

MISSION WEST COOPERATIVE DEVELOPMENT CENTER

# PROFIT OR PASSION?

CED EXPERIENCES AND INSIGHTS FROM REGIONAL  
FOOD PURCHASERS: A CASE STUDY OF THE  
WESTERN MONTANA GROWERS COOPERATIVE



**OLIVIA ALEXANDER-LEEDER**

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# ABSTRACT

Understanding how regional food hubs participate in community economic development (CED) efforts requires an understanding of how the hub evolves synchronously with the community. Utilizing purchaser insight, this research constructs a more holistic view of the role of the Western Montana Growers Cooperative (WMGC), a regional food hub, in community economic development of the Western Montana region. In-depth qualitative interviews were conducted with a sample of WMGC's purchasers. These interviews provided insight into the maintenance and enhancement of WMGC's prevalence in the community through the markets in which they sell. Learning from the experiences and insights of WMGC's purchasers, this research further informs current understanding of the ways in which WMGC is a CED organization, and how WMGC can better partner with their purchasers and engage with consumers to enhance their influence in the Western Montana regional community.



# INTRODUCTION

Across the United States, many communities face on-going changes stemming from environmental degradation, economic dissatisfaction, and a breakdown in community identity. In the face of these issues, community economic development (CED) may provide practicable insight and panacea for struggling communities. Within CED theory and practice is the potential role of regional food systems, namely food hubs and agricultural cooperatives, and their ability to partially address multi-faceted community issues. Food possesses obvious importance for health and well-being in addition to its perhaps less obvious central place in the social, economic, cultural, and environmental sectors of communities (Christensen & Phillips, 2016). CED can capitalize on the power of regional food through the establishment of regional food hubs and their function in community asset building. Establishment of regional food hubs as CED intermediaries and the appreciative inquiry approach to community development both require the mapping, building, and maintenance of all seven types of community assets: physical, human, social, financial, environmental, political, and cultural (Flora, et al., 2016). This research relies heavily on the appreciative inquiry approach to community development and CED as a method to uncovering new insights in food hubs and CED organizations (Flora, et al., 2016).

The appreciative inquiry approach focuses on the way communities rely on and utilize their various assets (Flora, et al., 2016). Especially salient to this project is the appreciative inquiry approach's emphasis on fact-finding through "the power of story-telling [and]... the primacy of conversations and dialogue" (Flora et al., 2016, p. 450). Rooted in the values of appreciative inquiry, this research is a qualitative study of the Western Montana Growers Cooperative (WMGC), a regional food hub and agricultural cooperative that operates out of Missoula, Montana. This project consists of analysis of interviews conducted with purchasers from WMGC and how they interpret the role of the cooperative as well as the community influence of regional food. A previous case study of WMGC utilized the capability approach, an alternative assessment method that "conceptualizes development as broad sets of freedoms and opportunities," to better understand how various actors with WMGC interpret regional food's influence on development (Motzer, 2019, p. 1142). Though not adhering to a strict usage of the capability approach, this research similarly utilizes purchaser insight to construct a more holistic view of WMGC's and regional food's role in CED. Interviews conducted with participating purchasers provided insight into the maintenance and enhancement of WMGC's prevalence in the community through the markets in which it sells. Learning from the experiences and insights of WMGC's purchasers, this research further informs current understanding of the ways in which WMGC is a CED organization and how WMGC can better partner with their purchasers to enhance their influence in the Western Montana regional community.

# COMMUNITY ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT, FOOD HUBS, AND WMGC

Community economic development, both in theory and practice, provides the tools to understand and incorporate the diverse voices within communities in order to sustain long-lasting socioeconomic well-being. An inherently interconnected practice, CED can be cursorily understood as an intersection of community development and economic development; though more accurately, CED is a holistic practice that is historically rooted in supporting and uplifting marginalized communities of both place and identity (Cummings, 2001). The goal of CED is to utilize and develop the assets of individual communities to collaborate in the creation of a sustainable and internally focused economy and society (Anglin, 2011). Through identifying and amplifying assets, CED practices rely on theories of development such as the self-help method of community development and the economic self-development approach; specifically, both theories emphasize that ingenuity and entrepreneurialism stem from within, and is in turn fostered by, the community (Flora, et al., 2016). Practicing CED essentializes practitioner access to economic capacity and socio-political inclusion for diverse people, businesses, and organizations within the community (Shaffer, et al., 2006). There are many organizations, such as Community Economic Development Institutions (CEDIs) and Community Development Corporations (CDCs), that are crucial for the facilitation of CED practices for business and organizations within a community (Anglin, 2011). Regional food hubs are just one example of a business type often partnered with a CEDI that is experiencing increasing attention as a practical vector of CED.

Regional food hubs exist as both economic firms and social actors in communities (Barham et al., 2012). The importance of regional food hubs in the practice of CED is, in part, described by the importance of regional food, which is uniquely positioned as a key element in the social, cultural, economic, and environmental spheres of communities (Christensen & Phillips, 2016). Regional food hubs are often characterized as operating within a determined region and can facilitate a wide array of important services for regional food growers and producers (Barham, et al., 2012). Regional food hubs are frequently advertised as serving a wide gamut of important CED functions. Food hubs serve as the mediator of interactions between producers and consumers, through facilitating the expansion of small producers into larger markets, fostering entrepreneurialism, and stewarding the responsibilities that regional food producers have to the environment (Barham, et al., 2012). Regional food hubs work to address a supply-chain gap between producers and consumers of regional food (Diamond & Barham, 2011). Specifically, regional food hubs establish what

can be seen as a “values-based food value chain” in which they advance a specific set of social and political missions in concert with maintaining money in local circulation (Matson, et al., 2014, p. 7).

