Montana Healthy Food and Communities Initiative

2015 Program Report

October 2015
About Us

The National Center for Appropriate Technology launched the Montana Healthy Food and Communities Initiative (MHFCI) in 2011 to combat childhood obesity, reduce childhood hunger, promote healthy, local foods in institutional cafeterias, and support vibrant local farms and ranches.

Our Initiative encompasses three projects that work together to bring healthy, local foods to people across the state: the FoodCorps AmeriCorps program, the Farm to Cafeteria Network, and the Grow Montana Food Policy Coalition.

Through this program we:

- teach low income children about food and nutrition.
- help children get their hands dirty as they learn about growing food by planting and harvesting food in school gardens.
- change what is served on school lunch trays by helping schools buy healthy food from local producers.
- combat childhood obesity and reduce hunger for low-income and disadvantaged families.
- change what is being served in cafeterias in institutions such as long-term care facilities and hospitals.

- create market opportunities for local farmers and ranchers that help grow rural economies.
- create leadership opportunities for high school students interested in building local foods systems for healthier communities.
- eliminate barriers so local farmers and ranchers can sell to schools and other institutions.
- create and share educational resources for students, teachers, institutional food service staff, legislators, and local producers that promote healthy, local foods.

The Need

- Almost 30% of Montana’s children are obese.
- The No Kid Hungry Campaign reports 22% of Montana kids struggle with hunger.
- One in three children are on track to develop diabetes in their lifetime. For children of color, it’s one in two.
- Children and adults who suffer from diet-related diseases score lower on tests, miss more days of school, advance less in their careers, and raise children who are likely to repeat the cycle.
- When it comes to Native communities, a study published in 2014 found that six Montana Indian reservations are classified as “food deserts,” meaning they lack fresh fruit, vegetables and other healthy foods.
- Obese children are more likely to become obese adults; they are also at risk in the long term for heart disease, diabetes, stroke, and several types of cancer.
- By 2030, diet-related diseases will cost our nation more than $1 trillion a year: $550 billion in medical costs, and another $500 billion in lost productivity.
Program Goals 2014-2015

Through educational activities, research, advocacy, and strong public and private partnerships, we seek to change how Montanans grow, buy, and think about food.

Our goals are to:
- increase understanding of the importance of healthy, local food and reduce childhood obesity through education and outreach;
- improve access to healthy, local food for all Montanans by connecting food producers and distributors with local food markets, including institutions; and
- create opportunities and eliminate barriers for food producers with the goal of strengthening Montana’s regional and local food systems.

Our Impact – Food Corps

We partner with schools, after-school programs, and other non-profit organizations to educate kindergarten through high school students about the importance of eating healthy foods. NCAT serves as the Montana host site for FoodCorps, which works with organizations and schools to create healthier school food environments. FoodCorps members work in Montana schools and teach hands-on lessons about food and nutrition; build and tend school gardens; teach cooking lessons; and help change what is served in school meals by giving children healthy food from school gardens and local farms.

Last year, our 10 FoodCorps service members taught in 42 schools in the state. They provided hands-on nutrition education to 9,445 students, and tended, built or revitalized 29 school gardens.

We partnered with the No Kid Hungry AmeriCorps program to leverage our program’s impact across the state, and co-hosted an AmeriCorps VISTA member, who served in Browning to address childhood hunger and food security issues there.

One service member writes: “I’ve been fortunate enough to serve with hundreds of students in the gardens during the school day and during after school garden club, exploring the journey of our food from seed to plate, the role of pollinators, Native American planting practices, and answering important questions like, “Is dirt really made of worm poop?”(Answer: “Kind of.”)

“Taste tests are exciting. They’re exciting for kids because they involve free food, something different in the classroom and the opportunity to use their voice and vote. I partnered with District 5’s No Kid Hungry Service member to do a lentil hummus taste test with carrots and zucchini. I chose to test lentil hummus because MTproduces half the lentils grown in the U.S. but few students are choosing to eat it when we serveit...
on the lunch line. Kids had to vote that they “Tried it,” “Liked it,” “Loved it.” Not only did 114 students try the hummus but 80 percent of them “Liked it,” or “Loved it.” One 4th grader commented that “it was the best thing she’d ever tasted.”

