Having had the privilege of working with many dedicated groups and individuals on local food here for over 18 years, currently coordinating the La Plata Food Policy Council, and embarking on two exciting new projects, I feel a need to assess how far we have come in this area (which is very impressive), reflect on our current state, and think strategically about the future. This report is an effort to share these thoughts to encourage critical thinking, discussion, and engagement on how we can best move forward, as quickly as possible, toward a deeply sustainable community-based local food system.

At Healthy Community Food Systems (HCFS), we try our best to take a whole systems view—a wide and long-term view, giving attention to interactions and consequences, and using critical thinking. We address both immediate problems and solutions, but also those underlying issues that can undermine our best efforts.

We have put some of these guiding principles in our brief blueprint for rebuilding local food systems, “Setting a Green Table: Good food for all, good food for a better future.” This current report uses that blueprint and 18 years of experience here in assessing our own local food system. La Plata County is not an island, but it is the area for which we feel most responsible, so we begin here close to home. If anything in this report is of use to colleagues in neighboring areas, we would be pleased.

The challenges we face are especially critical to food and agriculture. The fundamental economic and social uncertainties ahead and the unfolding biodiversity and climate crises pose severe threats to farming, ranching, and food systems. Yet local food can be a powerful tool to strengthen local economies, bring personal and social health to communities, protect and restore biodiversity, and avoid worst-case climate scenarios. We feel a distinct sense of urgency to make real progress as quickly as we possibly can.

Both new projects that HCFS is undertaking require a whole community effort. They can help build, and ultimately depend upon, a healthy vibrant local food system, so critically assessing that system is essential. Our Farm to Preschool project builds on our 11 years of helping start and grow the K-12 Farm to School program. We feel a need to learn from what worked well and what did not over those 11 years, in order to be successful with preschools. Our Healthy Local Foodsheds project is aimed at mapping and monitoring the land and environmental health of our local foodshed (which we see roughly as La Plata and San Juan Counties in Colorado) and adapting our local food efforts to an uncertain future, with special attention to biodiversity and climate change.

Assessing the state of our local food system is important to us in starting both projects, and their ultimate success very much depends on how well and how quickly we, as a community, achieve a robust and resilient local food system. We hope that these thoughts will encourage deeper community discussion along these lines as well as strategic planning and action for our future.
A BRIEF TIMELINE OF OUR LOCAL FOOD MOVEMENT

This timeline highlights just a few of the local food happenings in this area to give a sense of our history and progress. These are items I was able to find online or in my notes, so any corrections or additions for future timelines can be sent to me at: jadyer@frontier.net

1994
  • Local Organic Produce Project (LOPP) started

1996
  • Durango Farmers Market (current organization) officially formed — mainly Saturdays, but tried Wednesdays a few years as well as some winter markets.

1997
  • SW CO Ag Network (SCAN) formed as a LOPP and Durango Farmers Market collaboration
  • Turtle Lake Refuge formed

2000
  • Community Ag Coalition organized by County Commissioner Josh Joswick

2001
  • Shared Harvest Community Garden established

2002
  • Sunnyside Meat Processing Plant opened
  • LB F.A.R.M. Co-op started
  • Small Farms Conference with Lynn Miller of Small Farms Journal
  • Garden Project of SW CO formed

2003
  • Small Farms Conference with Gary Paul Nabhan
  • Southwest Marketing Network's SW CO Project initiated
  • Community Kitchen Feasibility Study released
  • Southwest Marketing Network's 1st Annual Conference held in Durango
  • Mesa Verde Guide to Local Sustainable Food and Fiber began
  • Oakhaven Permaculture Center offers first classes
  • La Boca Center for Sustainability formed as a nonprofit

2004
  • Growing Partners of SW CO formed
  • Swadeshi Festival at Oakhaven Permaculture Center (thru 2006)
  • Small Farms Conference with Joel Salatin

2005
  • Sustainability Alliance of SW CO formed with a Food & Agr Policy and Farm to School Committee
  • Farm to School Project began

2006
  • LiveWell Colorado began funding Healthy Lifestyle La Plata (through 2013)
2007
- Growing Partners La Plata County Food Assessment published
- 1st Homegrown Conference featuring Dave Henson
- Smiley Garden established by Tom Bartels
- Heart and Soil film premiered
- First Annual Tour de Farms event (continues annually)

2008
- Healthy Community Food Systems formed
- First Farmer-Chef Connection at Zia
- First Annual Iron Horse Chef competition (continues annually)

