

Building Local Food - Local Communities in Western Oklahoma

Final Report for CS06-040

Project Type: Sustainable Community Innovation

Funds awarded in 2006: \$10,000.00

Projected End Date: 12/31/2008

Matching Non-Federal Funds: \$10,000.00

Region: Southern

State: Texas

Principal Investigator:

[Darryl Birkenfield](#)

Ogallala Commons

Project Information

Abstract:

Through six training sessions, this project created a framework for revitalizing declining rural communities in three Western Oklahoma counties, melding together two educational components: a sustainable community development framework and entrepreneurship opportunities in a local & regional food system. Ogallala Commons provided 5 training workshops for community leaders and youth in asset mapping, community planning, youth engagement, and entrepreneurship in three Western Oklahoma counties: Woods, Major, and Roger Mills. For their part, Oklahoma Food Cooperative and Oklahoma Land Stewardship Alliance offered a workshop outlining marketing options for entrepreneurs seeking more sustainable agricultural enterprises.

Introduction

The dependence of conventional economic development approaches upon non-renewable, imported resources has had a crippling effect on the economy and ecology of the Great Plains region of Oklahoma. Ownership, capital, energy, equipment and labor for local farming operations all come from outside the region. At the same time, Oklahoma's abundant natural resources are extracted and exported out of our region as commodity items, failing to return sufficient income in an equitable and sustainable manner to Great Plains rural communities. Farms have disappeared and been consolidated, while absentee landowners hire low-paid immigrant labor for their farms. Young adults and young families are unable to see opportunities to make a living in our communities, choosing instead to migrate to large urban centers, taking their precious skills with them. The lack of community self-sufficiency has led to decay in most of the essential services in rural communities. Schools, hospitals, local banks, grocery stores, and main street businesses that were viable and strong, are now struggling or bankrupt. Racial divisions, high teen drug use, pregnancy, domestic abuse, food insecurity, suicide,

and the exodus of bright, young minds are among the social problems that have developed as a result of the agricultural stagnation of the High Plains-Ogallala Aquifer region (See Wendell Berry, *The Unsettling of America*). Sadly, many who live in this section of the Great Plains are a disenfranchised people, lacking in a sense of their unique place and contributions to the fabric of America. We are denied the community development that mainstream and urban America takes for granted, due to depopulation, political fracturing (dividing the Great Plains region into parts of multiple states with far distant state capitals and diminishing rural representation), economic stagnation, lack of education opportunities, and lack of creative local leadership.

Since the days of pioneering families, rural communities in the Great Plains region of western Oklahoma have had a tradition of self-reliance, based on a creative ability to make a living from the gifts of natural resources and productive farmland. In the past 30 years, these key capacities have been severely eroded by a loss of community leadership, a decline of local agricultural markets, the outmigration of youth and young adults, and the growth of large-scale commodity-based agriculture. To revitalize rural communities, it will take more than success by individual citizens and businesses. Rather, a reinvestment in civic life is essential to change the negative conversations, as well as the look and the feel of “Main Street” in these communities. In short, rural communities in western Oklahoma need a comprehensive framework for growing their own leadership and linking that leadership with creative agricultural entrepreneurship.

In 2006, Ogallala Commons recruited, organized, and trained two Regional Clusters of 11 community teams who worked collaboratively to begin implementing the HomeTown Competitiveness (HTC) model and our Commonwealth of Ogallala Commons as community development. The six communities that invested in the Texas Panhandle Cluster were: Canadian, Crowell, Littlefield, Dimmitt, Hart, and Nazareth. Communities in eastern Colorado that invested in the second Cluster were Springfield, Holyoke, Burlington, Northeast Colorado RC&D, and Atwood, KS. The main activity of the Clusters was five one-day training/learning sessions, each held in a different town in the Cluster. The first session provided an overview of the HTC framework, as well as the work of Ogallala Commons, while the other four sessions focused on each of the four HTC pillars: leadership development, youth engagement, entrepreneurship, and charitable assets. The Cluster operated for 12 months, and the training/learning undertaken by the communities led to several important outcomes that contributed to sustainable community development and sustainable agriculture:

- Creation of the L.I.F.T. (Leaders Involved in Formation & Training) community leadership development program in Castro County, TX, and now in Phillips County, CO and Rawlins County, KS.
- Organizing efforts for and renovation of the Crowell Activity Center in Crowell, TX.
- A highly successful Youth Entrepreneurial Agriculture Fair at Rawlins County High School in Atwood, KS...where the top 3 youth entrepreneurs were awarded \$2,200 to invest in their business ideas.
- The participation by 20 middle and high school students from Crowell, Nazareth, Hart, and Littlefield in a Youth Engagement Day in Olton and Littlefield, where students learned about local entrepreneurs and potential hometown careers.
- A “Let’s Do Business” Fair in Nazareth, TX, that was attended by 150 people, with booths by 60 local and home-based businesses in a town of 600 residents.
- The formation of the Canadian Community Foundation, and a similar mechanism that was set up in Crowell and has gathered \$175,000 for community philanthropy.

Currently, Phillips County, CO is working on setting up a community foundation through the Commonwealth Community Foundation at Rocky Mountain Farmers Union-Cooperative Development Center.

- The creation of a Youth Survey for students in Canadian Middle and High Schools.

While commodity prices in farm country remain largely stagnant, and export markets continue to decline, there is ample evidence that entrepreneurial agriculture, direct sales, agri-tourism, and building community food systems can provide new benefits for hard-pressed farmers, ranchers, and rural communities (see www.foodsecurity.org). A further justification for this project is the track record established by the Oklahoma Food Cooperative. For nearly three years, the Oklahoma Food Cooperative has established an exemplary list of producers and customers across the state in an innovative, grassroots manner. As of December 2006, Oklahoma Food Cooperative's total sales of groceries and non-food products will surpass \$500,000, with 95% of that total being returned to the farmers and producers (see www.oklahomafood.coop). Clearly, the work of Oklahoma Food Cooperative meets the vision of sustainable agriculture. According to Robert Waldrop, president of the cooperative, "Our goal is a business that is environmentally sustainable, economically viable, and socially just."

It is the firm belief of the partners in this project that the burgeoning field of direct marketing and community food security in central and eastern Oklahoma (see *Closer to Home: Healthier Food, Farms & Families in Oklahoma*) can be melded with the needs of more isolated communities in western Oklahoma to re-energize sustainable community development through investment in leadership training, sustainable land management training, small business incubation, and youth entrepreneurship.

Project Relevance to Sustainable Agriculture

Throughout rural Oklahoma, communities are focused on the same problem: how to survive. The conventional response to survival is to seek industrial recruitment or large-scale agribusiness operations that deplete the natural resource base. Ogallala Commons and its partners believe that this project moves toward sustainability, first of all, through a cohesive approach that does not separate the natural resources, the farms and ranches, and the communities of Oklahoma...one from another. In other words, the vision of this project is that there cannot be significant improvement in the overall economic, environmental, and social conditions of western Oklahoma communities by following conventional economic development approaches. Instead, rural towns need a ground-up approach to community development that is holistic...a set of strategies that link business development, educational institutions, and agricultural assets with practices that enhance and increase a community's basic assets...in a way that the community itself can learn and empower its own citizens to maintain. Rather than just surviving, Ogallala Commons and its partners believe that communities in Western Oklahoma can thrive through developing basic community capacities like leadership, youth engagement, and business incubation...along with an entrepreneurial regional food system. According to Suzanne Morse, this is the work of community building, a bedrock of genuine sustainable development. "Community building undergirds the creation of social capital and provides a foundation from which a community can grow and build...Creating a community's ability to change its own future can take several approaches...There is agreement about the fundamentals that must be in place for capacity building to take place: existence of resources broadly defined, networks of relationships, strong leadership, and vehicles for collective action and problem solving." (Suzanne Morse, *Smart Communities*, 82-83). Investment in the community building capacities mentioned above would begin to reverse decades-old

trends that have debilitated farm families and their hometowns...tangible signs of an emerging sustainable agriculture.

In the past 30 years, key community capacities have been severely eroded by a loss of local leadership, a decline of local agricultural markets, the outmigration of youth and young adults, and the growth of large-scale commodity-based agriculture. To revitalize rural communities, it will take more than success by individual citizens and businesses. Rather, a reinvestment in civic life is essential to change the negative conversations, as well as the look and the feel of “Main Street” in these communities. In short, rural communities in western Oklahoma need a comprehensive framework for growing their own leadership and linking that leadership with creative agricultural entrepreneurship.