The central presence of social and economic values in regional food hub operation is especially salient with agricultural cooperatives. There are many obvious similarities between the tenets of CED practice and the core characteristics of cooperative structure and function (Phillips, 2012). Predominantly, cooperatives emphasize community and economic self-sufficiency, democratization of organizational attributes, as well as social-cultural-environmental core operational principles, which all mirror goals often ascribed to CED practices (Phillips, 2012; ICA, 2018). The International Cooperative Alliance (ICA, 2018) defines a cooperative as “an autonomous association of persons united voluntarily to meet their common economic, social, and cultural needs and aspirations through a jointly-owned and democratically-controlled enterprise.” This definition alone reflects the values of collective agency, shared goals, and self-sufficiency that are harmonious with theories of community and economic development (Flora, et al., 2016). Agricultural cooperatives are governed by a member-controlled (either producer or consumer) board of directors and earnings garnered by the cooperative are either returned to members or reinvested in the cooperative to improve their function (Hassanein, et al., 2013). Thus, cooperatives are, in addition to their guiding principles, structurally different than traditional businesses. Akin to most organizations and businesses, however, cooperatives are subject to federal and state laws, though they often possess individual sets of rules and bylaws for operation as determined by initial Articles of Incorporation and by the Board of Directors as the decision-makers for the cooperative (Hassanein, et al., 2013).

The focus of this research, the Western Montana Growers Cooperative (WMGC), is a producer-owned agricultural cooperative and food hub that has been operating out of Western Montana since 2003 (WMGC, 2020). Originally, operation occurred out of Arlee, Montana though in 2016 operations moved to Missoula, Montana, a change of location that provided greater access to infrastructure as well as a larger surrounding population. WMGC’s operational area spans Montana, Northern Idaho, and Eastern Washington, in which it markets products that include both fresh and frozen foods ranging from meat to dairy and eggs to vegetables (WMGC, 2020). The variety of products offered by WMGC enables their distribution across broad markets: from direct-to-consumer sales with Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) shares, to health food and grocery stores, restaurants, schools and institutions, and other producers. All aspects of regional food sale and distribution are handled by WMGC in their effort to make purchasing and consuming regional food as accessible as possible within their operational region. WMGC provides specific services for their members that extend beyond distribution, in some cases, to processing at the Mission Mountain Food Enterprise Center, as well as offering member

support with marketing (Hassanein, et al., 2013). Despite overcoming the initial hurdles of garnering support and managing expansion, WMGC is often regarded as an agricultural cooperative success story (Hassanein, et al., 2013).

WMGC strives toward a wide variety of CED operational goals and acts congruently. WMGC is built on a foundation of four values: “cooperation, appropriate technology, land stewardship, [and] social equity” (WMGC, 2020). Through incorporation of these four qualities, WMGC strives to be an organization in which the members build relationships with each other and the larger community; minimize costs to the producers, consumers, and environment; manage land in ways that are sustainable and beneficial; and, provide for all people in their community with nourishing, high-quality food (WMGC, 2020). In the effort to provide food to all community members, WMGC’s community partnership includes food donations to regional food banks as well as acceptance of Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits and payment plans for their CSA shares (Hassanein, et al., 2013; WMGC, 2020). In accordance with the four values WMGC strives to embody, they list four “business objectives” which are representative of their commitment to be a functional, reliable partner to their producers and members as well as being a responsible and proud supplier to their consumers (WMGC, 2020).

As a well-established and successful agricultural cooperative, it is no surprise that WMGC has been intensely studied in past years. Previous case studies of WMGC have indicated that the successes and challenges of working with the food hub are dynamic and iterative. Though the research contained in this project cannot lend any insight into potential changes observed by staff, members, or producers of WMGC, many of their insights regarding challenges and successes were shared by purchasers and are therefore briefly explored. A



2013 study of WMGC utilized a combination of techniques, including in-depth interviews with WMGC staff, growers, and purchasers in the health food and institution categories, to explore the operation of WMGC (Hassanein, et al., 2013). In this case study, many of the staff that were interviewed mentioned pride in food hub's ability to act as an "advocate for local food and agriculture" and that they were accomplished "as an aggregator of local products able to reach a greater number of markets" (Hassanein, et al., 2013, p. 35-37). Some concern was expressed over WMGC's need to increase marketing and advertising (Hassanein, et al., 2013, p. 53). Purchaser interviews indicated that the cooperative was viewed positively throughout ordering, delivery, and upon inspection of the quality of their products (Hassanein, et al., 2013, p. 112-113). However, purchasers also indicated a desire for increased direct marketing and educational materials (Hassanein, et al., 2013, p. 114-116). While some of the challenges of working for and with WMGC that were mentioned in the 2013 case study have since been addressed, such as a desire for continued growth and relocation to Missoula, other challenges are less obviously rectified or easily monitored (Hassanein, et al., 2013, p. 33).

A case study published in 2019 of WMGC provided some additional insight into the perceived societal effect of the cooperative as a means to increase understanding of regional food hubs' influence on rural development (Motzer, 2019). In this case study, interviews were conducted with "member growers; non-member growers; CSA consumers; and non-CSA consumers" (Motzer, 2019, p. 1144). Evaluation of interviews with these participants indicated that those involved with WMGC viewed their involvement positively; specifically member-growers reported economic gains and CSA consumers experience greater access to regional food and nutrition (Motzer, 2019). It was also widely observed that participants "perceived advances in agency and activism, fulfillment and inner peace, and participation of agricultural minorities" (Motzer, 2019, p. 1153). In contrast, the producers interviewed in this case study indicated that they felt their products didn't reach "rural or low-income consumers" and many were described as "feeling neglectful towards their neighboring communities" (Motzer, 2019, p. 1150). Additionally, some insight was provided that begged questions about how in-touch WMGC truly is with the community, in that "WMGC's beneficiaries are overwhelming urban, well-educated, well-off, and white," a sentiment that reiterates an observation appearing earlier in the case study's discussion that the "unchanged outcomes for disadvantaged groups, especially Native Americans and low-income households, reaffirm racial and social divisions in AFNs [alternative food networks]" (Motzer, 2019, p. 1153-1154). Regarding WMGC's function and CED influence as a multifaceted bridge for regional food, case studies indicate a diverse array of observations that ultimately attempt to link what has been theorized about regional food as a development vector and how it is truly experienced throughout communities.

