VERNON COUNTY, WISCONSIN COMMUNITY FOOD ASSESSMENT

LINKING FARMERS AND COMMUNITY FOR SUSTAINABILITY

Valley Stewardship Network

FOOD & FARM INITIATIVE

This report was an 18-month process from start to finish that would not have been possible without the dedicated volunteer efforts of the Valley Stewardship Network Food & Farm Initiative Steering Committee Members. The researchers and authors of this report include:

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Dani Lind

Becky Comeau

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Suzie Howe

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

1. BACKGROUND

In the fall of 2007, the Valley Stewardship Network formed the Food & Farm Initiative to respond to local food security issues. The VSN Food & Farm Initiative has the potential to: provide healthful, nutritious food to local schools, institutions, and low-income families; facilitate the growth of viable, community-based food businesses; link consumers with local farmers; encourage and grant incentives to those practicing sustainable farming methods; and most notably to build shared understanding and trust among local food and farm stakeholders.

> Community Food Security: "*A food system in which all community residents are able to obtain a safe, culturally appropriate, nutritionally-sound diet through an economically and environmentally sustainable food system that promotes community self-reliance and social justice.*"
>
> **World Hunger Year – Food Security Learning Center**

The mission of the Food & Farm Initiative (FFI) is to encourage the development of a sustainable, equitable local food system by:

- Engaging, educating and mobilizing a broad network of county residents;
- Improving access to healthy, locally produced foods for all members of the community, especially the low-income population;
- Strengthening the economic viability of regional agriculture; and
- Addressing market barriers for local producers.

To date, the FFI has been largely funded by the Organic Valley Family of Farms Employee and Farmer Profit Sharing Program and donations received from VSN members. The Vernon County CFA is a comprehensive, community-based planning project involving a diverse group of food security stakeholders. For the 18 month duration of Vernon County's Community Food Assessment, Steering Committee members have been engaged in a process of simultaneously examining our local food system and actively participating in food-security related projects.

Community Food System: "*A sustainable community food system is a collaborative network that integrates sustainable food production, processing, distribution, consumption and waste management in order to enhance the environmental, economic and social health of a particular place.*"

UC Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education Program

II. ASSESSMENT GOALS

Community Food Assessment: "*A collaborative process that examines a broad range of food-related issues and resources in order to improve the local food system.*"

Community Food Security Coalition

The purpose of this community food assessment - *Linking Farmers and Community for Sustainability* – is to evaluate local food security assets, opportunities, and needs and to identify strategies relating to community food security in Vernon County. The CFA will serve as a foundation for stakeholders to identify programs, projects, policies and partnerships to meet the aforementioned goals of a sustainable food and farm system. See Appendix A for an outline of the basic steps of a community food assessment.

Goals of the Community Food Assessment include:

- Identify resources and needs regarding a) the local food system, b) underserved populations, and c) key stakeholders;
- Strengthen links between existing food system groups;
- Promote community learning and participation through the community food assessment; and
- Use the results of the community food assessment to plan effective Community Food Projects.[1]

II. LEAD ORGANIZATION

The Valley Stewardship Network (VSN) is a community-based, not-for-profit 501(c)3 organization that promotes stewardship and connects communities throughout the Greater Kickapoo Valley Region in southwest Wisconsin. The primary mission of the Valley Stewardship Network is to promote a balance between a healthy environment and strong communities. VSN works to encourage positive land use patterns, sustainable agriculture, community food security, water quality monitoring and communication and coordination among various agency and nonprofit organizations throughout the watershed.

[1] In an effort to not "reinvent the wheel", this community food assessment's goals where greatly influenced by a number of other community food assessments, especially those outlined in the Growing Partners of Southwest Colorado Community Food Assessment. http://www.sustainableswcolorado.org/cfa.htm

III. PARTNER ORGANIZATIONS

Key Collaborators:

Viroqua Food Co-op (VFC)

VFC is centrally located and provides Vernon County's residents with organic and locally produced food items. VFC works to promote the long-term health of individuals and the environment. VFC strives to be an active partner in the Vernon County community by recognizing that practicing good business citizenship supports the mission of the Co-op. VFC has played a lead role in ensuring food security in times of crisis. For example, VFC contributed volunteers and substantial food donations to the August 2007 and June 2008 Flood Relief, Viola Tornado Relief, and Hurricane Katrina Disaster Relief. VFC staff members are actively involved in the VSN Food & Farm Initiative and serve on the advisory and steering committees.

Vernon Economic Development Association, Inc. (VEDA)

VEDA is a non-profit 501(c) 3 organization, formed in January of 2006 to serve a region whose economy and culture are largely agricultural. VEDA's mission is to create economic wealth and prosperity while preserving our rural Vernon County lifestyle. The organization's strategic plan to build a stronger economy includes specific objectives to: support the development of new businesses and foster the retention and expansion of existing businesses; and to coordinate the efforts of local, county, state, and regional organizations towards common goals. The director serves on the advisory committee for FFI. She also participates in regional planning efforts to provide technical assistance to support businesses that provide or market local food. In addition, VEDA helps coordinate tourism efforts to promote local food and agricultural based activities or events.

Crossroads Resource Center (CRC)

CRC has worked on community capacity building efforts since 1972, primarily in low-income and rural communities. CRC's role is to create tools that community groups can use to attain greater self-determination. The organization focuses now on farm and food systems, sustainability, and systems evaluation. CRC also has prior experience in inner-city business development. Ken Meter is the president of CRC.

- Ken Meter's relevant experience:
  Creator of "Finding Food in Farm Country" studies, which have been adopted in 38 regions in 18 states, have transformed the discussion of farm and food economics, and launched a national discussion on local foods as economic development. Ken has made over 150 presentations nationally on local food systems, including 2 keynote presentations for Rep. Collin Peterson, chair of U.S. House Agriculture Committee,

keynote for the Upper Midwest Organic Growers Conference, and food summits in Hawaii, Virginia, Washington state, Oregon, Kansas, and many others.

In addition to our key collaborators, an nine member CFA Project advisory committee and a seven member CFA Project steering committee were formed to assist with project design, planning and implementation. The primary role of the steering committee was to guide the efforts of the CFA project. This entails determining assessment purposes and goals, planning and conducting research, evaluating findings and developing recommendations for follow-up actions as well as incorporating community input. (Appendix B includes a list of those community members present when the CFA mission was developed.)

TABLE I. STEERING COMMITTEE

Name	Organization/Affiliation
Sara Martinez	Family & Children's Center
Dani Lind	Viroqua Food Coop
Therese Laurdan	Weston A. Price Foundation Home Green Home
Becky Comeau	Community Member Small Produce Farmer
Bob Goonin	Organic Valley Family of Farms Small Produce Farmer
Lori Harms	Family Farm Defenders
Suzie Howe	Family & Children's Center

Like the steering committee, members of the advisory committee represent various stakeholder groups of the local food system. Advisors have offered their support and input when needed as we work through the community food assessment process and beyond.

TABLE II. ADVISORY COMMITTEE

Name	Organization/Affiliation
Kelly Jacobs	Vernon County Land & Water Conservation Department – County Conservationist
Tim Rehbein	UW-Agriculture Extension Agent for Vernon County
Dave McClurg	Vernon County Farm Bureau President Local Crop & Beef Farmer
Paul Peterson	Farm Bureau District Representative
Darin Von Ruden	Wisconsin Farmers Union District Representative Organic Dairy Farmer
Marilyn Volden	Viroqua Area Schools Food Service Director Organic Dairy Farmer
Lynn Chakoian	Vernon County Planning Commission Chair

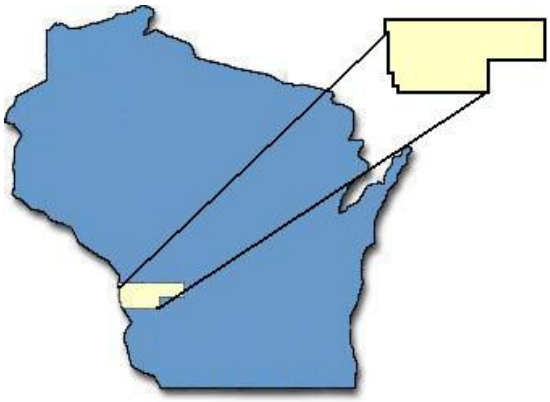
Sue Noble	Vernon Economic Development Association Executive Director
Jan Rasikas	Viroqua Food Coop General Manager

CHAPTER II

A PROFILE OF VERNON COUNTY

1. SUMMARY
2. ENVIRONMENTAL, AGRICULTURAL & CULTURAL PERSPECTIVE
3. SOCIO-ECONOMIC DEMOGRAPHICS
4. POVERTY PROFILE

I. SUMMARY



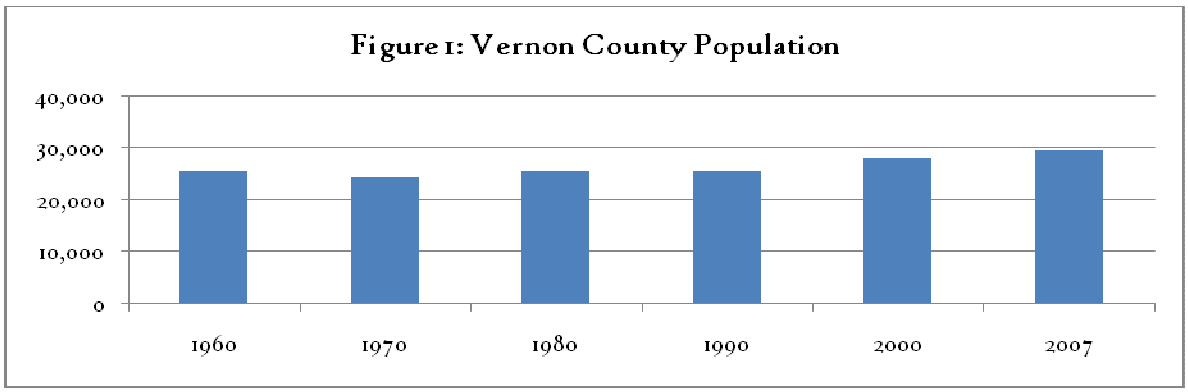
Vernon County is located in the heart of the Driftless Area in southwest Wisconsin. Vernon County is known for its diverse landscape of lush valleys, forested hills and cold-water streams. The climate and fertile soils of southwest Wisconsin have historically yielded and embraced a variety of food crops and livestock breeds. Simply stated, farming and food production has been a major economic mainstay and way of life for the people of the Driftless Area since the 1840's when European settlers abandoned the mining of lead and put the plow to work instead.

Vernon County has three major communities, the City of Viroqua (county seat, population 4,335[2]), the City of Westby and the City of Hillsboro. In addition, there are nine villages (Chaseburg, Coon Valley, De Soto, Genoa, La Farge, Ontario, Readstown, Stoddard and Viola) and seven unincorporated communities (Bloomingdale, Esofea, Liberty Pole, Redmound, Retreat, Romance and Victory).

Population

In 2007, Vernon County's population was 29,530[3]. According to the 2000 Census the median age was 39.1 years. Of the total population, males comprised 49% and females comprised 51%. The average household size was 2.55. Between 1960 and 2000, Vernon County averaged 4.75% annual growth, with most of the growth occurring between 1990 and 2000.[4]

[2] US Census QuickFacts 2000; Vernon County, Wisconsin
[3] Demographic Services Center, Wisconsin Department of Administration, October, 2005
[4] Mississippi Region Planning Commission 2007 Vernon County Profile



Land

Vernon County encompasses 795 square miles (roughly 523,000 acres) and is bisected by the beautiful Kickapoo River Valley. Vernon County land use statistics are as follows[5]:

- 95.2% Private Lands (Residential, Commercial, Undeveloped, etc.)
  - 55.56% Agricultural Lands
  - 32.15% Forest Lands (Private & Public combined)
  - 10.49% Other Private Lands
- 2.83% State Lands
- .67% Federal Lands
- .49% County Lands
- .81% Other Public Lands

County Overview

The following text was taken from the Vernon County Comprehensive Planning Committee's Summary of Themes from the Summer 2008 County-wide Listening Sessions.

Regionalism in Vernon County is built into the landscape: steep topography, rivers, soil resources, cities and villages. These barriers and attractions are often reinforced by transportation infrastructure that keeps areas isolated, or pulls citizens to other cities and counties. As a result we have a very diverse base of world-views and social/cultural groups that need to be understood as we plan for the whole county.

Mississippi River

Vernon County's western edge is the Mississippi River Valley that offers a rich mixture of natural beauty, wildlife and plants from the bluffs down to the wildlife refuge and fish

[5] 2008 Vernon County Tax Assessment Roll

hatchery. Highway 35 facilitates travel north (La Crosse) and south (Prairie du Chien) that provide the major centers for jobs and commerce.

Prime Agricultural Lands

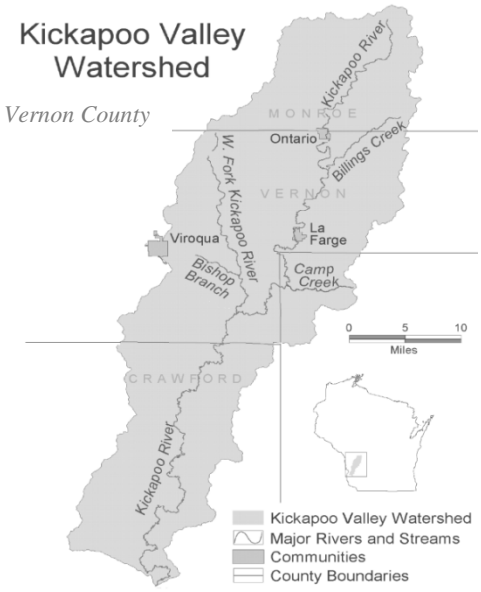
Inland from the Mississippi River is a region of prime agricultural soil (50% is Class I or II by NRCS definitions.) This area stretches east from the bluffs to the US Highway 14 corridor. The prime agriculture designation forms a patchwork because of our steep slopes, and this land is productive beyond the mapped boundaries if there is good stewardship and use of conservation practices. Viroqua provides a hub of commercial activity, but often mailing address location or school district identity forms the basis for cultural affiliations that subdivide this large region. These rural communities tend to be tightly knit—neighbors help each other, people regularly gather at a local bar or restaurant, and there is a pride in being self-sufficient at the very local level. Protection of land for agricultural use was a strong message from this group.

Cities

The Cities of Viroqua and Westby form another distinct region in the county. Residents of these more centrally located cities expressed concern over natural resource protection. The vast majority wanted land-use controls and zoning county-wide. This attitude provides a contrast with the rural areas of the county that were more divided on this issue. Non-city residents often wanted the effects of land use regulation/zoning, but weren't uncomfortable with the implementation of regulation that would make it possible.

Kickapoo Valley

Further east is the Kickapoo Valley region of the county. This unique culture and landscape results from the physical characteristics of the river valley (trout fishing, scenic beauty, historic flooding) and the history that resulted in the development of the Kickapoo Reserve. The valley was represented in a single listening session and found a focus on protection of area natural resources rather than a concern about preservation of agriculture. Residents discussed eco-tourism opportunities – in particular a specialized agri-tourism that allows visitors to experience farm work and rural scenery on small farms. This is an area of the county with plentiful Amish farms that could be regarded as agri-tourism in place.



Hillsboro region

The eastern part of the county is the rural Hillsboro and City of Hillsboro region that, being on the edge of the county, orients to the Interstate Highway to the north and US Highway 80 south to Richland Center. This directs the focus of commerce/jobs away from Vernon County and to adjoining counties. Residents expressed interest in redirecting that out-migration and attracting new residents to the Hillsboro area. In addition, residents expresses the need to cultivating a diverse economy (manufacturing, tourism and agriculture) that would provide family-supporting jobs so the youth can stay and new people would relocate locally.

II. ENVIRONMENTAL, AGRICULTURAL & CULTURAL PERSPECTIVE

The following text was taken from the Trout Unlimited 1999 Kickapoo Watershed Conservation Plan.

Chapter 1: A Place Worth Protecting: A Brief History of the Kickapoo, A Land and People Shaped by a River

Rivers connect people and places across a landscape. They also connect people in those places over time. People have always built communities and farmed near rivers to sustain themselves on the life-giving water, to move from here to there, for better or worse to remove waste and harness its power, and to play and refresh the soul. Rivers help shape the landscape as well as the people and communities that live near them and, in turn, those who live there shape and change the rivers and landscape.

Native People in the Kickapoo

We know that people have been coming to the Kickapoo for well over 12,000 years. Paleo-Indians arrived first, probably to hunt mastodon, wooly mammoth and caribou that were plentiful near the edge of the retreating glaciers. The Kickapoo River Watershed nestled in the heart of the Coulee Region of southwest Wisconsin, was spared the massive leveling force of the most recent set of glaciers about 10,000 years ago. Unlike most of Wisconsin which has thousands of lakes scattered across the landscape – footprints of the retreating ice floes, the Coulee region has hundreds of miles of streams that flow down the steep hills into the numerous valleys.

As the climate changed and the mammoth and mastodon became extinct, the early inhabitants adapted to a hunting and gathering lifestyle in a period known as the Archaic. They would gather in large groups along the Wisconsin and Mississippi rivers during the summers and then disperse again in small bands during the winter where they sought refuge in rock shelters that dot the Kickapoo landscape. The appearance of the landscape is determined in large part by its geology. Several strata of sandstone and dolomite limestone formed by ancient oceans underlie the 725 square mile Kickapoo watershed. Some of these

layers have fractures and caves, or form the overhanging cliffs, where the Archaic people found shelter.

There is evidence of early forms of agriculture, pottery making and burial of the dead in mounds during the Early Woodland Phase which began about 2500 years ago. Southern Wisconsin eventually became the center of the Effigy Mound Culture where conical, linear, or animal shaped mounds were built to bury the dead. The upper Kickapoo valley is the northernmost extent of this area. One of the largest effigy mounds ever discovered in the state was found near present day Viola. The eagle shaped mound stretches 450 feet from wing tip to wing tip. Many mounds have since been destroyed but a few remain as reminders of those who came before, helped shape and were shaped by the Kickapoo. The Oneota came over 1000 years ago. They practiced agriculture and were more sedentary than the groups that preceded them. By 1635, John Nicolet found bands of Sioux living east of the Mississippi. These mobile groups traded with the Winnebago who lived farther east. Today the Winnebago are better known as the Ho-Chunk.