2009
- Growing Partners received USDA Community Food Projects grant (through 2011)
- Southwest Marketing Network’s 7th Annual Conference held in Durango
- 2nd Farmer-Chef Connection at Ska
- Beginning Farmers courses started here by LP County Extension

2010
- 2nd Homegrown Conference
- 3rd Farmer-Chef Connection at Cosmopolitan
- Local First formed with a strong local food focus

2011
- Climate-Wise EPA Project began with Climate-Friendly Food component (through 2014)
- 3rd Homegrown Conference with Mark Winne
- Old Fort Market Garden Incubator program began

2012
- 4th Homegrown Conference with Andy Nowak
- Multi-district Farm to School Bids began

2013
- 5th Homegrown Conference with Steve Warshawer
- Ohana Kuleana Garden’s first season
- New National Young Farmers organizer stationed in Durango

2014
- Southwest Farm Fresh Co-op started
- Ft Lewis College signs on to Real Food Challenge
- 6th Homegrown Conference with Russell Evans
- HCFS launches Farm to Preschool Project

2015
- 7th Homegrown Conference with Sarah Haynes

THOUGHTS ON THE STATE OF LOCAL FOOD IN THE LA PLATA COUNTY AREA

This area should be proud of the progress it has made so far in developing a strong local food system. The dedication, loyalty, and innovativeness of our local producers, consumers, and support
organizations are the reasons for this progress. To “Get Serious about Local Food”, we must acknowledge our successes at the same time that we challenge ourselves to do much more and do it quickly.

La Plata County is known widely for having a vibrant local food movement and for pioneering work in Farm to School and other programs. Our job now is to build on those efforts, overcome obstacles that are confronting the scaling up of these efforts here and across the country, and plan for a future that we know will be much different than today. For an area with the pockets of wealth that we have, the highly educated, skilled, and active residents, the number of nonprofits, and the pride we have in doing things well, we should be able to overcome these obstacles and build a much better future.

As we focus on the details of increasing local production, viable markets, efficient distribution systems, and other programs, it is easy to lose sight of the bigger picture. Our blueprint or guidance for this work, Setting a Green Table, suggests that we remember to:

- Seek not only local food, but healthy, green, fair, and affordable food.
- Ensure everyone in the community has a place at the table.
- Look beyond oneself, be thankful, and insist on social justice.
- Insist on the best food and gardens for every child.
- Accept the responsibility to help grow some of your own food.
- Be creative in reducing food waste.
- Proactively plan for a healthy food system and future for our children.

Gardening and Growing One’s Own Food

Gardening achieves a number of objectives of a healthy local food system. Growing food helps develop a better understanding of real food and good food choices, gets people outside and active, produces some of the freshest food possible, and can help reduce your food budget.

School gardens started early in this area. They are an essential part of the Farm to School and Preschool effort, and most are still operating. These will be discussed more in the Farm to School section. We have a number of strong community gardens in Durango and Bayfield, but a check of the Garden Project’s website shows over a dozen have come and gone over the past several years. Many people here are proud of their backyard gardens, but actual numbers and trends are not readily available. The county celebrates its gardens, and farms, with the annual Tour de Farms event.

We should celebrate all types of gardens in our county, but also ask ourselves why more people are not involved and why many public gardens are not maintained over time. Both school and community gardens need leadership to begin, but those leaders are often few in number. Unless the gardens are institutionalized as part of an organization or a tight-knit community, they are vulnerable when that leader leaves. Without such a firm base, community gardens are often subject to the varying interests of the landowner (or the principal in the case of schools). School to Farm in Montezuma County is exploring a model whereby they use grant funds to hire a school garden coordinator, but then work to shift that expense to the school itself over time once the garden has proven its worth.

We could and should do more. Gardens are fun and rewarding on many levels, but they can also be seen as a responsibility—part of the responsibility to make this world and our children’s future better. We could use a public attitude similar to that of the wartime Victory Gardens. One could argue that we currently face threats from climate change, obesity, and the economy that would
justify a similar approach.

With such a community attitude, our public gardens would have deeper ranks of leaders, champions, and supporters, and be more sustainable over time. Local policies would eliminate any unnecessary obstacles to community or backyard gardens, and make marketing of excess produce as easy as possible. The oft-mentioned idea of requiring space for community gardens in low-income housing developments would be adopted. All kids would have a home or community garden in which to demonstrate to their parents what they learned in their school garden.

Neighbors would be willing to care for gardens next door of those who are travelling (one of the more common reasons I hear for not gardening). Procrastinators would realize fully understanding how to grow food here is an elusive goal and would dig in with the help of all the garden experts we have—from Extension, the Garden Project, garden clubs, HCFS’s own Tom Bartels (Grow Food Well), and many more. Not having a garden would be the exception, rather than the rule.