# METHODS

Congruent with the previously discussed case studies, interviews were the preferred method of data collection for this project due to the need for first-person description and explanation of the individual and community experiences. Utilizing interviews as a data collection method enabled an “interpretive approach” (Hesse-Biber, 2017, p22). Valuable components of taking an interpretive approach to this research include the weight that it placed on “experience and perspective as important sources of knowledge” and the association with hermeneutic tradition, which “posits that the only way to understand social reality is from the perspective of those enmeshed within it” (Hesse-Biber, 2017, p22). This method of data collection is congruent with the knowledge gathering practiced with the appreciate inquiry approach to community development (Flora et al., 2016). To gather information about the ways WMGC is perceived as well as potential insights into ways to amplify WMGC’s influence in the Western Montana region, qualitative interviews were conducted. Purchasers with WMGC were chosen as interview participants to better understand the insight and experiences of theoretical bridges between WMGC and the regional community. Purchasers are defined as the various businesses that purchase goods from WMGC to then sell in some form to an end-sale customer, known as the consumer.

The choice to interview purchasers was informed by several theories regarding community economic development. Shaffer et al., (2006, p. 66) point out that “business’ interpretation of the market’s socioeconomic characteristics and how they influence decisions to provide particular good and services” is of special interest in understanding CED. Businesses act in CED by supplying goods, such as regional food, and by competing economically for community support (Shaffer et al., 2006). Specifically, businesses increase their success in a community by maintaining a knowledge of “prices, access to stores, variety of goods or services...and personal knowledge of the customer” (Shaffer et al., 2006, p. 66). Businesses, and those that mediate business practices therein, can also be viewed as social actors as opposed to strictly economic actors. Green (2008, p. 57) states that in order to understand social movements, which can include CED practices, the practitioner should “look at the multiple ways in which social actors understand the situation they face and believe that it can and should be changed.” As Green (2008, p. 57) points out, part of the framing approach to social movements is to incorporate the anecdotes of “social actors’ understanding of structural arrangements and processes, what they claim ultimately needs to be done about them, and how they see themselves as playing a role in the process.” Purchasers, through their role in the businesses that interface between WMGC and the





Western Montana regional community, can provide crucial insight to regional food hubs as a CED organization. While only a piece of the total food system in which WMGC acts, purchasers can provide critical knowledge to amplify the influence of WMGC and regional food.

The motivation to gain descriptive and purposeful knowledge related to the experiences of purchasers with WMGC indicated in-depth interviews as the preferred interview form. In keeping with the definitional characteristics of in-depth interviews, I decided that the unique knowledge of purchasers could best be ascertained under the assumption that it was communicable through active and iterative conversation (Hesse-Biber, 2017, p 106). Due to time constraints in addition to a wide scope and breadth of potential answers, I decided to conduct the interviews with a semi-structured question format. Through utilization of a semi-structured format, researchers are able to cover important thematic topics, while providing the participant with enough freedom to speak naturally and idiomatically throughout the interview (Hesse-Biber, 2017, p112). The final interview guide contained twelve questions that were organized thematically. See Appendix A for the interview guide used for this project. The first six questions were organized under the theme of working with WMGC, which primarily discussed the costs, benefits, and business impacts of purchasing food from WMGC. The next three questions were organized under the theme of consumer preference, which primarily discussed how purchasers interpreted the consumer's food preferences and how or if regional food was a factor. The final three questions were organized by theme of how purchasers perceive the relative importance of local food and its impacts in communities. My intention with this interview format was to construct enough space for genuine, candid responses from the participants regarding their perceptions, while maintaining enough structure so that the responses were still substantive for the scope of my research interests and the allowance of time that I had to analyze the responses.

I wanted the interviews to proceed conversationally so I could ask probing or follow-up questions. Under usual circumstances in-person interviews would have been preferable, though given the limitations associated with COVID-19 social distancing protocols, each of the interviews were conducted remotely. Most participants did not have access to video-conferencing software, thus only Participants #1 and #2 were interviewed using videoconferencing and all other participants were interviewed via telephone. Determination of participants followed a purposive sampling procedure (Hesse-Biber, 2017, p55). Purchasers were only considered viable candidates for interviews if they were active purchasers in the study years 2016-2019 and were still actively purchasing from WMGC at the close of 2019. WMGC separates purchasers into twelve categories depending on their business type: health food, grocery, co-op, restaurant, CSA, catering, distributors, employee members, institutions, processors, producers, and special. Participants were chosen from the four categories with the greatest percentages of WMGC's total sales in the study years from 2016-2019; these categories were health food (36.95%), grocery (26.08%), restaurants (22.17%), and institutions (5.53%). Within those categories, the purchasers with the greatest dollar amounts purchased from WMGC were selected to interview, specifically those located in the Western Montana region. Should a selected purchaser be unreachable or unavailable as a participant, the next purchaser on the list was selected. While the chosen sampling methodology was not exhaustive, it provides valuable insights from those purchasers who are especially salient in the market portfolios of WMGC.



Twenty-three purchasers were contacted for an interview by means of an initial email and, if needed, a maximum of two subsequent phone calls with voice messages when possible. Of those contacted, six purchasers did not respond, one purchaser no longer ordered from WMGC, one purchaser stated that they didn't feel comfortable being interviewed, and two stated that they did not have the time and/or did not want to participate. In order to preserve the purposive sampling technique, purchasers were no longer contacted in a category if four interviews were already scheduled from the category or if any additional purchasers were outside the top six greatest purchasers in their category in the Western Montana region. The remaining 12 purchasers completed interviews, thus yielding a response rate of approximately 52.17%. Of the 12 participants, four were from the health food category, three were from the grocery category, two were from the restaurant category, and three were from the institutions category. Within the institutions category, each participant belonged to an individual sub-category: school, university, and care facility. The 12 participating purchasers completed interviews that ranged in duration from 15 to 56 minutes. All of the interviews were recorded and personally transcribed. Participants were made aware that their identity and business affiliations outside of WMGC would be kept confidential and provided their consent to be recorded prior to the start of each interview.

Transcript texts of the interviews were analyzed utilizing a categorical and analytical coding process (Hesse-Biber, 2017, p315). Given the structure of my interview guide (Appendix A), I was able to group responses in terms of those that related to how the participants experience worked with WMGC; the participants' observations of their consumers' preferences; and, the participants' perceptions of the importance of regional food in the Western Montana region. Each of these over-general themes had mutually exclusive categories, all of which could be further divided into subcategories based on contextual subtleties or descriptive differences. All descriptive coding and corresponding indices were stored in a spreadsheet to facilitate reference and transcript location.