The Kickapoo felt the effects of the most recent newcomers, European settlers, even before they arrived in the area. Many Algonquin speaking tribes migrated to Wisconsin after being displaced from their territories in the East. Pressure came from both settlers and the Iroquois confederacy. During the 1700s many of these groups had to relocate frequently. Always on the move, the Kickapoo tribe was first noted by French trappers in 1728 living near the confluence of the Wisconsin and Mississippi rivers. The name Kickapoo, which means "he who goes here and then there," was appropriate for the long path of both the highly mobile tribe and the sinuous river. The Kickapoo, Miami, and Mascouten people explored and hunted for fur and game in the Kickapoo area. The Algonquin tribes continued to be displaced and eventually left the area. By 1810 the Ho-Chunk occupied the area from Lake Winnebago to Prairie du Chien, but eventually lost most of their tribal lands in a series of treaties, the last signed in 1837. They traded meat, corn, and sugar with the early settlers and there are settler accounts of a village along the West Fork and mainstem of the Kickapoo. Many cultural and historical sites remain along the Kickapoo River to document the heritage of the Ho-Chunk.

Europeans Arrive in the Region

It would be impossible to say with any certainty how the Kickapoo River and surrounding landscape appeared 12,000 years ago, or even 1,000 years ago. We do know, however, how it looked when Europeans first arrived. The first Europeans who came to this area were French fur trappers in the 1700s who searched the rivers and streams in search of beaver and other animals. The French dubbed this area the Coulee region from the French word "couler" which means to flow – an obvious reference to the hundreds of miles of streams found here. In the time after the fur trade, the area remained largely uninhabited by Europeans until the

1830s, except for a few criminals seeking refuge in the remote valleys. J.T. Sterling began his exploration of the area in 1832 and saw great potential for the land. He documented Native American villages, rich forests, prairies, and streams. Oak savannas with some prairies dominated the western part of the watershed and pine forest and sugar maple, basswood and white ash were predominant on the eastern side. The river acted as a firebreak, stopping the fires that maintained the savanna. The tributary streams that feed the Kickapoo were narrow, deep, extremely stable, and full of brook trout. Rainwater infiltrated the soil almost completely, so severe flooding was extremely rare.

The forests drew the first European settlers to the area. The Kickapoo River was used to transport the logs and power the sawmills. Gays Mills, the first settlement north of Wauzeka, was founded in 1840 and located near the sawmill. Most of the other communities founded around that time, including Ontario, LaFarge, and Soldiers Grove, were also located near mills. By the late 1800s, so great was the influx of people who hoped to harvest the rich timber resources the period was called "The Little Klondike," after the Alaskan gold rush of the same era. The settlers outlasted the virgin timber, which was almost completely gone by the 1920s, and they began to farm the cleared land.

European Settlers and their Agriculture

Many settlers came from northern Europe where they grew wheat, so it became the first major crop grown in the region, although the soils are not particularly well suited for wheat. Furthermore, the traditional practice of plowing straight up and downs hills proved devastating to the land in this area. Southwest Wisconsin gets over 30 inches of rain a year, much of it falling during intense spring and summer storms. That is more than 3 times the normal rainfall on wheat fields in Scandinavia. Once the protective sod layer was broken on cropped land the ground was susceptible to erosion from rain and wind. Indeed, the erosion from the fields was extreme and wheat farming rapidly gave way to dairy farms. Dairy farms dominated the landscape and by 1939 over 98% of the land in the watershed was grazed or cropped. Early cropping practices continued to be plagued by severe soil erosion. Scientists estimate that enough soil washed from the ridge tops into the valleys of the Kickapoo watershed to cover an area over 52 square miles with more than a foot of soil. Heavy grazing compacted the soils, particularly on the hillsides, so when rain fell it could not infiltrate the ground and slowly release back into the streams. Aldo Leopold described the water moving off the land "like rain off a tin roof."

The radical change on the landscape from prairie and forest to all crop and grazing land brought some dire unintended consequences. Most wildlife habitat was gone. Rainwater no longer infiltrated the ground as it fell and flooding became a serious problem. During the spring snowmelt and summer storms large amounts of water would rush down the steep valleys. The flooding would create massive gullies, carry away tons of rich topsoil off of

cropland, and frequently wreck homes and farms in its path. The towns along the river, including La Farge, Soldiers Grove, and Gays Mills were repeatedly flooded out in a series of major floods in 1907, 1912, 1917, 1935, 1951, 1956, 1961, 1965, 1978, 1992, 2007, 2008.

The flooding and erosion also took its toll on the area streams. Massive amounts of sediment would accumulate in the streams raising the level of the streambeds. Much more of the water feeding the streams came from rain running off the landscape, rather than from cold springs. Many springs and small streams dried up. Larger streams grew warmer, wider, and slower as they tried to cut a new course down through the tons of fine sediment. During major flood events, the streams would sometimes change course cutting new swaths through farm fields. Most of the streams became completely unsuitable for the brook trout native to the area, as well as for the brown trout that had been introduced by Europeans. They were replaced in most areas by carp, suckers, catfish, bullheads, and few bass. In 1958, a state fisheries biologist wrote of the fishery in the Kickapoo region:

> *The ... region's streams are in extremely poor shape because of watershed management problems. And it is probable that the habitat conditions will continue to be degraded. Because of this fact, it is also likely that trout fishing may practically disappear in the future.*

A Healing Landscape

Early land use practices took their toll on the landscape, streams, and livelihoods of local people. Fortunately, the 1930s saw the beginning of a proud conservation legacy that continues today. The first Soil Conservation Service (SCS) watershed project started in 1933 in Coon Valley just over the ridge. The SCS with assistance from University of Wisconsin and many Civilian Conservation Corps crews helped landowners install contour strips on cropland, stabilize eroding gullies and stream banks, and foster reforestation on steep slopes. Those practices not only stemmed the severe soil loss, but also created the characteristic appearance of the landscape that is still evident today - forested slopes, contour strips on the ridges, and pastures in the valleys. Local and state agencies, landowners, and sports clubs continue the tradition of implementing soil conservation practices.

The hills make for a breathtaking landscape, but they also limit the amount of productive land on farms. Farms in the Kickapoo Watershed are smaller than farms in the rest of the state. In Vernon County, for instance, the average farm size is 177 acres compared to the state average of 228 acres.[6] Farming has never been an easy living in this region. During the 1960s, agriculture in the region fell on harder times and it was difficult to compete with the larger, more productive farms to the south and west in Wisconsin. By the late 1970s, after years of

[6] Acreage numbers are representative of 1999.

decline, a significant number of small farms went out of business and much of the land became reforested, particularly in the more southern, steeper areas of the watershed. Many farms in those areas have since been sold to people looking for recreational land. Agriculture still dominates the northern portion of the watershed where the land is less steep, easier to cultivate, and the farm size is slightly larger.

Flooding continued to plague the area, however. From the 1930s up until the 1970s, large dams were seen as the solution to stop severe and frequent flooding. In 1962 Congress formally authorized a $38 million federal dam project in La Farge. The initial plan was later revised to include a lake, which brought promises of tourism development and an economic boost to the area. The Corps of Engineers acquired nearly 9,000 acres of land and displaced over 100 families within the project area. For a variety of reasons, many of which were environmental issues, the dam project was suspended in 1975 even though $18 million had been spent, a lakeside road built, and part of the dam structure was already in place. The area economy was further hurt by this federal abandonment, and local resentment of government was understandably high. However, as the land lay fallow, natural vegetation reestablished, and water quality improved. The slow healing processes that were occurring throughout the watershed were magnified in the project area and the ecological results were dramatic.

Community Conservation Consultants, with the help of local residents, wrote the original proposal for the Kickapoo Reserve in 1992. With assistance from the University and the State, a local citizen advisory group was formed to try and resolve the long-standing "dam-land" issue. They recommended the creation of a "Kickapoo Valley Reserve," managed by a local-state board to help protect the river's headwaters and attract tourism to the region. Federal legislation transferring the land to the State of Wisconsin passed in 1996. The State passed accompanying legislation to form a local management board. The land is now managed by a the local Reserve Board with joint representation by the State of Wisconsin and the Ho-Chunk Nation.

The cumulative effects of improved land management on both agricultural and recreational lands are responsible for the improving health of the rivers and streams of the Kickapoo Valley. Soil erosion off the land and sedimentation in the streams has decreased significantly. Also the amount of rainwater and snowmelt infiltrating the groundwater system has increased, recharging the springs and seeps that keep the streams constantly running cold. According to flow data from a gauging station operated by the U.S. Geological Survey on the Kickapoo River, instantaneous peak flows (high flows after a rain storm) declined an average of 1.3 percent annually from 1961 to 1990, while base groundwater flows increased. Since the 1970s there has been noticeable improvement in the health of the streams. Less sediment and pollution are entering the streams, stream flows are less flashy after rain events, and water temperatures are cooler.

Though the water quality improved dramatically, the changing land uses that brought about improved water quality have not healed the damage done to the stream banks, and cover for fish to hide and rest was limited. In the 1960s, the DNR began a program of streambank restoration and developed a structure to install that creates an artificial undercut bank, excellent cover for trout. By the early 1980s, DNR fisheries staff noticed brown trout reproducing successfully in some area streams, an extremely encouraging sign considering the dire predictions made in the 1950s. The health of the fishery improved and anglers began to discover the area. About the same time, other tourists came in greater numbers to canoe, hunt, snowmobile, camp, or just enjoy the scenery in the Kickapoo. Recreational tourism has brought new potential for economic development to the local communities. This is a welcome prospect for a region that has only about half the average per capita income of the rest of the state, making it one of the economically poorest areas.

The Kickapoo Today

Today there are approximately 25,000 people who live in the watershed. The total population hasn't changed much since 1900. There are 16 incorporated communities (2 cities and 14 villages), which range in size from 4,000 in Viroqua to less than 200 in Steuben, though most live in the rural areas. People in the watershed earn their livings primarily in farming, the service industry, factories, or by working for the government. It is worth mentioning that there is a significant population of Amish whom now live in the area. Relative newcomers, the Amish have been moving into the area since the mid-1960s. The largest Amish community in the state of Wisconsin is located between Cashton and Ontario. The vast majority of land in the watershed is in private ownership with the major exception of the 12,000 acres that make up the Kickapoo Valley Reserve and adjacent Wildcat Mountain State Park.

Finally, a small but growing portion of the population is absentee homeowners who use their property for recreation and vacations. Agriculture is still the dominant land use and foundation for the local economy, but recreation is becoming an increasingly important part of the local economy. It is also, once again, changing the appearance of the landscape. Recreational property owners tend to purchase forested land, but they also tend to buy smaller parcels. The patchwork of land owners that covers the landscape is tending towards smaller and smaller units. This ownership trend could be good or bad for the watershed – it depends on how people decide to manage their land. Watershed conditions are generally good, but there are still significant areas that need improvement. The area is facing new challenges, particularly with changing agricultural practices, increasing second home development, and other land use changes. If not undertaken wisely, these land use changes could easily reverse decades of environmental healing. Therefore, the local communities should be encouraged to be proactive and plan wisely for these changes. People are increasingly aware that land use, the health of the streams, the quality of life, and economic

benefits are interrelated. Hopefully this plan will help provide a framework for taking positive action to protect those things they value and guide positive change in the watershed.

III. SOCIO-ECONOMIC DEMOGRAPHICS

The following text was taken from the 2007 Vernon County Workforce Profile, a document prepared by the Office of Economic Advisors at the Wisconsin Department of Workforce Development.

Work-force Profile

The population in Vernon County totaled 29,530 on January 1, 2007 after adding over 130 new residents during 2006 and posting an increase since Census 2000 of 1,474 new residents. The 5.3 percent increase from 2000 ranked 34th highest among the state's 72 counties, matching the increase in the state but lagging growth in nation.

All but five of the county's 33 municipalities added residents since 2000 with the greatest loss occurring in the City of Hillsboro. The majority of municipalities, however, added residents and increases in the five largest accounted for over one-third of the total increase in the county.

Vernon County's total population is increasing from both natural causes (births minus deaths) and net-migration (more individuals moving into the county than leaving). Since 2000 births out-numbered deaths by 679 while net-migration added 795 residents.

Adding new residents from natural causes is helping to keep the median age in the county in check, but at 39.7 years it is still higher than 35 other counties in the state and higher than the state median age of 37.6 years. Although the county's median age has dropped in the last three years, it remains a bit higher than the median age of 39.4 years in 2000.

The median age is poised to increase, however, as a large share of the county's population advances toward the older age groups. The bottom chart shows the shift in population projected over the next 25 years. By 2030 roughly 28 percent of Vernon County's population will have celebrated their 60th birthday. In contrast, in 2005, slightly better than 21% of the population was aged 60 years or older.

Also in 2005, roughly 30 percent of the population was less than 20 years old. Although projections do show an increase in the number of residents in this younger group, from 8,560 in 2005 to 9,270 in 2030, the group will shrink proportionately to 27 percent of the county's population. The population will be a bit more evenly distributed among the age groups in 2030 as the ratio of young to old increases.

Most of the shift in population is due to the dominance of the baby boomer population, who numbered 7,965, or 27 percent of the total population, in 2000 and were 36 to 54 years old. By 2030, they are older and although their numbers will drop to 6,415, they will still comprise 19 percent of the total population.

Of more immediacy are the roughly 6,460 baby boomers currently in the labor force, who by 2020, even with an increasing desire to remain engaged in the workforce, will reduce the number of hours they work, leave their current job for self-employment or change of scenery, and eventually, retire. Even with greater participation their numbers will decline to less than 5,800 by 2020. Not only will boomers leave the workforce but the population to replace them is diminishing.

Employment

In Vernon County, education and healthcare provide both the greatest number of jobs and the largest portion of the county's wages. The list of largest employers has three employers related to health care and two school districts. This is also apparent in the list of the prominent industries with educational services listed as the largest employing industry, and all four healthcare and social assistance industries within the top 10.

Vernon County Food System Facts

40% of all Economic Activity is directly linked to Agriculture.

Top 100 Nationally

The prominence of healthcare on both these lists reflects the fact that healthcare employment is the state's fastest and largest growing employment base and will remain so for the foreseeable future. It is a demand-driven industry fueled by, and increasingly needed by, an aging population.

It is not unusual for school districts and government to be included among the largest employers in a county as well as among prominent employing industries. Government and public schools serve a large segment of the county's population resulting in a large concentration of employment with a single or few employers.

Nevertheless, Vernon County has remained true to Wisconsin's agricultural heritage. Economic analysis by the UW Extension notes that Vernon is one of Wisconsin's counties with a stronger than state average presence in agricultural activity—estimating that more than 40 percent of all economic activity in the county is directly linked to agriculture. Vernon County appears on a number of top 100 county lists (national rankings) from the U.S. Census of Agriculture, including number of farms in a county.

National & County Food System Facts

The market for organically grown food increased from $1 Billion in 1994 to $13 Billion in 2003.

Vernon County has the largest number of organic farms per capita in the United States.

The list of largest employers in the county includes two firms (CROPP & Tri-State Breeders) with clear and present ties to agriculture. Numerous other employers in Vernon County have direct ties to agricultural activity.

Vernon County's economy as a whole has benefited from, and capitalized on, the rapid growth in organic farming. The American market for organically grown food amounted to $1 billion in 1994, and $13 billion in 2003. Increased consumer awareness of food safety issues and environmental concerns has contributed to the growth in organic farming over the last few years.

Income

The industries in a county, and the occupations of workers employed by businesses in those industries, provide the primary income component of the county's total personal income (TPI). Workers' wages from Vernon County employers comprise roughly 44 percent of net earnings, which also include earnings of self-employed individuals and proprietors. Additionally, net earnings includes wages from over one-third of the county's workers who travel out of the county for jobs.

Net earnings comprise 62.9 percent of TPI in Vernon County, low when compared to other counties and less than the 69 percent TPI in both the nation and state. The share of TPI from net earnings in Vernon County ranks 48th, lowest among Wisconsin's 72 counties. This is significant since net earnings provide the stimulus for growth in per capita personal income; much more so than the two other major components of TPI, property income (dividends, interest, rent) and personal transfer payments.

Property income comprises 16.7 percent of TPI in Vernon County while transfer receipts make-up 20.4 percent. Transfer receipts are a much greater share of TPI in the county than in the nation, 15 percent, or state, 14 percent.

Transfer receipts are, for the most part, payments made under Medicare and Medicaid (together they comprise 39% of transfer receipts) and Social Security (43% of transfer receipts). Generally, these payments are stagnant although they do include a cost-of living component. The primary recipients, especially of social security and Medicare, are residents aged 65 years or more; and, in Vernon County, that includes nearly one in five residents.

With roughly 20 percent of the population living on fixed, and presumably reduced, income; and average annual wages well below state wages; it follows that overall per capita personal income (PCPI) would lag below state PCPI. Per capita personal income, which is the result of dividing total personal income by total population, is also impacted by a young population with little or no income.

PCPI in Vernon County in 2005 was $23,108, only 70 percent of Wisconsin's PCPI of $33,278 and 67 percent of $34,471 for the nation. Lower PCPI in non-metropolitan counties of the state and nation is common. The primary reason is that the corporate and business offices that employ workers in professional and technical occupations with higher wages tend to locate in metropolitan areas rather than rural areas. The PCPI in Wisconsin's metro areas was $35,203 compared with PCPI in nonmetropolitan areas of $28,254.

Since 2004, PCPI in Vernon County increased 2.1 percent, compared with an increase of 3.7 percent in the state and 4.2 percent in the nation, and the increase of 20.1 percent over the 5-year period was better than in the larger geographies.

Tourism

In 2007, tourist spending resulted in $45.9 million in Vernon County, which was equal to 0.36% of total tourism expenditures in the State of Wisconsin. Tourist spending peaks during the months of June-August, providing 42% ($19.4 million) of the total yearly tourism expenditures. Out of 72 counties in Wisconsin, Vernon County ranks 56th in total tourism expenditures.[7]

IV. POVERTY PROFILE

Between 1990 and 2000 the number of people living in poverty in Vernon County has declined from 15.8% in 1990 to 14.3% in 2000. Even though poverty levels are declining, it's essential to investigate the issue of poverty when attempting to understand food security. Community food insecurity is closely linked to poverty. One startling statistic recently announced by the Wisconsin Council on Children and Families states that Wisconsin currently ranks first in growth in poverty[8], which, among other issues, poses serious threats to child development. However, community characteristics, economic assistance policies and the availability and use of public and private

> Food Security: "*When all people at all times have access to sufficient, safe, nutritious food to maintain a healthy and active life.*"
>
> **World Health Organization**

[7] Wisconsin Department of Tourism. "The Economic Impact of Expenditures by Travelers on Wisconsin Calendar Year 2007: County by County Report. April 2008.

[8] Wisconsin Council on Children and Families. "Wisconsin Ranks First in Growth in Poverty: Census Bureau Reports" Press Release, August 30, 2005.

resources also play an important role in measuring food insecurity. The following statistics begin to explain the issue of food insecurity as it relates to poverty in Vernon County.

