global food system. They saw that if they were able to market directly to consumers, they would be able to keep more of the consumers’ food dollar, thus helping them afford to keep their land in production, rather than selling it for development.
Barriers to Local Marketing

Although many participants see benefits to local marketing to producers, consumers, and the community in general, many also spoke about the limitations of and barriers to it. This is not surprising, given the complex and difficult task of re-building local food systems discussed earlier. The main perceived barriers mentioned pertained to the limited nature of our local market, problems with local beef processing, and a generalized resistance to change.

Seven participants perceive the market for locally-raised food to be limited. For example, some view local marketing as an option only for vegetable crops, but not for commodities such as grain. This is because there are not adequate processing facilities here to help producers market value-added crops and those that require processing. As Lester remarked, “If you raise grain, you’ve got to plan on haulin’ it to the coast or somewhere. There’s no place anymore that takes it in town.” This comment reflects once again that larger trends in concentration and centralization in agriculture impact localities. Michael, a grain farmer, remarked that not only does this area lack processing facilities, he also sees it as unreasonable to try to market the quantity of food raised here to a local market. For him, the thought of selling his grain locally does not make much sense:

Between this farm and another farm, we’ve probably grown enough wheat to supply the whole County for a year! I don’t know. You know how little wheat it takes to make a loaf of bread? Like a handful, and we grew millions of handfuls of wheat, so how many billions of loaves of bread do you sell in Missoula County? So, I just don’t quite see how you could do it on a County basis, although I’m supportive of trying it on a statewide basis.
He noted that scale is a key factor in thinking about how local marketing can work for producers. Due to the size and nature of his operation, it makes more sense for him to think about local marketing on a larger scale than a small-scale vegetable producer might. Hence, the meaning of “local” might differ from farmer to farmer.

A couple of participants even thought the local market for vegetables is limited. They viewed the farmers’ market as insufficient to sustain a farmer, although it is a good market to get a producer started. Lester commented on the farmers’ market, noting that although it seems to be very popular, he still felt that it is not sufficient for producers. He saw it instead as a way for producers to make a few extra dollars here and there:

Well, you know, the farmers’ market goes great, but that’s very small... I guess it increases every year. I never go down there, but it’s a niche for people, you know, a backyard deal, and make a few bucks, but I don’t know what else.

A couple participants noted the difficulty for a small-scale local producer to break into the large grocery store market as a limitation. “Yeah, it’s hard to get into those big supermarkets...,” said Sylvia. Paul specifically mentioned the difficulty he has had in obtaining the proper license from the City to be able to sell his produce to local grocery stores. These participants felt like local producers would benefit from large grocery stores and others trying to make it easier for them to market their products here.

Even though many participants noted the seeming popularity among consumers of purchasing locally and organically raised food, several expressed doubt that consumers would be willing to increase the amount they pay for locally or organically-raised food enough to significantly impact farmer profits. As Michael explained,

There’s only a certain amount of incremental money the consumer’s gonna pay to get a steak that was grown in Missoula County versus the one that was grown in
the state of Montana versus one that was grown where she doesn’t even know where it was grown—which is the more typical.... Will people...buy local beef that they think is better? Sure they will, but only to a certain point. How much of that flows back to the farmer? Probably not enough to keep him in business if he’s a marginal producer at this point.

Other participants agreed that the work it would take for producers to shift to a locally-based market would not produce adequate profit increases and be worth the extra effort.

Since almost half of the study participants raise cattle, our conversations about local marketing often turned to the difficulties of processing beef locally in order to sell it locally. Several barriers to local beef processing and marketing were raised, but the main one, raised by six participants, was the lack of nearby processing facilities with adequate capacity. George explained the complexity of establishing a successful local processing facility for beef by reflecting on what he thinks might have caused existing local plants to go out of business in years past:

You have to have the support system in Missoula or some close surrounding area to do that. And that’s the support system that we had when this ranch was productive and...what we raised here...most of it was sold in Missoula or Western MT. That would include a slaughter plant that had a capacity enough...for output... That would have to be financially able to operate, which they weren’t able to because of a lot of the health standards... And yet you still got to be able to compete with a large regional packing plant like out of Denver or Portland or wherever. The per unit cost on these larger slaughter plants were low enough that they could bring their overrun of production into Missoula and just dump it, and the local people couldn’t compete.

He indicated that a local beef processing facility would have to meet expensive regulatory standards and be able to compete with larger regional and national processing facilities. Several other producers also spoke about the enormous financial risk involved with establishing a local beef processing and packing facility. Shane expressed hope that a local beef processing facility may indeed make it back to this area: “It’s not an easy
thing. It’s hard... I think you’re going to see it happen, but it’s going to take a little time.”

In addition, it was noted that in order to process beef locally, producers would need to find a way to “finish” their cattle locally, getting them fat enough for slaughter and processing. This means that there may need to be local feedlots established to meet this end, which may not be welcomed by Missoula County residents. As Thomas remarked,

And then where do you—you can’t put a feedlot close to town, because the water and a lot of those restrictions... are so tight. Not that they shouldn’t be, but it’s hard to make it even with a feedlot... So there’s a lot of problems. I don’t know if there’s any set answer.

