

SPOTLIGHTING LOCAL FOOD SYSTEM STEWARDS

MISSOULA FOOD POLICY ADVISORY BOARD
NEWSLETTER



MFPAB CHIPs in to Support Food Access

The Missoula Food Policy Advisory Board (MFPAB) is excited to serve as the convening organization for one of the goals in the newest iteration of the Missoula City and County Community Health Improvement Plan (CHIP), developed by Missoula City-County Public Health and other community organizations and nonprofits.

MFPAB will bring community partners together to advance the goal:

"Improve access to nutritional food in Missoula County. Reduce food insecurity by addressing the root causes of food and nutrition insecurity."

Over the next five years, the Board looks forward to learning more about the work being done to address this particular goal in Missoula County and working towards its accomplishment.

If you, or an organization you know, is interested in collaborating and contributing to achieve this goal, please reach out: foodpolicyadvisoryboard.msla@gmail.com

Western Montana Growers Cooperative Receives \$66,000 to Expand Local Food Distribution

BY BLAKE LINEWEAVER AND
WESTYN KIEHN



The Missoula Food Policy Advisory Board recognizes the contributions of many organizations, producers, and food businesses in our city and county moving the needle towards a more sustainable and resilient local food system. Among these partners, the Western Montana Growers Cooperative (WMGC) stands out as a leader that has grown steadily over the last twenty years to meet a rising demand for locally grown products. Seeing a need to improve their existing footprint, the cooperative is scaling up their headquarters based in Missoula's Westside neighborhood.

“We are able to stretch our limited resources further to better serve our local agriculture community.”

The farmer-owned food hub recently secured \$66,000 in accessible financing to expand the co-op's distribution service and warehouse infrastructure, directly supporting its mission to provide a market in our region for fresh, high-quality products from local farmers and ranchers. This financial package was made possible through the Montana Local Food Financing Partnership (MLFFP), AgWest Farm Credit, and Valley Banks of Ronan.



“The Montana Local Food Financing Partnership has been a valuable tool to help WMGC expand our capacity,” says Dave Prather, General Manager for WMGC. “This program has helped us collateralize a construction loan and reach a better interest rate with our lender. In turn, we are able to stretch our limited resources further to better serve our local agriculture community. Our current project includes increasing our cooler and freezer capacity and making much-needed improvements to our warehouse.”

By aggregating, processing, and distributing nutritious, local food, businesses like WMGC play a vital role in:

- Ensuring farmers and ranchers receive a fair price for their products while maintaining consumer affordability;
- Creating secure jobs in the food and agriculture sector; and
- Promoting equitable access to nutritious foods across Montana.

However, these vital food businesses often face barriers to accessing the financial capital needed for their ongoing growth and expansion. Common barriers include lack of collateral, high interest rates on commercial loans, and insufficient cash flow to provide matching funds for grant-funded expansion projects.

MLFFP provides customized credit enhancement tools to equip food retailers, food hubs, and direct-to-consumer programs, like community supported agriculture (CSAs), here in Missoula and across the state to overcome these initial barriers and higher costs to expanding their food businesses.

The \$3 million MLFFP program is coordinated by Mission West Community Development Partners, a regional economic development nonprofit based in Ronan, Montana, in collaboration with Hopa Mountain and the Montana Department of Agriculture.

Do you operate—or know someone who operates—a food retail, aggregation, or business involved in direct-to-consumer sales of nutritious foods? The partnership is currently welcoming inquiries from prospective food businesses looking to expand.

Contact Westyn Kiehn, Mission West's Business Development Manager, at westyn.kiehn@missionwestcdp.org for more information about available funding and support.

Eligible applicants will undergo a business health assessment and receive tailored support packages to help them overcome financing barriers and achieve sustainable growth.

For more information on MLFFP:

- [What is the Montana Local Food Financing Partnership?](#)
- [How Do I Apply?](#)

After 25 Years, Sustainable Food Systems Leader Retires from UM

BY ERIKA BERGLUND

Joining the Environmental Studies program faculty at the University of

Montana in 2000, Professor Neva Hassanein has spent the last 25 years building and sustaining the program's Sustainable Food and Farming focus area, mentoring students as changemakers in their communities, and fostering valuable partnerships and connections between the University and diverse environmental organizations. With her retirement, Neva leaves a legacy of empowered students and lasting improvements to the food systems and communities they now help lead.



Neva's teaching, scholarship, and activism have inspired a generation of UM students—myself included—seeking to make a difference in their communities, particularly through the advancement of sustainable food systems. As a professor, Neva not only provided students with the knowledge and skills to pursue careers in environmental stewardship, but she also modeled what it means to be a dedicated and effective activist in one's community. To me, this was one of the most meaningful and unique aspects of Neva's mentorship.

Among her many achievements throughout her professorship, Neva played an instrumental role in strengthening Missoula's local food system, including the following initiatives:

- Creation of the Program in Ecological Agriculture and Society (PEAS) farm in partnership with Garden City Harvest
- Completion of the 2004 Missoula Community Food Assessment
- Creation of Farm Connect Montana (formerly Community Food and Agriculture Coalition) and Grow Montana
- Creation of Missoula Food Policy Advisory Board
- Establishment of Corner Farm, Montana's first Community Land Trust project specifically designed to protect sustainable farming operations in perpetuity

Neva's work exemplifies what it means to build systems that better serve communities and the land, not only through collaborative initiatives and scholarship, but by empowering people—students, farmers, policymakers, and community members—to carry the work forward. While she may be stepping away from her role at UM, Neva's future endeavors will no doubt continue to nourish Missoula's local food system and influence efforts far beyond it.

Thank you, Neva, for your vision, commitment, and belief in the power of food to transform communities.

MFPAB Wants to Hear from You!

Are you involved in an effort that is relevant to MFPAB's work?

Community groups, individuals, and organizations all over Missoula County are advocating for increased access to healthy food for all. If you are a part of this effort, we want to hear your story! The more we stay connected to local action, the more effective we can be as a whole.

Voices we'd love to hear from:

- Ranchers and farmers providing food to our community.
- Local organizations directly working to address food insecurity in our community.
- Local organizations whose clientele experience the impacts of food insecurity.
- Parents in search of nutritious options for their children and families.
- Farmers Market and Grocery Store staff, who have their finger on the pulse of Missoula consumer habits.
- Individuals working in the restaurant industry.
- And so many more!



If you're interested in sharing your story with the board, contact us!
foodpolicyadvisoryboard.msla@gmail.com

Interested in Joining the Board?

MFPAB is now accepting applications for board vacancies!

If you're passionate about strengthening our local food system and advocating for policies that improve food access, sustainability, and resilience, we encourage you to apply. [Apply here](#), or send us an email if you're interested,

Food for Thought

Check out Missoula Food Bank and Community Center's new podcast series "LEVL with us," highlighting the work of their Lived Experiences, Voices, and Leaders (LEVL) program and its participants. [On Spotify.](#)