The overall obstacle, as I see it, is not a lack of time, money, growing season, water, space, or know-how—although these are sometimes real impediments. The real underlying obstacle is in not making this a priority—for schools, for the community, for one’s own family. Hopefully the importance of gardening and growing food will be underscored by other sections of this report.

**Food Security and Food Waste**

In one form or another, food security has been the primary stated goal of many if not most of the local food groups here. This is usually, in its most basic form, defined as all members of the community having access (including affordability) to sufficient healthy food.

In its 2007 Food Assessment, Growing Partners of Southwest Colorado chose to define “community food security” more specifically as “a situation in which all people at all times have access to healthy, local, affordable and culturally appropriate food, produced in ways that are sustainable.” This is the vision of the local food advocate who recognizes that local food can be a promising and powerful tool to help reduce overall food insecurity.

The La Plata Food Assessment also concluded from community discussions that a variety of factors keep some populations and some areas of the county from being food secure mainly in terms of food quality not quantity, so the necessary conclusion was that the county as a whole was food insecure by their community food security definition. They further concluded that the disparities in food access and security make this a divided community in that respect. Much of the work of local food groups has been to address this food insecurity.

Much data is readily available now to illustrate food insecurity in a variety of ways: total number insecure, number of children insecure, number eligible for assistance, etc. Feeding America sets La Plata County’s “Food Insecure Population” rate at 13.6% (or 1 in 7) in 2013, and defines it as the “as the inability to meet food needs during at least 7 months of the year.” This is only slightly below the state average, lower than Montezuma County at 16.2%, but higher than Archuleta County at 13.3%. Disparities between counties and as we know here, within counties, can be stark. To put things in a Four Corners perspective, the rate in northeast Arizona is 28.2%.

I recall a few years ago the audience at one of our local food retreats being called out by a hunger activist for not being aware of how many people in our own community are food insecure. While numbers don’t tell the whole story, and definitions can be problematic, I think this was a valid criticism. So it might be helpful if we remember our 13.6% food insecurity rate or simply “1 in 7” as
we go about our day—eating, shopping for groceries, harvesting from our gardens, throwing food away, or even when voting.

Digging deeper into how food insecurity is often calculated is revealing. The county data above is determined on the local level, not by interviews or household visits, but by applying correlations determined on the state level between food insecurity and economic indicators such as “poverty, unemployment, median income, etc.” and county economic data. This pragmatic shortcut in calculating county-level food insecurity, while perhaps not perfect, underscores the strong connection between income and food insecurity. This confirms the importance of addressing the underlying issues of income disparities locally, or we may be largely spinning our wheels in trying to reduce food insecurity in the long run.

The increasing trend to link local food to reducing food insecurity is encouraging. Local groups are looking for funds to institute “double-up” benefits for food assistance programs whereby food assistance is matched or doubled if fresh local produce is purchased. Farmers Markets are a centerpiece of the local food movement. By their nature, they are social events. This can be welcoming for some populations in a community and not for others. For example, food security advocates have struggled to help the Durango Farmers Market be more broadly accepted by all populations. We have instituted SNAP benefits at the market, Spanish language posters, Farmers Market Buck incentives for low-income consumers, Wednesday stop-and-shop markets, and tours. This effort should continue, and we may be wise to encourage more diversity in vendors and foods available as well. It may well be that other markets during the week are the key, as part of the Durango Farmers Market, if that is in their interest, or as a separate effort.

The Bayfield Farmers Market seems to be doing well over the years, but Ignacio seems to struggle to keep a vibrant farmers market in place, so this should be a high priority. Neither community has the depth or variety of grocery outlets that Durango has, but there is excitement about the new grocery in Ignacio. Access in the unincorporated parts of the county is still hard to assess. More needs to be known about the degree of food insecurity in these areas, how daily commuting to Durango may affect the need for rural retail outlets, and how rural people are best served by food access assistance.

Local foods, especially excess foods at harvest, are increasingly being seen as a very good way to make high quality fresh foods available to emergency feeding and assistance programs. Local produce donations to the Produce Bounty Food Distribution in September have been very successful, as have been the Manna Soup Kitchen garden and food donations. Even the fruit tree gleaning project of BearSmart to reduce bear-human encounters is uncovering another source of otherwise wasted fruit for food, livestock feed, or compost. The new Food Recovery Project of the Fort Lewis College Environmental Center should give a significant boost to all these much-needed efforts.