In terms of local beef processing, there was also concern that local beef production would not match up with local consumption needs. Thomas explained his view that production would undershoot local consumption needs. “Well, we can’t produce enough to satisfy the market. I don’t think they could raise enough cattle in Montana to satisfy all the cities in Montana with beef.” Two other participants had a different perspective, feeling instead that production would overshoot the local market for beef. For Brandon, this had to do with the timing of local beef production. The fact that many ranchers calve at a certain time of year means that our local beef market would have an influx of too much beef all at one time. He explained in detail what might happen if he were to try to market his beef locally:

Let’s say the Good Food Store wanted to buy our cattle, and they say, [Brandon], you do a really great job, we hear you’ve got great cattle’… Now I’d have to hang onto my cattle, maybe take them to a feedlot... and they’d feed them out to 1200 pounds. Then, I would have to take them to a facility like White’s. Now, they can only kill about ten calves a day, so my entire herd is gonna take them a long time to go through. Once that’s all processed, then the Good Food Store can go ahead and buy my meat.... And then there’s the fact that I calve in February and March and the cattle will be ready... next August. So they’re gonna get too much meat all at once.... So it’s just easier for them to order meat in from Pasco every day... and then they can control their inventory.... The only other thing I
could do is I could calve all year round. Well then, man, you’re just making me work and work and work...calving every day and I’m up at night.

Despite the incongruence among study participants regarding the relationship between local beef supply and demand, it seems clear that in order for local beef processing and marketing to be successful, the balance between supply and demand would be a factor.

Lastly, a couple participants talked about other difficulties for farmers who want to switch to a more local market for their goods. Local marketing is more labor intensive, it requires new marketing skills, and it takes time to establish new marketing connections, all of which could be barriers for farmers. Kelley described local marketing this way: “It...takes a different mind set, and it takes some marketing skills, but it would be a neat way to go.” It is important not to underestimate the challenges many producers might face when shifting to more local marketing. Shane pointed out: “I guess we’re all comfortable right now. We’re eeking along, you know, and it’s a whole lot easier just to put those calves on a truck and they’re gone... It’s just gonna take a lot of courage to take that step and do it. I think it can be done.” It seems that from the perspective of several study participants, local marketing, in particular for beef and other large scale commodities, will require quite a bit of financial and technical support.

Study participants also offered several suggestions for how local marketing could be encouraged or strengthened here. These suggestions not only included establishing a local meat processing plant but also cooperating with institutional food purchasers such as schools and hospitals and garnering the community’s commitment to support local agricultural production through public education. George explained the role of consumer commitment by saying,
A lot of this is consumer driven. In order to support a local economy, you’d have to have higher prices per unit in order to make that happen. And I don’t know whether the majority of the consumers would buy stuff at that higher price... It would take a commitment by the community in order to make it work.

Sylvia also mentioned the need to educate consumers about where their food comes from as a way to strengthen the local market for agricultural products. As she said,

I think part of it’s just education. I think people who walk into Tidyman’s have no idea what it took—and maybe they don’t care—for their food to come from wherever. All the processing that went into it. Where that stuff’s going to go afterwards—the plastic and cardboard...

Perhaps if consumers were more aware of the origins of their food, they would be more likely to demand locally-raised products. In this way, increasing demand could help facilitate increasing infrastructure to provide locally-raised food. This suggests that building local food systems, something many scholars believe is necessary, requires a potentially complicated balance between local production and local consumption—and a lot of hard work! The table below summarizes participants’ views about the benefits of and barriers to local marketing.
### TABLE IV: Study Participants’ Perceived Benefits of and Barriers to Local Marketing

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Study Participants’ Perceived Benefits of Local Marketing</th>
<th>Study Participants’ Perceived Barriers to Local Marketing</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>10 Good prospects for local marketing</td>
<td>7 Limited local market</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8 Brings increased profits to producers</td>
<td>6 Lack of infrastructure for local processing and distribution</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 Educates and empowers consumers</td>
<td>3 Expense of creating new infrastructure, including for beef</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Strengthens local economy</td>
<td>3 Difficulty of balancing supply of and demand for local farm and ranch products</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Reduces fuel use</td>
<td>2 Difficulty of changing to a local marketing system for producers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 Helps keep farmland in production</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* The numbers to the left of the perceived benefits and barriers indicate the number of study participants who mentioned each. Total N=13.

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### The Decision to Keep Land in Agriculture

Given the range of factors influencing participants’ ability to keep their operations going for the long-term, I asked them to describe how they make decisions regarding whether they will keep their land in production. Their responses shed light on what the agricultural lifestyle is really all about for many of these farmers and ranchers. They tended to base this decision on either economic or personal reasons, and often both. Many noted it is often not an easy decision to make. Shane captured the difficulty of this decision when he said this about his operation, “It sometimes feels like a big boat anchor around your neck. You wonder sometimes why you’re doing it, because…we’re not
going to see any benefit of our labor for a long, long time.” For him and for many others, there are reasons for doing it that outweigh the challenges involved, at least for now.