Food Corps- By the Numbers

- 10 FoodCorps members taught students in 42 schools
- 9,445 students received hands-on nutrition education
- 2,863 educational activities were held
- 91 new ingredients and recipes were introduced
- 93 new farmers were engaged in 251 interactions with school staff
- 16,137 pounds of local food was served in classrooms or cafeterias
- 29 school gardens and 2 community gardens were built, tended, or revitalized
- 2,287 pounds of produce harvested from school gardens
- 366 volunteers were recruited to assist with gardens and nutrition education
- $200,000 spent by School District 5 in the Flathead Valley on Montana food products for its school cafeterias

Our Impact – Farm to Cafeteria

We helped launch a Montana Harvest of the Month pilot program that showcases Montana-grown foods in our schools and communities. In collaboration with the Office of Public Instruction (OPI), Montana Team Nutrition Program, and Montana State University Extension, we worked with 11 sites to promote one locally-grown item each month. Items ranged from winter squash to beef to lentils to beets, and were featured in a meal, through classroom taste tests, and in educational lessons and activities surrounding both the nutritional and agricultural aspects of the food. The two primary goals for this program are to expose students to new, healthy foods and to support Montana’s farmers and ranchers.

Farm to Cafeteria- By the Numbers

- Nearly 170 educational activities were conducted reaching 1,813 students
- One hundred six meals featuring Harvest of the Month items were served
- 60 taste tests were conducted, with students voting on whether they “tried it,” “liked it,” or “loved it.” The overwhelming majority "loved it!"

Growing Leaders

We awarded mini-grants to two high school student groups in the fall of 2014 to support local foods projects. In Missoula, Hellgate students harvested vegetables from the school’s rooftop garden and served chips and salsa made from garden ingredients to more than 100 fellow students during a school event.
The Flathead High School Environmental Club also received a mini-grant to host a garden opening party, engaging 40 students and community members during the event. Garlic planting, Garden Jeopardy, face painting, and sampling local foods were just a few of the activities during this event.

Conference- Farm to Healthcare

We hosted a day-long conference about farm to healthcare, bringing together producers and institutional staff to examine the rewards and challenges of serving local food in hospitals and long-term care facilities. More than 60 people attended the conference, held in Livingston, which featured speakers and panel discussions to help producers access this new market. Comments from participants included, “Good to understand the issues that these institutions have in incorporating local food,” “The assurance of demand in the marketplace,” and “Hearing how excited some healthcare people are about local food. How affirming!” We recorded the conference speakers and the video can be viewed at: http://farmtocafeteria.ncat.org/2015/02/04/nourishing-people-and-sustaining-communities-farm-to-healthcare-conference.

“The Farm to Hospital Conference that NCAT held in November 2014, really helped Mission Mountain Food Enterprise make a great connection with Kalispell Regional Medical Center. While the Western Montana Growers Cooperative had a previous relationship with KRMC, local processing or season-extended products had not been broached in depth. The conference offered a critical networking opportunity to hear Seth Bostick, KRMC’s Executive Chef, needs and how we could step up to address their needs. After the conference, I contacted Seth to discuss KRMC’s produce projections for the following year. Mission Mountain Food Enterprise Center, the Western Montana Growers Cooperative, and KRMC signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) that included processing and storing at least 20,000 pounds of season extended local produce, on top of their purchases of unprocessed local produce. I can’t wait to see what the final numbers will be come next year.”

Plans are under-way for regional youth summits to be held around the state this fall. These events will involve an estimated 200 students, providing them opportunities to learn about food systems and offering leadership training that encourages involvement with their local organizations and the chance to define their own youth-led projects and ideas. Sixty-nine organizations are assisting with these summits, and each day-long training will feature local and regional experts as well as student presentations.
Webinar- Farm to Institutions

We offered a live webinar about farm to institution efforts this spring, which was recorded for future viewing. “Selling to Institutional Markets: Strategies and Considerations for Montana Producers” had 132 registrants, and provided information and technical assistance to Montana farmers, ranchers, and food processors interested in accessing larger food service markets. A diverse mix of farmers, ranchers, extension educators, ag department staff and others attended the webinar and survey respondents rated the conference 4 out of 5 in terms of the webinar quality and value. Eighty percent of the respondents said they gained new knowledge that would help them make new contacts, seek out further information on their own, or share information with folks that they serve. The recorded webinar has had 249 views, and you can view it at: http://farmtocafeteria.ncat.org/2015/04/10/selling-to-institutional-markets-strategies-and-considerations-for-montana-producers.

Databases for Producers and Consumers

We developed and maintain two critical resource databases for Montana producers and institutional consumers: the first, a producer database for institutional markets, contains information about Montana food producers, processors, and distributors who are interested in selling to institutions. It includes information on product type, volume availability, distribution capacity, and more. The second, a farm to cafeteria program resource, contains information about those Montana institutions utilizing local food systems to put food on the table. This database includes information on Farm to School, Farm to College, Farm to Prison, and Farm to Healthcare programs across Montana.