- In 2007[9], more than 4 out of 5 (82%) of the respondents in a Vernon County Low-Income Household Needs Assessment Survey had a yearly household income of $21,462 or less.
- In 2005[10], 15.8% of Vernon County's population lived in poverty.
- In 2005[11], the Vernon County child poverty rate was 25.5% compared to the Wisconsin child poverty rate of 14.9%.
- In 2008[12], 38% of the public school students in Vernon County were eligible for free and reduced rate lunches.
- In 2007[13], an average of 1,518 Vernon County residents were monthly Foodshare (food stamp) recipients compared to 686 in 2000.

[9] Jones, Grace, Teadt, S. and Roth, C. CouleeCap. *2007 CouleeCap Needs Assessment for Crawford, La Crosse, Monroe and Vernon Counties*.
[10] Jones, Grace. "The Face of Poverty in the Coulee Region." CouleeCap. June 2008.
[11] Jones, Grace. "The Face of Poverty in the Coulee Region." CouleeCap. June 2008.
[12] Wisconsin Department of Public Institutions (http://dpi.wi.gov/fnsl/progstat.html)
[13] Wisconsin Department of Health and Family Services Foodshare Data (http://dhfs.wisconsin.gov)

CHAPTER III

A REGIONAL PROFILE OF AGRICULTURE

5. HISTORY OF AGRICULTURE
    i. Overview
        i. 1884 "History of Vernon County, Wisconsin" excerpt
        ii. 1981 Vernon County Farmland Preservation Plan excerpt
    ii. Coon Creek Watershed
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6. AGRICULTURE TODAY
    i. 2007 Census of Agriculture, Vernon County Profile
    ii. Ken Meter Rural Economic Study
7. A PROFILE OF AGRICULTURAL ENTREPRENEURSHIP
    i. Organic Valley
    ii. Westby Creamery
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    iv. Harmony Valley Farm
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I. HISTORY OF AGRICULTURE

a. Overview

The following text was taken from the 1884 book "History of Vernon County, Wisconsin" published by Union Publishing Company in Springfield, Illinois.

AGRICULTURE AND THE AGRICULTURAL SOCIETY

As Vernon county consists of timber land, oak openings and prairie, it is now, and was originally, settled by farmers almost exclusively. As yet, manufactories may be said to be practically unknown. The farming interests are paramount to all others and doubtless will be for generations to come. There are no pineries or great lakes on its borders and the Mississippi is only available, so far as the county is concerned, to aid in transporting to market its surplus farming products. That manufactories will rise up, upon the introduction of greater railway facilities, is certain, but that they will overshadow the farming interests of Vernon county before the ending of a century from this time or even longer, is exceedingly doubtful.

The Chicago *Tribune* had this to say, in 1861, of Vernon (then Bad Ax) county:

"Of this county nearly one-third is prairie, quite rolling and very rich. I do not know where I have ever seen any prairie soil that looks richer, or that bears heavier wheat. It is a rich black, vegetable mould, of a clayey texture and basis, and such as has been tested seems to be enduring and wears well. Near one-third is oak opening or ridge land, covered with oak undergrowth or grubs. These ridges are quite broad in many places, furnishing good locations for farms. There has been opened up many ridge farms. The land where cultivated appears to be a clayey loam—a good wheat soil, and which has so far turned out excellent crops of wheat."

The balance of the country is covered with heavy timber—oak being the predominating kind. This timber is valuable because of its nearness to good prairie, and the land is as good, even better for corn. Though the timber is heavy, the land is easily tilled, owing probably to the fact that the roots of the trees lie deep in the ground, which admits of the soil being plowed close to the stumps. Taken as a whole there is scarcely an acre of waste land in this county. Though somewhat rough, its slopes and hillsides admit of cultivation nearly to the top.

Such parts of this county as are unfit for the plough are most admirably adapted to the rearing of sheep. In fact, to my mind, much of northwestern Wisconsin is admirably adapted to sheep husbandry.

The population of this county is 11,500. In 1855, it numbered a little over 4,000. La Crosse was then about 4,000, as was Monroe, lying east of La Crosse. These latter have had the benefit of railroads to stimulate their growth. La Crosse being possessed of much good farming lands and several small villages, as well as the City of La Crosse, numbers 13,500, while Monroe, with a smart village or two, with more poor land, has but 8,400. To my mind Bad Ax has more than kept pace with her neighbors, considering her secluded position.

There is estimated to be in this county this year, at least 1,000,000 bushels of surplus wheat seeking a market. Of pork, there will be enough for home consumption, and possibly a little for sale. Cattle and sheep are beginning to receive attention, and but a few years will elapse before the hill-sides will be covered with large herds of lowing cattle and flocks of bleat-ins sheep.

Some attention is being paid to fruit. Here and there were to be seen newly set orchards. In time, after the trees have become acclimated it is my impression that the hillsides, and especially the northern slopes of Bad Ax county will be covered with orchards heavily laden with rich and luscious fruit.

The numerous streams in this county furnish ample water power, which combined with its excellent timber, will supply numerous openings for the employment of capital in

manufacturing agricultural implements, and also for the purpose of building mills, to flour their own wheat.

The people of this county look forward with no small degree of interest to the day when they shall be favored with railroad facilities such as will place them on an equal footing with their more favored neighbors."

VERNON COUNTY AGRICULTURAL SOCIETY

Bad Ax County Agricultural Society was organized and chartered April 11, 1857. The society in 1859 had seventy members, each paying an initiation fee of one dollar, and an equal sum per annum. The payment of ten dollars instituted a life membership. Other modes of obtaining funds were from admission fees into the fair grounds. The society possessed in real estate ten acres of land enclosed with a board fence seven feet high, and valued at $8800. Here an exhibition is held annually, when $100 are paid for premiums, the largest being $5 for the best address; a similar sum, each, for the best stallion and best acre of wheat, and $4 for the best bull. The library then consisted of forty-seven volumes, worth $1100. Since the fair of 1857 there was, up to 1859, a great improvement in domestic animals and an increase in crops. The desire for agricultural knowledge had become general.

In 1883 the society was in excellent financial condition. The fair grounds were located about a quarter of a mile west of the court house. They embraced about fifteen acres of land, valued at about $30 per acre. They were well supplied with buildings, and well fenced. The old $10 life membership fee had been abolished, and the by-laws provided that will pay for a membership, and each member should buy a $1 family ticket each year." There were $300 in the treasury of the society in 1883.

In 1883 the officers of the society were: President, F. K. Van Wagoner; secretary, O. B. Wyman; treasurer, E. Powell; vice-presidents, H. H. Morgan, of Wheatland; P. J. Jrody, of Clinton; J. H. Stevenson, of Harmony. Executive committee, E. A. Stark, of Viroqua, chairman; E. Tilton, of Viroqua; John M. Vance, of Sterling; Edward Minshall, of Viroqua; and F. W. Alexander, of Franklin.

At the last fair held at Viroqua, in September, 1883, the whole number of entries was 503. The total receipts from the sale of tickets were $696; receipts from entrance fees were §174.00; from stand licenses, $153.50; from rent of ground, etc., $24.60. Total receipts, $1,048.70.

The following text was taken from the September 1981 Vernon County, Wisconsin Farmland Preservation Plan, Volume 2: Background Report.

HISTORY OF AGRICULTURAL PRODUCTION IN VERNON COUNTY

Agriculture settlement of Vernon County began in the 1840's and 1850's. In these early years the County raised wheat, corn, oats and potatoes. Thirty bushels of wheat to the acre, or fifty bushels of oats per acre were considered average crops. The early demand for agricultural products came from the Military and Indian Departments, the fur trade and particularly from the lumber trade which created a demand in excess of [the] supply of agricultural products. With the advent of steamboat transportation on the Mississippi, the County became a wheat exporting area. In 1861, 1 million bushels of wheat were marketed. The construction of the La Crosse and Milwaukee Railroad in 1879 enhanced the wheat export capabilities of the area. By the 1870's, Vernon County was the most specialized wheat area in the state, and it continued to hold that position until wheat ceased to be an important crop in Wisconsin.

In 1880, there were a few small cheese factories in Vernon County. In the 1880's and the 1890's there was a gradual increase in dairying. The large increase in dairying took place after 1910, and dairying has continued to be the primary type of agriculture since that date. Vernon County gained particular fame as an outstanding butter producing area, although it produced a full mix of dairy products. By 1952, Vernon County produced 6.3 million pounds of butter and 8.5 million pounds of cheese.

In 1979, dairy products represented 66% of the total cash receipts from agriculture in the County. Dairy products were followed by meat animals (17%) and field crops (13%).

Since the 1880's, tobacco has been an important specialty crop in the County. At its peak during the 1950's, tobacco constituted 15% of the gross farm income in the County.

FARM CHARACTERISTICS AND AGRICULTURAL LAND USE

Vernon County has been experiencing most of the same trends in farm size and agricultural land usage as other rural counties. According to the U.S. Census of Agriculture, during the past two decades there has been a gradual but steady decline in the number of farming units and a gradual increase in the average size of farming units.

Family Farm: "*An operation in which most decisions are made by family members actively engaged in the farm operation. A mid-sized family farm is defined as: 1) small commercial farms with annual sales of $50,000-$99,999; and 2) moderate-sized commercial farms with annual sales of $100,000-$249,999.*"

Economic Research Service, U.S. Dept. of Agriculture

At both ends of the spectrum of farm size, two different trends appear to be occurring. The high production farms are tending toward larger acreage, more capital investments, and increasingly scientific [i.e. industrialized] methods of production. At the other end of the production spectrum the number of hobby farms has increased. Hobby farms are often owned by absentee landowners or recent arrivals to the

County from more urban areas. They typically have smaller acreages and lower yields than production farms. The average sized family-owned farm appears to the type of farming unit which is most threatened by changes in farm ownership and economic factors.

The overall land in farms has declined according to statistics published by both the U.S. Department of Agriculture and the Wisconsin Department of Agriculture. Both sets of statistics suggest that there has been a conversion of agricultural land to non-agricultural use in nearly every town in the County. The reasons for the loss of farmland vary from town to town. In the Kickapoo Valley, public acquisition for the proposed La Farge Dam project removed acreages in Stark and Whitestown from private farm ownership. Private acquisition of scenic land for recreation and speculation has also caused a loss in farmland in the Kickapoo Valley. During the years 1967-73 when the dam and recreational reservoir were actively being planned and public land acquired, land speculation caused land prices in the Kickapoo watershed to increase 150 percent. In the western part of the County, particularly the towns along the Mississippi River, private acquisition for residential and recreation use has been the primary cause of farmland loss. Non-farm residential use has also increased in the vicinity of Westby and Viroqua.

COSTS OF AGRICULTURAL PRODUCTION

The economics of agricultural production have been a major factor influencing the type of agricultural production and the characteristics of farming units. In particular, the high costs of farming have fueled the trend to larger, more capital intensive operations. As the costs of production have increased dramatically, smaller farmers have been forced to sell their land to larger operators or else to non-farm users. In some parts of the County, this has helped spur the amount of non-farm speculative and recreational investment in farmland.

Although the market value of agricultural products sold has increased over 150% during the past decade, the costs of production have increased at an even faster rate.

At the same time that the economics of agricultural production have forced many smaller farmers into an unstable economic situation, the value of farmland has risen dramatically, so that the incentive to sell the farm is created by the high prices a farmer can receive for farmland. Although the value of farmland peaked several years ago and there is a temporary dip in land values, it is expected that the land inflation will continue to be a factor which encourages farmland conversions.

The Wisconsin Farmland Preservation Act was passed by the Wisconsin legislature in the expectation that the bill would provide some property tax relief to farmers, thus mitigating one element of the economic squeeze on the farming industry.

b. Coon Creek Watershed

The following photo and text was taken from the Vernon County Land Water Conservation Department website.

The Coon Creek Watershed: A Success Story of Cooperative Conservation

One of the world's most remarkable series of conservation events has taken place in the Coon Creek Watershed in southwestern Wisconsin. This transformation happened through the first large-scale erosion control demonstration project in the US.

Originally a pristine woodland a century and a half ago, the area suffered ruinous agricultural degradation through early farming practices. Farm income failed not only because of the depression, but because productivity of the land was washed down the Mississippi.

This aerial photograph appeared in the December 1995 issue of the National Geographic© magazine. The ridge pictured in the photo is located in the Coon Creek Watershed in Vernon County.

In the early part of the century, damaging floods occurred every two or three years because of the poor condition of the upland woods and cropland. Average soil loss was 10 to 20 times higher than could sustain soil productivity. Upland silts literally filled the floodplains.

In Coon Valley, up to 13 feet of silt have filled low-lying valleys. You can see the thick layer of silt along streams where the water current has eaten away at the streambank. At least one old mill has been buried under the silt. The topsoil eroding from the hillsides not only affected the valleys in the Coon Creek area, but made its way to the Mississippi River and on into the Gulf of Mexico.

"Coon Valley is one of a thousand farm communities, which through the abuse of its originally rich soil, has not only filled the national dinner pail...but has created the Mississippi flood problem, the navigation problem, the overproduction problem, and the problem of its own future continuity."
(From Aldo Leopold's essay "Coon Valley: An Adventure in Cooperative Conservation" 1935)

Due to the efforts of a multi-disciplinary group of pioneering conservationists, a few farmers willing to risk a new way of farming, and the newly created Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC), conservation planners used the degree of land slope to separate land use. Relatively flat bottomland and land sloping from 2-20% was usually cropland or pasture. Slopes from 8% to20% were put into contour strips. The 20-30% land was fenced for pasture by the CCC crews, and the steeper land was used for woods. These same guidelines were used on ridges to separate land use.

Today, conservation practices have reduced valley sediments 94% since the 1930s, and restored farmland productivity. Most woods are ungrazed and managed, flooding has been greatly reduced, wildlife is more abundant, and trout fishing in the area is unmatched in the Midwest.

The upstream branch of Coon Creek, Timber Coulee, is now the most heavily fished trout stream in Wisconsin and also the most productive. This is because upland soil conservation work has reduced erosion and is allowing more rainfall to infiltrate into the soil, improving spring flow and providing better water quality. With upland conservation practices slowing runoff, it now takes a very hard rain to cause excessive flooding in the valley.

The woods have never been this thick before. After the glaciers, the Native Americans burned back the trees to encourage forbs and grasses for deer and other grazers. Early settlers grazed cattle and burned the woods in the spring. The Coon Creek project discouraged grazing and burning. The result is the first natural stand of mature trees in probably 10,000 years. About 44% of the watershed is now forested. Ungrazed hillside woods can absorb rainfall at the rate of 17 inches per hour without runoff occurring.

Wildlife numbers have also increased. One of the reasons is the habitat created along the edge of the woods by shrubs, which the early conservation plans encouraged. Another reason for the increase in wildlife is due to additional wetlands along the creek.

This conservation ethic continues today, with creative partnering and a commitment to preserve and enhance existing natural resources.

b. Cheesemaking

Researched and written by Sara Martinez, Food & Farm Initiative Steering Committee Member

It's hard not to picture Wisconsin's landscape without its patchwork of family dairy farms. The truth is that the early days of homesteading and agriculture in Wisconsin, especially in the Driftless Area, were distinctly characterized by intensive wheat production. Until the late 1860s, Wisconsin's wheat crop was ranked third in the nation. Wheat production then declined due to soil exhaustion, devastating chinch bug infestations, and reduced prices that largely resulted from the opening of large areas of prairie in Minnesota and the Dakotas. **1** (p.154) The same climate and soil that had produced large wheat crops were ideal for forage crops, and the land that was unsuitable for cultivation was good for pasturing livestock. By 1904 a majority of farmers across the state had chosen an alternative to monocultural wheat cropping that capitalized on these conditions, dairying. **2** (p. 134) The growth of commercial cheese production, which aggregates milk from multiple herds and results in a relatively durable and easily transportable food, thereby providing steady income for farmers, played a pivotal role establishing Wisconsin's identity as "Dairyland". In the decades between the Civil War and the turn of the century, cheese was fast becoming the state's best-known and economically significant value-added food product.

To preserve excess milk, some local farm families had previously made farmstead cheese and butter for their own consumption. But commercial cheesemaking required significant knowledge and skill, and it was practiced by only a handful of farmers. Cheese traveled relatively well and spreading railroad transportation opened markets for Wisconsin dairy farmers. **2** (p. 132) New Yorkers and European immigrants were influential in the development of the state's value-added dairy product industry. They brought with them butter-making and cheese-making traditions as well as experience with the establishment of community cheese factories and creameries. 1 (p.154) It is well-known that the rise of dairy farming and predominance of value-added dairy production in Wisconsin was also promoted and supported by the University of Wisconsin. The University's Dairy School opened in 1887. Butter and cheese-maker training and licensing were instituted as part of the program. In 1890, University of Wisconsin Professor Stephen Babcock created the standardized test for measuring butterfat in milk. The test permitted rapid and accurate grading of milk at markets, discouraged adulteration and thinning, and made the testing of an individual cow's milk practical, providing a standardized way of paying farmers for their milk. **1** (p. 155) The public education system benefitted local independent businessman and Viroqua Dairy owner, Forest O'Connor, who enrolled in the University of Wisconsin Dairy Short Course in the late 1920's. He emerged from the course with knowledge and confidence which was to shape his professional career. **3** (Booklet's Introduction) In turn, O'Connor's successful creamery business and others like it contributed to the area's economic life.