Economic Reasons

Six participants talked about economic influences on their decision to continue farming or ranching. Three of them indicated that they plan to keep their land in production as long as they can afford to do so. As Brandon and his father, Pritchard, agreed, “We’ll stay here as long as we can make a living. As long as we can pay our taxes and put food on the table.” Thomas concurred: “Well, if you can afford to do it. We’ve just made up our mind that...we’re gonna keep what we can... This is the best use of the ground right now.”

While several explained that they will keep their land in production as long as they are able to afford to do so, Ronald reported that he keeps his land in production in order to watch it appreciate in value until he sells it for maximum profit. “It only stays in agriculture...to watch the appreciation of the land... The only paycheck you get on ranching is when you sell the ranch.” Whereas others will farm until they can no longer afford it, he will farm until he can no longer bear the temptation and financial gain of selling his property.

Rosemary reported that financial considerations weigh heavily on her decision to keep her land in production. She would like to see as much of her land as possible stay in production, but she feels forced to develop her property due to financial considerations. Portions of it will remain in production only if subsidized by the development through homeowners’ associations or some other way. As she explained,
I’ll preserve a lot of open space, but...I’m putting a planned unit development master plan in place. Hopefully it will preserve a lot of the agricultural components—I think trying to find a melding of the two. But that will be with homeowners’ associations paying the price to allow agriculture to be there.

Clearly, there are several ways financial considerations come into play in participants’ decisions about keeping their land in production.

**Personal Reasons**

Although financial reasons weighed heavily in decisions about whether to keep land in production, ten participants mentioned personal reasons. Seven of those indicated that it is a financial sacrifice to keep their land in agriculture, yet they do it anyway. As Ronald put it, “I support the ranching. The ranching does not support me.” George indicated that he might be much better off financially if he sold his land instead of keeping it in agriculture: “Well, to this point, we’ve voluntarily kept it in production probably at a disadvantage as far as our economic well-being.” Kelley acknowledged that he must support his ranching operation with other sources of income, but he is willing to do it because he feels so strongly about the land. He remarked, “There is really nothing that will prevent me from continuing to operate the place—not because it’s self-sustaining, but because I’m certainly willing to put in other sources of revenue to keep it going.” Shane echoed this deep commitment to his land:

For a lot of us, it’s all we’ve ever done. We’d like to stay here. It’s our home. A lot of us, it would break our hearts to see our land subdivided, that we’ve worked so hard on, oh, forever, you know... Most farmers and ranchers don’t want to get rich... Keep them comfortable, and they’ll stay on the land, because that’s what they love to do. But we’ve gotta find the dollars to keep them comfortable on the land.
Despite the hardships his family has endured regarding production and financing of the operation, they continue to do it. These participants characterize a common theme among study participants: they farm or ranch because they love to do it. Very few do it as a means toward financial wealth.

Several participants talked specifically about why they care so much about keeping their land in production and what, if not financial wealth, motivates them to do so. Many feel strongly that agriculture is the best use of their land. This is what motivated Kelley to put a conservation easement on his property. As he said, “I feel so strongly about the land and keeping it as an agricultural entity that we placed it in a conservation easement several years ago, which means that it can never be developed.” Similarly, Brandon’s sense of responsibility is connected to his family’s long history on the land. He spoke at length about what his land means to him and how it connects him to a long history of struggle.

The biggest thing that weighs on my mind is that you have his grandfather, my grandfather, my dad, and now me. And I don’t want to be the one that goes, ‘Okay, let’s just cash out, put the money in the bank’ and you know, live high off the hog and take two trips to Hawaii every year and do that. I feel a sense of responsibility. They came here for a reason—because there was no opportunity where they were. If you think about all the blood, the sweat, the tears, the picking the rocks, the child death...cold winters, hot summers, the depression, two World Wars, all those things. That weighs heavily on me.

His sense of responsibility to his family and to the land is complex, but it appears he is not alone among study participants and others in terms of the obvious depth of personal investment he has in his land.

Jeremy talked about the fact that he would never hope to make a living in agriculture. As he commented, “It’s almost impossible to make a living ranching, in my
opinion. I don’t think you could.” He went on, however, to explain why he enjoys the work so much:

I actually enjoy doing the hay. It's hard work, but it’s not a book work job. You know, you’re out in the fields. So it’s a heck of a contrast from my daily job. I’m in the office all day. So I really enjoy haying. And that’s probably the main reason I do it, is because I enjoy it.

For him, as many others, his personal enjoyment of working on the land is what motivates him. It provides him with a kind of experience that he feels he benefits from, even if not financially.

Several participants spoke about the fact that they simply love the work and the lifestyle of farming or ranching. As Sylvia explained with laughter,

I like the work. I like growing things. I like having my kids with me. I like feeling like I’m doing something that’s good. I like the whole—everything about it. I like being part of the community doing something that I feel good about. And I like seeing people eat our food (laughs).

