Perceptions of our Rural Foodshed

Asking community members about how they eat

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Method From August through October 2024, a survey (IRB 2241322-1) was distributed to community members in Modoc, Lassen, and Siskiyou Counties. The survey was available online and in paper form, and in both English and Spanish. No financial or other incentive or compensation was involved. The survey was offered at public events and through community partner organizations. 192 surveys were returned from 25 of the total 62 ZIP codes in the tri-county region.

Who Are We?

Respondent Profile

- Age range from 12 to 65+, with **70% of respondents aged 25-65**.
- About **20% reported living alone**, 35% with one other person, and 40% reported living with more than one person.
- About **76% access the Internet with their phone**, 81% via a computer at home or work.

Our Food Priorities

When asked to choose three words to describe the most important drivers to food purchasing decisions, the top choices were **Healthy** (71%), **Fresh** (53%), **Inexpensive** (50%), and **Delicious** (37%).

What We Think About Local Food

The top three words chosen to describe *local food* were **Fresh** (72%), **Healthy** (51%) and **Nutritious** (38%). Other top choices included “Community”, “Farmer” and “Expensive”.

Health Conditions We Think Are Related to Food

139 respondents chose to answer this free-text question, with 51 (37%) listing **diabetes**, 30 (22%) listing **cardiovascular disease**, and 17 (12%) listing **obesity**. Other responses included oral health, digestive issues, mental or behavioral challenges, and autoimmune disease.

How Do We Feed Ourselves?

Access

In our rural communities, access to transportation is a requirement for most residents to access food: 40% respondents had to travel over 25 miles round trip for groceries than lived with 5 miles of a grocery store or access point (30%). Fourteen respondents (7%) reported that they normally travel over 100 miles for groceries.

Production

Most residents (73%) grow or raise their own food or want to, with 42% reporting having a home garden or a few head of livestock. Of those who raise food, 81% feed fewer than 15 people in a year, and over half (56%) provide food for their family only.
Most residents are not interested in producing more food (74%) or selling food (55%), citing harsh and unpredictable growing conditions, access to markets, and time/labor restrictions as limiting factors.

Consumption

Many residents practice cultural food traditions and would like to spend more on local food. One hundred twelve respondents (69%) reported eating foods from their cultural traditions at least a few times a month. In aggregate, 56% of respondents currently spend more than 10% of their food budget on local food, 87% but would ideally spend more, and 37% would like to spend more than a quarter of their food budget on local food. Thirty respondents (13%) reported that their primary food source is a food bank or pantry.

Pain Points

Economics and education are the biggest challenges.
Respondents were asked to rate five of their community’s most important food-related challenges. Eighty-four (45%) of respondents chose “Healthy food is too expensive” as the biggest challenge, while forty-nine (26%) chose “People don’t understand why they should eat healthy food” forty-five (24%) chose “People don’t have the time or energy to eat healthy food”.

Who’s not at the table?

This survey was distributed at food-related or health-related public events and through Community Based Organizations focused on food or health. Segments of the population in more remote parts of the region, those who eschew public events or institutions, are experiencing a limiting disability, are pre-literate or are undocumented were least likely to have had their voices and opinions counted. Partnering with faith-based communities, social clubs and organizations, health care facilities and personnel, and grassroots organizers would increase the likelihood of a more comprehensive regional assessment, as would making the survey available at post offices or by individual mailings and using earned media and advertising to increase participation.

Further Research

Opportunities for deeper inquiry include conducting focus groups that especially include members of the community whose experience has not been included in this initial survey (see box to the left). Literature reviews to inform the issues highlighted as most prevalent or critical in our region and to note similarities or difference with other rural regions nationwide as well as discussions with Extension colleagues at conferences and elsewhere may result in interventions and activities that improve health outcomes and economic vitality in the region.