"Ontario is one of the many Kickapoo Valley villages that has a creamery with a capacity of 6,000 pounds of milk per day and we were informed that within a radius of six miles of that village that five cheese factories were located," documented the authors of The Kickapoo Valley: The Gem of Wisconsin in 1896. **4** (p. 59) In 1922, there were over 2,800 cheese factories in the entire state. **5** Well into the 1930's, Vernon County was dotted with cheese factories and creameries, which served their numerous farmer patrons and provided job security for the individuals and families who operated the plants. Sometimes the creameries made butter and cheese and sometimes the terms milk plants and creameries were synonymous. In any case, the cheese factories and creameries bore responsibility for controlling sanitation, producing quality foods, as well as marketing. They also competed to be able to assure farmers a good price and maintain their patron numbers. Floyd Burt, who ran Bud Cheese Factory for more than 46 years, explained in Jerry Apps' Cheese: The Making of a Wisconsin Tradition, "It was up to the cheese-maker to make a quality product or it would not sell. We always stressed quality cheese rather than quantity." **6** (p.57)

Creameries and cheese factories were an essential component of the rural infrastructure supporting small-scale farming. Viroqua Co-op Creamery, for example, bought milk from 900 farmers in the 1930's. For the most part, the creamery produced butter for the Chicago market. Like other patrons of cheese factories and creameries throughout the countryside, Viroqua Co-op Creamery's dairy farmers formed long lines daily, waiting to deliver their fresh product in 10 gallon cans by wagon and later by truck. **7** (p.345) Vernon County's official total for dairy plants and canneries in 1939 was forty. **8** (p. 26) "Vernon County is an important producer of cheese," articulated the same document published in 1946 by the Wisconsin Crop and Livestock Reporting Service, United States Department of Agriculture, and Wisconsin Department of Agriculture. In 1945, county farmers and cheese factories put out 7,470,000 pounds of cheese. **8** (p.49)

Consolidation of milk processing facilities and the decline in the number of dairy farms began after World War II and accelerated during the next two decades. By 1945, there were about 1,500 cheese factories and an unknown number of creameries in Wisconsin. **5** Viroqua Co-op Creamery's employment peaked in the early 1960's at 32, plus 15 contracted milk haulers. The late 1960's brought a significant decline in the use of milk cans with the wide-spread application of pipelines, bulk tanks, and improved roads for larger trucks. Viroqua Co-op Creamery merged with Hiawatha Valley Creamery of Sparta in 1967 and the two later became part of Golden Guernsey out of Milwaukee. **7** (p. 345) Westby Cooperative Creamery's patrons stopped using cans by 1969. **9** However, the use of canned milk was not all that uncommon in Vernon County in the 1970's. In a 1981 publication written by Bill Werth of University of Wisconsin-Extension, he observed that the use of cans was continuing to decrease as more farmers managed to purchase bulk tanks as a necessary part of doing business with the modernizing and increasingly fewer commercial dairy processors. **10**

Today there are approximately 115 cheese factories in Wisconsin. **5** The 2009 Vernon County Community Food Assessment counts seven cheesemaking facilities or other dairy processors that operate in Vernon County. There are at least three others close to its borders. Several are cooperatives. All include specialty cheesemaking as an important piece of their business. One cheese plant accepts milk in cans. A few utilize goats' and sheep's milk rather than or in combination with cows' milk. Farmstead cheesemakers, producers who make cheese from milk produced on their farms, are included among Vernon County's cheese factories. Besides specialty cheese varieties and Wisconsin mainstays like Cheddar and Colby, consumers can also enjoy artisan, organic, rGBH-free, and raw milk cheeses from Vernon County. The fine quality of Vernon County cheeses is recognized by food cooperatives and food specialty shops. This is evidenced by their inclusion in local foods and gourmet inventories across the state and as far away as the Twin Cities and Chicago. Even though the days of a community cheese factory or creamery in every township are over, local cooperatives and independent agricultural entrepreneurs are finding ways to serve area farmers and meet consumer demand for quality cheeses.

There is a need for more research in this important area of local food and farm history as the stories of many cheese factories and creameries which once operated in and around the county are not documented. The accompanying list and map of cheese factories and creameries that currently operate or once operated in Vernon County and on its borders is a humble attempt to show how food processors were once generously dispersed throughout the county, playing an essential role in the area's agriculture.

Number of cheese factories in Wisconsin **5** (p.22)
1870 -- 90
1880 -- 700
1890 -- 1,149
1905 -- 1,518
1922 -- 2,807
1938 -- 1,917
1950 -- 1,279
1960 -- 798
1980 -- 334
1995 -- 142
2008 -- 115

TABLE III: LOCAL CHEESE FACTORY LIST

# on Map	Cheese Factory or Creamery Name	Location	Year Opened	Year Closed	Notes
1	Avalanche Cheese Factory	Avalanche	before 1924		
2	Bloomingdale Creamery	Blooming-dale, Clinton Twp.			
3	Brush Hollow Cheese Factory	Viola, Webster Twp., N of 82	1912	1978	newpaper reported that closure was attributed by owner to a DNR issue related to indequate septic; building still there
4	Bud Cheese Factory	Bud	1939	1986	milk rights sold to AMPI; Viroqua Whey Products took 25,000 #/day and local pig farmers took 5,000-7,000# of whey/day
5	Carr Valley	La Valle, Sauk Co.	Circa 1900	open	cow, goat, and sheep dairy products
6	Chaseburg Co-op Creamery	Chaseburg	1905		1991: expanded from 80 local farms to 700 farms in 5 states
7	Coon Valley Co-op Creamery	Coon Valley			

# on Map	Cheese Factory or Creamery Name	Location	Year Opened	Year Closed	Notes
8	CROPP Co-op (Organic Valley)	Chaseburg		open	butter and other
9	CROPP Co-op	La Farge		open	milk, cut/wrap/shred
10	De Soto Creamery	De Soto			
11	Debelo	Greenwood Twp., Sect. 15			
12	Dilly	Dilly, Forest Twp. Sect. 36			existed before Warner Creek Cheese Factory
13	Elk Creek	on U, Richland Co.			
14	Fargo	Franklin Twp. at 82 and 27			
15	Ferryville Creamery	Crawford Co.			
16	Folsom Cheese Factory	Franklin Township			original building burned down in 1993, was closed before that
17	Foremost Farms	Hillsboro		2003	
18	Genoa	Genoa			
19	Green Creek Farmers' Cheese Factory	Yuba	before 1924		
20	Greenwood	Greenwood Twp., Sect. 31, Hwy C			Last run by Emil Kaukl
21	Hidden Springs	Westby	2006	open	sheep's milk cheese--see website

# on Map	Cheese Factory or Creamery Name	Location	Year Opened	Year Closed	Notes
22	Hillsboro Creamery	Hillsboro	before 1924		
23	La Farge Cheese, Inc.	La Farge			sold to AMPI, then site to CROPP
24	Liberty	Viola-Liberty	before 1924		
25	Liberty Pole Cheese Factory	Liberty Pole	1903-06	1991	was Liberty Pole Dairy Products 1975-91; in 1981 95% of whey went to Milk Specialties in Boscobel
26	Lower Weister Cheese Company	Pott's Corners, Stark Twp., Cty P	before 1924		
27	Manning Cheese Factory	Kickapoo Twp., between Readstown and Liberty (S)			
28	Middle Ridge Cheese Factory	Middle Ridge, La Crosse Co.	1902	1971	
29	Mid-Port Cheese Factory	La Crosse Co.	1971		merger of Middle Ridge and Portland Cheese Factories; started with 92 patrons

# on Map	Cheese Factory or Creamery Name	Location	Year Opened	Year Closed	Notes
30	Mt. Sterling Cheese Co-op	Mt. Sterling, Crawford Co.	1976	open	goat milk dairy products; started as SW WI Dairy Goat Producers Co-op
31	Mt. Tabor	Forest Twp.., Sect. 11, Hwy V			
32	Muncie	Union Twp., Sect. 35			
33	Newry Dairy and Creamery	Newry			
34	Nordic Creamery	Westby, farm near Esofea--cheese is currently made in Plain, Sauk Co.	2007	open	goat's and cow's milk cheeses; Al Bekkum is the former head cheesemaker and buttermaker of Mt. Sterling Goat Cheese Cooperative; currently using Cedar Grove Cheese Plant in Plain to produce small batch, artisan cheeses
35	Northwood	Wonewoc	before 1924		
36	Old Country Cheese	SE of Cashton	1983	open	see website; has tours; 230 Amish producers, uses fresh can milk

# on Map	Cheese Factory or Creamery Name	Location	Year Opened	Year Closed	Notes
37	Ontario Creamery	Ontario			
38	Otter Creek Cheese Company	Ottervale, Webster Twp., Sect. 14, Hwy D, 2 mi. N of 82	before 1924		
39	Pasture Pride Cheese	SE of Cashton	1982-3	open	over 250 patrons; Amish-founded
40	Pine River	Richland County, close to Hillsboro			
41	Pleasant Ridge Cheese Factory	Hamburg Township So. part of Twp.?			
42	Portland Cheese Factory	Portland, Monroe Co.		1969	destroyed by fire in 1969; merged with Middle Ridge Cheese Factory in 1971
43	Readstown Creamery	Readstown	circa 1906	1988	founded as a cooperative; closed during Depression-- bought and reopened circa 1934 by Larson Family

# on Map	Cheese Factory or Creamery Name	Location	Year Opened	Year Closed	Notes
44	Redmound Cheese Factory	Redmound			small amount of cheese was sold locally--most went to Dairy State brand in Monroe; Donald Green then Winnie Holverson Cheesemakers
45	Retreat Creamery	Retreat			
46	Rockton Creamery Company	Rockton	before 1924		
47	Romance Cheese Factory	Romance		in 1940's	
48	Ross Cheese and Butter Company	Viola-Ross Sect. 5, Liberty Twp.	before 1924		
49	Section 22 Co-op Cheese Company/Fariview Cheese Factory	La Farge, Stark Twp., Sect. 22	1919		Schmidt Bros. of La Farge was warehouse and distrbutor for Eastern Vernon Co., including Sect. 22
50	South Bear Creek Coop Cheese Association	La Farge, Sect. 35, Hwy D and MM	before 1924		

# on Map	Cheese Factory or Creamery Name	Location	Year Opened	Year Closed	Notes
51	Star Valley	Star Valley, Northern Crawford County, between Mt. Sterling and Rising Sun			
52	Star Valley Cheese Association	La Farge, Stark Twp., Sect. 9, Old 131, near Reserve	before 1924		
53	Stoddard Cheese Factory	Stoddard		early 1950's	
54	Sugar Grove Cheese and Creamery Company	Soldier's Grove, Kickapoo Twp., Sect. 13, on P	before 1924		Building now a residence
55	Towerville	Utica Twp., Crawford Co.			
56	Trippville	Hillsboro Twp., Sect. 8, Cty F			
57	Viroqua Co-op Creamery	Viroqua	1904	1967	in 1967 merged with Hiawatha Valley in Sparta; butter was primary product--also cheese and powdered milk

# on Map	Cheese Factory or Creamery Name	Location	Year Opened	Year Closed	Notes
58	Viroqua Dairy	Viroqua	1937	2005	in 1990 had a delivery radius of 50 miles; ice cream parlor; was purchased by 1st Nat'l Bank in 2007
59	Warner Creek Cheese Factory	Union Twp., Sect. 4, P and Warner, near Valley	before 1924		
60	Warner Cheese Factory	56 E. of Viola, Richland County, Forest Twp.	before 1895		mentioned in Kickapoo: Gem of Wisconsin
61	West Prairie Cheese Factory	West Prairie	before 1924	1986	farmers took milk to Liberty Pole after it closed; Verlyn Glick cheesemaker
62	Westby Co-op Creamery	Westby	1903	open	burned; at present location since 1924; farmers hauled own milk until 1930, when Milton-Carlson milk trucks started service for $4.50 per trip
63	White City	Union Twp., Sect. 11, 82 and V			
64	Whitehall Specialties	Hillsboro		open	produces "analog cheese", which is processed cheese

Sources:

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2. Wisconsin: The Story of the Badger State. By Norman K. Risjord. Published by Wisconsin Tales and Trails. (1995)

3. The Kickapoo Valley: The Gem of Wisconsin By Gertrude Frazier and Rose B. Poff. Originally published in 1896. Reprinted by United Graphics for Friends of the Kickapoo Valley Reserve. (2007)

4. Wisconsin Milk Marketing Board. http://www.eatwisconsincheese.com/wisconsin/history_of_wisconsin_cheese.aspx. (2009)

5. Cheese: The Making of a Wisconsin Tradition By Jerry Apps. Published by Amherst Press. (1998)

6. Viroqua Dairy: 1937-Present By Elizabeth O'Connor Steinbrenner. Self-published. (1999)

7. Viroqua's Main Street History (1846-1996) Researched by Vic and Donna Navrstad. Published by Vernon County Historical Society and New New Past Press, Inc. (2004)

8. Vernon County Agriculture: County Agricultural Statistics Series, Wisconsin. By Wisconsin Crop and Livestock Reporting Service, U.S. Department of Agriculture, and Wisconsin Department of Agriculture. (1946)

9. Wisconsin's Westby, 'Little Creamery That Could,' Marks 100th Anniversary. http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m0KFU/is_5_70/ai_110264926. (Sept.-Oct. 2003)

10. "Another Look at Vernon County Agriculture". By Bill Werth. University of Wisconsin-Extension. (1981)

Sources for Cheese Factory and Creamery List include: Vernon County Museum's News-clipping and Photo Collection "Cheese Factories"; Brad Steinmetz; John Sime; Chris Larson; Dick Stillwell; Del Rae Wolfe; Biennial Report of the Dairy and Food Commissioner of Wisconsin, 1924.

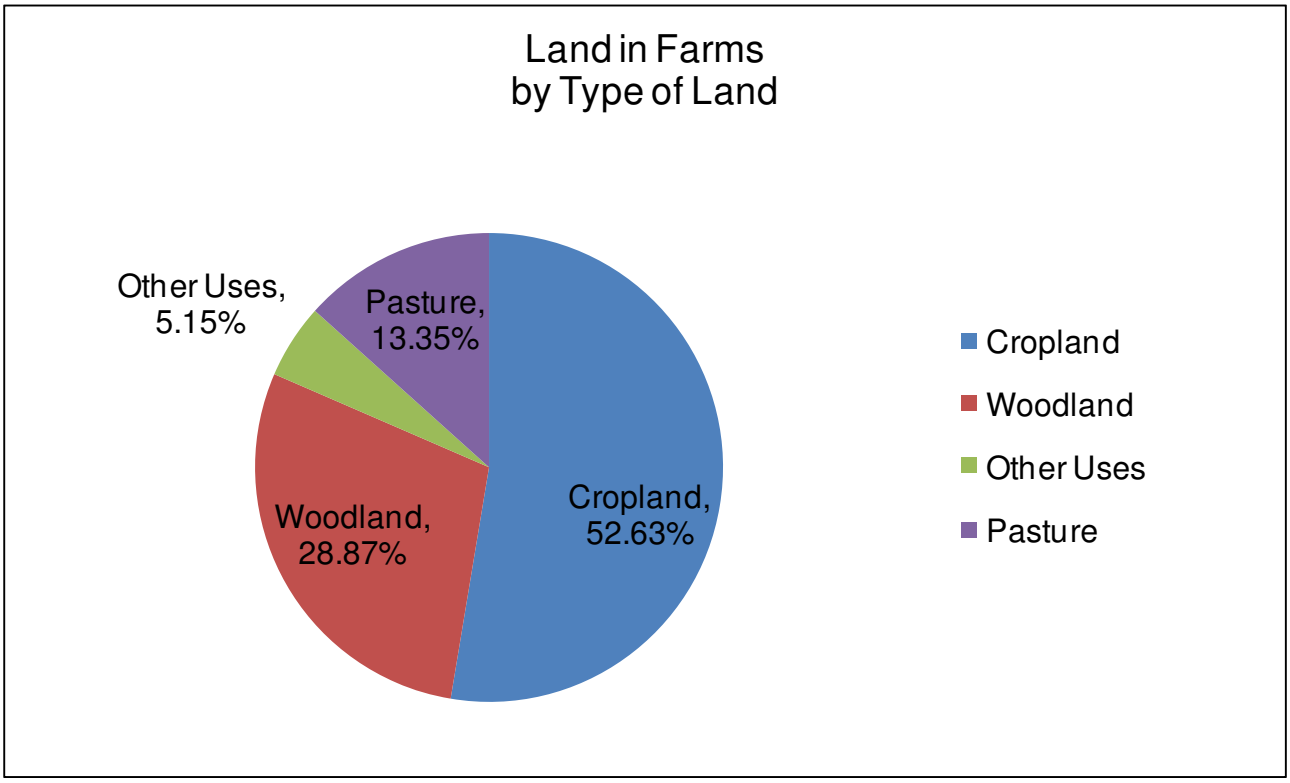
II. AGRICULTURE TODAY

a. 2007 Census of Agriculture, Vernon County Profile

Although the number of farms in Vernon County has steadily decreased over the past two decades there was a 12% increase between 2002 and 2007. The Census of Agriculture released new statistics on agriculture in early 2007. For the first time, statistics on organic agriculture have been included. Here is a profile of agriculture in Vernon County as represented in the 2007 Census of Agriculture statistics.

TABLE IV: 2007 VERNON COUNTY AGRICLULTURE STATISTICS SUMMARY

	2007	**2002**	**% Change**
Number of Farms	2,492	2,230	+12
Land in Farms	357,090 acres	382,218 acres	-7
Average Size of Farm	143 acres	171 acres	-16
Market Value of Production	$167,490,000	$90,210,000	+86
Crop Sales $30,268,000 (18%)			
Livestock Sales $137,222,000 (82%)			
Average Per Farm	$67,211	$40,453	+66
Government Payments	$3,162,000	$4,217,000	-25
Average Per Farm	$2,689	$4,516	-40


Land in Farms
by Type of Land
Other Uses,
5.15%
Pasture,
13.35%
Woodland,
28.87%
Cropland,
52.63%
Cropland
Woodland
Other Uses
Pasture

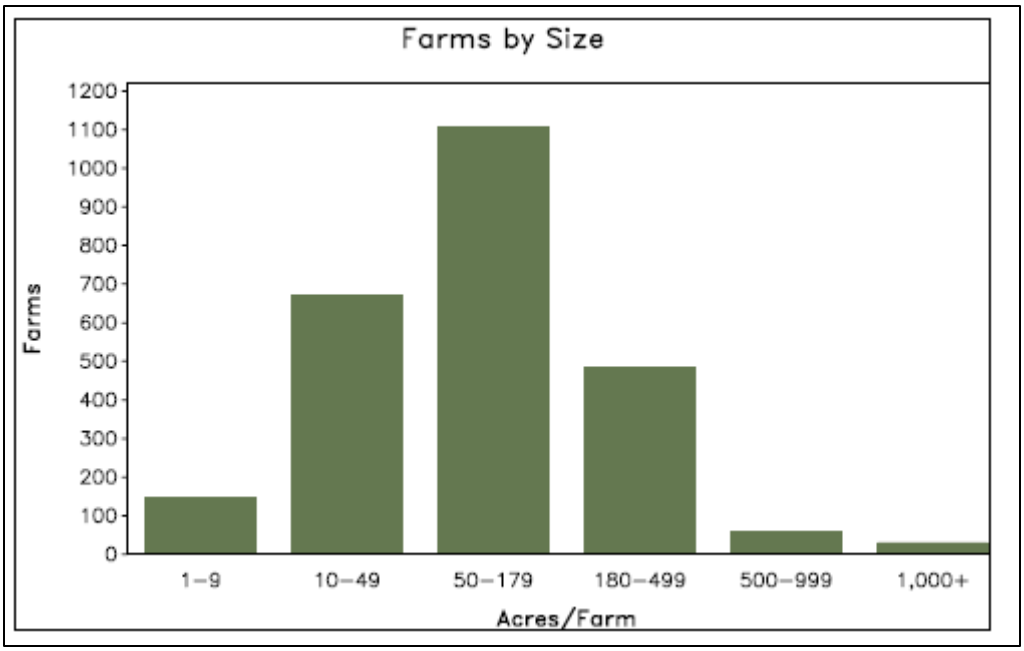

Farms by Size
Farms
1200
1100
1000
900
800
700
600
500
400
300
200
100
0
1–9
10–49
50–179
180–499
500–999
1,000+
Acres/Farm

TABLE V: 2007 ORGANIC AGRICULTURE – WISCONSIN & VERNON COUNTY

Land Used for Organic Production		**Vernon**	**Wisconsin**
Total acres used for organic production		222	1,443
farms			
	acres	16,838	147,120
Acres from which organic crops were harvested		192	1,282
farms			
	acres	9,241	101,903
Acres of organic pastureland		139	793
farms			
	acres	5,338	35,140
Acres being converted to organic production		104	759
farms			
	acres	4,312	33,896
Value of Sales of Organically Produced Commodities			
Total organic product sales	farms	206	1,281
	$1,000	9,655	80,630
By value of sales:			
$1 to $4,999	farms	80	488
	$1,000	133	728
$5,000 or more	farms	126	793
	$1,000	9,522	79,902
Crops, including nursery and greenhouse		153	955
farms			
	$1,000	2,376	16,658
Livestock and poultry		36	236
farms			
	$1,000	589	3,866
Livestock and poultry products		85	431
farms			
	$1,000	6,690	60,106

b. Ken Meter Rural Economic Study

The following is an excerpt from Ken Meter's "Southwest Wisconsin Local Farm & Food Economy" Study produced for the Valley Stewardship Network.