Lester talked about the independence that comes along with agriculture as a reason that he valued the experience so much. As he said, “Well, the thing about ranching—you’re independent. If you make a mistake and screw up, it’s your fault. But you can do. You can go ahead and do things.” He clearly appreciated the freedom and creativity he was afforded by being in agricultural production, something others no doubt value as well.

Shane said that despite the hardships of farming and ranching, he feels that many farmers hold onto hope that conditions will improve, and that is what keeps many on the land.

“Right now, I see there’s still hope on the horizon to keep us here, and that’s what’s keeping us here. And I think that’s what’s keeping a lot of us here.”
The table below summarizes the major perceived threats and contributors to participants' long-term viability as reported in Chapters Five and Six.

TABLE V: Study Participants' Perceived Threats and Contributors to Long-Term Viability

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Perceived Major Threats to Long-Term Viability</th>
<th>Perceived Major Contributors to Long-Term Viability</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>12 Lack of economic viability of agriculture</td>
<td>8 Off-farm employment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8 Impacts of growth and development</td>
<td>7 Personal commitment to land and way of life</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8 Policy concerns including taxation</td>
<td>5 Good market opportunities, including local</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8 Adverse environmental conditions</td>
<td>3 Keeping production costs down</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 Cost of production, including labor</td>
<td>2 Environmental conditions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 Changing community attitudes toward agriculture</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 Lack of agricultural infrastructure, including markets</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* The numbers to the left of the perceived threats and contributors indicate the number of study participants who mentioned each. Total N=13.

Conclusion

As this Chapter illustrates, there are a variety of strategies, both current and potential, that aid in keeping local agriculture alive. Participants discussed many factors that facilitate their ability to keep their operations going, including off-farm jobs, good local markets, and reducing production costs. Many also discussed environmentally sustainable practices they employ, such as water conservation, grazing and soil quality practices, and reducing chemical use, often as a means to lower their costs. All but one study participant felt it is important to protect farmland from development for the long-term if the community wants to keep local agriculture alive, but several expressed
dissatisfaction with the County's perceived role in farmland protection. Among the farmland protection methods discussed, the use of tax dollars received the widest support among participants, while agricultural zoning received far less. Many spoke about the positive aspects of using conservation easements as a farmland protection strategy, while others noted the limitations of this approach. Several noted that without economic viability, protecting parcels of land from development is not sufficient for keeping agriculture alive. Many discussed the opportunities for local marketing as a way to increase local farm and ranch viability, as well as the significant barriers to it. Finally, participants shared what helps them make the decision to keep their land in production from year to year, whether economic reasons or deep personal commitments to their land and way of life.

The findings from these in-depth interviews with farmers and ranchers in Missoula County show that there is a wide range of experiences and perspectives among producers concerning the challenges to, as well as the strategies for, preserving agricultural viability for the long-term. Despite an often-low economic return for agriculture, major financial rewards for selling land for development, and a common feeling that the community and County officials don't care about agriculture, there is interest in farmland protection and local markets, among other strategies, because there is a deep love for the land and the lifestyle among most study participants.

The findings of this study are supported by the findings of the telephone survey of farmers and ranchers in the County conducted by the Missoula County Community Food Assessment Project and reported on in Food Matters (Hassanein and Jacobson 2004a). The phone survey results are based on a sample size of 52 who, in many ways, represent
the make up of the farming population of Missoula County. Telephone survey findings are similar to in-depth interview findings in many ways, some of which I will briefly highlight here. Like in-depth interview participants, telephone survey respondents named the high cost of production and low economic return for their crops as two of the factors that most threaten their long-term viability. In addition, off-farm jobs and practices that reduce production costs were named as two of the most important factors that contribute to the long-term viability of telephone respondents and in-depth interview participants alike.

Sixty-five percent of telephone survey respondents think the County should do more to protect farmland from development, and over 70% expressed interest in marketing their products locally. Many of them identified the same advantages to local marketing that the in-depth interview participants identified: increased profit for the producer; reducing shipping and fuel costs; educating and empowering consumers; and benefiting the community and local economy. In addition, like in-depth interview participants, telephone survey respondents identified the lack of local agricultural infrastructure such as processing and distribution facilities, as barriers to local marketing (Hassanein and Jacobson 2004a). These and other congruencies between the Community Food Assessment Project’s telephone survey of farmers and ranchers in Missoula County and the in-depth interviews reported on here lend support for both studies and the overarching effort of the CFA project. The connection between these studies serves to create a more meaningful context for these in-depth interviews.