Another element of sustainable agriculture that this project addressed is the creation of new enterprise opportunities that will allow farmers and ranchers to adopt practices that build up soil and water resources, increase the health of both producers and customers through pesticide-free, organic produce, and provide healthy food for western Oklahoma communities. For relatively isolated rural communities, having access to organic food can be a significant lever for combating nation-wide increases in obesity and adult diabetes. In addition, the economic benefits that Oklahoma Food Cooperative has brought to its member-producers, would make a strong impact on the local agricultural economy in western Oklahoma.

In the end, only with increased local leadership will sustainable agriculture practices and institutions be able to continue. Therefore, it is imperative that rural communities be equipped with tools to identify and develop their own leaders, across generations and over a long timeframe. In this project, Ogallala Commons and its partners offered tools to local communities that will allow them to greatly increase their leadership pools...to create what Suzanne Morse refers to as leadership plazas. “No longer is it desirable or even practical to build leadership pyramids—those closed, hierarchical structures based on traditional organizational charts. Rather, the task facing communities today is to build leadership plazas—open, inviting opportunities to put the whole community to work for the community.” (Smart Communities, 204).

Literature Cited

Berry, Wendell. *The Unsettling of America: Culture & Agriculture*. San Francisco: Sierra Books, 1977.

McDermott, *Closer to Home: Healthier Food, Farms & Families in Oklahoma*. Poteau, Ok: The Kerr Center for Sustainable Agriculture, 2004.

Morse, Suzanne. *Smart Communities: How Citizens and Local Leaders Can Use Strategic Thinking to Build a Brighter Future*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2004.

Project Objectives:

- 1) 4 communities in western Oklahoma will be re-energized by increased civic engagement through the work of 20 Community Core Team members, trained in community capacity building, entrepreneurship, leadership development, and support mechanisms for long-term planning and strategic action.
- 2) 20 adult leaders, plus 30 high school and junior high students from the three counties will have opportunities to learn about entrepreneurship, as well as options for “coming back” to their hometowns to build viable careers and businesses, through training and a youth entrepreneurship fair.

3) 50 farmers and ranchers will be trained in sustainable farming and grazing practices that will improve soil and water conservation, as well as the natural resource base in the three counties.

4) 5 new producers and 20 customer-subscribers will join the Oklahoma Food Cooperative from the three target counties.

Cooperators

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Research

Research results and discussion:

Through the entirety of this project, 4 counties in Western Oklahoma (Major, Woods, and Roger Mills) and 5 communities in those counties (Freedom, Alva, Waynoka, Fairview, and Cheyenne) were engaged in the training sessions. Through 6 total training sessions from March 2007 to June 2008, 54 adult leaders were educated about identifying the 12 commonwealths, or key assets in their communities, and how to use tools known as Fence Posts, to build up their commonwealths in order to build vibrant local communities. The Six Fence Posts are: Assessing & Prioritizing, Conserving Natural Resources, Growing Leaders, Engaging Youth, Supporting Entrepreneurs, and Harvesting Wealth.

On November 5, 2007, 68 Jr. and Sr. High School students from the region gathered at a Youth Engagement Day at Waynoka High School in Waynoka, Oklahoma, to learn about Commonwealth Community Development and the Six Fence Posts. The teenagers and some of their teachers took part in an exercise to identify where their futures would be lived as adults. Afterwards, the students were introduced to the opportunities of entrepreneurship, and to the potential offered by the Oklahoma Food Cooperative. A panel of local entrepreneurs addressed the audience and spoke

about the challenges and rewards of creating a local business. The event concluded with students working in 4 groups to brainstorm entrepreneurial opportunities that would apply to their hometowns. In the end, no students responded to an invitation to enter a Youth Entrepreneurship Fair, but March just has too many activities for teenagers in Oklahoma schools. Plans are to offer the Youth Entrepreneurship Fair in Fall 2008.

In addition to the 54 adult leaders who attended the 4 training sessions, there were also two trainings that took the form of field days: a Field Day at the Woodward, OK Farmers Market on May 30, 2008, and an Ag Diversification/Community Development Workshop on June 16, 2008. As a result of all 6 of these events, more than 60 farmers and ranchers learned about the Oklahoma Food Cooperative and about entrepreneurial agricultural opportunities available to them, as well as resources in Oklahoma that could assist them in their business pursuits (see 6-panel color brochure). In addition, the color brochure was mailed out to over 200 community leaders, rural tourism businesses, and members of Oklahoma Food Cooperative in Western Oklahoma counties.

