



Whatcom County Community Food Assessment

A snapshot of the Whatcom County food system from 2008 to 2009.

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Introduction

“In a thriving food system, there is healthy food available to all, so it’s not a class issue. Second, food is produced, processed and distributed in ways that enhance rather than degrade the environment. There must be appreciation for local food traditions. And food must be fair—from the standpoint of those who are growing and processing the food, all the way to those who are purchasing it.” Tom Stearns, President, Center for an Agricultural Economy, Vermontⁱ

What Is a Community Food Assessment?

A community food assessment gathers and shares information about a community food system that can be used to improve or develop programs such as farmer education, farmland protection, nutrition programs, hunger reduction, food security initiatives, and policy advocacy. It focuses on assets as well as needs of the food system. With a goal of learning about where and how food is produced, how it is accessed, and where food shortages exist in a community, a community food assessment is inclusive, valuing input from a diverse range of community members. In the process, a CFA promotes community involvement, leadership opportunities for youth and others, collaboration among diverse participants (such as farming groups and health advocates), community discussion about the way food is connected to the community, and education of the public on food related issues.

History of the Whatcom Community Food Assessment

The Whatcom County Community Food Assessment (CFA) began as a journey into the world of local food systems in the spring of 2007. Staff and faculty at the Washington State University Whatcom County Extension office were addressing community food security and were inspired by community attempts in North America to conduct community food assessments. The WSU Extension Faculty for Family and Community Health Programs agreed to convene the community food assessment process in cooperation with the WSU Whatcom County Integrated Pest Management Coordinator and to make it a focus of a multi-state extension leadership program.

One of the gratifying aspects of this process has been the interest in the CFA from the beginning. The nascent Whatcom CFA was given a boost when Heifer International agreed to give Whatcom County technical assistance and to fund a training event for the community on how to begin the CFA process. A group coalesced following a community meeting that included presentations by Colleen Donovan, Heifer International. In the fall of 2007, a two-day training prepared the community to plan the CFA. A newly-formed steering committee further refined the goals and directions for the CFA.

The Whatcom CFA has been a work in progress since its inception. A community-wide event was sponsored in 2008 to further refine the data gathering process. Roles have shifted for many of the original planners, as happens in many communities, and although that slowed the process, the need for the final product has been a force for completing it. We celebrate the tenacity and interest of all those who believed that the Whatcom County Community Food Assessment is worth having!

What the CFA is and What it is Not

The Whatcom Community Food Assessment is a collection of maps, data sets, survey information, and other descriptions that form a snapshot of the community food system and community food security in Whatcom County between 2008 and 2009. The focus areas were determined by the steering committee with public input and are not meant to be a comprehensive description. The Whatcom CFA was conducted by a number of volunteers and staff from a variety of local agencies and institutions. It is a tool that can be expanded as time goes on.

Each CFA is different; there are no universal formulas or rules. The Whatcom CFA is not comprehensive and it is not “perfect.” The team examined as many topics and points of view as possible given the resources available.

There may be omissions that the reader will feel are important. Readers are advised to take from it what they may and use the information as an opportunity to dig deeper.

Goals, Assumptions, Indicators

In early January 2008, the Whatcom CFA Steering Committee met and developed a logic model as a planning tool. The following goal was created:

To establish a baseline of knowledge of the Whatcom County food system, from field to fork to food disposal, to reflect the current situation.

The group identified the assumptions that would drive planning the CFA. The assumptions are as follows:

1. There are hungry people in Whatcom County (WC).
2. There is abundant food in WC.
3. There are barriers to accessing food.
4. Some people are eating less desirable (health-related) food.
5. Data is already available.
6. Data may be biased.
7. If we study the food system, we will learn things that will help people.
8. People define healthy food differently – diversity of opinions.
9. WC is becoming food opinionated.
10. Loss of farmland is an important issue for the food system in WC.
11. Ensuring local food production is important in WC.
12. Food is a political topic.

The group identified a vision for the CFA that would help answer why we were doing the work:

The Whatcom CFA will help ensure a local food system that will sustain the land and livelihoods that provide adequate, nutritious food for current and future generations in Whatcom County.

The focus of the CFA was selected using a model developed in California. We initially selected indicators to be measured and expressed them in terms of how they would impact the local food system. These indicators fit into 9 categories (detailed indicators can be found in the appendix).

The Whatcom County Food System:

1. Promotes food choices that lead to healthy eating.
2. Provides easy economic and physical access to healthy food from retail outlets for all eaters in Whatcom County.
3. Provides for meaningful livelihoods and opportunities for all farming workers and farmers.
4. Is characterized by many locally owned and operated food and farming businesses.
5. Provides eaters with foods produced as close to home as possible.
6. Encourages eaters to know where, how, and by whom their food is produced.
7. Honors and draws upon the diversity and richness of different food cultures.
8. Conducts farming, ranching, and fishing activities so that water, air, forests, and soil resources are enhanced, biodiversity and wildlife habitat are increased, and food production continues in perpetuity.
9. Provides incentives for waste recycling, reduction of petroleum, and other nonrenewable inputs.

In working through collecting and compiling data for the CFA, a new outline was developed that fit better with the available data and flow of the document. This CFA answers the following questions in separate chapters of the document:

1. Who Lives and Eats in Whatcom County?
2. How Are Food Consumption and Health Related in Whatcom County?
3. Where Does Whatcom County Get its Food?
4. Agriculture Yesterday and Today—How Has it Changed?
5. How Does Whatcom County Agriculture Impact the Environment?
6. What are the Threats and Opportunities for Agriculture in Whatcom County?
7. What Role Do Fisheries Play in Whatcom County’s Food System?
8. What Food is Processed in Whatcom County?
9. Where Does Whatcom County’s Food Waste Go?

What Can We Learn from this Document?

We can learn about the rich variety of food that is produced and processed in Whatcom County. We can learn about the long history of agriculture and fisheries in Whatcom County. We can learn about abundance and access to markets and farms. We can learn about shortages and where and why some people are not able to access farm fresh food. We can learn that our community food system is complex and needs to be viewed through different lenses in order to be fully understood. We can learn where effort is needed to preserve and improve the food system and what more we need to learn. We can learn about how we handle food and agricultural waste and how the links from farm to table to food waste disposal are all integral to a healthy community food system.

This Community Food System is still a work in progress and we offer it to you as a picture of what we found in the last part of the first decade of the 21st century. We discovered that there are gaps in the information available about our food system. Conclusions are presented at the end of each chapter that describe lessons learned and pose new questions for an additional level of learning about our food system. We acknowledge that we have more to learn and hope that others will use this work as a framework for more thought, study, and action.

i Quoted in Goodman, David (2009). “Building a Healthy Food System in Rural America,” *Eating Well*, July/August 2009.
ii The Whatcom County Community Food Assessment Steering Committee acknowledges The Vivid Picture Project for its inspiration on the indicators. Feenstra et al. (2005, October). *Proposed Indicators for Sustainable Food Systems*. Ecotrust:
<http://www.vividpicture.net>