# RESEARCH AND DISCUSSION

Analysis of participant responses revealed 16 specific subcategories within 5 topical categories. Categories one through three primarily fall into the theme of purchasers' experience of working with WMGC. Category one, Purchaser Relationship with WMGC, is comprised of responses that indicated how the purchasers perceived the success and failure of their partnership with WMGC. Responses regarding working with WMGC were subcategorized with respect to Ease of Ordering, Purchaser Engagement, or Services Provided By WMGC. Category two, Availability, is primarily concerned with purchaser comments regarding the subcategories Regional Food Accessibility, Organic Produce, and Supply and Demand. Category three, Information and Education, is by far the most heavily discussed and diverse category. Subcategories of Information and Education are Maintaining Producer Identity, Marketing and Advertising, and Providing More Product Information. Categories four through five are predominantly concerned with the themes of how participating purchasers perceived their customers' preferences and how they interpret the importance of regional food in the Western Montana community. Category four, Customer Preference, covered a dynamic array of purchaser perceptions that were subcategorized by answers that related to Paying for Quality, and Interest in Regional Food. Category five, Effects of Regional Food, included responses that provided insight into how purchasers feel regional food influences other aspects of their reality. The subcategories of Effects of Regional Food were organized as Environmental Concerns, Nutrition and Health, Supporting Local Businesses, and generally Perceptions of Importance. The categories and subcategories will be explored in greater detail and depth in the subsequent discussions.

## 1. PURCHASER RELATIONSHIP WITH WMGC

Participants were asked how long they had been purchasing from WMGC in order to better understand how much experience each participant had working with the food hub. Of the 12 participating purchasers, seven purchasers had been buying from WMGC for 10 or more years, four purchasers had been purchasing from WMGC for the duration of time they have been employed in their current position, and only one purchaser began purchasing with WMGC after their employment in their current position. These responses indicate that participating purchasers have ample experience in their partnership with WMGC.

### *1a. Purchaser Relationship with WMGC: Ease of Ordering*

Nine of participating purchasers indicated that they purchased with WMGC because it made ordering regional food easy. Specifically, purchasers mentioned that this sense of

ease stemmed from only having to order from a single source. Participant #1 asserted, “what I really like about Western Montana Growers Cooperative is that I can talk to one person to do an order and get produce from multiple farms. That is what I really love about them.” However, the ease associated with ordering from a single source extended beyond just convenience for many purchasers. Participant #5 states, “it makes my life a lot easier to have one place, one sales rep to call or email to place an order for a wide variety of products as opposed to calling all those individuals growers. I would not be able to carry the amount of local produce that I do, if we didn’t have the co-op.” The statement of Participant #5 implies the perspective that WMGC facilitates access, or more accurately an increased access, to regional food. Facilitation of purchasing regional food, not only speaks to WMGC’s ability to uphold their objective to be a responsible partner to their purchasers, but also one of the ways in which they mediate the flow of regional food into their participating markets.

#### *1b. Purchaser Relationship with WMGC: Purchaser Engagement*

Half of the purchasers mentioned that their communication with WMGC was reflective of an overall positive relationship with them. In many cases, WMGC’s ability and willingness to correct errors and listen to purchaser feedback was highlighted in interviews. Participant #5 mentions that they are in “pretty much daily contact [with WMGC]... we phone each other if things are really hairy.” On the other hand, Participant #6 feels more comfortable with phone contact stating “I can just call them if I need something or have a question about availability of a product or something along those lines. I can just call them up and get an answer right then and there.” WMGC’s rapport with their purchasers is not only appreciated as a means to communicate feedback, but also it adds a layer of community and reciprocity throughout the purchasing process. Participant #2 points out that “they [WMGC] are different than a normal food wholesaler and that might be because we’ve developed a really good relationship with them over the years.” This sentiment is reiterated by Participant #3 when they relay, “if there are issues it’s more of friends helping friends as opposed to some blind, anonymous, gigantic entity that doesn’t really care about me and just cares about selling a product.”

#### *1c. Purchaser Relationship with WMGC: Services Provided by WMGC*

In addition to the ways that purchasers directly benefit from their relationship with WMGC, some were also observant and appreciative of the services that WMGC provides to producers. “When new vendors talk to me about whether they should deal directly or through a distributor, I always suggest the grower’s co-op first because they are a Montana business and because they have been so helpful to other brands” (Participant #8). Akin to Participant #8, Participant #9 relays, “when someone says, ‘I’m a grower and I’m interested in being organic and I’m interested in selling to your store’, I have a place to send that person. I say, ‘the co-op, they can help you out with packaging and logistics and distribution and if you want to get in with this store, well guess what, if you get in with the co-op then you can get in with two dozen other stores as well.” These anecdotes provide insight into how WMGC upholds its role as a regional food hub by connecting small producers with larger markets. These anecdotes also speak to the pride that purchasers feel when working with WMGC in addition to their perception of how WMGC is a reliable partner to producers and consumers alike.

## 2. AVAILABILITY

### *2a. Availability: Regional Food Accessibility*

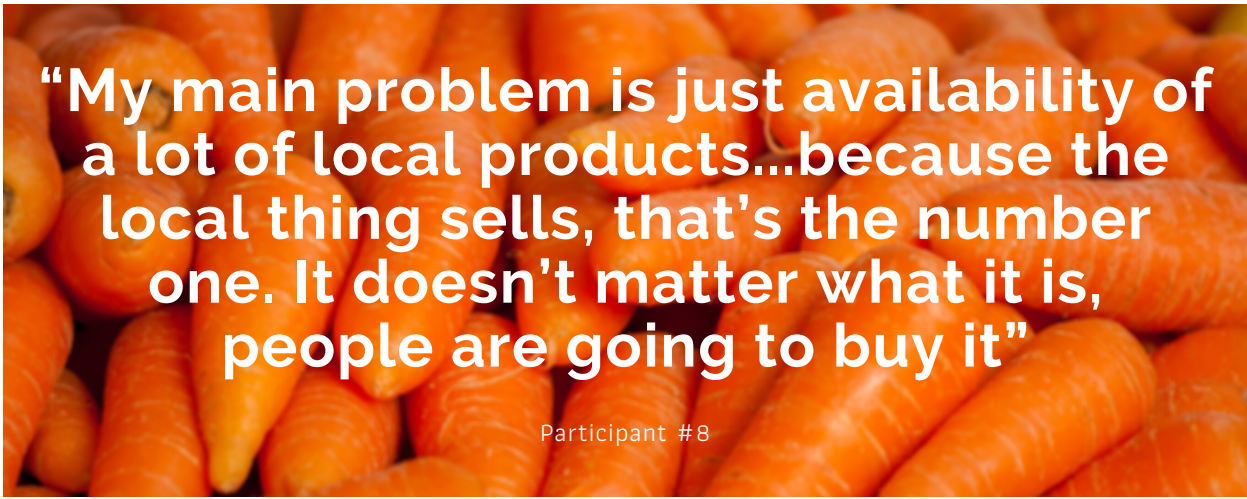
Speaking on the availability of regional food products in their surrounding community, Participant #9 brought up farmers' markets as a major access point for regional food, though they commented that many people work on Saturdays—the day that the farmers' market is hosted—so, “people aren't getting to that product because they have to work.” While the farmers' markets are not in partnership with WMGC specifically, many alternative markets for regional food are. Participant #10 describes attending farmers' markets as “fine” while expressing that “it would be nice if there were more availability in local grocery stores.” The observations of Participants #9 and #10 indicate a shortcoming of regional food systems as a whole in Montana: that they are not reaching the most common consumers, such as working-class Montanans or those who convenience shop. Additional partnerships with conventional grocery stores could be a potential method for WMGC to increase sales of regional food while striving to achieve their operation objective of providing food for all people in the community (WMGC, 2020).

