Increasing Local Food Production in Boise

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ABSTRACT

The City of Boise has requested a summary report outlining how to increase food production in two areas: residential & community gardens and commercial food production. This report aims to compile research conducted within the last five years and aggregates the thinking of organizations and thought leaders from the area. The report outlines barriers to current local food production while also highlighting recommendations that can be adopted for use in the Sustaining Boise project. The recommendations outlined below are the sole view of the Idaho Center for Sustainable Agriculture and do not reflect the opinion of organizations referenced throughout.

Residential & Community Gardens

Interest in community gardens throughout our cityscapes has become a growing interest for residents and organizations not only in Boise, but also across the country. There are currently 12 community gardens/garden groups listed in a directory maintained by the Let’s Move Boise project. In Meridian, there are another 12 community gardens/garden groups listed care of the Garden Project. The rise in these projects can be attributed to a heightened awareness of local food production and willingness from citizens to connect with food.

Barriers:

- Awareness: people don’t understand new urban agriculture ordinances and opportunities for growing and selling food/livestock within Boise city limits.
- Time and money: Planning, organizing and maintaining any type of agriculture takes time (for a lot of people this is in addition to the time they spend on their full-time job and having a family) and money (e.g. water, equipment, land costs).
- Skills: Though some are easier than others, many crops can require some skill and basic knowledge to yield a substantial edible crop.

Recommendations:

- Provide financial incentives for landowners to donate or convert idle urban landscapes to non-profits or for-profit farmers.
- Heighten awareness of current community gardens through non-profit campaigns. Garden operations can be made more productive by formalizing a more effective volunteer program for maintaining garden space.
✓ Provide incentives to institutional buyers (retailers, restaurants, etc.) for financially supporting and bolstering community garden space. Provide assistance and assurances food is safe and of high value for commercial sales.
✓ Make adjustment in the Urban Farm Ordinance to increase the number of chickens allowed from six to eight or more to enable people to produce the quantity of chicken and eggs needed.
✓ Adjust or create exceptions to urban and county fence requirements so more perimeter areas like the Boise foothills can maintain an effective deterrent for deer and other wildlife.
✓ Community Gardens Food Production Increase: Establish a baseline food production measurement of community gardens in the city limits in 2014. Based on that baseline, increase community gardens food production in the city limits by 10% per year (year over year). (Reference: Urban Land Institute Study, page 9)
✓ Limit restrictions for for-profit farms on city owned land.

Commercial Food Production
Local commercial food production is one of the most consistent trends in the food industry, as made evident in the growth of local farmers markets across the United States (see Figure 1). Institutional buyers and retailers are all trying to understand the keys to success in tapping into this consumer interest.

At the heart of local food production is the issue of farmer profitability and local food logistics. Like any business, commercial farming fails unless entrepreneurs can generate a descent living from their labors. In addition, local food must safely get to market. This need for profitable farmers is complicated by the need for urban development to remain profitable. A balance must be reached between urban agriculture and urban development.

Findings from a 2011 study conducted by the Urban Land Institute:
- During the real estate boom between 2002 and 2007, Ada County lost 14% of its farmland.
- The most common barriers to success mentioned by survey respondents were: access to/the cost of labor, the availability of local markets, transportation expense, and land availability.
- The amount of land currently used for agriculture has been difficult to determine. Our best guess is based on the county tax assessors and the amount of land receiving tax exemptions for agricultural use. In 2011, 465,000 acres received such exemption, including land used for dry land farming and grazing; land that has
been platted and improved, where crops are being grown between streets; or land that is marginal for long term agricultural production. A better indicator may be land classified by the assessor as irrigated agricultural land. There are almost 196,000 acres in this category, representing 28% of all private land in Ada and Canyon Counties. While all 196,000 acres may not be viable agricultural land, it is currently the best data we have.

- 50,000 acres can provide 150,000 new homes or grow 50% of the 2011 population’s food needs for a healthy diet.

Findings from a 2010 study conducted by Ken Meter and the Treasure Valley Food Coalition:

- The Greater Treasure Valley region has seen an increase in corporate farming. Over the years 1969 to 2008, the percentage of farm income earned by corporate farms, as a percentage of farm proprietor income, rose from 10% to 55%.