The general picture that emerged from these in-depth interviews is a local agriculture with an uncertain future. It seems to be teetering on the edge of survival,
waiting to either die out completely or be revitalized. A common theme that emerged is that the future of farming in this County will largely depend on the will of the community, whether it be through consumer demand for locally-raised food or the community’s desire to protect farmland through governmental or non-governmental means. Many study participants are clear that agriculture in Missoula County is vulnerable to extremely difficult economic pressures, yet several are hopeful, and even optimistic, that as a community we can maintain a place for agriculture to thrive here, as long as farmers and ranchers play a key role. In the following Chapter, I explore options within the community that could help to secure a vibrant future for agriculture here.
Scholars and activists have alerted us to the fact that our global food system leads to enormous costs for society (Heffernan 2000, Kloppenburg et al. 1996, Mander 2002). Moreover, although farmland benefits local communities in a variety of ways, it is rapidly being converted to developed use across the country. An effort to re-localize our food system, based on the unique characteristics of particular places, is touted by many as the most effective way to counter the negative impacts of the global system on local communities. To be sure, there are other approaches to this end; food system re-localization is not the only strategy espoused by food scholars and activists. Also important is work on other scales to address large-scale corporate control of the food system. Among re-localization advocates, however, few have begun to integrate farmland protection into food system re-localization efforts, and this study fills a need for further research on how these issues intersect in a particular place, namely Missoula County, Montana. It adds to an existing body of research on farmers’ and ranchers’ perspectives on development and farmland protection by including perspectives on re-localization efforts, such as local marketing of agricultural products, as a component of a successful local farmland protection strategy. In addition to reviewing relevant County land use planning documents, I asked thirteen select farmers and ranchers in Missoula County to talk about their perspectives on these issues using an in-depth interview technique.
Uncertainty about the Future of Local Agriculture

My conversations with study participants illuminated challenges they see to the future of local agriculture as well as strategies for keeping it alive. Participants reflected that agricultural trends at the national and international levels impact local producers in many ways. Study participants are influenced by the low economic return on products sold into national markets and the high cost of production. These larger scale economic dynamics, however, impact local producers in a particular way due to the specific circumstances of this place. For example, the low economic return for agriculture and the high cost of production take on particular significance when placed in the context of Missoula County’s increasing growth and subsequently, increasing property values, making it more desirable for producers to sell their land for development and exit an already-tough economic market. Thus, many local farmers and ranchers are in a tight squeeze, and it is understandable that some feel agriculture here has been “left for dead.”

Despite the hardships, study participants shared a wealth of information about current and potential strategies for keeping local agriculture alive. Currently, participants rely on off-farm jobs, strong markets, and reducing costs to keep them afloat. Most participants think it is important that we protect farmland from development for the long-term, and raising money for this through tax dollars, such as a bond, was the most supported method for doing so. Strong support for voluntary methods of farmland protection, rather than regulatory ones, reflects an allegiance to private property rights among participants that must be balanced with the public good. Although important barriers exist for successful food system re-localization efforts, most participants believe there are strong prospects for the success of local marketing of agricultural products here.
Ultimately, a deep love for their land and way of life is what keeps many participants going, and it helps many find “hope on the horizon” that a bright future for local agriculture awaits.

The question remains, “How can we come home again?” (Kloppenburg et al. 1996). My journey through Missoula County’s “foodscape” in the previous chapters leads back to where I began. Kloppenburg and his colleagues invite us to start right where we are, in our communities, to find ways to bring our food system back home, in essence to counter the negative impacts of our global industrial food system at the local level. Many sectors of the community have an important role to play in this effort. We cannot expect individual landowners, particularly farmers and ranchers, to solely bear the burden of protecting farmland and ensuring viable local agriculture for the future because, as discussed, it is often extremely difficult for farmers to be able to afford to keep their land in production. As Daniels and Bowers (1997:12) rightfully note, “If farmland is to be protected, it must first be profitable to operate a farm. One of the most overlooked aspects of farmland protection is helping farmers to stay in business.” Faced with growth and the ensuing pressure to develop land for increased profits, this situation becomes even more difficult.

...Given the low prices received for most agricultural products, it is impossible for most types of conventional agriculture to compete for land with residential or commercial development in the absence of citizen actions to remove the economic differential (Libby 145).

Indeed, there are actions that can be taken by the citizens of Missoula County to protect farmland and viable agriculture for the future.
Suggestions for Moving Forward

Given the range of components to any food and agriculture system, from food production all the way to consumption, a multi-pronged approach seems most appropriate for finding the answer to the long-term food security puzzle in Missoula County. An effective strategy does not lie solely at the state level, or at the County government level, or with local non-profit organizations, or with grocery store shoppers. The key to maintaining farmland and viable agriculture here (and perhaps elsewhere) lies at all of these levels simultaneously. Creating long-term food security is a comprehensive task, and it requires all of us to act according to our particular situation within the County.

The state legislature has a role to play, as does the City and County government. Furthermore, those who work in the local private sector, such as organizations like those represented on the Missoula County Community Food Assessment steering committee, have a strong role to play. Lastly, each of us who purchase and consume food can make use of our consumer buying power to benefit local farmers and ranchers. Ultimately, a wider discussion of food and agriculture issues would help to clarify specific goals within the community of Missoula County and in turn, clarify a collaborative strategy for community food security. Once again, community food security is defined as “a condition in which all community residents obtain a safe, culturally acceptable, nutritionally adequate diet through a sustainable food system that maximizes community self-reliance and social justice” (Burton et al. 2002, 5).