### *2b. Availability: Organic Produce*

The aforementioned 2013 case study of WMGC indicated that purchasers desired a greater number of certified organic products as opposed to the alternative “Homegrown” labeling, despite being consistent with many federal organic certification requirements, and embraced by the Montana Sustainable Growers Union and WMGC (Hassanein, et al., 2013, p. 58 & 114). Analysis of purchaser interviews indicate that perhaps previous sentiments regarding organic certifications are changing. Only two purchasers mentioned a desire for more organic produce options. Participant #1 mentioned that Homegrown labeling is still not completely understood by their customers, while Participant #2 indicated that organic labeling may increase the value of regional foods in their market.

### *2c. Availability: Supply Matching Demand*

Over two thirds of the purchasers interviewed indicated that they occasionally felt frustrated with an apparent mismatch between WMGC's supply of a product and the demand for that product. Participant #4 states, “sometimes I don't get what I want because they're so popular...I just think they are creating a demand, which is great, but the supply can't always keep up with it.” Participant #10 shares, “I'll get a list of availability on Monday morning and when I try to put my order in at noon, well they are out of certain things, they can't procure items, which I understand but that's kind of a hassle sometimes if I really wanted the product. Availability is really the biggest challenge [in working with WMGC].” Participant #7 recounts trying to order certain items that are no longer available as being the only challenge they can think of in working with WMGC. However, the challenge of supply not matching demand is not necessarily always due to the product not being available, but sometimes a producer not being available. “My main problem is just availability of a lot of local products. I just need more local people to go into



**“My main problem is just availability of a lot of local products...because the local thing sells, that’s the number one. It doesn’t matter what it is, people are going to buy it”**

Participant #8

making experimental stuff because the local thing sells, that’s the number one. It doesn’t matter what it is, people are going to buy it” (Participant #8). Connecting with a greater number of regional producers may enable WMGC to address some of the supply-side shortages that are challenging to their current producers. A satellite benefit of connecting with additional producers is that WMGC can further provide services that strengthen the role of regional food through supporting entrepreneurialism while meeting the demand of their purchasers and consumers.

In contrast to the challenges of supply shortages occasionally experienced by purchasers, four purchasers indicated an appreciation that WMGC attempts to and frequently succeeds in finding local sources for any products they request. In the concise words of Participant #6, “If a customer ever asks me if we can get something, WMGC is who I would ask.”

### 3. INFORMATION AND EDUCATION

The most recurrent observations of the purchasers regarded the potential, and in some cases desire, for increased information and education regarding regional food or WMGC as a food hub and business. Multifaceted concepts of information and education were shared by every purchaser at some point in their interview indicating an area of great need that can be addressed by WMGC.

#### *3a. Information and Education: Maintaining Identity*

Despite listing “maintaining the identity and integrity of locally produced and distributed food products within the regional marketplace” as one of their guiding business objectives, WMGC’s purchasers found that this was still an area for continued improvement (WMGC, 2020). Four of the participating purchasers discussed a desire for more information regarding where exactly the regional food comes from. Participant #1 believes that information regarding the producers

would be a boost to customer interest: “I think our customers would love to have a closer connection to where things are grown but you know time is a limiting factor...I just don't necessarily have time to do the research and pass it along to our marketing or try to get it passed on to our customer... so if there was an easier way to increase that connection from the individual farms to our customers would be great.” On the other hand, Participant #10 feels personally interested in increased information regarding farm identity: “what I would like to see more of is what farm it's coming from and maybe that information is available to me somewhere but what specific farm, what specific region are the products coming from.” Participant #10 reiterates this sentiment when making suggestions for what they would like to see more of from WMGC. Other purchasers, such as Participants #2 and #4, explain that they appreciate being able to list and talk about the farm that the food comes from, when possible. Participant #4 did not indicate feeling frustrated by a lack of information, but they did indicate that there is a definitive use and desire for farm identity information among WMGC's purchasers.

*3b. Information and Education: Marketing and Advertising*

Eleven of the participating purchasers suggested WMGC increase their advertisement or marketing campaigns. Participant #3 suggested “getting the word out to other buyers and people that are interested in buying locally so that they actually know that this is available.” This suggestion was included as one of the most important actions to increase sales of regional foods from Participant #3's perspective.

Participant #8 believes “you have to make people trip over it [regional food] in order for them to know that it's here. I think just getting those Montana products in front of as many people as possible is crucial... just to make sure that people know those names are out there rather than having to look them up or hear about them somewhere else.” In a similar vein, some





purchasers suggest that WMGC advertise who their purchasers are to let consumers know where they can buy local products; in the words of Participant #9, “that would really help out, that’s huge.”