I am obviously partial to Farm to School and Preschool, but the ability of these programs to bring healthy local foods and garden education to all children, regardless of socioeconomic situation is clear. I see no other program that can address food access and health disparities as well as Farm to School. Preschool food programs are not as uniform as in K-12 schools, so every effort should be made to ensure that the highest quality care, food, and education are available to all.

**Local Food Production**

One of the most common needs expressed in our local food discussions is to increase the amount of local food production—either by having more viable farmers and ranchers or by increased scale of operations, or both. There is a high interest in beginning farming. Not surprising, since production
is very tangible and the love of growing food is much more universal than that of marketing, distribution, relationship building, and community organizing to make a food system work.

I have been heartened by the number of new producers, particularly young producers, that have started operations in the last 10 years or so. There has also been a trend of a few producers scaling up for larger markets, and focusing on a few crops they can grow and market well. What is unclear in my mind is how viable they are or will be financially and personally over the longer term. We need to support these new ventures in the marketplace during their critical start-up time, and watch carefully for keys to success and failure.

I have also sensed more of a reliance in the past decade on Montezuma County—Mancos to Cortez—for our La Plata County needs (lots of good things are happening there to our west!). I am not saying we shouldn’t buy from our neighbors to the west, and admittedly there is more water, affordable land, and better growing conditions in some areas of Montezuma. My contention is simply that we in La Plata County should not neglect supporting more local food being grown in our county as well.

To increase local production the 2007 Food Assessment called for 1) increased access to farmland for new producers, 2) encouraging new and existing growers, 3) better marketing and distribution opportunities, and 4) providing more consumer education. It seems that we have done a very good job on item 4. Much of the outreach included in recent grants and LiveWell funding was directed to consumer education on why and how to access local foods. Many community activities such as Iron Horse Chef and Tour de Farms for example support this effort.

Item 2, encouraging producers, has also been addressed quite well. The Beginning Farmers courses from Extension have brought business planning training to many new and prospective growers. It has helped interested individuals see if their financial and lifestyle expectations are compatible with the opportunities here. The new work by National Young Farmers Coalition in this area to support new and existing young farmers has brought more young voices to this effort, which is essential. Their work on drought and other climate-related challenges from a young farmer perspective is encouraging as well.

Depending on local food sales as a sole family income remains very challenging here in my opinion, but if coupled with non-farm income it may well be a financially viable approach and a rewarding lifestyle. I do think that the lifestyle rewards are one of the most important reasons that family farmers and ranchers—of all scales and ages, new and longstanding, conventional and alternative—work so hard to make a living this way. Programs and policies must be designed with this in mind.

Item 3, distribution and marketing opportunities, has been more elusive, but the emerging SW Farm Fresh Co-op distribution and the Farm to School multi-district bid process are promising signs of new progress. Both opportunities are helping growers explore what to grow, how much diversity, and how to market to maintain longer term financial viability. These producers and programs should be supported by markets and policies during this exploratory stage especially.

The first item above, increased access to land for beginning and expanding producers, remains problematic. Land with water is generally expensive in La Plata County. The amount of land required for a viable intensive produce operation is small and not necessarily impossible for a beginning farmer to afford. Buying just that amount of land however may be difficult given land and water restrictions—and complicated if the grower wants a home site as well.

One of the clearest messages I gained from the recent beginning farmer movement across the
country is the advice to consider access to land rather than simply assuming the grower must own the land. There are a number of alternatives and increasing sophistication of longer-term leases suitable to small growers. One problem is that high land prices here tend to make most available land subject to sale at any time.

Our [Land Link](#) listing of farmland available for produce growers is simply a bulletin board type service, but indications are that potential growers are not taking advantage of land available at low or even no cost. It could be that potential growers are not confident that a lease would protect them, are concerned that the land could be sold at any time, or that they really want to own their farm land. Our next step in increasing access should be to make the examples of suitable leases more readily available and see if they can work here. A possible policy intervention would be a special subdivision provision allowing and encouraging just enough land for an intensive produce operation and a modest home with safeguards to restrict this to actual local food production.

Finally, the prospects for local growers is ultimately dependent on the willingness of consumers and institutional buyers to take the extra effort to find good local food, and then be able and willing to pay a higher price for higher quality food if necessary. This is especially important at harvest time when growers have much more food available, but often cannot market it. Ability to pay depends on things such as livable wages for individuals and many systemic factors for institutions, but willingness to pay depends on our priorities as individuals and as a community and broader society.