- Greater Treasure Valley: markets for food eaten at home (2008): Source: Bureau of Labor Statistics. Residents purchase $1.87 billion of food per year, $1.10 billion of this to eat at home. Home purchases break down in the following way:
  - Meats, poultry, fish, and eggs - $236 million
  - Fruits & vegetables $210 million
  - Cereals and bakery products $140 million
  - Dairy products $126 million
  - “Other,” incl. sweets, fats, & oils $388 million
  - If the region’s consumers purchased only 15% of the food they need for home use directly from local farmers, this would produce $165 million of new farm income in the region and thousands of new jobs.

Findings from a 2013 study conducted by the University of Idaho Office of Community Partnerships:

- Idaho’s Bounty is a distribution system for local food in southern Idaho. Their success highlights the potential for marketing and "As we talk to farmers, producers, consumers, processors, retailers, buyers and everyone else involved in regional food system development, we hear more and more about small and mid-sized farmers struggling to get their products to market quickly and efficiently. And more and more we hear that these same producers need access to things like trucks, warehouses, processing space and storage. These things require capital investment, infrastructure maintenance and dedicated oversight — things that small and mid-sized producers often can’t afford or manage themselves.”
  - USDA 2013
distribution efforts. Idaho’s Bounty currently focuses its efforts on organically produced foods. While some institutional buyers are interested in organic products, a larger market exists for local in general.

- The University of Idaho’s Food Technology Center (in Caldwell, 7,000 sq/ft.) is a multi-purpose food production facility. It includes a commercial kitchen available to individuals and companies, and a pilot plant available to help established companies with research and development, food processing studies, and food quality and safety analysis.

- As part of the Cultivate Idaho project in Emmett, community members are creating a community food hub to provide distribution and processing opportunities for small farmers in Gem County. They started a feasibility study in the summer of 2012, and they are currently identifying a business structure.

- Although the institutional buyers often described the quality of local products as excellent, many survey respondents expressed frustration when discussing their business relationships with local producers. Programs that strengthen farmers’ business skills could improve relationships with institutional buyers, while helping producers better understand their potential markets. Programs that focus on post-harvest handling and packaging could also help producers understand the expectations of institutional food buyers as well as other non-farmers market customers.

- Season extension is a priority strategy for increasing the supply of local food. High tunnel experimentation as well as crop variety trials specific to southwestern Idaho could increase the profitability of small- to medium-size farms and the supply of food produced for Treasure Valley markets.

**Barriers:**

- Land acquisition – farming operations cannot typically compete with traditional real estate developments in terms of financial returns.

- Local food infrastructure – having the necessary facilities (food hubs) and low-cost transportation needed to get local food to market is critical; especially with growing concerns over food safety and new standards outlined in the Food Modernization Act.

- Most agricultural producers – large or small – are unaware, uninformed, or disengaged from the planning process at the county or community level.
Recommendations:

✓ Commission the ICSA to spread awareness of urban agriculture rules and ordinances. Awareness needs to be compiled into easy to understand content available via search online and through public outreach. Practical and relevant information can be difficult to find in a very large document.

✓ Encourage *development-supported agriculture* where local real estate developers add agricultural amenities to their projects and balance profitability with making capital investments for setting aside land as for-profit farming operations.

✓ Commission the ICSA or another entity to conduct an analysis of the cost/benefit for implementing a food hub in or near Boise. This would include investigating possible locations, facilities and costs. A food hub analysis is currently underway in Emmett.

✓ Encourage and support food hub production facility(s) in or near Boise. There is a tendency to look at developing food hub facilities in industrial zones or the downtown district zones, but providing micro-food hub facilities embedded in Boise neighborhoods may be the best option. The facility in Caldwell is 7,000 sq. ft. Facilities closer and within the city limits would encourage and enable more local production.

References and Resources:

- Let’s Move Boise Community Gardens Listing
- Meridian Community Gardens Listing
- Urban Land Institute, Sustaining Agriculture: Measuring Success
- Treasure Valley Food Coalition 2010 Study
- University of Idaho Office of Community Partnerships 2013 Study
  - Briefing
- University of Idaho Food Technology Center
- City of Boise Community Gardens information
- General community garden information
- Regional Food Hub Resource Guide
- 2013 National Food Hub Study
- USDA Local Food Systems Economic Report
- APA Guide for Community/Regional Food Planning