A great portion of purchasers suggested that WMGC should market themselves a great deal more. Participant #3 supports that WMGC ought to do whatever it can to ensure that consumers “are aware that this place [WMGC] even exists and what kind of products they have and when they have them and all of that information.” Purchasers with WMGC are well aware that the food hub could increase its influence and provide greater access to regional food through advertising and marketing if it reached a wider audience of potential business partners. Four purchasers specifically pointed out that an increased presence on social media as a marketing and advertising platform would be beneficial to WMGC. Though some purchasers tout the benefits of traditional advertising, such as Participant #11 who backs word-of-mouth advertising as “really influential,” others fall in-line with Participant #9 who advises, “anything that you [speaking to WMGC] can do on social media right now is massive because I think that is the way of advertising for the future.”

### *3c. Information and Education: Providing More Product Information*

Purchasers report that consumers don’t exclusively want to know information regarding availability and where to purchase regional food; ultimately, consumers are interested the product as a whole. Participant #7 indicates that the most effective tool for advertising regional food is to “showcase the quality of the products.” Conversely, Participant #5 believes that as a purchaser:

“we could be doing a better job, I could be doing a better job of promoting the economic development piece of local, sustainable agriculture: reducing our food miles, recirculating our food dollars locally, and rebuilding the agricultural economy of what is essentially an agricultural state that still manages to import 90% of its food from somewhere else. There is an opportunity there... The co-op can help grow its own demand if we tout the benefits of keeping young, energetic people on the land locally, keeping that open space, keeping that landscape, and keeping those dollars in our economy and getting fresh really nutritious, delicious food. The more I talk about it the less I feel I need to advertise it.”

Some purchasers would argue that the landscape of information available to consumers is not accessible unless they are motivated to self-educate. Participants #3 and #4 believe that information regarding theorized effects of regional food is not accessible enough to those who don’t already know to look for it. In the words of Participant #4, “everybody has access to information but it’s a desire to seek that out, to educate yourself. I think Montanans have access to education just like everyone else in the world does. It’s just a matter of understanding that they need to self-educate.” WMGC has an opportunity to provide a greater array of information to both purchasers and the public regarding the holistic benefits of regional food to increase its sales and to amplify WMGC’s influence in the community. As WMGC magnifies its footprint in

advertising and marketing, it ought to include information campaigns to established and potential purchasers that identifies producer-members with WMGC as well as the ways that regional food can benefit other sectors of daily life in Montana.

## 4. CUSTOMER PREFERENCE

Despite purchasers observing opportunities for more information and advertising of regionally produced food, all of the purchasers that participated felt that customers displayed interest in regional produced food in some way or another. Both Participant #2 and Participant #7 believe that part of the customer preference for regionally produced food stems from “local food” being a buzzword at this point in time. Insights from all twelve participating purchasers indicate that there are further complexities in understanding customer preference that provide valuable insight for WMGC.

### *4a. Customer Preference: Paying for Quality*

Every purchaser that participated in an interview mentioned the slightly higher price of regionally grown food in some capacity. Participant #1 indicated that one of the most important strategies to increase sales of regional food is “definitely pricing... we love to support our local growers, but we need to keep it fairly competitive.” Keeping price competitive was also indicated as an important strategy by Participant #8: “getting more support for these local brands and making sure that we can keep their pricing competitive and ... make it so the Montana product is the default choice, even without it being made here, just because it is an attractive price and a great product.” Simply put by Participant #6, “as prices go up, people start to look in other directions pretty quickly.”

While high prices can be a deterrent, several purchasers also indicated that price might exclude low-income consumers from buying regional food. Participant #11 observes that “there are of course people that are looking for the cheapest option and that usually isn’t the local option.” In discussing how to amplify support for regional food, Participant #5 states, “I would love to see local, organic produce on the shelf of every store in town. That would be great. The way to get there is for people to vote with their feet. Again, in some ways, it’s such a no brainer, it’s such an easy conversation if you can get past the dollar sign. That is in most respects the stumbling block.” Participant #5, who was especially vocal about the role of regional food—or lack thereof—in the experiences of food insecure individuals, also stated “I’m sure people that are food insecure would welcome access to fresh healthy delicious food, but it’s got to be affordable and culturally appropriate and all the rest of it.” Regardless of the disparities of price, several purchasers shared the sentiment expressed by Participant #7, that “they [WMGC] are really focused on making sure everyone eats not just the ones that can afford it.”

In many cases higher pricing associated with regional food was explored by purchasers as related to higher quality products. More often, disparities in price between regional and

conventional food products were justified by purchasers through indicating they and the consumers are paying for a better-quality product with regional food. Participant #1, Participant #3, and Participant #8 state that, despite recognizing the high prices associated with regional food, they are willing to pay those prices because the product quality is increased via its alignment with their beliefs. In the case of Participant #1, they are willing to pay a higher price because the shipping time is less and there will be less “shrink.” For participants #3 and #8, respectively, they are willing to pay a higher price for regional food to know that they are keeping that “local business chugging along” and that by dealing with WMGC they “are supporting ultimately two Montana businesses.” Participant #4 indicated that they feel their customers are willing to pay more for a food product that aligns with environmental values.



However, the quality of regional food is not exclusively added through its alignment with value-associated business practices. Participant #12 states, “the price is slightly higher than conventional but when you take into account the quality that you are getting it is an exceptional price for the quality that you are being provided.” Participant #3 plainly states, “it’s nicer stuff, like bigger, redder tomatoes because they haven’t been sitting in a truck, they haven’t been sprayed with whatever kind of gnarly chemical they’re putting on them in California, they aren’t coming from California.” Participants #8 and #9 shared personal anecdotes regarding putting regional products on sale as a tool to bridge the price gap, so people will try the product, realize its quality, and continue to fuel demand for that product as the price returns to normal.

WMGC strives to provide a good quality product that is accessible to all people of the community, a task that they are largely accomplishing. However, the responses of purchasers as they relate to price and quality represent a seemingly dichotomous task for WMGC: how to price regional food more competitively without sacrificing the quality of the products. Participant #8 claims that the key is in expanding distribution, stating:

“I think the exposure would be great because the stuff that we make here is awesome. I mean there is not a product that I carry that is made in Montana that I think needs work. I think people are really good about what they do. I know we would really compete in the broader marketplace if we were able to support our local vendors and distributors as far as getting extra distribution going.”

The idea of expansion was shared by Participant #3, though with greater caution:

“maybe expanding their zone of influence, any way that they can continue to co-op more people into what is obviously a pretty good system, would be cool. But of course, how big does it get? When do they [WMGC] become the faceless entity?”