Southwest Wisconsin Local Farm & Food Economy

Highlights of a data compilation

By Ken Meter, Crossroads Resource Center (Minneapolis) for Valley Stewardship Network

October 24, 2008

This study covers Crawford, Monroe, Richland, & Vernon Counties

Southwest Wisconsin region (Bureau of Economic Analysis, 2006)

106,559 residents receive $2.7 billion of income annually. Population is rising at about the same rate as the state as a whole. Real personal income has doubled since 1969.

The region's farms (U.S. Agricultural Census, 2002)[14]

Land:

- 6,804 farms. This is 9% of Wisconsin's total.
- 3,108 (46%) farms are between 50 and 179 acres.
- 228 (3%) farms are less than 50 acres.
- 101 (1.5%) farms are 1,000 acres or more.
- Average farm size is 183 acres, 90% of the state average.
- The region has 1.2 million acres of land in farms.
- This amounts to 8% of the state's farmland.
- 496,000 acres of harvested cropland.
- 168 farms (2%) have a total of 6,342 acres of irrigated land.
- Average value of land and buildings per farm is $346,000. This is 75% of the state average.

Sales:

- $287 million of crops and livestock sold (2002). This is a decline of 7% from 1997.
- $68 million of crops sold (24% of sales).

[14] The Food & Farm Initiative Steering Committee is working to update this report with 2007 Census of Agriculture Statistics.

- $218 million of livestock and products sold (76% of sales).
- The number of farms/ranches selling livestock, poultry and related products decreased 7% from 1997 to 2002 (4,540 to 3,510), while the amount of livestock products sold fell 23%.
- 3,952 (58%) of the region's farms sold less than $10,000 of products in 2002.
- 2,372 farms (34%) sold less than $1,000.
- 744 farms (11%) sold more than $100,000 of products.
- 85% of farm sales are made by 20% of farms, which sell more than $50,000 of products.
- 53% of the region's farms (3,600 of 6,804) reported net losses in 2002.
- 48% of the region's farmers collected a combined total of $14.7 million of federal commodity support payments.

Dairy & Cattle:
- 3,862 (57%) ranches and farms hold an inventory of 230,000 cattle.
- The region holds 77,000 dairy cows, and 27,000 beef cattle.
- 1,581 farms sold $151 million of dairy products.
- This is a 28% decline in the number of farms (2,197 in 1997) and a 12% decline in sales ($172 million in 1997).
- 4,022 (68%) farms produce 793,000 tons of forage crops (hay, etc.) on 239,000 acres.
- 24% of region farms raise corn for silage.
- 102,000 cattle were sold in 2002 from 3,031 farms for total sales of $58 million.
- This is a 21% increase from 1997 sales of $48 million.
- The number of farms selling cattle fell 28% from 4,232 farms in 1997.

Other livestock & animal products:
- Hog and pig sales fell 86% from $10 million in 1997 to $1.4 million in 2002.
- The number of farms selling hogs and pigs fell 29% from 316 in 1997 to 225 in 2002.
- 237 farms sold $656,000 of sheep, lambs, and goats.
- 284 farms raise poultry, up 21% from 235 in 1997.
- Poultry sales total $1.3 million, up 17% from $1.1 million in 1997.
- 292 farms sold $1 million of horses in 2002.

Grains & oilseeds
- 2,745 (40%) farms raise corn.
- 29% of the region's harvested cropland is devoted to corn.
- The region produces 20 million bushels of corn.
- 784 farms raise soybeans.

Vegetables & Fruits (some farmers state that Ag Census data does not fully represent fruit production):
- 129 farms work 857 acres to raise vegetables.

• 31 farms raise 2,700 hundredweight of potatoes.
• The region has 92 farms with a total of 1,309 acres of orchards.

Tobacco
• 126 farms raise tobacco on 257 acres. This is 28% of the state's tobacco farms, and 17% of state acreage.
• Total production in the region is 570,000 pounds.
• Vernon County is the largest tobacco producing county in the region, with 78% of the region's production.

Direct and organic sales:
• 382 farms sell $2.1 million of food directly to consumers. This is a 9% rise in the number of farms (352 in 1997) selling direct, and a 63% increase in direct sales from 1997 to 2002.
• Direct sales total 0.8% of total all farm sales, compared with a national average of 0.5%.
• 133 region farms sold organic foods ($4.9 million in sales). Vernon County was the regional leader in organic sales, with $3.6 million.

Balance of Cash Receipts and Production Costs (BEA):
Southwest Wisconsin Region ranchers and farmers sell $386 million of food commodities per year (average per year for the 13 years 1994-2006), spending $419 million to raise them, for an average loss of $33 million each year. Note that these sales figures compiled by the BEA are far higher than cash receipts recorded by the USDA Agriculture Census (above).

Overall, farm producers have lost $429 million since 1994. Farmers have earned a surplus only one of the past 13 years. Nevertheless, 53% of the region's farms and ranches reported that they lost money in 2002 (Ag Census). Southwest Wisconsin Region farmers and ranchers earned $232 million less by selling commodities in 1969 than they earned in 2006 (in 2006 dollars).

Farmers and ranchers earn another $42 million per year of farm-related income — primarily custom work, and rental income (thirteen-year average for 1994-2006). Federal farm support payments are relatively small, averaging $21 million per year for the entire region for the years 1994-2006. Forty-eight of the region's farms collect federal subsidies.

Loss of income from livestock and dairy products is one of the key reasons for the decline of the region's farm economy. Farmers earned $624 million from selling livestock and products in 1979; this had fallen to $289 million by 2006, a decline of more than half.

The region's consumers:
Southwest Wisconsin Region consumers spend $231 million buying food each year, including $131 million for home use. Most all of this food is produced outside the region. $2.1 million of food products (one percent of consumer demand and 0.1% of farm cash receipts) are sold by farmers directly to consumers.

Estimated change in net assets for all region households combined was a loss of $126 million in 2006 (BLS).

Farm and food economy summary:
Farmers lose $33 million each year producing food commodities, and spend $135 million buying inputs from external suppliers, for a total loss of $168 million to the region.

Meanwhile, consumers spend $208 million buying food from outside. Thus, total loss to the region is $376 million of potential wealth *each year*. This loss amounts to 97% of the value of all food commodities raised in the region, and is also well more than the amount needed to feed all residents.

Southwest Wisconsin Food System Fact

Southwest Wisconsin (Monroe, Richland, Vernon & Crawford Counties) loose a total of $376 million every year due to current commodity-driven agriculture methods and food purchases from outside the region.

If the region's consumers purchased 25% of their food directly from farmers, it would produce $33 million of new farm income each year — enough to offset current farm production losses.

Southwest Wisconsin Region: markets for food eaten at home (2006):

	millions
Meats, poultry, fish, and eggs	$ 30
Fruits & vegetables	21
Cereals and bakery products	17
Dairy products	15
"Other," incl. sweets, fats, & oils	48

County Highlights from the 2002[15] Agriculture Census:

Crawford County
1,278 farms in 2002, up 12 percent from 1997.

[15] The Food & Farm Initiative Steering Committee is working to update this report with 2007 Census of Agriculture Statistics.

Government payments rose 61% from 1997 to 2002, to $3.2 million.
70% of the county's 1,278 farms are 50 to 499 acres in size.
County farms sold $42 million of farm products in 2002, up 2% from 1997.
68% of county farm sales are livestock and products.
Most important farm product was dairy, with $18 million in sales.
$8.6 million of cattle and calves were sold by county farms.
$1 million of hogs and pigs were sold.
Crawford County ranks 9th in Wisconsin for fruit sales, with $3.2 million.
County farms sold $232,000 of vegetables.
41,000 acres of county farmland were devoted to raising forage crops.
Crawford has an inventory of 38,000 cattle.
Crawford County is the eight-largest goat-producing county in the state.

Monroe County
1,938 farms in 2002, up slightly from 1997.
Government payments increased 103 percent from 1997 to 2002, to $4.2 million.
Nearly half of county farms are 50-179 acres.
Of the $103 million in farm products sold by county farms, 75% involved sales of livestock or animal products.
Dairy products are the largest single item, with $53 million sold — half of county farm sales.
$20 million of cattle and calves are sold.
Monroe County ranks second in Wisconsin for fruit sales, selling $16 million.
$9 million of grains were sold.
The county ranks third in horse inventory.
Monroe County ranks 6th in Wisconsin in broiler chicken inventory.
Inventory of cattle and calves is 72,000.
68,000 acres of county land are devoted to forage crops.

Richland County
1,358 farms in 2002, up 6 percent from 1997.
Nearly half of county farms are between 50-179 acres.
Market value of farm production fell 18 percent from 1997 to 2002.
82% of farm sales are livestock and related products (including dairy).
Dairy sales total $30 million, 59% of total farm sales.
Cattle and calf sales total $9 million.
Grain sales total $6 million.
County farms sell $685,000 of fruit.
Vegetable sales are not reported by USDA to protect confidentiality.
Government payments increased 69 percent to $3 million.
Inventory of cattle and calves, including dairy animals, is 44,982.

Hog & pig sales are not reported, but the county is 9th-largest producer in Wisconsin.
50,800 acres of land are devoted to forage crops.
Corn for grain is planted on 25,600 acres.

Vernon County
2,230 farms in 2002, down 5 percent from 1997.
Market value of farm sales declined 5 percent from 1997 – 2002, to $90 million.
Livestock and dairy sales totaled $72 million, or 80 percent of county farm sales.
Dairy sales total $49 million, or 54% of county farm sales.
Sales of cattle and calves total $20 million.
Grain sales total $11.7 million.
$704,000 of vegetables are sold by Vernon County farms
Government payments rose 78% from 1997 to 2002.
Vernon County ranks third in Wisconsin for tobacco production.
The county ranks fourth in the state for horse production, and sixth for sheep and goats.
Vernon County is the seventh largest producer of hay and forage crops in the state, with 78,000 acres.
49,000 acres of county land are devoted to corn for grain, and 21,000 to soybeans.

State of Wisconsin
The state has 77,131 farms, three percent less than 1997.
Nearly 30,000 of these farms (38%) are 50- 179 acres.
Farm product sales total $5.6 billion, down 3% from 1997.
70% of all farm sales are livestock and dairy products.
Government payments increased 65% from 1997 to 2002, to $247 million.
Wisconsin ranks 8th in the U.S. for livestock and products.
The state has 704,513 acres of corn for silage, the most of any state in the nation.
Wisconsin ranks first in the U.S. for "other" animals (other than cattle, pigs, sheep, goats, horses).
The state ranks 2nd in acreage devoted to vegetable production, with 253,000 acres.
Sales of vegetables total $341 million, eighth in the nation.
Milk sales total $2.6 billion, second-largest in the U.S.
Wisconsin ranks 4th in the nation for acreage of forage crops.
Christmas tree sales total $23 million, sixth-largest in U.S.
The state ranks 8th in the U.S. for acres devoted to corn for grain.
Wisconsin has the ninth-largest inventory of cattle and calves in the U.S.
Sales of grains total $893 million.
Cattle and calf sales total $835 million.

Top 25 farm products in Wisconsin in 2006 [USDA Economic Research Service]

		$ millions
1	Dairy products	$3,075
2	Cattle and calves	937
3	Corn	789
4	Soybeans	275
5	Greenhouse/nursery	245
6	Potatoes	212
7	Cranberries	143
8	Hay	130
9	Hogs	110
10	Broilers	66
11	Wheat	63
12	Corn, sweet	53
13	Chicken eggs	45
14	Beans, snap	37
15	Apples	22
16	Peas, green	16
17	Oats	10
18	Cabbage	8
19	Aquaculture	7
20	Honey	7
21	Cucumbers	6
22	Carrots	6
23	Strawberries	6
24	Onions	5

Note: Turkeys are also among the top 25 farm products in Wisconsin, but sales are not reported by ERS to protect confidentiality.

Key data sources:
Bureau of Economic Analysis data on farm production balance
http://www.bea.doc.gov/bea/regional/reis/.com
Food consumption estimates from Bureau of Labor Statistics Consumer Expenditure Survey
http://www.bls.gov/cex/home.htm
U.S. Census of Agriculture
http://www.nass.usda.gov/census/.com
USDA/Economic Research Service food consumption data:
http://www.ers.usda.gov/data/foodconsumption/.com

USDA/ Economic Research Service farm income data:
http://ers.usda.gov/Data/FarmIncome/finfidmu.htm
For more information:
To see results from *Finding Food in Farm Country* studies in other regions of the U.S.:
http://www.crcworks.org/locales.html
To read the original *Finding Food in Farm Country* study from Southeast Minnesota (written for the Experiment in Rural Cooperation): http://www.crcworks.org/ff.pdf
To view a PowerPoint presented in March, 2008, by Ken Meter at Rep. Collin Peterson's (D-MN) Minnesota agricultural forum, called the "Home Grown Economy":
http://www.crcworks.org/crcppts/petersonkmo8.pdf
To get a brief list of essential food facts, many of which are cited in the presentation above,
http://www.crcworks.org/foodmarkets.pdf
To link to further analysis of farm and food economies in the U.S.:
http://www.crcworks.org/econ.html

III. PROFILES OF AGRICULTURE ENTREPRENEURSHIP

Organic Valley
Westby Creamery Cooperative
Keewaydin Organics
Harmony Valley Farm
Amish Community Farm

ORGANIC VALLEY FAMILY OF FARMS

Staying Ture to a Cooperative's Roots

(Reprinted with permission of Organic Valley)

Vernon County Food System Fact

CROPP Cooperative (Organic Valley Family of Farms) is the largest organic farming cooperative in North America.

Organic Valley began in 1988 with a group of Wisconsin farmers who shared a love of the land and a belief that a new, sustainable approach to agriculture was needed in order for family farms and rural communities to survive. Frustrated by the loss of nearly 2,000 family farms each week and the staggering number threatened with extinction, these farmers set out to create a solution: organic agriculture.

With this mission in mind, the farmers formed CROPP Cooperative (Cooperative Regions of Organic Producer Pools), which today is the largest organic farming cooperative in North America with more than 1,300 farmer-owners in 32 states and one Canadian province. In

addition to providing farmers a way to stay in business, organic agriculture fulfilled their vision for a sustainable agriculture: Farming without antibiotics or synthetic hormones and pesticides, pasturing animals, and ensuring the land would be preserved for future generations.

Farmers: Organic Valley represents more than 1,300 organic farmers in 32 states and one Canadian province, up from 361 farmers in 15 states in 2002. Farmers by region are: Heartland, 781; Northeast, 183; Northwest, 70; New England, 155; California, 18; and Rocky Mountain, five. Farmers by type or "pool" are: Dairy, 1051; Produce, 122; Pork, 20; Poultry, 1; Beef, 50; Egg, 69; Juice, 14; Soy, 12; Feed, 17. (Note: some farmers produce for more than one pool.)

In order to market their products, CROPP created the more commonly known brand Organic Valley. Organic Valley has become one of the largest organic brands in the nation, offering milk, cheese, juice, eggs, spreads, produce, and soy, as well as meat labeled under the sister brand, Organic Prairie Family of Farms. As the co-op continues to grow, they prove that it is not necessary for a business to sacrifice people for profits: today, the cooperative's farmer-owners represent approximately 10 percent of the entire nation's certified organic farming community.

Despite Organic Valley's growth, it remains true to its roots and unique business model. Part of Organic Valley's success is due to the fact that the farmer-owners pay themselves a stable, sustainable pay price, which is set by a farmer board elected by the membership.

"The success of Organic Valley proves that organic agriculture can be a lifeline for America's struggling family farms," says George Siemon, Organic Valley's C-E-I-E-I-O. "In an era of rising and falling agricultural prices, Organic Valley farmers can count on a stable, living wage to stay in business on their land."

Just as Organic Valley strives to support family farms, it is also committed to its local communities. In 2004, Organic Valley chose to build its new company headquarters, which accommodates approximately 250 employees, in La Farge, Wis., the small town the co-op has called home since its inception. In 2007, they opened a distribution center in a neighboring small town, Cashton, Wis. By maintaining relationships with businesses and other partners nationwide, and contracting with production plants and shipping companies, Organic Valley has minimized investment in "brick and mortar" while simultaneously supporting local communities where their farmers live.

Being farmer-owned and independent has allowed Organic Valley to stay true to its original mission of keeping family farmers farming. Organic Valley customers can be confident that the food they purchase was produced under standards that meet and exceed the USDA

national organic standards by farmers who are stewards of the earth and at the heart of the organic revolution.

Model: Organic Valley provides its members with a stable, fixed annual pay-price, a rarity in an industry where farmers' paychecks typically reflect unpredictable, fluctuating markets. A board of farmer-owners sets Organic Valley's annual milk prices and oversees every aspect of the organic process. They also uphold sustainable farming practices, such as pasturing animals and treating them humanely, ensuring Organic Valley farmers meet and generally exceed USDA organic requirements.