Re-localizing our food system does not necessarily lead to food security for Missoula County. Re-localization efforts can, however, support the continued existence and viability of local food producers. As such, these efforts support a critical component
of food security—farmland on which a community may depend for food production and a current and/or potential source of food that maximizes community self-reliance. Moreover, supporting local farmers and ranchers does not necessarily mean that low-income residents of the County will have access to the foods raised by those farmers and ranchers. It is important to bear in mind, however, that many times, due to the elimination of "middle men" who reap most of the profit in the food system, locally-raised food can be cheaper than most food found in retail stores. In addition, by exploring these issues comprehensively in the context of the Community Food Assessment Project, we are building the capacity to connect consumers and producers in a particular place in new and creative ways. Moving toward community food security requires that we address the needs of local farmers and ranchers at the same time that we address the needs of those in our community who do not have access to an adequate amount and quality of food. The hope is that eventually, these two strands will merge together as we work together and learn how to take care of our landscapes and our human communities.

The particular characteristics and land use planning environment of Missoula County, coupled with the perspectives gathered from farmers and ranchers here, point to a need for a creative approach to keeping farmland and viable agriculture alive. Given the limited ability of the local government to aggressively protect farmland from development through explicit land use planning techniques, it is important to ask who else in the community can play a role in farmland protection. It seems clear that regulatory attempts to protect farmland, such as strict agricultural zoning, could be met with public scorn. Hence, it makes sense for voluntary methods of farmland protection, such as conservation easements, to be encouraged and made available to more interested
landowners. Whether through area land trusts or other agencies, I suggest that further outreach be done to area farmers and ranchers about conservation easements. Moreover, my hope is that increasingly, agencies that fund land trusts for the purchase of conservation easements will elevate farm and ranchland—even small, scattered parcels—as a funding priority.

In addition, based on the fairly strong support among study participants for a bond that would raise money for farmland protection, I recommend this approach to farmland protection locally. The fact that Gallatin County was able to pass a $10 million bond, largely for purchasing easements on ranchlands, lends hope that such a measure might succeed here. A County wide bond with the overarching goal of farmland protection would create a farmland protection fund to be managed by the County. Monies out of the fund would be distributed proportionately to various types of projects, such as purchase of farmland conservation easements, projects that connect local producers with local consumers, and projects that increase economic viability for local farms and ranches. Funds would be made available to such projects on the basis of applications submitted to the County from groups or individuals involved with the projects.

Fifty percent of the farmland protection funds should be designated for use as "Conservation Easement Purchase" on local farms and ranches. The use of these funds should prioritize farms and ranches with soils ideally suited for food production. Prioritization for the use of funds to purchase easements, however, should also involve a public dialogue process to identify and prioritize areas that County residents value for natural and cultural reasons. Not only should a County wide bond be used to purchase conservation easements, but it should be used in a way that acknowledges building a
local farm economy as an indirect farmland protection method. We must change our thinking about farmland protection from simply saving distinct parcels of land here and there, to understanding that the long-term economic viability of local farms and ranches is also a path to farmland protection, with all the benefits it brings to the community.

As several scholars have suggested, protecting individual parcels of farmland is only effective if the farmer is able to make a living farming it (Lyson et al. 1999; Daniels and Bowers 1997). Thus, fifty percent of the money contained in a County farmland protection fund should also be used to subsidize “Food System Re-localization” initiatives that help to connect local producers and local consumers or that aim to increase the economic viability of local farms and ranches. Such projects could include appropriate technology initiatives that reduce production costs and local marketing initiatives, among others. Once again, in this scenario, groups or individuals engaged in such projects would be able to apply to the County for funds raised by the farmland protection bond. In this way, important yet costly projects aimed at rebuilding local agricultural processing and distribution infrastructure could be at least partially funded. Furthermore, given the increasing average age of farmers and the lack of incentives for young people to enter farming, a portion of the “Food System Re-localization” bond money ought to be available for projects that provide training and farm incubation for people interested in starting a food production enterprise. In these ways, a County wide farmland protection bond could truly bring a comprehensive approach to keeping farmland and viable agriculture alive.

Despite the barriers to localizing the food system in Missoula County, such as issues surrounding supply and demand for locally-raised beef and the lack of processing
and distribution infrastructure, I think these efforts are worth a try. Without significant funding for such infrastructure, it seems unlikely that large-scale commodity producers in Missoula County will greatly benefit from an attempt to increase local demand for their products. Other types of production, however, such as intensive vegetable production, show more immediate potential to benefit from these efforts.

Food system re-localization is a gradual and piece-meal process—not one that happens over night. It is not likely, nor necessarily desirable, for the entire food system of a particular place to be derived solely from the local area. Despite the costs incurred through our global food system, we undoubtedly benefit from it in various ways. There are benefits to be had, however, by communities that take steps to create pockets of food system re-localization by gradually integrating elements of it. Such efforts give consumers the potential for greater access to fresh and healthy foods, and they give producers the potential for increased profits due to the loss of costly “middle-men” in the food chain. Ideally, through re-localization efforts, we can find a way to support financially struggling local producers while at the same time providing a low-cost way for all segments of the population to obtain healthy, fresh, locally-sourced foods. The community at large has the opportunity to support local farmers and ranchers economically, supporting farm viability. In turn, this helps to ensure farmland will remain profitable for farming and ranching, continuing to provide the community with the various aesthetic, ecosystem, and food security benefits that it produces.