Most purchasers return to the idea of sharing information regarding regional food and the concept that Participant #5 refers to as “pay me now or pay me later,” which refers to paying the higher price for local or organic food to avoid costs from conventional food harming communities, economies, and the environment over time. That sentiment is congruent with a dominant desire among purchasers to maintain the quality of the food. As Participant #12 states, “it’s the best thing that a company can do... is to have a high-quality product consistently produced, and consistently and reliably be able to get this high-quality product to the people that seek to consume it.”

#### *4b. Consumer Preference: Interest in Regional Food*

Seven purchasers perceived just a general interest in regional food on behalf of their consumers. Participant #2 describes their consumer’s preferences as a way “to define and redefine their sense of place in Montana through food and product and stuff like that, they usually get a lot out of it.” Participant #5 describes the relationship between their consumers and regional food producers as simply “a mutual admiration society.” Finally, Participant #6 confidently believes that their consumers will “buy those [regional products] anytime over anything that is not local.” Responses from purchasers that are diverse and nonspecific regarding consumer preference highlight the curious machinations of customer preference overall. While speculation is warranted with regard to alignment with consumer values, affordability, and product quality, many purchasers commented on just an observable and, in many ways, general inclination for regional products. Whether this feedback can be attributed to the work and presence of WMGC is unclear, though worth noting in analysis of regional food.

## 5. EFFECTS OF REGIONAL FOOD

When purchasing regional foods from WMGC, purchasers demonstrated that they derived a great deal of fulfillment from the belief that they are supporting products that align with their personal values. These observations from purchasers indicate the presence of a value-based food value chain existing for purchasers throughout the process of buying and marketing regional food. There are some indications that WMGC has succeeded in establishing grounds for a values-based food value chain in their ctions as a regional food hub. What purchasers perceive as added value associated with purchasing regional food can also provide valuable insight into what is important to consumers as the food hub seeks opportunities to amplify its presence in the community.

### *5a. Effects of Regional Food: Supporting Your Neighbor*

Four purchasers perceived that sales of regional food were motivated by the idea that consumers were helping to support their neighbors. Participant #12 asserts that “a lot of the customers like the quality of the things that are from their neighborhood, so to speak, and also supporting businesses that are nearby. My customers like the idea of supporting the local business ecosystems.” Participant #6 believes, “They [the consumers] like to know that they are supporting someone that works locally in the community, people that they might know who work there, and that they can help and support them.” Sales of regional food related to supporting local businesses may also be a recent development with economic pressures associated with the COVID-19 pandemic. An especially salient quote regarding consumers supporting their neighbors during the pandemic came from Participant #9:

“[Choosing regional food] gives them [the customer] a chance to say ‘I’m doing something right now in troubling times to keep my neighbor up and going. I’m feeding myself, but I’m also keeping my neighbor afloat’...Most people are afraid that their job isn’t going to be there in a month, so local people get the feeling that they might be struggling, but they’re also helping their neighbors.”

Similarly, purchasers expressed a personal desire to support local businesses as a factor that influenced their decision to buy and sell regional food. Participant #2 expressed that they “think it is a big deal to know where your food comes from why it exists and supporting, economically, that system.” Participant #10 expresses feeling a sense of “camaraderie” and perceiving that feeling in other regional food consumers. Participant #3 positions that the draw to regional food for them is “the impact economically on whatever little town or business that you’re running. Say you’re a little farm that only specializes in growing cherry tomatoes in the Flathead Valley. I would rather support you than some gigantic faceless farm in Southern California.”

### *5b. Effects of Local Food: Nutrition and Health*

Four purchasers mentioned the idea that regional food has health benefits. Participant #7 specifically referred to consumption of local honey as a remedy for seasonal allergies. Participant #4 referred to the health benefits of regional food as a marketing tool to increase consumer preference for regional products, stating “it also benefits their [the consumer’s] health, which then will save them money down the line. Just making people aware of the cycle of food and nutrition.” Participant #10 feels that people are beginning to really see the dire importance of “healthy, clean food.” Though the nutrition and health effects of regional food were mentioned sparingly, it is crucial to note as the United States health landscape undergoes rapidly changing public perception of health systems and their influences.

#### *5c. Effects of Local Food: Environmental Concerns*

Environmental concerns as a motivating factor to support regional food systems was mentioned by five purchasers. Participant #1 specifically mentioned that including environmental concerns, such as climate change, in awareness about regional food would be effective for promotion of the products. Participant #3 expressed concern by stating that “fuel costs and pollution are bad news, so reducing that by having it [regional food products] be closer is better.” Participant #4 believes that Western Montana generally caters to an eco-friendly community and attributes that with the trend of embracing regional food products in the area.

#### *5d. Effects of Local Food: Perceptions of Importance*

While all purchasers believed that local food had the potential or burgeoning ability to be of extreme importance in Western Montana, seven purchasers stated that they strongly believed it was already considered extremely important. Participant #9 believes that regional food is very important for them on a personal level but that it falls outside the top-ten most important concepts on a business level. Purchaser #8 believes that there is an untapped potential for regional products that hasn't been met in way meaningful enough to warrant regional food as highly important in Western Montana. Participant #5 felt the importance of regional food was ramping up and attributed it to “somebody somewhere has been doing some good work in this area because it has made people ask the questions, where does my food come from and is it sustainable and do I want to put that in my body, do I want to feed that to my kids?” Participants #1 and #2 only felt comfortable speaking on the importance of regional food for their personal industries, though both participants believed that it was “extremely important” in that respect. Regional food and regional food systems were referred to as “vital” by Participant #3 and “effectively important everywhere” by Participant #12, sentiments that mirror those of all the purchasers who identified regional food as important to Western Montana.