Sales: (2008) $527 million; (2007) $432.5 million; (2006) $334 million; (2005) $245 million; (2004) $208 million. In the past five years, Organic Valley's total sales have increased 153 percent and its increases have consistently outpaced the food industry overall.

Employees: 500 employees work for CROPP at a number of locations including the CROPP Headquarters in La Farge, Wisconsin; the Distribution Center in Cashton, Wisconsin; the Butter Creamery in Chaseburg, Wisconsin; as well as the national sales team and farmer support staff located nationwide.

WESTBY COOPERATIVE CREAMERY

Maintaining Farmer Control

(Researched and Written by Lori Harms, Food & Farm Initiative Steering Committee)

The Westby Creamery Cooperative is a farmer-owned and farmer controlled cooperative. The 118 farmer patrons who currently own the cooperative provide all of the milk for the creamery's products. Most of the family-operated farms where the milk is produced are located within 50 miles of Westby. The average herd size is 50 cows; no herds are very large. Some farms are grass-based, some are certified organic and others are not. None of the cattle on these farms is injected with recombinant bovine growth hormone (rBGH).

In 1992 the Westby Creamery Cooperative became independent of dairy giant Dean Foods. The cooperative invested capital in their facilities, expanded production and developed the familiar Westby Creamery Brand. They have recently formed a partnership to create the organic brand Cultural Revolution. The creamery makes various products for ethnic and specialty markets, such as Polish-formula yogurt, and does some milk processing for other cooperatives.

The 60 employees of the Westby Creamery Cooperative produce cottage cheese, sour cream, cheese, yogurt, curds and butter which gets to the consumer in a number of ways: the Creamery Retail store, some local restaurants, local and regional food coops and grocers, and

through the food service industry. The Westby schools directly purchase some products; Viroqua schools may do so this fall. Specialty products may be found in Michigan, Illinois and New York. And of course the attendees of many local church, charity, non-profit and school events benefit greatly from the generous donations from Westby Creamery Cooperative patrons.

One hundred six years ago, 300 Vernon County farmers pooled their resources, skills, knowledge and will to create an economic entity that has served the community to this day. Over the years the many patrons of the Westby Creamery Cooperative have made decisions that are rare in the world of dairy cooperatives: they have remained independent of big dairy and maintained control of their product. The farmers have rather quickly responded to consumer demands and concerns by rBGH and increasingly turning to organic and grass-based production. Consumers are able to identify the source of their food, the one-hundred eighteen dairy farms within fifty miles of Westby, Wisconsin.

Many thanks to Pete Kondrup, General Manager of the Westby Creamery Cooperative.

KEEWAYDIN ORGANICS

A New Venture from an Old Farm

(Reprinted with permission of the Viroqua Food Coop; minor updates added by Bob Goonin, Food & Farm Initiative Steering Committee)

Keewaydin Farms was founded in 1976 as a dairy farm by Richard and Mary Hauke. They were both city kids from the east side of the state who bought into the back-to-the-land movement hook, line and sinker. They were further committed to the dream of farming after traveling through this area in the early 70's. After several years of searching, they discovered a farm perched on a prominent ridge overlooking the eastern tributary valleys of the Kickapoo River with beautiful views of the sunrise, storms, sunsets and the county night sky.

They farmed here till 1996 when they could no longer sustain their farming dream. But they were able to hold on to the land, and in 2004 after several years of traveling and ski-bumming, their children Jessica, Jacob and Rufus returned to the home farm to make a family farm again. Now known as Keewaydin Organics, they market and distribute not only their own produce but that of 15 other local farms as well.

How does the new venture work – Is it a coop?

Rufus - In December 2007 (when produce farmers have some time on their hands) we started connecting with several farmers in the area who were looking for more markets. The conversations started sooner with one of our farms in particular, the Thimmesch Farm, whose owners Jason and Jennelle lived and worked on our farm last year before purchasing their own farm in the Avalanche area. Once winter set in though, we were finally able to focus on several more farms and after holding meetings around the area, the business began. Currently we are not a co-op, though we do cooperate in ways and will continue to do so. For now everyone sees satisfied with the current business arrangements. To us the most important aspect of our business is that we are small family-run farms, raising a diversity of crops and tending livestock as well. All the farms we work with are certified organic and are within 20 miles of the Viroqua Food Co-op.

What are the benefits to you & the other farmers?

Rufus - I decided to try this because I have been fortunate enough to have more market demand than I was able to supply and wanted to share that with other farmers. I have been committed to farming no more than 10 acres of market garden because I see this as a sustainable level of farming both for our land and our time. The benefit for me is that I get to share my markets with other farmers; I get to visit their operations and learn how others are farming. I help (hopefully) provide a more stable supply of local, organic product to meet the growing demand for food produced in our neighborhood. For the other farms I am providing a more diverse marketing base, increasing the amount of money that makes it back to our farmers and teaching them about new crops they could grow for this ever-expanding market.

Who are the other farmers that make up Keewaydin Organics?

Rufus - The farmers I am working with are all from the local area, some Amish, some not. They all operate beautiful little family farms nestled in quaint valleys and ridges with names like Cozy Hollow, Pristine Valley, Little Ridge, or EZ Farming. These are the types of farms lots of marketing people would like consumers to think of when they buy their products, but rarely exist anymore in the modern farming world. They are farms where the cows or sheep still graze on pastures, where families can be seen working gardens together, where in some cases horses still work the land.

When I first started visiting these farms I was amazed at how beautiful these places are, as someone who has grown up in the area and have seen the Amish working the fields from afar

it has been an awaking for me to see these farms up close. I've even gotten to drive a team of horses as they disked up a field. The silence and pace of work was breathtaking.

What has the experience been like so far?

Rufus - So far the experience has been quite positive. I have made many new friends in the farming world and learned many new techniques of farming I would never would have thought about. Many of these farmers have been farmers their entire lives and are well versed in what they are doing. Many have been saving their own seed for years or growing gardens their whole lives.

Of course with everything there are negatives, such as the amount of driving I have been doing this year. We joke around at Keewaydin Farms that I'm more of a window farmer these days. I would honestly like to get back to farming my own land more, but I know that will happen in due time, starting a new business requires patience and the ability to put off some of your wants until another day. Other negatives involve just general rookie mistakes that any person starting a business is bound to run into, making sure you are constantly looking at the numbers, doing your homework and watching the summer fly by as your friends are out floating on the Kickapoo River. And then there is the sleep factor; sometimes the nights get long and sleep can be a precious commodity. All of those things are minor though, compared to the friendships I've made and life lessons I've learned.

Where the heck do you find the time for your own farming?

Rufus - Luckily for me I have a wonderful wife and crew that have made it possible for me to do what I am doing. I sneak out to the garden when I can with cell phone in hand. I'm looking forward to more gardening time this fall when things slow down. We are in the process of putting up a couple greenhouses to extend our season as long as possible.

What is your plan for Keewaydin Organics next year?

Rufus – I hope to continue next year, though one never really knows what the future will bring. There will definitely be changes and that is one thing I have always tried to communicate with everyone. We must always be ready to face the changes that present themselves to us. As long as we have the support of the community and people who support small organic farmers with their food dollars we are bound to be successful.

HARMONY VALLEY FARM

Organic, Local and Wholesome Year-round!

(Researched and Written by Sara Martinez, Food & Farm Initiative Steering Committee)

Richard de Wilde of Harmony Valley Farm explains that his family-owned farm has grown over its 25 years with the expanding market for organic vegetables for consumers in the Upper Midwest. Harmony Valley Farm's home farm of 200 acres lays along Spring Creek and additional leased acres of farmland border the nearby Bad Axe River. Well-managed organic production of an incredible diversity of fresh market vegetables, integrating a healthy, natural environment is fundamental to the farm's mission as well as economic success. Harmony Valley Farm strives to improve soil life and fertility through a system of cover-cropping and application of compost and minerals. Customers benefit from great-tasting vegetables and superior nutrition, and they come back for more every year as subscribers to the Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) operation. 100 acres of vegetables are the mainstay of the farm. Harmony Valley Farm also collaborates with local farmer Jim Munsch to offer Grazier's Organic Beef. Once weaned at twelve months of age on Jim's farm, near Coon Valley, the cattle are rotationally grazed on 60-80 acres of pasture at Harmony Valley Farm.

CSA boxes are provided to members nine months of the year, May-January. With upwards of 1,000 CSA boxes to fill and deliver per week during peak vegetable season, Harmony Valley Farm depends on and honors its employees' contributions. Wholesale distributors and a few regional restaurants are also among the farm's customer base. The Dane County Farmer's Market hosts a stand for the farm too. Harmony Valley Farm employs 12-15 people year-round and 40 people during peak farm labor times. Employees are provided chef-prepared meals, made with the farm's vegetables and pasture raised meats.

A top-quality market produce operation like Harmony Valley Farm requires not only significant labor inputs, but also washing, cooling, and storage infrastructure. As the business and demand for organic, high quality vegetable and fruits has expanded, infrastructure has been developed deliberately and successfully. Food cooperatives as far as the Twin Cities display Harmony Valley Farm's lovely produce year-round and it is proudly labeled as regionally-produced; often Harmony Valley Farm's fare are the only organic vegetables not grown on the West Coast offered for sale in the winter. Harmony Valley Farm's means of distribution include ownership and operation of two 20-24 foot refrigerated

freight trucks and the use of regional trucking services. The trucks deliver primarily CSA orders and farmers' market stock. Wholesale products are included on trips as needed to maximize efficient use of the transportation. Harmony Valley Farm's shipping stalls also serve as a consolidation point for other local organic vegetable farms to distribute their produce to locations in Minneapolis, Madison, and locations in between. Interestingly, transporting food to markets in the Twin Cities is easier than servicing Madison buyers, even though Madison is much closer. "Distribution is a challenge," says Mr. De Wilde.

Mr. De Wilde says that another more obvious challenge for the farm was the area's flooding in 2007 and 2008, "We have some raised beds, but there's only so much they can cope with." Floods caused crop and soil loss, weeds to wash in, and the need to replace fences. The farm provided weekly news updates about the flooding and its impact on the farm through their CSA newsletter. CSA members from across Wisconsin and into Minnesota were supportive and understanding of the consequences of major flooding during peak vegetable season and have remained loyal customers.

The downturn in the economy is also on Mr. De Wilde's mind as the farm gets organized for the planting season. Harmony Valley Farm is planning on maintaining its current CSA member base. Mr. De Wilde is also concerned about local food security and the quality of food provided to Vernon County residents, especially residents fed in schools and nursing homes. "Those are the people that need nutritious food most." He also shares his belief that the county would benefit from a processing facility that could utilize high quality, wholesome, and locally-produced foods. He thinks a processing facility would create local jobs and capacity for businesses like his to prepare value-added nutritious foods. It also could be a site for processing local foods for use at institutions year-round.

AMISH COMMUNITY FARM – MARY & PERRY GLICK

Mutual Benefits of local Food Movement Progress

(Researched and Written by Becky Comeau, Food & Farm Initiative Steering Committee)

On a 44-acre farm in the rolling hills south of Viroqua, Mary and Perry Glick and their 7 sons, grow 13 acres of organic produce. They noticed a change when they arrived from a smaller farm in southeast Minnesota: people nearby really appreciate their produce. Perry says that growing organic has definitely opened markets to them. They would not be able to sell as much direct to consumers if they were growing conventionally. They are able to sell some of their first quality produce to Organic Valley, and the seconds and thirds sold well last year, too. Demand for locally grown produce is increasing steadily.

The Glick family is part of a large Amish community in the county. Wisconsin is home to over 15,000 Amish people (the state ranks 4th in the nation.[16]) and the statewide population has been increasing at the rate of approximately 6% per year. Vernon County is fortunate in many ways to have a thriving Amish community, and it seems there is mutual benefit. The "Englishers" are gobbling up the fantastic food that the very able Amish producers bring to market.

One weekday, late morning, finds the kitchen abuzz with activity: several women are preparing food in the large, warm kitchen. Several freshly baked loaves of bread and a half dozen pies are cooling; the table is set for 15 or so people. Grandmother Lydia remembers a previous visit with Sara, a neighbor English woman who has come to facilitate the interview, and remembers the names and ages of her children. She takes time to talk and ask me questions, helping to make me feel very welcome and comfortable in my first-ever visit. It does remind me a bit of my own grandmother's home, many years ago. In the next room, several younger women are busily hand-stitching an intricate and brightly colored quilt that they will sell to someone in Iowa. The extended family and community clearly work and eat together, and at the same time are welcoming to their visitors. We arrange to return the following week to talk about their farm and food production activities.

Small vegetable farms are cropping up around Vernon County and the seasonal farmer's market of Viroqua recently expanded to an indoor winter market. The Amish community has played a significant role in this new endeavor. They are major participants in the thriving local food movement, and take a very active interest in the process. As we settle into the living room for our interview, Mary and Perry share their experience and perspective on this growing food market.

They are a group of 10 families, and another one will be added to the congregation this year. Some of their farms are over 100 acres. They work together informally to share knowledge and trade amongst themselves. "Sharing, that's the way to go" sums up their community approach. In fact, someone they know had shared with them some very large fish they'd netted near Ferryville, which were stored frozen on their front porch. Also, someone shared some hickory nuts which Mary made into a (very delicious) pie, which she shared with me. This went very well with the tea that Perry brewed in a large pot and shared with us. He made it from his own raspberry leaves, nettles and other things.

They find it concerning that so many small farms have disappeared over the years. That is definitely "going in the wrong direction" they tell me. Perry told a story about someone he knows seeing a very large milk tanker with license plates from Idaho; the driver told them it came from a farm with 25,000 cows, which was going to expand to 50,000. Those cows are

[16] "Amish Population by State (2008)." Young Center for Anabaptist and Pietist Studies, Elizabethtown College. http://www2.etown.edu/amishstudies/Population_by_State_2008.asp

turned over every 2 years, a very different scene from the pasturing care Perry's cows are given. Those cows are with them for many years. He has a hard time imagining how hard it is on those thousands of confined cows.

It seems their gardening experience has come largely through Mary, who learned from her mother. She is very curious and tries new things. For example, she was starting her sweet potato slips in jars this week, and decided to try rooting ginger the same way. Also, she and Perry are very interested in using their greenhouse year-round as a season extender, and they asked to borrow Sara's book about hoophouses. They talked about learning from mistakes, and the valuable lessons that come from that. They have been learning a great deal from Mat and Kate Eddy's who operate Ridgeland Harvest farm just up the road and they describe as expert organic growers.

Last year (2008) for the first time the Glick's had no trouble selling even their 2nds and 3rds, which previously ended up as feed for their animals and compost. New markets are opening to them as well. They have been meeting this winter, every 2 weeks, with Jenny Borchardt, who is arranging to sell their produce to chefs in Chicago where she lives. Jenny also has a farm outside Viroqua and is learning from these farmers, such things as how to grow from seed. Jenny tells them that there is a very large expanding market in Chicago. She will be bringing a truck to pick up and haul their produce. Apparently the word is getting out amongst chefs and eaters in Chicago, and more of them want this "local" produce. In their meetings with Jenny, they are planning who will grow which items.

They have seedlings in the spring and produce throughout the summer. They will be starting their onions (from seed!) next week. They grow heirloom and open-pollinated varieties. Mary is very fond of her "Aunt Mary" variety of tomato, which came from, you guessed it, her aunt Mary. They also grow a small stuffing pepper that is an Amish special. Mary is spending time browsing her Bakers Creek (Missouri) seed catalogs, and reading the stories of the various varieties. They also buy from Seed Savers exchange in Iowa. But, as much as they can, they save their own seed.

One area that they have questions about is pricing. For example, they sold turkeys last year for around $2 per pound. They could have sold more. They don't want to be greedy, but want to know what is a fair price. That's a good question, one faced by many diversified farmers in the area.

Vernon County has a major "asset" in this curious and open-minded group of Amish people. The mutual sharing of knowledge and produce is a benefit to all.

CHAPTER IV.

A PROFILE OF FOOD RESOURCES

1. FARMERS MARKETS
2. COMMUNITY GARDENS
3. CHARITABLE FOOD PROGRAMS
    i. Senior Meal Sites
    ii. Food Pantries
    iii. Food Stamp/Foodshare
    iv. WIC
4. GROCERY & RETAIL FOOD OUTLETS
5. RESTAURANTS
6. COMMUNITY SUPPORTED AGRICULTURE (CSAs)

(Written by Dani Lind, Food & Farm Initiative Steering Committee)

I. FARMERS MARKETS

Viroqua Partners (a collaboration of the Viroqua Revitalization Association & Chamber of Commerce) hosts an outdoor farmers' market at the Viroqua Wisconsin Technical College every Saturday from the last weekend in May through October. It features over 50 farmers and vendors from Vernon and surrounding counties. There is also an indoor market in the winter months across the street at the Main Street Station.

Other smaller yet notable Vernon County famers markets are located in Westby, Hillsboro and Desoto. In addition, Coon Creek Produce & Meats manages a summer produce stand weekdays across from the north side Kwik Trip in Viroqua.

II. COMMUNITY GARDENS

A community garden is a piece of land made available to individuals, families, or organizations to grow produce for consumption, sale or donation. There may or may not be a rental charge for use of this land.

The number of community gardens in Vernon County is very limited, perhaps because as a farm community most people wishing to grow a garden probably have a relative or friend that can provide space.

- The only rent-free community garden is offered by Tom Wilson on the northeast side of Viroqua. It is about 1/4 acre. The only requirement is that organic gardening methods be used.

- The City of Viroqua hosts a community garden at "Well 4". The rent for a plot is $15/year, registration at City Hall.
- Human Services Department uses a plot of the Vernon County Farm to provide youthful offenders gardening experience to fulfill their community service obligations The produce grown is donated to various churches and food pantries.
- Family and Children's Center maintains a vegetable garden for school age behavioral health clients.
- Some of the area schools have programs which are similar to community gardens:
    - Viroqua Area Schools has an active FFA program. This includes a 4-acre orchard on the southwest side of Viroqua, greenhouse-raised bedding plants each spring and greenhouse-raised tomatoes November through January. This produce is offered for sale to school personnel.
    - De Soto Area Schools has a learning vegetable, herb, and flower garden at Prairie View Elementary School near Retreat.
    - Pleasant Ridge Waldorf School uses a 1/4 acre plot near the school which is used to teach agriculture classes. A small portion of the produce is used in their school hot lunch program.
    - La Farge School District has a couple of acres made available by Organic Valley Family of Farms used by various school organizations for fund raising.
    - Youth Initiative High School in Viroqua has an Agriculture Program. Students have used land at Jacob Hundt's for food production.

III. CHARITABLE FOOD PROGRAMS

1. Vernon County Senior Meal Sites

Those Vernon County residents who are 55 or older can contact the Vernon County Unit on Aging for program information.

