

OUR COMMUNITY



Students of the Noyo Food Forest's Learning Garden are providing food to the Fort Bragg School District, coastal restaurants, the Fort Bragg Senior Center and the Food Bank as well as learning farming and entrepreneurial skills.

Visitors driving north on US 101 toward Ukiah view a sign promoting three of Mendocino County's assets: "Wilderness, Waves and Wineries."

Not so very long ago, the inclusion of another "W" word, wheat, would have informed a traveler they were entering an agricultural sweet spot—a sustainable food system providing residents with a year-round bounty of grains, fruits, vegetables and animal products. Perhaps, through our collective efforts, the next generation of Mendocino County farmers will reclaim their position as stewards of a major food-producing region, and farming will have regained its prominence as one of our most fundamental and significant community contributions.

Our relationship to food is more than personal. It defines how we live and what our larger priorities are as a community. A 2004 national study stating that the current generation of America's children may not live as long as their parents³⁵ is a sobering reminder

that our food choices have drastic and even deadly consequences.

In order to "grow" a sustainable local food system, we must address issues of geography and demographics. We must continue to build our concentric rings of community support and engagement so that the importance of healthy food and its significance to our health and economy is more than just an intellectual concept.

Big County, Small Population

Although Mendocino County is the 15th largest of California's 58 counties, its 87,841 residents³⁶ represent less than one-quarter of one percent (0.24%) of the state's population. Mendocino County is larger in size than the states of Delaware and Rhode Island combined but has a population density of only 2 persons per square mile.

Our isolated communities make access to

commercially grown seasonal and local foods increasingly difficult for those living outside of the county’s major population centers. Food producers must have enough guaranteed income to justify the increasing costs of transporting food from one end of the county to another. The farther away one lives from an incorporated city, the less likely that local foods will be readily available (unless you grow your own).

Senior “Momentum”

Mendocino County has an older population than the state of California, with a median age of 43.3 for women and 40 for males (compared with 35.2 statewide). Seventy-eight percent of county residents are aged 18 or older. The 2010 census found the greatest population growth in the county’s 55–64 age group, which increased by 64% between censuses.³⁷

This pattern is expected to continue. By 2015, the number of people between ages 30 and 59 is projected to be 36%, while the population of all seniors (age 60+) will be more than 25% (1 in 4) of the total population.³⁸

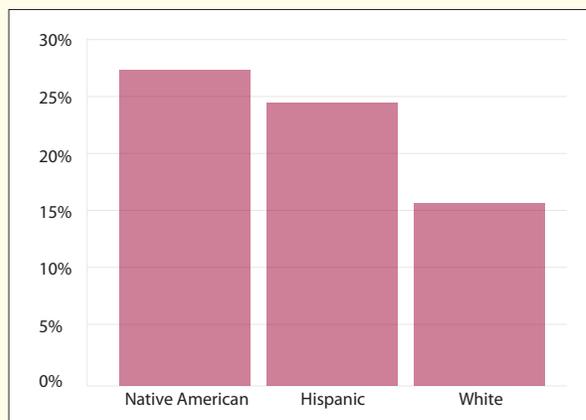
For seniors, many who live on fixed incomes, even a weekly trip to a farmers’ market may not be practical or possible. Those living in assisted living facilities have even fewer opportunities to purchase locally produced foods. Without community connectivity, young farmers are deprived of the wisdom and experience of our elders, many of whom spent decades growing and preserving their own food.

A Changing Cultural Matrix

Ethnically, Mendocino County is 68.6% White/non-Hispanic, 22.2% Hispanic, 5.7% Native American, and 3.5% multi-racial or other ethnicities.³⁹ The county’s

increasing diversity is reflected in the 2010 class of kindergarten students, which was 41.3% Hispanic and 7% Native American.

% Population Below Federal Poverty Level By Race/Ethnicity, 2006–2008



Source: American Community Survey 2008 for Mendocino County

Mendocino County’s most vulnerable populations include Latinos, Native Americans, the homeless, elderly, children, and single mothers. Due to their increased potential for low-income status, these populations are at greater risk for food insecurity. For these high-risk populations, access to affordable, culturally suitable, healthy food and nutrition education is a priority. Our communities are committed to a local food economy that serves and supports our most vulnerable citizens.

Economic Realities

In 2009, Mendocino County’s median household income of \$41,488 was only 70% that of the statewide median of \$58,925.⁴⁰

Comparison of 2009 Poverty Levels: Mendocino County and California³⁷

	Mendocino Co.	California
General population	17.5%	14.2%
Children under age 18 years	22.6%	18.3%
Children under 5 years	26.6%	19.8%
Families with female head of household with children < 5	54.6%	36.9%
People age 65 and older	10.1%	8.4%

Source: US Census Bureau: State and County QuickFacts.