**Local Markets and Distribution**

**Farmers markets** have been discussed above in terms of food access. Bayfield has a long-standing market. Ignacio has had trouble continuing theirs. The Durango Farmers Market (DFM) has a long history as well and has tried Wednesday markets to reach other customers. Small winter markets have been held either by the DFM or independently organized. LB Farm Co-op has had a Friday afternoon market at the Wildcat Liquors parking lot just west of Durango for a few years now. It seems that priorities would be a strong Ignacio farmers market, continued exploration of additional market days in Durango either by the DFM or other interests, EBT/SNAP opportunities at as many markets as possible, and double-up benefits for local produce purchases to encourage more low-income participation.

**Retail groceries** carry varying amounts of local food depending on the area. Both Ignacio groceries carry local meats: Roots carries local produce, and the new Farmers Fresh Market intends to. Durango has a number of stores carrying locally grown products. Nature’s Oasis and Durango Natural Foods carry a number of items, mainly produce and meat. Natural Grocers has a few local-to-regional products, but since they only allow only certified organic produce very few local produce items are carried. Unfortunately, very few local produce growers who are near or even beyond organic have seen a need to become certified organic to sell in the local area. Although they are not a locally-owned company, where Natural Grocers stands out in my mind is that they have very clear and high standards for what they will carry and what they will not. Many shoppers are attracted by their lower prices as well.

**Community Supported Agriculture or CSAs** are offered by several growers in the area. HCFS recommends that preschools consider a CSA share in order to get a good variety of local foods for educational activities with their kids as well as for meals and snacks. The smaller size of many preschools than K-12 schools makes a CSA subscription a significant contribution to their local food offerings. Last Spring we were aware that Adobe House Farm, Homegrown Farm, Old Fort at Hesperus, Twin Buttes, Tierra Vida Farm, and Field to Plate Produce offered CSAs, and we recommended that preschools look at them. We hope that some preschool parents will buy a share
as well, if they see their preschool participating.

It would seem that this model is a very good one for producers to consider since it can help lock in a market well before harvest. Partnering with other producers to increase the variety of products is an option to consider as well. As consumers begin to realize more clearly the value of healthy local food, the convenience and encouragement that comes with a weekly basket, and do the math on the cost of a CSA, we can hope this marketing channel will grow.

**Restaurants** are a mainstay of the local food movement especially in the tourist town of Durango. From a select few offering local foods 10 years ago or so, today there are many with significant amounts of local produce and meats, and a few stand out as making local a centerpiece of their operation. Chefs are often early adopters of new products and can bring great creativity to their preparation. While these meals may not always be financially accessible to the whole community, the attention and business they bring to local farmers, ranchers, and their products can help promote these local products throughout our food system. The local food groups should take every opportunity, such as with the Iron Horse Chef competition, to bring attention to local foods on these restaurant’s menus or that promotional effect will be lost.

**Local Distribution** is one of the most often cited needs in local food discussions, yet has remained elusive. It is difficult to create a financially viable distribution system without sufficient local production or sufficient proven markets, yet a lack of efficient distribution can hamper new production and new market development. LB Brands Co-op has been distributing for its members on a small scale for several years, and more recently, Southwest Farm Fresh Co-op has been taking innovative new strides to move product throughout Southwest Colorado. These efforts should be strongly supported in the marketplace during these difficult startup periods.

**Local Food Policy**

Local food policy had been included in several earlier meetings, but the earliest formal local food policy group that I am aware of was the establishment of the Food and Ag Policy Committee of the Sustainability Alliance of SW Colorado (SASCO) in 2005. The committee focused mainly on developing a Farm to School program in the county, but did keep an eye open for policy opportunities and provided input to County Land Use Code revisions, eliminating unnecessary obstacles to local food production and marketing, and later to the County comprehensive Plan (which was not adopted due to conservative concerns). I coordinated these meetings from 2005 through 2011.

The policy effort was reinvigorated when Mark Winne presented at our 2011 Homegrown Retreat. Many new people were added to the mailing list, and a renewed interest in a more formal La Plata Food Policy council was created. Very well-attended Policy Council meetings were held for a few months, but attendance dwindled drastically. Very small meetings were held periodically to keep the effort alive. It became hard for the group to coalesce on a mission and structure for the Policy Council, perhaps because there were already several groups working on local food in the county, and most people gravitate to programs rather than policy per se.