Chaseburg: Tippy Toe Inn (M-Th)
307 Depot St. Chaseburg 483-2119

Coon Valley: Fjord Bar and Food (M-Th)
404 Central Ave. Coon Valley 452-2278

De Soto: Bright Spot (M-Th)
118 Mill Park De Soto 648-3514

De Soto: Prairie View Elementary School (M-Th)
E3245 Cty. Rd. N De Soto 648-2227

Hillsboro: Parkview Apartments (M-Th)
Hill Ave Hillsboro 489-2780

La Farge: Kickapoo Haven (T-F)
106 W. Main La Farge 625-2202

Ontario: Speakeasy Cafe (T-F)
201 Garden Ontario 337-4577

Readstown: Valley View Apartments (M-Th)
520 N. 4th St. Readstown 629-5442

Stoddard: Valley Apartments (M-Th)
350 Elm Dr. Stoddard 457-2219

Viroqua #1: Viroqua Senior Center (M-Th)
220 N. Main Viroqua 637-3529

Viroqua #2: Park View Manor (M-Th)
200 Park View Ct. Viroqua 637-2626

Westby: Westby Community Center (M-Th)
206 N. Main Westby 634-2699

2. Food Pantries

The following is a list of food pantries that provide emergency food assistance to Vernon County residents. Each pantry has different times of operation and requirements to participate. Four pantries (New Hope, Good Samaritan, Living Faith, and Bethel Butikk) rely on TEFAP (the federal Emergency Food Assistance Program, administered through the Westby CouleeCap office, 634-3104) for about half of their inventory. The rest rely solely on community donations.

DeSoto: New Hope United Methodist Church
E2290 Hwy 82 (location); E 1421 Hwy 82 (mail) De Soto 54624; 648-2644

Hillsboro: First Congregational Church
620 High Ave. Hillsboro 54634; 489-2492

Hillsboro: Good Samaritan
128 Mill St. (location); POB 389 (mail) Hillsboro 54634; 489-2492 or 489-3627

LaFarge: La Farge Free Methodist Church
214 S. Cherry St. LaFarge 54639; 625-4197

Stoddard: St. Matthews Evangelical Lutheran Church
303 N. Main St. Stoddard; 457-2711

Viroqua: Good Shepherd Lutheran Church
504 S. Main St. Viroqua 54665; 637-3978

Viroqua: Living Faith Church
852 N. Main St. Viroqua 54665; 637-7470

Westby: Bethel Butikk
341 Black River Ave. Westby 54667; 634-3473

Westby: Salvation Army Vernon County
314 Black River Ave. Westby 54667; 634-3473

3. State Food Stamp/FoodShare Benefits

FoodShare benefits are administered through the Vernon County Human Services office at E7410 County Road BB (637-5210). Benefits have been steadily rising, with the monthly average number of recipients in Vernon County growing from 686 in 2000, 1,057 in 2004, to 1,733 in 2008.

The following is a list of stores and farms that accept Food Stamps in Vernon County:

Walgreens 517 North Main St. Viroqua

Viroqua Food Cooperative 609 North Main St. Viroqua

Village Market 1230 North Main St. Viroqua

Wal-Mart 1133 North Main St. Viroqua

Harmony Valley Farm S3442 Wire Hollow Viroqua

Kwik Trip 603 South Main St. Viroqua

Kwik Trip 520 North Main St. Viroqua

Dollar General 93 Swiggum Westby

Hansons IGA 419 North Main St. Westby

Bloomingdale Community Foods E8959 Ridge Road Westby

Dollar General 1231 Water Ave. Hillsboro

Hillsboro County Market E18590 Hwy 33/82 Hillsboro

Kwik Trip 229 Mill St. Hillsboro

Small Family CSA S2958 W. Salem Ridge Rd. La Farge

Bergums Food Market 101 North Maple Street La Farge

Kwik Trip 202 Main St. Stoddard

Kwik Trip 308 Central Ave. Coon Valley

Viola Natural Foods Coop 110 Commercial St. Viola

4. WIC

WIC stands for Women Infants & Children, a federal USDA program that provides grants to states for supplemental foods, health care referrals, and nutrition education for low-income pregnant, breastfeeding, and non-breastfeeding postpartum women, and to infants and children up to age five who are found to be at nutritional risk. WIC benefits are administered through the Vernon County Human Services office in Viroqua (637-5210 or 637-5251). Vernon County staffs satellite clinics in Hillsboro, Coon Valley, Ontario and DeSoto.

WIC participation in January of 2008 was 752. The average monthly number of participants in 2007 was 680. These numbers represent individuals not families. According to Vernon County Human Services over 45% of the low-income persons in Vernon County receive WIC benefits. Vernon County has the ability to provide WIC benefits to 100% of the county's eligible residents. The number one participant criticism is the fact that the program does not cover the purchase of organic food products.

WIC provides farmer's market vouchers for the purchase of fresh fruit and vegetables from participating farmer's market vendors during the summer months.

WIC Retailers:

- Most grocery stores (Wal-Mart, Village Market, IGA Westby) except for the Viroqua Food Coop because a % of total stock is not organic.

- Farm Stands (2-3 in 2007)
- Viroqua and Hillsboro Farmers Market
    - June 1st – October 31st
    - Must have a farmer's market voucher
    - Only fresh veggies

Eligible Food Products: (no produce or fruit)

- Cereals
- Juice
- Dried Bean, Lentils, Peas (no fresh or frozen)
- Peanut Butter
- Cheese (no specialty, goat cheese or deli cheese)
- Eggs (no organic, natural, cage free or free range)
- Milk (no organic, soy, rice)
- Formula
- Infant Cereals

IV. GROCERY AND RETAIL FOOD OUTLETS

Many area grocers offer at least a small amount of local foods, but most of them do not label them as such, so interested shoppers may have to hunt for them. The exception to this is the Viroqua Food Co-op, who is committed to buying locally produced foods whenever possible as part of their mission and utilize special 'local' signage to make identification easy. Organic Valley, Westby Co-op Creamery, and Pasture Pride run retail outlet stores in LaFarge, Westby, and Cashton respectively. The Cashton Produce Auction between Cashton and Hillsboro is open to the public and specializes in locally grown or produced fruits, vegetables, and baked goods. There are also many Amish homesteads scattered across the county that are open to the public and sell eggs, produce, and baked goods. One Sun Farm and Bakery (637-6895) off of Highway 56 outside of La Farge also runs a retail store featuring their produce, meats, home-made pizzas and other local products. Artos Bakery at the Main Street Station in Viroqua sells their made-from scratch bread, baked goods, and local farm products.

IV. RESTAURANTS

There are several area restaurants that offer locally sourced food to some degree on their menus. The most commonly seen foodstuffs are dairy products from Westby Co-op Creamery, local seasonal produce, and meat from local lockers. Most restaurants do not advertise their use, if any, of local products – customers must ask if interested. However,

The Driftess Café, the Viroqua Food Co-op Deli, and Sibby's Organic Zone – all in Viroqua – are dedicated to buying locally produced food as much as possible.

VI. COMMUNITY SUPPORTED AGRICULTURE

Community Supported Agriculture forges mutually committed relationships between local households and farms producing fresh food. Household members support the farm by paying an annual fee in the beginning of the season (when most farmers are typically cash-poor) that entitles them to a "share" of the season's harvest, be it bountiful or not. During the season, members pick up a weekly box of fresh foods (which may include produce, fruits, cheeses, eggs, meats, poultry, flowers, herbs or preserves) at the farm or centralized drop-off locations.

There are a couple of opportunities for households to reduce the cost of a CSA membership. MACSAC (Madison Area Community Supported Agriculture Coalition) runs a CSA cost-share program called Partner Shares for low-income households. Only CSA's that are a part of MACSAC are eligible. Applications and a list of participating farms are available at www.macsac.org or by calling (608)-226-0300. Additionally, several health care providers and HMO's offer rebates to members for eligible CSA shares. MACSAC has a list of these also available on their website.

Vernon County is rich in CSA farms that service both local and regional communities. The following is a list of CSAs currently servicing Vernon County. Although we have made our best effort to create an exhaustive list for 2009, we cannot guarantee that the following list is complete, as new farms crop up every year.

Bella Sol Organics (Janice Blair)
Grass-fed beef and pork, chicken, turkey, ducks
S5868 Olson Ln. Viroqua
637-6727 www.blackberryridgellc.com

Driftless Organics (Josh and Noah Engel)
Vegetables, sunflower oil, grass-fed beef
50561 Cty. Rd. B Soldiers Grove
734-3711 www.driftlessorganics.com

Driftless Farm (Amelia Baxter)
Vegetables, salsas, honey
E2890 Lorenz Rd. Stoddard
452-2315 www.driftlessfarm.net

Harmony Valley (Richard de Wilde)
Vegetables, berries, grass-fed beef
S3442 Wire Hollow Rd. Viroqua
483-2143 www.harmonyvalley.com

Keewaydin Farm (Rufus Haucke)
Vegetables
152 Haucke Ln.Viola
627-1701 www.keewaydinfarms.com

Lynwood Farm and CSA (Lynn Tschumper)
Herbs, vegetables
Stoddard
483-2718 lynwood@mwt.net

Ridgeland Harvest (Cate & Mat Eddy)
Vegetables, grass-fed beef, pork
E5538 Nelson Rd. Viroqua
675-3855 www.ridgelandharvest.com

Small Family Farm CSA (Jillian Jacqinot)
Vegetables, fruit, beef
S4374 Haugrud Hollow La Farge
625-4178 www.smallfamilyfarmcsa.com

Spring Valley Produce
vegetables
E15487 Warner Ave. Hillsboro

Sylvan Meadows (Virginia and John Goeke)
Grassfed beef, lamb, pork, vegetables, bread, berries, fruit, honey, maple syrup
E8303 Hwy SS Viroqua
637-2544 naturewool@mwt.net

Twinhawks Hollow Farm (Sandra Eldredge)
Chicken, vegetables, lamb, herbs
E15936 Champion Ln. Hillsboro
528-4628

Westridge Produce (Jake and Kim Jakubowski)
Vegetables
26820 Kasts Ln. Blue River
536-3017

Whitakers (Faith and Duane Whitaker)
Vegetables
S2822 Garner Hill Rd. Hillsboro
489-2114

CHAPTER V

A PROFILE OF THE LOCAL SCHOOL FOOD SYSTEM

1. FOOD SERVICES
    i. School Meal Programs
2. VERNON COUNTY FARM TO SCHOOL PROGRAM

I. FOOD SERVICES

School Meal Programs

School Lunch Program Profile:
Pleasant Ridge Waldorf School Organic Hot Lunch Program

PRWS Organic Hot Lunch Program provides over 10,000 nourishing meals a year to students and faculty. Started eight years ago, it was one of the first organic hot lunch programs in the country. Four days a week, the program offers a 100% made-from-scratch meal. The diverse, rotating menu consists of one entrée and two sides that are vegetarian, nutritious, and protein balanced. All of the program's food and personnel costs (a coordinator/cook and four part-time, special-needs adults) are entirely funded through meal fees (currently $2.75/meal).

The program purchases locally grown food whenever possible. Much of the program's staples, such as onions, garlic, early potatoes, and winter squash are grown by its coordinator/cook, Jim Hallberg. A small amount of the program's produce is grown by the school's 3rd and 8th grade agriculture classes. Other locally grown food comes from farms associated with the school (families who have children currently or formerly in the school or farmers who graduated from the school). The rest of the school's purchases are ordered through the Viroqua Food Co-op, with an emphasis on regional or at least domestic product.

The program is a model for healthy, affordable, locally focused hot lunch programs. Hallberg has helped eight other schools start similar programs.

VERNON COUNTY AND NORTH CRAWFORD FARM TO SCHOOL PROGRAM

(Researched and Written by Suzie Howe, Food and Farm Initiative Steering Committee)

Ed Block and Kait Keely were hired in October of 2008 through an AmeriCorps grant to implement a Farm to School Program in Vernon County School Districts and in North Crawford School District. Ed Block and Kait Keely are two very different people who are performing two very different roles to meet a common goal. To provide a sustainable local food system that will provide quality local foods to area school districts for the nutritional enrichment of the children in these schools.

Ed comes to his role as Food Procurement Specialist with experience as a master gardener and a commitment to the local community and local foods. Ed initiated his role with a planning phase. During this time Ed worked toward his goal to provide a system to enable local school districts to connect with local farmer/producers. Ed reviewed Farm to School programs that are currently functioning both in Wisconsin and throughout the country. Ed also networked with community resources including UW agriculture extension agents and school district personnel. During this process Ed worked to learn of the schools food needs and goals as well as barriers to creating a Farm to School Program. Ed's target area included North Crawford and Vernon County School Districts. The majority of school districts contacted, including North Crawford, Viroqua, Westby, La Farge and De Soto, have expressed an interest in creating a Farm to School Program. This interest included a $500.00 match for the AmeriCorps grant.

The second phase of creating a Farm to School Program was to interview local farmer/producers. Ed defined a local farmer/producer as one who operates within 10 miles of a given school. This area was determined as it allows for free delivery in most instances reducing the overall cost to the school of food purchased. Ed has met with several farmer/producers and indicates that the reception for a Farm to School Program has been positive. Ed desires to create a system that will be a win-win situation for the schools and producers. In order to accomplish this Ed has discussed the use of seconds, quality food that does not have the perfect store shelf appearance, with both schools and farmer/producers. The use of seconds is a natural choice for both entities. Types of foods being considered for this program include, but are not limited to fruits such as apples, cranberries and raspberries and vegetables such as squash, root crops, peppers, tomatoes, peas and beans, onions, broccoli, cabbage and greens.

Kait comes to her role as the Nutrition Educator with a youthful enthusiasm and a strong desire to work with kids. Kait, a native to area schools, including Kickapoo and De Soto, provides the educational component of the Farm to School Program. While many children frequently eat fresh local foods, some of the children in the districts may not be familiar with the various foods that will soon be coming to their lunchroom. Kait's focus is to provide education to grades K-12 on nutrition and an introduction to healthy locally grown foods. This will include the benefits of buying local and the joys of trying foods that they may not have previously tried. Kait has been focusing on the elementary grades during the initial phase of this project. This process takes different forms at different schools. The type of nutrition education provided was determined through meetings with various school districts to determine from them what would best meet their needs.

Both the Viroqua and Westby School Districts have monthly taste tests in the lunchroom. During these taste tests Kait sets up a table that highlights a specific food that is grown locally and might appear on their lunch plate in the future. To date these have included cranberries in the form of craisins, sweet potatoes sliced and served raw with or without dip and cabbage served as coleslaw and sauerkraut (Powerkraut). Along with food offerings Kait provides educational information on the foods served and recipes are sent home.

In North Crawford and De Soto Kait visits each first grade elementary classroom once monthly for 30 minutes. During these visits an enhanced version of the lunchroom taste tests occurs with increased nutritional information and explanation of the importance of eating locally grown sustainable foods.

La Farge has been the most challenging school for Kait as they already have a strong food curriculum. This includes an active wellness committee, farm links and an active agricultural department. Kait does hope to initiate taste testing in some form at La Farge soon. She is also hoping to help La Farge School District to market some of their produce at a farmers market in the summer months.

Kait believes that parent involvement in the Farm to School Program is critical. Many parents have offered encouragement and ideas to enhance her efforts. Kait is very interested in creating programs that improve children's awareness about healthy eating. She plans to increase her programming to include the middle schools and high schools next year.

Ed and Kait both perform all of these tasks in about 20 hours per week. They are enthusiastic, thoughtful and effective in their efforts.

CHAPTER VI

VERNON COUNTY COMMUNITY FOOD ASSESSMENT CONCLUSIONS

TYING IT ALL TOGETHER:

Key Themes Regarding Food Security in Vernon County & Recommendations for Future Food Projects

The following are themes regarding the overall situation of food security in Vernon County. They are addressed with recommendations for future food projects, which have been identified through this 18-month long examination of the local food system. Since the Community Food Assessment was an active, participatory process, organizational relationships and collaborative groups have already started working on some of the recommended projects. The themes are separated by recommendations regarding local food supply (production) and local food consumption (access).

Current and future project partners include the following groups, organizations, agencies and other entities:

- Vernon Economic Development Association
- Vernon County Land & Water Conservation Department
- Vernon County Planning Commission
- Vernon County Tourism Council
- Vernon County 4-H Groups, FFA and other community youth groups
- Vernon County Farm Service Agency
- Vernon County Farm Bureau
- Vernon County Farmer's Union
- Viroqua Food Coop
- CROPP Cooperative
- Couleecap
- Local Human/Social Service Agencies
- Great Lakes Region Farm to School Network
- Land Stewardship Project
- Wisconsin Department of Agriculture, Trade and Consumer Protection
- Vernon County Farm to School Program
- University of Wisconsin Extension
- Vernon County Fair Board

- Area schools, churches, farmer's markets, food pantries, medical facilities, universities, institutions, farmers/gardeners, food retailers, restaurants

REGARDING THE LOCAL FOOD SUPPLY (PRODUCTION)

To increase the amount of local food available and accessible to our population across the socioeconomic spectrum greater support is needed for those interested in and already engaged in food production and distribution for the local market. Such support should address the following obstacles and needs:

1. SUPPORT FOR ECOLOGICALLY AND ECONOMICALLY SUSTAINABLE PRODUCTION SYSTEMS

2. SUPPORT FOR FARMLAND PRESERVATION FOR THE PRODUCTION OF FOOD WHICH CAN BE CONSUMED LOCALLY

3. SUPPORT FOR THE PROCESSING, MARKETING, STORAGE AND DISTRIBUTION OF LOCAL FARM PRODUCTS

4. PROVIDE CONSUMER EDUCATION TO SUPPORT LOCAL FOOD AND AGRICULTURE

5. IMPROVE ACCESS TO PUBLIC GROWING SPACES FOR NON-FARM RESIDENTS

1. SUPPORT FOR ECOLOGICALLY AND ECONOMICALLY SUSTAINABLE PRODUCTION SYSTEMS

More technical training for new and inexperienced farmers is needed to create a bridge between agricultural development and the need to foster new farmers. Such programs might include:

PROJECT: **New Producer & Continued Training/Education**

- Including direct marketing opportunities for producers, ideas and technical education for creating a profitable agricultural enterprise, and season extension techniques. Expand outreach for management intensive grazing groups to youth in 4-H and new farmers.