Family income data for 2009 shows 21% of Mendocino County families living on incomes of \$25,000 or less, compared with 15% statewide. Low-income and below-poverty residents have enormous challenges finding jobs that pay sufficient salaries to feed their families, resulting in having to choose between paying rent or buying food. This places increased pressures upon an already burdened network of organizations, churches and social service agencies tasked with the critical work of providing food assistance for those who need it.

Each of us has something unique and valuable to offer our community, whether it is a few dollars, a basket of surplus tomatoes or a few hours per month serving on a committee or task force. We must “feed” our community in order to create the conditions so that we can feed ourselves, now and in the future.

Keeping It Local

Mendocino County is home to a number of faith groups, service clubs and fraternal organizations, all of which support the concept of a self-reliant economy that offers health, security, and “social capital”—the community connections that count most in our daily lives: good will, fellowship, sympathy, and social interactions. These groups form the backbone of what can become a larger and more organized local food movement. Some communities choose to create “departments of food,” hiring staff and creating an agency tasked with seeking funding, creating food policy and connecting food system stakeholders. Our county is currently utilizing groups of volunteers and a few anchor agencies to engage the community and encourage dialogue. Regardless of the structure, a local food system is just that: local people, imbued with the history, understanding, motivation and vision who come together to protect, preserve and enhance our relationship to food.

Localization efforts are not new. This is an ancient concept that has been nearly lost in the last 150 years of increased industrialization and globalization. Localization advocates believe that increased local food production will become essential as energy supplies shrink and the need to cut back on greenhouse gas emissions increases. Many localization groups encourage growing one’s own food, saving seeds, preserving surplus harvests

from one season to the next and creating means of exchange that will support farmers. Though some of these concepts are relatively new, localization efforts are taking place throughout the world, and at the heart of these efforts is a deep respect for the power inherent in cohesive, engaged communities.

Letting Our Gardens Grow

One of our county’s most visible and successful responses to the need for a localized food system has been the establishment of dozens of school and community gardens. In 1999, a grant was awarded to Mendocino County Schools for the creation of “A Garden in Every School” program. Through the receipt of this and several other grants over a period of years, students throughout the county became the early leaders in the local food movement. The Garden-Enhanced Nutrition Education Program exposes 7,500 Mendocino County students to gardens at 35 school sites.

Since their inception in 2007, the Gardens Project of NCO Community Action has helped to create over 26 gardens and coordinate a support network for over 65 school and community gardens. The Gardens Project has acted as coordinating entity, providing Head Start



Students at the Mendocino County Office of Education Youth Garden grow food for over 140 individuals and sell produce to MCOE staff.

programs, schools, faith communities, senior housing residents and apartment dwellers with the training and tools to conceptualize, establish, plant, irrigate, harvest and maintain their own gardens. In 2012, over 27,000 pounds of food valued at over \$51,000 were produced in Gardens Project gardens.

NCO Community Action supports the provision of a nutritious food supply to individuals, children, and families in physically engaging, community-supported environments and provides life-long, transferable, and self-sustaining training in food production, cooking, coordinating surplus food sales and reducing household food costs.

Getting to Know You

Gardens are about relationships. Plants are in constant communication with the soil, water, nutrients, neighboring plants, the weather and the sun. One of the most significant and stunning successes of community gardens has been the development of human relationships—apartment-dwelling

neighbors who never knew each other until they spent time weeding their plot, or a compost company so committed to community gardens that they continue to donate tons of rich, dark organic material for the establishment of a new garden. Landowners have stepped out of their comfort zones and found ways to allow the community to improve the owner's land and their own lives by allowing a garden to develop. Children learn the deep messages the earth has to offer, simply by taking part in the planting of seeds and following them to harvest.



California Conservation Corps (CCC) members have worked with the Gardens Project to help with the installation of community gardens throughout the region. At the Jack Simpson School View Apartments in Ukiah, CCC members created specially-designed, raised garden beds for the senior residents. This enables any senior living in the complex, including those with mobility impairments, to enjoy and reap the benefits of a personal garden plot.

Noyo Food Forest: Growing Food, Youth and Community



The Noyo Food Forest has created a successful partnership with the area's school district, hospital, businesses and the greater community, providing fresh food, employment training and a brighter future for coastal Mendocino Youth.

Something good is growing at the Noyo Food Forest's Learning Garden, says Executive Director Linda Pack. "Our goal is to provide the Fort Bragg area with organic food, be a model for students and improve the lives of our community."