How far re-localization efforts could take Missoula County is an empirical question. Despite the small sample size and other limitations of this study discussed in Chapter Four, this study does present data that suggest we take action towards long-term
community food security. This data is strengthened by the complimentary components of
the Missoula County Community Food Assessment Project research, which further
explore the connection between the needs of local food producers and the needs of low-
income food consumers (Hassanein and Jacobson 2004a and b). All arrows seem to point
at the critical need for action, and as others have suggested, one of the best places to start
is where we stand—locally. Efforts to connect local producers and consumers may well
build on one another. Or, we may find that localizing our food system here works for
some types of production but not for others. We do know, however, that changing the
food system will not happen overnight, and if we do not make an effort to come home
again, it is unlikely that we will ever find our way.
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APPENDIX A

Number of Missoula County Farms

Average Farm Size in Missoula

149
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>1 to 9 Acres</th>
<th>10 to 49 Acres</th>
<th>50 to 99 Acres</th>
<th>100 to 499 Acres</th>
<th>500 to 999 Acres</th>
<th>1000 + Acres</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1950</td>
<td>118</td>
<td>95</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>209</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1954</td>
<td>153</td>
<td>89</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>201</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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APPENDIX B

In-Depth Interview Guide for Select Agricultural Producers in Missoula County

INSTRUCTIONS IN CAPS FOR INTERVIEWER:
BEFORE ARRIVING AT INTERVIEW, CHECK TAPEING EQUIPMENT
(INCLUDING MIC) FOR BATTERIES, AND CHECK TAPE. RECORD THE
PARTICIPANT’S NAME AND DATE ON A SHEET TO BE KEPT CONFIDENTIAL,
AND ASSIGN THE PARTICIPANT A CODE.
RECORD THIS INFORMATION ON THE TAPE:
Date: ____________
Participant Code #: ________  Interviewer: ______________

Thank you again for agreeing to participate in this project. As I mentioned on the phone,
I’m part of a group of community members and students at the University of Montana
who are doing a study of food and farming in Missoula County. Perspectives from
people like you are important in helping us better understand what challenges agriculture
faces in the county and the ways agriculture can be better supported here.
Before we get started, I want to let you know that your identity as a participant in this
study will remain confidential. Your name will not be used in any presentations or
written reports unless you want your identity to be disclosed.
If it is OK with you, I would like to tape record the interview. Taping ensures that your
views are accurately recorded and allows us to focus on what you’re saying rather than
taking notes.
Is that OK with you?
IF YES, TURN ON TAPE RECORDER.

Script for interview:

History and Overview
First, I want to learn a little bit about your farming or ranching operation and experience.

1. How long have you been farming or ranching in Missoula County?

2. Would you please describe your farm or ranch, like what crops do you produce or
livestock do you raise and sell?

   PROBE: You mentioned ________. Anything else?

3. Think about your experience farming or ranching here in Missoula County over
the years. What do you care about or value most about that experience? What
kinds of things make farming or ranching a positive experience for you?
**Farm and Ranch Viability**

Thank you for telling me a little about what you do. Now I want to ask a few questions about the long-term viability of your farm or ranch. First, I will ask you about factors that might threaten or pose challenges to long-term farm viability for you. Second, I will ask about factors that facilitate or contribute to long-term viability for you.

4. Let's start with those factors that pose challenges. What factors most threaten your ability to keep your farm or ranch going?

**PROBE WITH EXAMPLES IF NEEDED:** For example, taxes, labor concerns, high cost of production, things like that.

**PROBE IF NEEDED:** Can you say more about how that affects your operation?

**REPEAT BACK THE FACTORS NAMED BY THE PARTICIPANT, AND THEN PROBE:** Are there any other factors that you think are the most important in threatening your ability to keep your operation going?

5. Okay. Now I want to ask you about factors that facilitate or contribute to the long-term viability of your farm or ranch. What factors most facilitate you keeping your farm or ranch going?

**PROBE WITH EXAMPLES IF NEEDED:** For example, federal farm policies, property taxes, processing opportunities, off farm employment, things like that.

**PROBE IF NEEDED:** Can you explain a little more how that affects your operation?

**REPEAT BACK THE FACTORS NAMED BY THE PARTICIPANT, AND THEN PROBE:** Are there any other factors that you think are most important in facilitating your ability to keep your operation going?

6. We've talked about some of the struggles you face, as well as some things that are going well on your farm. How do these factors, both positive and negative, affect your decision making about whether the land remains in agriculture?

7. **FOLLOW UP:** What sort of process do you use to make those decisions?
Growth and Development
Okay, now I want to shift gears a little bit. Let's talk specifically about your thoughts on growth in Missoula County. As you may know, the county's overall population grew by 22%, or about 17,000 people during the 1990's. But the population in areas outside the city limits of Missoula increased by 46%. And, during the past ten years, over 10,000 acres of land in the county were subdivided outside the Missoula City limits. I have several questions related to these development trends. The first one asks you to think about your farm or ranch in particular. The others ask you to think about agriculture in the county in general.