In 2011, I proposed that we focus our Policy Council on a specific task of monitoring four key elements of our local food efforts: food security, Farm to School and Preschool, how local food groups were coordinating here, and local policy opportunities. The only action items would be to recommend needed actions to appropriate local groups. Attendance at meetings consisted of interested individuals and attendance was not consistently adequate for good discussions.
During this time, a Colorado Food Policy Network of local groups was forming to share information, models, and collaborate on common policy issues. The hope was that this would allow us to see real examples among our peer communities of feasible and innovative local food policies—something that was eluding us locally. With this opportunity in mind, I reconvened the group in 2015 with the same charge, but focusing on making sure that a representative of each of the main local food coalitions were present along with anyone who wished to attend, and agreeing to meet at least twice a year.

HCFS is committed to the continuing these meetings to provide policy review and guidance to various groups in the county. If a need and desire to become more formal and/or action-oriented arises, we will be in a position to move in that direction.

Farm to School

Farm to School (FTS) began here as a local project in 2005. The Southwest Marketing Network brought national leaders in the emerging Farm to School and food policy movements to its First Annual Conference in Durango in 2003. In February 2005, local individuals interested in local food policy, sustainability, and food security started the Farm to School and Policy Group acting as a committee within the new Sustainability Alliance of SW Colorado. Monthly meetings continued into 2011 with the main task of supporting the development of FTS throughout the county. FTS was a program component of the Growing Partners Community Food Project grant, LiveWell Colorado’s local funding from 2006–13, my involvement under Southwest Marketing Network funding from the Kellogg Foundation and several USDA grants, and HCFS FTS involvement since its founding in 2008.

School gardens were established, especially with the help of the Garden Project. Local food purchases under the program began in August 2005, and grew steadily ever since especially in Durango 9R schools but also in Ignacio and Bayfield public schools and the Southern Ute Academy. Salad bars were a key means of incorporating local produce, and local organic grass-fed beef became a large part of the initial program. The beef purchases began as a result of one of our Farmer-Chef Connection events, and became well-known across the US. As an example of the growth, from a single meal for staff in August 2005, local purchases grew to over 9000 pounds of local beef and 19,000 pounds of local produce from 17 producers for Durango school meals in 2014.

FTS spread to neighboring counties in SW Colorado. In 2012, Krista Garand at Durango 9R spearheaded a multi-district local produce bid and a local beef bid with four other districts. This bid process has continued and has usually included Ignacio, Bayfield, Mancos, and Cortez schools.

I would attribute the success of the FTS program to several key factors including:

- Very determined Food Service Directors
- Local producers willing to take a chance on a new market
- The bid process which required in-depth discussions between schools and producers
- Support from several local groups to streamline a food safety protocol for producers
- High visibility in community media
- Highly visible school gardens
- Including beef as well as produce in the program
- A positive approach emphasizing the opportunities rather than the problems with school meals

Today, Farm to School is well established here—it is an expectation of the whole community that schools will have gardens and local products included in meals and snacks. School gardens are
becoming much more integrated into the whole school. The multi-district bids continue, new producers are selling to schools, and 9R expects to have its receiving center for local foods completed in Summer 2016. This should make it much easier to handle local produce during the height of the harvest season and facilitate increased collaborative purchasing and distribution.

Yet, some school gardens are still too dependent on a few champions. School budgets continue to put pressure on Food Service departments to cut costs. Producers are developing a better idea of what they need to charge to stay in business. In some respects, I feel that we may be at a plateau in terms of the amount of local food purchased by schools—and uncertainty exists about future growth. This will demand our careful attention as local food advocates, especially since FTS is essential to fighting diet-related diseases, is a promising market for producers, and is one of the best ways for a community to address health disparities across all socioeconomic groups.

Farm to Preschool

HCFS began its Farm to Preschool (FTPS) project in 2014. As explained in their recent report, “The Promise of Farm to Preschool in SW Colorado”, this is a natural addition to the K-12 FTS movement—with many similarities and several differences. As we begin this effort, we are looking at the keys to success of the K-12 FTS movement here, so that we can hopefully establish FTPS in La Plata County and then help it spread it, with current Gates Family Foundation funding, across all of SW Colorado as quickly as possible.

We realize that including gardens for preschoolers is a key to success as well as engaging parents—which is easier at this age. We also realize that the dampening effect of K-12 school budget issues on FTS may well have parallels in FTPS, so we must look at the underlying issues involved if we are to be successful. We believe that a key to success is to view FTPS development within the context of the whole community and the whole local food system and foodshed. That is one of the main reasons for this report.

THE PATH FORWARD — RECOMMENDATIONS

Starting with some of the broader recommendations from above, here are some things to consider as we work toward a better future in a challenging world.