Participation Summary

Educational & Outreach Activities

PARTICIPATION SUMMARY:

Education/outreach description:

Publications:

Commonwealths...Our Foundational Wealths

A diagram of the 12 commonwealths that all rural communities possess.

Six Fence Posts of Commonwealth Communities

a diagram of 6 key capacities that will improve and help create vibrant communities

Can We Sustain Our Rural Communities?

A color tri-fold resource brochure

Training Sessions & Field Days:

Community Leaders Orientation Session

February 28, 2007

Northwest Oklahoma State University

Alva, OK

11am -2pm

At this session, 10 local leaders, agency directors, and county commissioners learned about our project and its objectives. Four counties agreed to enlist in the project, and to bring a team of leaders to an organizing session on March 16th.

Community Partners Organizing Session

March 16, 2007

Northwest Oklahoma State University

Alva, Oklahoma

10am - 2pm

A larger group (22) gathered for this session, where a powerpoint overview was given of the Ogallala Commons Commonwealth Communities Project, the 6 Fence

Posts, and Best Practices of the 6 Fence Posts.

Western Oklahoma Regional Cluster Training Session

April 17, 2008

Northwest Oklahoma State University

Alva, Oklahoma

9am - 2pm

Facilitators Remelle Farrar and Darryl Birkenfeld led four community teams (15 attendees) through a 2-hour Community Futures Forum, as a model of what could be done to create community buy-in and priority-setting for their hometowns. Remelle Farrar also presented demographic and economic data on the four counties involved in the training session.

Waynoka Community Futures Forum

June 17, 2007

Waynoka City Hall

7-9pm

Project partner Kim Barker conducted a Community Futures Forum for 43 local citizens. The priorities that the group built a consensus around were: retention and expansion of local businesses and jobs, more youth engagement activities, and increasing tourism jobs through Great Sahara State Park.

Youth Engagement Day

November 5, 2007

Waynoka High School

Waynoka, OK

10am - 12noon

Facilitator Darryl Birkenfeld demonstrated to students from Jr. & Sr. High and their teachers, techniques for youth engagement in community development, and the potential for youth entrepreneurship to create careers and bring young people back to their hometowns.

Oklahoma Food Cooperative Field Day

Saturday, May 30, 2008

Woodward Farmers Market

Woodward, OK

9am - 2pm

Rancher and OK Food Coop member Kim Barker and another OFC member conducted a Field Day for 20 participants, about the opportunities offered by the Oklahoma Food Cooperative for both producers and consumers.

Ag Diversification/Community Development Workshop

Monday, June 16, 2008

Croton Creek Ranch

Cheyenne, OK

10am - 2pm

Facilitators Darryl Birkenfeld and Remelle Farrar engaged rural tourism businesses and community leaders in opportunities to work collaboratively, and how to use the Six Fence Posts of Commonwealth Communities to create a Regional Cluster in Roger Mills and Dewey counties of Western Oklahoma.

Project Outcomes

Project outcomes:

Again, the main accomplishments of this project was the training of community leaders with some tools that they had not been exposed to before. The trainings also allowed community leaders and youth to see the tools in action: such as the Community Futures Forum that was conducted in Waynoka, and the Youth Engagement Day on November 5, 2008. These events allowed new voices and new ideas to be recorded, and the drafting of a more comprehensive community vision in Waynoka, OK.

In addition, though many communities were not able to participate in our trainings, the creation and dissemination of our brochure through the mail, made a wide variety of community leaders and entrepreneurs in Western Oklahoma aware of community development tools and entrepreneurial agriculture resources.

Finally, two new producers have currently been added to Oklahoma Food Cooperative from the western part of the state, and 10 new customers. We are confident that even more will be added in the next 8-12 months.

Recommendations:

Future Recommendations

A recommendation that we would make from this project would be to create a training for local agriculture service professionals: Cooperative Extension, NRCS, FSA, etc., to enlist their support and their resources in sustainable community development.

Any opinions, findings, conclusions, or recommendations expressed in this publication are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the view of the U.S. Department of Agriculture or SARE.



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