# CONCLUSION

The experiences and perceptions of the purchasers interviewed for this project, provided valuable insights into the benefits of working WMGC, business practices of WMGC that purchasers feel could be improved, how WMGC is providing for consumers, and how WMGC utilizes their influence to cultivate CED values as a regional food hub. Purchasers feel that WMGC makes it easier to access and sell local food, they appreciate having friendly and reliable relationships with WMGC, and they observe that WMGC is providing a valuable service by connecting producers with markets. Purchasers provided insights into challenges that they had with WMGC that, when addressed, may lead to increased influence in the community and greater success of regional products in the area. Some perceptions of purchasers indicated that local food wasn't widely accessible in their immediate communities and that WMGC should pursue greater access to markets for a larger group of consumers. Parallel to previous case studies of WMGC, purchasers desire an increase in the available amount of certified organic produce offered by the food hub. Finally, purchasers experience occasional disparities between the demand that they have for a product and the supply that WMGC has available, which may indicate that WMGC should connect with more producers to better serve their purchasers and amplify their influence in the community. Many purchasers expressed a desire for more types of information sharing from WMGC, including the specific identities of farms growing the products as well as providing education and knowledge to purchasers and their consumers about the function and benefits of local food purchasing. Though the most common feedback from purchasers regarding information networks was the desire for the co-op to more effectively and frequently advertise and market regional food, business, and their own services.

Purchasers also provided insight into what draws them to WMGC as well as what they perceived draws consumers to regional food. Consumers were typically drawn to regional food because of the quality of the product or an alignment with personal values. Though the prevalence of higher prices were repeatedly mentioned by purchasers as potential barriers to widespread acceptance of regional food. The only solution to rectifying competitive pricing with high quality products was for WMGC to expand their operations, though some concern was still expressed regarding too much expansion and the effect that it might have on how WMGC is viewed in the community. Evidence from purchasers indicates that WMGC has a strong hold on maintaining a value-based food value chain as a local food hub; additionally, insight into the specific

values important to purchasers and consumers can be utilized by WMGC to better connect their services with the interests of their patrons in the future.

The appreciative inquiry approach emphasizes “engaging community members with each other for discussion, planning, implementation, and monitoring,” which inspired the practical framework of this research’s inquiry into the experiences of WMGC purchasers (Flora, et al., 2019). However, this research was constrained by various obstacles or limitations. Social-distancing measures, unpredictability, and time-constraints associated with the global COVID -19 pandemic not only changed the preferred interview structure for this project, but also likely created some barriers to scheduling interviews that decreased the response rate of purchasers. Future research should utilize larger sample sizes that are more representative of all the markets in which WMGC participates. Additional opportunities for continued research include interviewing a representative sample of end-sale consumers that participate in the markets to which WMGC provides regional food. Interviewing end-sale consumers will provide more accurate insight into the preferences of customers that drive the sale of regional food as well as what values they associate with regional food and how they view the role of WMGC. A representative sample of end-sale consumers from these markets will also include customers that make food choices out of availability and convenience as opposed to preconceived economic or social values; therefore, insights provided by these customers will not be as biased toward regional food as purchasers or CSA consumers and can provide some indispensable insight into the actual role of WMGC as a CED organization.

The information gleaned from purchasers throughout this research provided some awareness of what WMGC’s direct customers experience the food hub, understand the service provided by the food hub, and interpret the preferences of end-sale consumers. This increased level of understanding not only confirmed that many aspects of WMGC’s functions in the Western Montana region align with CED practices, but also provided suggestions from the food hub’s purchasers regarding how WMGC can amplify their influence and better serve existing and future producers and consumers of regional food. The influence of the Western Montana Growers Cooperative, more broadly regional food hubs, on community economic development practices can only be understood through iterative, dynamic, consistent research over time. Communities, their economies, and the needs of the community members all evolve with time and the true success of a regional food hub as a CED organization—WMGC included—ought to be measured by its ability to evolve synchronously and compatibly.



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# APPENDIX

## Purchaser Interview Guide

Introduce myself and my project:

Thank you for meeting with me. As I mentioned, I am a graduate student at UM. For my masters research, I'm studying community economic development and the role of regional food systems. My project is designed to help the Western Montana Growers Cooperative and their partners. Since you are one of their important customers, I'm interested to hear your perspectives on working with the co-op and ways to strengthen their influence in the region.

Before we begin, I want to assure you that I will not use your name or the business's name in any of the reports that I make on this research, so please share your views freely. Your identity as a participant in this study will be kept confidential.

To help me keep accurate notes, I would like to record our conversation; is that okay with you? [If yes, start recording.]

Just to clarify, throughout this interview I will be using the term "regional" because I am referring to the operation area of WMGC, though the products themselves are commonly referred to as "local" food.

Do you have any questions before we begin?

### Working with WMGC

To start off, I want to learn about your work and partnership with WMGC.

1. How long have you been purchasing from WMGC?

[If purchasing began after employment] How did this relationship begin?

2. In general, why do you purchase from WMGC?

Probe: Any other reasons?

3. How do you feel that working with WMGC has impacted your business, if at all?

4. Let's go a little deeper, what are the specific benefits you see from working with WMGC?

Probe: Any other benefits?

5. If any, what are the challenges or obstacles of working with WMGC?

Probe: Are there any other challenges?

6. When you are purchasing with WMGC, how do you communicate feedback about what your customers are interested in?

Probe: Is there anything else that you feel is important to communicate during the purchasing process?

## Consumer Preference

I'm really interested in any insight you can provide about the preferences of your customers.

7. How do you advertise the food you purchase from WMGC? Is it any different than how you advertise other items?

8. In your opinion, does regionally grown food factor into your customers' choices to buy from you? Why or why not?

9. Based on your observations and experiences, what are the three most important strategies that need to be pursued to increase sales of regional foods?

Follow-up: What recommendations do you have for the co-op itself to promote regional food?

## Importance of Regional Food

To finish up, I have a few questions relating directly to your opinion as both a customer of WMGC and a bridge with Montana consumers.

10. In terms of price and availability, how would you describe Montanans' access to regionally grown food?

Follow-up: And what about access to place-based information regarding food?

11. What changes or improvements could you suggest to WMGC to increase access to regionally grown food or information regarding it?

Follow-up: How would you suggest WMGC communicate social or economic facts regarding their food and business?

12. In your opinion, how important do you think regionally grown food is in Montana?

Follow-up: : Are there any other observations you have noticed about your community's relationship to regionally grown food?

Probe: What opportunities do you see for local and regional foods right now during the COVID-19 pandemic?

Is there anything that you feel is important to discuss that we didn't talk about today?

Thank you so much for your time. Feel free to contact me if you have any questions. Otherwise, I will be in touch regarding my final report and analysis.