Workshops and Trainings- Food Service

Leveraging funds from the foundation grant and additional funding from the USDA Farm to School program, NCAT brought school food-service staff together for Montana Cook Fresh trainings in Boulder and Butte this past year. The trainings promoted healthy, local food in school cafeterias by providing participants with helpful skills for preparing whole, raw ingredients in school kitchens and turning them into delicious meals that meet school nutrition guidelines and appeal to kids. The first training covered topics such as knife skills and tips for working with difficult ingredients. The second training taught food preparation, handling cutlery, using herbs and spices and tips for including more fruits and vegetables into student diets.

We teamed with Montana State University (MSU) Extension to prepare a school garden guide and to offer a School Garden 101 class for teachers in southwest Montana. This six-week course was designed to help faculty learn gardening and how to incorporate school gardens into every-day class curricula.

One of the attendees said, “I have gained an education on what a garden entails and all the care required from start to harvest. And I learned more about compost than I ever knew there was to know!”. One individual also said she was thinking of “starting a garden at the Y for the summer camp kids to plant,
“take care of, and harvest. Teaching them where food comes from and how fun it can be to grow your own.”

We are also working with MSU on a Beef to School project. We are members of the Montana Farm to School Leadership Team, coordinated by the OPI Farm to School Coordinator, and we founded and manage the Butte Farm to School advisory committee.

Farm to Cafeteria-By the Numbers

- 790 listserv subscribers
- 799 subscribers to the Dirt e-newsletter
- Over 17,000 unique visitors to our webpages
- 1,605 Facebook followers

Grow Montana- Food Policy

Our Grow Montana Food Policy Coalition members helped to craft and shepherd an important piece of policy through the 2015 Montana Legislature. House Bill 478 clarifies and streamlines Montana’s patchwork and often confusing food safety rules.

A key part of the bill created a cottage food law in Montana. This allows small producers to make non-hazardous food products in home kitchens and sell them directly to consumers, including at farmers markets, fairs, and other community events. Cottage food products include items like jams, jellies, baked goods, and dry mixes used for making pancakes and other items.

In helping draft HB 478, Grow Montana worked with both state and local health regulators to make sure that cottage food will be implemented in a safe way. By bringing various perspectives to the table, Grow Montana helped craft a bill with wide-ranging support that easily passed the legislature and was signed into law by Governor Steve Bullock. One local producer called the bill “manna from heaven,” and many others appreciated our work cleaning up current Montana code.

We produced two factsheets about childhood obesity and childhood hunger in Montana, which clearly show that these health issues are of significant concern across the state. You can read the documents at http://mhfci.ncat.org/wp-content/themes/mhfci/pdf/MHFCI_childhood_obesity.pdf and here: http://mhfci.ncat.org/wp-content/themes/mhfci/pdf/MHFCI_childhood_hunger.pdf.

Our Grow Montana Food Policy Coalition has a steering committee comprised of eight organizations:

- Alternative Energy Resources Organization (Helena)
- Community Food and Agriculture Organization (Missoula)
- Lake County Community Development Corporation (Ronan)
- Montana Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics (Bozeman)
- Montana Farmers Union (Great Falls)
- Montana Office of Public Instruction (Helena)
- National Center for Appropriate Technology (Butte)
- Northern Plains Resource Council (Billings)
Building Capacity

We continue our efforts to identify and request funds for this project from other sources, to augment and leverage the grant funds provided by the foundation.

Recognizing Our Partners

We offer special thanks to the Montana Health Care Foundation for your generous support of our programs. We also thank the many people and organizations who partner with us to improve the health of our Montana communities. We are grateful to the Boulder Elementary School and 21st Century Community Learning Center, Browning School District, Butte School District #1, Hylaite Elementary School, Kalispell School District #5, Madison Farm to Fork and Ennis Schools, Mission Mountain Food Enterprise Center, Missoula County Public Schools, Montana Office of Public Instruction, Montana Team Nutrition, Montana State University Extension, Red Lodge Area Food Partnership Council and Red Lodge Schools, and Somers/Lakeside, Big Fork, and Cayuse Prairie Schools, Yellowstone Boys and Girls Club, USDA Farm to School, Western Sustainable Agriculture Research Education program, and National FoodCorps.

Stay in Touch!

We’re always looking to involve more people in our work. If you care about healthy living and regionally-based food systems, please stay in touch with our program the following ways:

Visit us online at www.mhfcicat.org

Subscribe to The Dirt, our bi-monthly newsletter

Subscribe to the MT Food and Ag listserv, an interactive listserv where you can share and receive news, job postings, funding opportunities, and more.

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Reach out by email healthyfoodmt@ncat.org or by calling (406)494-4572