PROJECT: **Farm Field Classes**

- Hands-on education experience for young/potential farmers

PROJECT: **On-Farm Educational/Paid Internship Program**

- Interested/potential new farmers

2. SUPPORT FOR PRESERVATION OF FARMLAND FOR PRODUCTION OF FOOD WHICH CAN BE CONSUMED LOCALLY

PROJECT: **Farmland Preservation Initiatives**

- Utilize the myriad number of land conservation programs that give incentives to landowners who desire to keep their land agricultural in perpetuity

PROJECT: **Campaign which highlights Vernon County's history and modern bounty of diversified farms**

- Efforts to promote tourism development

3. SUPPORT FOR THE PROCESSING, MARKETING, STORAGE AND DISTRIBUTION OF LOCAL FARM PRODUCTS

Local farmers, retailers, and restaurants expressed the need for an efficient, cost-effective locally based distribution system. These projects could address a lack of dependable delivery systems for receiving or delivering local products and could offer support to farmers who do not have the time to complete their own deliveries.

PROJECT: **Distribution, Marketing, & Storage Facility/System**

- Local agricultural products

PROJECT: **Community/Incubator Kitchen**

- Educating people on how to utilize local foods and to enable local farmers to develop value-added products from locally produced food

PROJECT: **Greater Producer Wholesale Opportunities**

- Retail outlets, schools, restaurants, farmers' markets, Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) programs, and worksite CSAs

PROJECT: **Development of Local Small-Scale Specialty Markets**

- Improve local distribution

PROJECT: **More Farmers' Market Days**

- Increase distribution and outlets for locally produced food

PROJECT: **Greater Utilization of Existing Website Resources**

- Link farmers and retailers

PROJECT: **Farm to Institution Purchasing Program**

- Link farmers and schools, hospitals, care facilities, etc.

4. CONSUMER EDUCATION TO SUPPORT LOCAL FOOD AND AGRICULTURE

It is clear from farmers that there is the desire for an educational campaign that would increase community and institutional awareness on the benefits of buying local. Such education could build on existing momentum and help increase the support for local agriculture and local food-related business development.

PROJECT: **Buy-Local Marketing/Education Program**

- Promote the benefits of buying local food from health, economic and sustainable community perspectives

PROJECT: **Farm Tours**

- Increase awareness of local food production, safe and economical food preservation, and the food system in general

PROJECT: **Consumer Education at Farmers' Markets**

- Promote the benefits of buying locally produced food

PROJECT: **Youth Education**

- Increase awareness of the food system and agriculture policies on the local, national and international levels

PROJECT: **Community Cooking and Food Preservation Lessons**

- Increase purchase and consumption of locally grown, wholesome foods to enhance the local market for locally-produced foods and to improve public health by helping people consume fewer highly processed foods

5. IMPROVE ACCESS TO PUBLIC GROWING SPACES FOR NON-FARM RESIDENTS

PROJECT: **Education Programs and Greater Access to Resources for more Town-Based and Small-Scale Agricultural Production**

- Promote gardening and the concept of "growing your own," which are key strategies for strengthening the food system that will have wide-ranging effects. The effects include popular elements such as: community reliance, self-reliance, community education, research, public-private partnerships (especially with community gardens), school education and meals, policy improvements, healthy lifestyles (i.e. physical activity), and affordability of high quality food

PROJECT: **Land-Link Network**

- Created between landowners and non-landowners (or small-landowner producers who want to grow more food) to make use of experience, land, production, and water that is needed to grow more food. Such a system could help connect those with agricultural resources to those without resources and are interested in growing food.

REGARDING LOCAL FOOD CONSUMPTION (ACCESS)

Fundamental differences exist in Vernon County. These differences must be considered to effectively and equitably improve our local food system:

1. INCOME AND FINANCIAL ASSET DISPARITIES

2. NEEDS AND RESOURCES OF SCHOOLS

3. FOOD NEEDS AND RESOURCES FOR REMOTE RURAL AREAS

1. INCOME AND FINANCIAL ASSET DISPARITIES

It is theorized that the ability and willingness of residents of Vernon County to chose local foods as part of their food budget is affected by an individual's or family's income and

financial assets. The basic health and food needs of different socioeconomic groups are essentially the same; the difference is access due to both perceived and real costs.

PROJECT: **Coordinated Effort to "Glean" Unsold Produce from Local Farms**

- Distribution to people who want and need it

PROJECT: **Affordable Food Purchasing and Cooking Program**

- For those that do not have the knowledge or skills necessary to purchase and consume inexpensive, healthy foods

PROJECT: **Aggressively Market WIC Farmers' Market Nutrition Program**

- Improve access to local foods to WIC program participants

PROJECT: **Local Guide to Charitable Food Programs which can store and handle unprocessed whole locally-grown foods**

- For both consumers who are actively seeking local foods and for local farmers who wish to donate unsold, but healthful and safe foods

PROJECT: **Improve Cold Storage Capacity for Food Pantries in all parts of the County**

- Increase opportunities to accept donations of fresh, local wholesome vegetables which require refrigeration. This project could be a coordinated effort to solicit donations and/or grants to this end.

PROJECT: **Greenhouse and/or Garden Projects**

- Alternative food sources for charitable food programs

PROJECT: **Aggressively Market Electronic Benefits Transfer (EBT food stamp) Farmers' Market Program**

- Accept Food Stamps at area farmers' markets

2. NEEDS AND RESOURCES OF SCHOOLS

Vernon County school districts are important community institutions and they influence cultural and economic patterns. They are also major employers in the county. Each of the schools has different economic resources and needs which affect their interest and capability

to participate in various food programs. Differences aside, the districts would benefit from pooling human and economic resources when it comes to serving thousands of students in the county each day.

PROJECT: **Comprehensive Farm-to-School Program**

- Farm-to-school is a concept that resonates with the public and effectively "frames" many of the overall food system issues including access to healthy food choices, the importance of food quality over price, a need for system-wide policy changes and the importance of local foods.

PROJECT: **Youth Community Gardens**

- Educate and promote agriculture and local foods.

3. FOOD NEEDS AND RESOURCES FOR REMOTE RURAL AREAS

A lack of access, especially to healthy foods, exist due to costs, transportation constraints or distance to agencies and services and is a need the county must address to increase food security, especially in rural areas and for our aging population.

PROJECT: **Development of Rural Farmers' Markets**

- In the outlying, small farm towns. Town dump/recycling sites might be used for this purpose.

PROJECT: **Rural Food Exchange Program**

- Connect neighbors that produce food and those that do not

PROJECT: **Rural Community Garden Plots**

- Areas where people may go to gain knowledge and support from more experienced gardeners

PROJECT: **Rural Local Food Delivery Program**

- For seniors and low-income persons that improves access to healthy foods

PROJECT: **Rural Charitable Food Programs**

- Distribute of foods to those in rural areas in need

SUMMARY

The availability and affordability of safe, healthy, sustainable, local foods is an issue that must be addressed when redeveloping our local food system. The assessment concludes that there is much enthusiasm to improve our local food security. It is widely recognized that our economic well-being is closely tied to the strength of our capacity to produce food for local consumption. The recommendations listed for future community food projects are designed to address gaps in already existing food programs and/or create new programs, make way for food and agricultural policy change and involve and empower the community to address food security in an equitable and effective fashion.

By completing the Vernon County Community Food Assessment, information has been compiled regarding the resources and needs of the local food system, under-served populations, Farm-to-School programs and key stakeholders. The process has also strengthened links between existing food system groups, promoted community learning and participation around the local food system and food security and generated results to plan effective community food projects.

3.WHAT'S NEW AND WHAT'S NEXT?

ACCOMPLISHMENTS AND SHARING ASSESSMENT INFORMATION

The process of conducting the Vernon County Community Food Assessment has already resulted in several accomplishments that strengthen local food security. Accomplishments include the 2008 Harvest Dinner, 2008 Eat Local Challenge, and the creation of the Vernon County Farm to School Program and 5th Season Harvest Project.

The next steps in the process of building a stronger local food system are to publicly share the findings and recommendations of the Vernon County Food Assessment, to prioritize the assessment recommendations and to develop a series of action plans to implement future food projects.

The Valley Stewardship Network Food & Farm Initiative sponsored two Vernon County presentations showcasing Ken Meter's Southwest Wisconsin Rural Economic Study and the major findings and recommendations of the Vernon County Community Food Assessment. The presentations were held Tuesday, May 12th and Thursday, May 21st, 2009.

This document will be available on the internet through Valley Stewardship Network's website. Bound copies of this document will be available at county public libraries, schools, and Vernon County Museum. Individuals and organizations may purchase bound copies to be printed as requested.

APPENDIX A

BASIC STEPS OF A COMMUNITY FOOD ASSESSMENT

This checklist provides an overview of the steps typically involved in planning and implementing an assessment. These steps may not all be needed in each situation, and they won't necessarily occur in this sequence. ("Steps" borrowed from the Community Food Security Coalition's *What's Cooking in Your Food System? A Guide to Community Food Assessment, 2002)*

Get some background on Community Food Assessments

- Read reports from previous assessments and related resources
- Talk to people who have conducted assessments to learn about their experiences

Recruit Participants

- Identify a group of key stakeholders and organize an initial meeting
- Determine the group's interest in conducting an assessment
- Identify and recruit other participants, representing diverse interests and skills

Determine assessment purposes and goals

- Identify participants' goals and interests
- Clarify and prioritize initial goals for assessment
- Revisit and refine goals later as needed

Develop a planning and decision-making process

- Clarify who will make decisions and how
- Clarify the roles of participants, defining various levels of participation
- Develop a plan for meaningful community participation

Define the community

- Define geographic boundaries for the assessment
- Decide whether to focus on specific population groups

Identify funds and other resources

- Develop overall budget
- Secure grants or other funding
- Identify in-kind resources and a project sponsor
- Recruit and train staff and volunteers as needed

Plan and conduct research

- Develop assessment questions and indicators
- Identify existing data and information needed
- Determine appropriate research methods
- Collect data from existing and original sources
- Process and analyze data
- Summarize assessment findings

Present and disseminate assessment findings

- Identify audiences for assessment and appropriate ways to reach them
- Compile assessment findings into a report and/or other materials

- Disseminate findings through materials, meetings and media outreach

Evaluate and celebrate

- Review assessment process and outcomes
- Celebrate! Thank and honor participants

Implement follow-up actions

- Develop goals and action plan based on the assessment results

- Consider whether to implement another assessment phase

APPENDIX B

COMMUNITY MEMBERS WHO ASSISTED WITH INITIAL CFA PROJECT PLANNING & DEVELOPMENT

Name	Phone #	Business/Organization Affiliations
Jessica Luhning	637-3615	VSN Projects Coordinator
Matt Urch	675-3766	VSN, Land Stewardship Project, North Crawford High School
Sara Martinez	675-3766	VSN, Family and Children's Center
Lori Harms	637-7136	Driftless Café, Family Farm Defenders
Jean Young	634-2375	Elegant Stone Products
Suzie Howe	629-5019	Family and Children's Center
Dan Peper	675-3866	Driftless Folk School, Green Builders Guild, Viroqua Food Coop, VSN
Jenny Borchardt	773-805-3210	Produce farmer
Bill Motlong	629-5561	VSN
K OBrien	637-7778	Driftless Café, Local Theatre Group
Beth Baker	647-8870	Richland County Emergency Planning
Angie Scotland	637-7524	Organic Valley(CROPP), VSN
Dani Lind	624-3525	Viroqua Food Coop
Sue Noble	637-5396	Vernon Economic Develop. Assoc.
Therese Laurdan	637-2493	Weston A. Price Foundation, Home Green Home
Sarah Johnson	637-7455	Viroqua School Board
Virginia Goeke	637-2544	Sylvan Meadows Farm
Janice Blair	637-6727	Blackberry Ridge Farm
Rink DaVee	888-281-9472	Local Fare! UW-Platteville

APPENDIX C

COMMUNITY FOOD ASSESSMENT METHODOLOGY

1. OVERVIEW
2. LITERATURE REVIEW AND OTHER CFAs
3. COUNTY INFORMATION & DATA RESOURCES
4. ASSESSMENT SURVEYS
5. OTHER COUNTY ASSESSMENTS
    a. SOUTHWEST WISCONSIN LOCAL FARM & FOOD ECONOMIC STUDY – *Produced by Ken Meter, Crossroads Resource Center*
    b. FARMER & VENDOR SURVEYS – *A Contribution of the Department of Rural Sociology, UW-Madison; Crawford County Extension and Valley Stewardship Network*
        i. An Evaluation of Food & Culture Tourism: Food Vendor Perspectives on Local Food Networks in Southwestern Wisconsin
        ii. An Evaluation of Food & Culture Tourism: Fresh Food Production for Local food Networks in Southwestern Wisconsin

I. OVERVIEW

Steering Committee members and collaborators represented a diverse spectrum of the local food system, each bringing a wealth of knowledge and experience to the table. Early discussions revealed one overarching common goal; the creation of a healthy and sustainable local food system.

The development of the VSN Food & Farm Initiative evolved out of the desire to raise awareness about the importance of supporting sustainable, small family farming practices as opposed to large, industrial agriculture operations. In addition, conversations with small family farmers over the summer and fall of 2007 indicated a need for increased market opportunities for locally produced food items.

It was determined, after conversations with other organizations tackling food system issues that the best place to start was with the completion of a Community Food Assessment. According to the Community Food Security Coalition, "Community Food Assessments are a powerful resource for helping organizations to be more effective, to maintain momentum, to

gain new allies, to build new knowledge and support in the community, and to bring about new policies and practices."[17]

II. LITERATURE REVIEW & OTHER CFAs

To begin, we dedicated a significant amount of time to researching the food assessment process. This included a review of current food system literature and an investigation of other community food assessments such as the Missoula County, Montana *Our Foodshed in Focus* report; the Salinas, California-based Agriculture & Land-Based Training Association's *The Face of Food on the Central Coast*; La Plata County, Colorado Food Assessment; and the Milwaukee, Wisconsin Food System Assessment Study.

The Community Food Security Coalition (CFSC) and their extensive website[18] serves as an incredible resource for community organizations like ours exploring the food assessment process. The CFSC published a guide to the food assessment process titled *What's Cooking in Your Food System*[19]. In addition, the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) published the invaluable *Community Food Security Assessment Toolkit*, which includes a "general guide to community assessment and materials for assessing household food security, food resource accessibility, food availability and affordability, and community food production resources".[20]

III. COUNTY INFORMATION & DATA RESOURCES

Steering Committee members were able to utilize the USDA *Community Food Security Assessment Toolkit* as a guide for retrieving existing socioeconomic, demographic and food system program participation data from a variety of national, state and local tools and resources. These resources included:

- Socioeconomic and Demographic Data
    - United States Census Bureau's Internet Site: www.census.gov
- Federal Food Assistance Programs
    - Wisconsin Department of Health Services
        - Vernon County Human Services
        - Vernon County Health Services
        - Vernon County Unit on Aging
    - Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction

[17] Pothukuchi, Joseph, Burton, & Fisher. *What's Cooking in Your Food System? A Guide to Community Food Assessment*. Community Food Security Coalition, 2002.
[18] www.foodsecurity.org
[19] Pothukuchi, Joseph, Burton, & Fisher. *What's Cooking in Your Food System? A Guide to Community Food Assessment*. Community Food Security Coalition, 2002.
[20] Cohen, Barbara. *Community Food Security Assessment Toolkit*. Economic Research Service. United States Department of Agriculture, July 2002.

- Community Food Production Data
    - University of Wisconsin- Extension Vernon County
    - Vernon County Land & Water Conservation Department
    - Vernon County Area School Districts
    - Viroqua Partners
    - Vernon County Historical Society
    - United States Department of Agriculture Census of Agriculture Internet Site: www.usda.gov.
    - United States Census Bureau's Economic Census Internet Site: www.census.gov.
- Agriculture Data
    - Census of Agriculture Data: http://www.agcensus.usda.gov/
- Background Information
    - Vernon County Comprehensive Planning Committee's Summary of Themes from the Summer 2008 County-wide Listening Sessions
    - Trout Unlimited 1999 Kickapoo Watershed Conservation Plan
    - 2007 Vernon County Workforce Profile, a document prepared by the Office of Economic Advisors at the Wisconsin Department of Workforce Development
    - "History of Vernon County, Wisconsin" published by Union Publishing Company in Springfield, Illinois (1884)
    - September 1981 Vernon County, Wisconsin Farmland Preservation Plan, Volume 2: Background Report
    - Vernon County Land Water Conservation Department

IV. ASSESSMENT SURVEYS

The Steering Committee took advantage of a simple and adaptive assessment tool utilized by the Oregon State University Extension Service in their *Oregon Small Farms Technical Report: Tools for Rapid Market Assessment*[21]. The Dot Survey approach was easily utilized by steering committee members as it required little training or explanation for implementation. In addition, Dot Surveys require minimal resources as opposed to traditional survey techniques like interviews and written questionnaires, which are poorly suited to venues like county fairs and farmer's markets. As the Oregon State surveyors discovered, the "Dot Survey approach significantly increases the number of consumers surveyed and the percentage who

[21] Lev, Brewer and Stephenson. *Oregon Small Farms Technical Report: Tools for Rapid Market Assessment.* Oregon State University Extension Service, 2004.

agree to participate. This approach provides more accurate assessments of participant preference and behavior."[22]

Dot Survey questions are displayed on easels and participants indicate their responses by placing a colorful, round sticker next to their chosen response. Steering Committee members surveyed Vernon County residents at three locations during the summer months of 2008. The three locations included the Organic Valley Kickapoo Country Fair in La Farge, Wisconsin; the Viroqua Farmers Market and the Viroqua Area Schools "Back to School Night". Participants were asked questions about their annual local food budget, recommendations for farmers market improvements and Farm to School program preferences.

V. OTHER COUNTY ASSESSMENTS

In recent months the local food and farm system of southwest Wisconsin has been highlighted in a number of studies and publications. We were able to incorporate rural economic data and survey information collected from other county assessments including the 2008 farmer and vendor surveys completed by the Department of Rural Sociology, UW-Madison in collaboration with Crawford County Extension and the Valley Stewardship Network. The surveys are entitled: 1) An Evaluation of Food & Culture Tourism: Food Vendor Perspectives on Local Food Networks in Southwestern Wisconsin; and 2) An Evaluation of Food & Culture Tourism: Fresh Food Production for Local Food Networks in Southwestern Wisconsin.

In addition, the VSN Food & Farm Initiative contracted with the Minneapolis, Minnesota-based Crossroad Resource Center's Ken Meter to produce a "Finding Food in Farm Country" rural economic study for the southwest Wisconsin counties of Vernon, Monroe, Richland and Crawford. Vernon County data has been extrapolated and included in the findings of the Vernon County CFA report.

[22] Lev, Brewer and Stephenson. *Oregon Small Farms Technical Report: Tools for Rapid Market Assessment*. Oregon State University Extension Service, 2004.