Gardening and growing one’s own food: We should make clear the importance of as many people as possible growing at least some of their own food in community, school, and backyard gardens. The abundance of training and advice for gardening existing in this community should be publicized widely. School and community gardens need a broad base of supporters and to become institutionalized so that their continuance does not depend on one or two champions.

Food security and waste: The public should be continually reminded that “1 in 7” residents are food insecure in this county, of its underlying causes, and that reducing food waste can help solve the immediate problem. Reducing income disparities should be seen as just as important as actions to directly reduce food insecurity such as increasing access to local markets, enhancing food assistance with fresh local foods, and “double-up” and similar programs for purchasing healthy local products.

Support new producers and markets especially in the start-up phase: The free market can be harsh on newcomers, innovators, and risk-takers. If we really want them to succeed, we need to go out of our way to actively support them, especially in the early stages as they strive to prove the viability of their businesses. Beginning farmers, producers switching to growing local food, CSAs,
new direct marketers and markets, Farm to Table restaurants, and new distribution groups and co-ops could all use our support. That support can be in the marketplace as loyal customers willing to try new products and pay fair prices, through community acknowledgement in the media and elsewhere, and in local policies that encourage rather than impede. And, if we like what they get started, it can’t hurt to extend that extra help over the long term.

**Farm to School and Preschool:** These programs should be seen as the responsibility of the whole community as they support the well-being and education of our young, and are one of the best ways to address food insecurity. All students should eat and learn about local foods at school and learn how to grow food in a garden onsite or nearby. Opportunities for deeper ecological learning about food production should be encouraged through programs such as HCFS’s [Wild School Gardens Project](#). School gardens should be institutionalized for long term sustainability. Quality preschools including Farm to Preschool programs should be accessible to all, regardless of income.

**Local food policy:** The La Plata Food Policy Council should continue to monitor local food conditions and programs, recommend actions to groups as needed, and partner with other communities in the Colorado Food Policy Network. Specific local policies to encourage local food production, marketing, community gardens, and food assistance with local foods should be implemented. We hope that this report helps in the Council’s discussions.

**Recognize that local food means sustainable food:** Anne Lappe (*Diet for a Hot Planet*) has aptly stated that for local food advocates, “local food” is code for sustainability and connectivity. We must recognize this and insist on local and sustainable food—or “good food” as I prefer it: healthy, local, green, fair, and affordable. We know that local food is much more likely to be sustainable, and we have a much greater chance of knowing first hand how it is produced—if we know the questions to ask.

However, when we must buy non-local, which is the bigger part of most people’s diet, we should still insist on the most sustainable food possible. If we go out of our way to find local, sustainable food, we should take the same extra effort to find the most sustainable food if local is not available. This requires that one understands the various aspects of sustainable foods (healthy, green, fair, affordable), what production/distribution methods (less processed, organic, grassfed, etc.) can meet those needs, and how to find these foods in the marketplace. HCFS is working on gathering some guidance for making sustainable food choices easier.

**Underlying issues:** There are a number of fundamental issues that affect our ability to make progress on local food. Many of these issues are shared with other sectors of our community. Here are a few things we can all do:

- Be willing to pay for high quality local food if able. Recognize the true cost of food and the folly of cheap food.
- Don’t assume that wages in our area should stay low just because they are low. Pay employees fairly, pay farmers fairly, pay nonprofit employees fairly.
- Ensure fair participation of all socioeconomic groups in the decision-making of local governments and community organizations.
- Support local and other organizations working on livable wages, social justice, campaign finance reform, and other systemic problems.
- Push for policy innovations on the local level when the federal government doesn’t seem to be able to act effectively. (Climate change for instance)
- Question our assumptions and expectations regarding an ever expanding economy, ever expanding population, consumerism, wealth inequities, cheap food, leisure time, and convenience.
- Pay attention to food and take the time to grow, find, prepare, and enjoy it.
- Recognize and resist the manipulation of our food system by large corporate agribusiness: read the first third of *Omnivore’s Dilemma* by Michael Pollan.
- Think more of foods than nutrients: read Pollan’s *In Defense of Food* and *Food Rules*.
- Get people to care about “good food”—see next section for this key issue.

**Get people to care about “good food”:** So many of the actions above depend upon the will of people to change their behavior either as individuals or as a society (public will). We need to explore how to get more people to care passionately about good food for all, so that our efforts as local food activists can be effective. The problems that local food can help can be difficult to “see”—hungry and malnourished people, inhumane treatment of animals, plight of farm workers including children, impacts on wildlife and the environment, climate change. We are good at being able to not see. We need to help people see these problems—but just enough that they are spurred to action. Too much can be counterproductive as our instinctive coping mechanisms kick in. We must present feasible alternatives **at the very same time**—i.e., “what can you do”, so that people do not shut down.