Students, under the tutelage of Farm Manager Gowan Batist operate a 3-acre farm, sell at the Farmers' Market and handle commercial restaurant accounts. "They come away with a comprehensive education about how to be a small farmer, about what's going on in the larger world of agriculture—what industrial farming is," says Batist.

"Not only are we growing food; we're growing a lot of *really good* food, and kids are eating it and loving it. This is a viable way to get nutrition

and education to our kids and our community. If we had 20 farms like this we could do without delivery trucks," says Pack.

Noyo Food Forest provides high-quality produce to restaurants, the Mendocino Coast hospital, the Fort Bragg Food Bank and district schools. "Students learn back-of-the-house restaurant procedures, customer interaction and math skills. This makes it real, for the farm and the end user," says Pack.

The BEANS (Better Eating, Activity Nutrition for Students) program, in partnership with North Coast Opportunities Community Action, teaches teens nutrition and good eating habits. "Graduates" receive a stipend, become peer educators, teach nutrition concepts to younger kids and provide education and recipes for

adults at the Fort Bragg Senior Center. “When you give teens jobs, you’re teaching the value of labor and community contribution,” Pack continues.

“Small farms are infinitely more productive than large farms. We grow an enormous and affordable amount of food on three acres. We do on-site, closed loop recycling and we’re making compost with North Coast Brewery’s grain and hops,” Batist explains.

“This generation has a different world to contend with, and they know it. They’re seeking to be sustainable. Students talk about what their grandparents used to do in their gardens, and they’re trying to figure out how to do it again.”

Batist also provides realism to her student-farmers. “I don’t know anyone in agriculture who is making anything close to a living wage. I work seven days per week providing a needed service. People think local agriculture is fun, and it is, but someone’s got to get up every day and make it happen. As much as we are in a resurgence and wonderful things happening, farmers find it difficult to do this for the long term and survive,” says Batist.

Pack focuses upon harnessing the energy of their apprentice farmers. “Young people have enthusiasm and deep, broad concerns about their future. Previous generations skated on



One thousand pounds of fresh produce was provided to the Fort Bragg School District in 2012.

the largesse of being born during a time of tremendous plenty, living off the fat of the land. This generation has a different world to contend with, and they know it. They’re seeking to be sustainable. Students talk about what their grandparents used to do in their gardens, and they’re trying to figure out how to do it again,” says Pack. “I want this generation of young people to be taking the bit and running with it. That will be how we maintain ourselves.”

“Every day, 1,200 kids are eating food from this garden.”

Pack is optimistic about the future. “Last year we sold more than 1,000 pounds of food to the Fort Bragg School District, and another ton to local agencies. Seventy percent of the kids in our school district qualify for free lunches. That means every day, 1,200 kids are eating food from this garden. That doesn’t count our deliveries to restaurants, the hospital and food bank. That’s a lot of progress, for a group of students, a farm manager and a small community.”

Subhead

Body Text.



“Y yo quiero decirles que estoy muy contento de tener mi pedacito de jardin. Es mi lugar preferido. Ha sido de mucho beneficio para mi y toda mi familia. Mi siembra es organica. Adoro todas las plantas. Este ano fue mejor – de mas calida. Estoy aprendiendo mucho de agricultura gracias a todos los que hacen posible que muchas familias tengamos estas grandes beneficios. El proximo ano tender un jardin de Jamaica. Gracias.”

“My name is Maria Ortega. I live at the Thunderbird Apartments in South Ukiah. I want to share with you that I am so very happy having my own little garden. It is my favorite place to be. It has provided so many benefits for myself and my family. I garden organically and adore all of my plants. This year was better than last with much better quality. I am learning so much about agriculture thanks to all of those that have made this garden possible for so many families to receive these great benefits. Next year I will have a garden with hibiscus. Thank you.”

–Maria Ortega , community gardener

OUR COMMUNITY: GOALS & ACTIONS

Goal 12: Increase Community Resiliency through Organization and Self Determination

- 12.1 Develop, promote, and celebrate local, seasonal food through community events.
- 12.2 Develop, plan, and implement local food policy through community-driven, inclusionary planning including agricultural institutions (University of California Cooperative Extension, Farm Bureau, Granges, Food Policy Council, etc.).
- 12.3 Promote programs and community organizations countywide that facilitate the development of community gardens through education and access to land and resources.
- 12.4 Promote policies and agreements that support increased access to land for the establishment of community and school gardens and farms.
- 12.5 Provide liability insurance to community gardens through the creation or identification of a suitable non-profit organization.
- 12.6 Maintain county-wide school gardens with an integrated, food-related curriculum.
- 12.7 Inventory and create community access to food production and processing equipment (i.e. tool banks, juice and oil presses, commercial kitchens).
- 12.8 Develop and promote a community-based gleaners network.