8. Thinking about your farm or ranch in particular, do you think these development trends are positive, negative, or neutral for your operation? Why?

9. Now thinking more broadly, do you think these development trends are positive, negative, or neutral for agriculture in Missoula County in general? Why?

10. Do you think it is important to protect farmland from development in Missoula County for the long term?
    IF YES: Why?     IF NO: Why not?

11. Given your thoughts about that, do you think Missoula County is currently doing too little, the right amount, or too much to protect agricultural land from development?

    PROBE: Can you say more about that?

Farmland Protection
Okay, we've talked a little about farmland protection in general. Now I want to get your ideas about some specific methods for protecting agricultural land. Several are in use here and around the country. A common method is the conservation easement. Are you familiar with conservation easements?

ONLY EXPLAIN IF NEEDED: It is where a landowner sells or donates restrictions on the property to limit or prohibit development. The easement is generally held by a land trust, a private non-profit organization that makes sure current and future landowners abide by the easement restrictions.

12. Some landowners have used this method in Missoula County. Do you currently have a conservation easement on all or part of your land? Y N

    IF YES: Why did you decide to do that?
IF NO: Do you think you would ever be interested in that kind of a program? Why or why not?

13. a) Under what conditions do you think conservation easements would be an effective way to protect farmland from development here in Missoula County?

b) What might keep conservation easements from being an effective way to protect farmland from development here in Missoula County?

PROBE IF NEEDED: What barriers might keep landowners from wanting to put their land in a conservation easement?

14. Under a conservation easement, the development rights are generally held by a land trust, which is a non-profit organization. Another model is to have those rights held by the County. What do you think about having the county government manage a program like this?

15. As you know, the federal Conservation Reserve Program gives landowners direct payment from the federal government for taking a portion of land out of production for ten years.

a) Do you have any of your land in CRP? Y N

b) What role do you think CRP might play in protecting farmland from development here?

16. Another way some communities have tried to protect farmland from development is through zoning. Zoning can either be implemented by the local government, for example at the County level, or it can be voluntary.

a) Would you support governmental County-wide zoning?

PROBE: Why or why not?
PROBE. Can you say more about that?

b) In voluntary zoning, landowners agree to keep their land in agriculture in exchange for benefits like tax relief. The landowner can take their land out of agriculture at any time. Would you support voluntary agricultural zoning?

PROBE: Why or why not?
PROBE. Can you say any more about that?

17. Do you have any other ideas about how to protect farmland from development here?
Other Ways to Preserve Viable Agriculture

We’ve talked about some methods for farmland protection. Now I want to talk some about other ways that agriculture in the county can be supported, beyond farmland protection.

18. Think about the high value of land in Missoula County. What do you think could be done so that agriculture could compete with the development market?

PROBE IF NEEDED: Would any type of subsidies help? If so, how?

Local Markets

19. Some people propose strengthening local markets for agricultural products as a way to support farmers and ranchers in the area. Do you think local markets can be an important factor in maintaining farming and ranching here?

PROBE IF NEEDED: What do you see as the advantages of selling locally?
PROBE IF NEEDED: What would you say are the main barriers that prevent you from selling more locally?

20. Do you have any specific ideas about how local markets for agricultural products could be encouraged here?

PROBE: For example, I’m a student at the University, and there are people there working on making it possible for the University Dining Services to purchase food from local farmers and ranchers. Would cooperation with institutional buyers such as local schools help? If so, how?

Environmental Sustainability

Thinking about maintaining farming and ranching in Missoula County for the long-term, it seems like attention to the quality and health of the land itself is an important component.

21. What techniques do you practice to help maintain the quality and health of your own farmland for the long-term?

PROBE: For example, practices preventing soil erosion, non-chemical pest or weed management, protecting water quality, things like that?

PROBE ON ONE OR TWO PARTICULAR PRACTICES: Can you say more about that practice? Why do you do that?

Task Force

22. How would you feel about the creation of a task force that would recommend ways to promote local agricultural markets and preserve agricultural production in the county?
PROBE: Would you approve or disapprove of the creation of such a task force, or are you undecided? Why or why not?

23. Do you have any other specific suggestions about what else that task force might do?

24. Would you support the use of tax dollars, for example a bond, that might raise money for a farmland protection program in the County?

Food System Vision
25. We’ve touched on a lot of topics already, but before we wrap up here, I want to give you a chance to think more broadly and creatively. As you know, farming is just one part of a larger food and agriculture system. It includes production, processing, distribution, consumption, and even hunger concerns. I’d like you to think about that larger system, and think about Missoula County 25 years down the road. What’s your vision for what that food system would look like?

Closing:
26. To finish up, is there anything you’d like to add?
27. Do you know any other farmers or ranchers in the county who would be good for me to contact for an interview?

Thanks once again for sharing your time with me. I know you are busy and I appreciate you taking the time to tell me about your experience and thoughts.

We plan to do a public presentation of our findings when we complete the project, and we’d love to have you come to that. It will probably be sometime in late spring or early summer. We will let you know when that will be so that you can come if you’d like.