**Healthy Local Foodsheds:** One of HCFS’s new projects is to develop the concept of the healthy local foodshed as a more tangible idea than a food system and one which accurately stresses the importance of the land and environment. We consider the local foodshed that area we should look to first for our food and that area we should feel the most responsible for. For here, we think of La Plata County & San Juan County, Colorado with plenty of interdependence with neighboring foodsheds.

The mine spill in the Animas River clearly demonstrated the connection between the health of the whole landscape or foodshed and our food production. But what about mercury fallout from area power plants, wind-blown dust off bare fields, herbicide “carry-through” into manure and compost? Recognizing and mapping the key indicators of foodshed health and monitoring them over time is critical to maintaining the health of our whole food system.

**Looking Forward:** After mapping and monitoring the indicators of health in our local foodsheds, the next step is to look to the future and adapt as needed. We know that the future will hold many changes and challenges—economic, social, and environmental—especially with a changing climate. Not only do we need to adapt our food production to the weather extremes, drying, and warming that are already happening, we also need to reduce greenhouse gas emissions now to reduce even more future climate change.

We believe that we need to be looking at those adaptations without delay. How can our local food production emit fewer greenhouse gases, but also help sequester carbon in health soils and perennials. What sort of fruit tree varieties should we be planting now that will be suited for the warmer drier climate that is coming? How can we use our precious water sources most wisely and efficiently? These are questions we should be tackling now for more local food in our future and a better future for our children and grandchildren.

One of the most exciting developments for the future that I have seen recently is the rise of a new breed of young farmers. The National Young Farmers Coalition has been organizing young farmers in this region from a base in Durango, and have been working on policies, research, and networking.
to support them. I find their focus on water issues, climate change, and drought especially forward-looking. What I see is that these young farmers “get it”, focusing on healthy soils, cover crops, and crop rotations as their top priorities in addressing water issues. Inspiring and hopeful indeed.

THE PATH FORWARD

The urgency I see: There are many reasons to develop sustainable local food systems and foodsheds—our health, the economy, the environment—and addressing any one of these usually helps with the others. What gives me a heightened sense of urgency are two interconnected issues less-addressed by local food advocates, but of critical importance: climate change and biodiversity. Industrial agriculture’s fingerprints are all over both of these crises as major causes, and in both cases we are risking irreversible impacts. Extinctions are the ultimate in irreversibility, and some climate tipping points are near or even been crossed already. Biologically based food production and local food systems are the best answers to both crises, and the clock is ticking.

Change is needed in all aspects of society, and is sorely wanting. What will it take to rally the public will and individual resolve to make the required changes? How many more Hurricane Katrinas? Will it take a Sandy-scale storm moving up the Potomac to get Congress to act? How much sea level rise will it take? How much must food prices rise? How many extinctions do we need to witness? The only sane approach is to open our eyes, recognize that all these things will happen—it’s a matter of when rather than if, but that there is no reason to wait for them to occur in order to act.

There is much for us to do, but it should not be seen as a task just for the local food groups here. For an effort as important as rebuilding our local food system, and for an area of sustainability that depends so much on individual choices—three times a day in fact—there is work for everyone to do, just what depends on their situation. We should fully support these local food groups, help them as best we can, but also make sustainable food choices, seek out and support local producers, grow some of our own food, make wise political choices, and stand up for social justice, generosity, and fairness locally and beyond.

New HCFS initiatives: HCFS welcomes help with our new projects—Farm to Preschool and Healthy Foodsheds—so check out our website, newsletters, and Getting Serious Now Blog at www.hcfs.org. We will continue to monitor the local food system for signs of issues to be addressed and of opportunities to be acted on. We are looking for great examples from communities around the country that we might look at doing or adapting to do here, and we will share those.

We will also suggest challenges that we might take on as a community to show ourselves what we could achieve with a concerted effort. In our Farm to Preschool project we have posed a challenge of working as a community—producers, preschool providers, support groups, parents, and voters—to provide 20% of preschool meals and snacks from local sources. This 20% Local Food challenge could be just the start, spreading to schools and the community as a whole. Our No Child without a Garden challenge is very straightforward, garden and growing experience and education for all our preschool children, and then in their K-12 years as well. We hope you will join us in seeing how we can meet these two challenges.

If you believe like we do that developing a deeply sustainable community-based food system here—without delay—is key to strengthening and restoring our personal and community health, local economy, agriculture, and environment, then we have much work to do.