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AGRICULTURE OR FOOD EDITOR**

Food, Farms and Families Explored in Oklahoma Centennial Book

Can a small family farm make it in today's competitive environment? Can Oklahoma farmers grow fruits and vegetables year round? Can a low-income family eat well?

A new centennial book, *Closer to Home: Healthier Food, Farms and Families in Oklahoma*, reveals the answers to these and many other questions.

The book includes about two dozen articles about innovative people and programs in our state, says Maura McDermott of the Kerr Center for Sustainable Agriculture, the non-profit educational foundation that published the book.

The almost 200-page book covers a wide range of food-related topics, from "farm to table," says McDermott, editor of the book.

Closer to Home delves into Oklahoma's poor health standings and also the state's high rates of hunger and food insecurity.

Thirty-two of the state's 77 counties are classified as food deserts, meaning many residents do not have good access to affordable and nutritious food.

All of these food deserts are rural counties. Most are west of I-35 with others clustered in southeastern Oklahoma (except for Hughes County in central Oklahoma). The report also charts the decline of grocery stores and supermarkets in rural Oklahoma.

The book concludes that the health of Oklahomans would improve if locally grown, affordable fruits and vegetables were available in every community across the state.

The resulting expansion of local markets would also benefit family farms.

Farmers' markets and farm-to-school programs are two ways to get nutritious foods into Oklahoma communities.

This book takes a closer look at twelve counties. These "county snapshots" are a one page look at "health and wealth" in the county.

What is the percentage of overweight and obese people? How much do county residents spend on food? How much of this do county farmers capture in direct sales?

How many farm-to-school programs or farmers markets exist in the county? How much are farmers making? Is the county a “food desert?”

In Oklahoma, residents spend \$8.5 billion on food each year, but only \$3.7 million – less than half of one percent of the total – on food bought directly from farmers.

The county snapshots could easily serve as a starting point for groups who want to raise awareness of health or farm issues, says Wylie Harris, chief researcher and writer of the book.

Harris is a former Food & Society Policy Fellow of the W.K. Kellogg Foundation.

Counties without snapshots included in *Closer to Home* can easily make their own using the book’s lists of resources. The book also includes steps that communities can take to could bring greater food security to Oklahoma in its next century.

The book explores in depth the opportunities for Oklahoma farmers to grow more of the food we eat, as well as the challenges they face in diversifying their crops and finding local markets.

The book concludes that capturing a greater share of the food dollar through direct and local sales and adding value to farm products are two important strategies that can add to farm profits and sustainability.

The book also concludes that if the state is to achieve greater health and prosperity, Oklahomans must become more “food literate”: knowledgeable about what good food is, when and where to buy it, and how to prepare it.

The good news is that Oklahoma farmers, ranchers and gardeners can contribute to that lesson, says Doug Walton, president of the Muskogee Farmers market, and a contributor to the book.

“After all, nothing beats the taste of a vine-ripened tomato or fresh-picked peach—so good and so good for you,” he says.

Two years of research and writing have yielded a book with valuable information and insight on every page, says McDermott, whose background is in journalism.

“*Closer to Home* is very ‘readable,’” she says. “We invite readers to open the book anywhere and take a look. We are confident you will learn something interesting.”

Closer to Home is available for the cost of postage from the Kerr Center by calling 918.647.9123. The book can be downloaded at www.kerrcenter.com.