

FESTSCHRIFT FOR CHRISTINE M. PORTER | COMMENTARY

Groundwork for change: Dr. Christine Porter’s role in building the Wyoming Food Coalition

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Summary

The Wyoming Food Coalition (WFC) is a statewide network dedicated to “strengthening local food systems by connecting stakeholders and amplifying their voices to ensure Wyoming producers, consumers, and environments thrive” (WFC, n.d., “Mission,” para. 1). Established in 2020, WFC emerged from these stakeholders’ collective recognition of the need for a coordinated approach to address the unique challenges facing Wyoming’s food system, including vast rural landscapes, limited infrastructure, and food insecurity. The WFC operates through a decentralized structure of working groups with each group self-selecting chairs who serve on a central board of directors, emphasizing shared leadership and inclusivity. This commentary describes the history and structure of the WFC with a particular focus on Dr. Christine Porter’s contributions. Christine played a pivotal role in WFC’s inception and development, and

from 2020 to 2022, she acted as WFC’s Fairness & Justice working group chair. As a professor and Wyoming Excellence Chair in Community and Public Health at the University of Wyoming, she leveraged her position to provide initial funding and strategic guidance that were instrumental in establishing the WFC’s infrastructure.

Keywords

food policy council, nonprofit development, coalition governance, community-based organization

History and Function of the Wyoming Food Coalition

In December 2019, diverse organizations and individuals from across Wyoming met in Casper to discuss their unifying love of food. Some focused on producing food in a state known for its harsh, dry climate. Others wanted to see local foods in schools. Some wanted to create a network to better distribute Wyoming-grown products. Dr. Christine Porter joined in her capacity as a representative of the Wyoming Food Justice Coalition, which had

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first convened earlier that year. At the time, Wyoming was the only state without a food policy council or other umbrella organization representing statewide food systems interests. This conference, which would become the first annual Wyoming Food Coalition conference, was hosted by University of Wyoming Extension. An Extension AmeriCorps VISTA member, Tim McAteer, organized the event as a culmination of his position, which worked to “[find] ways to ensure that people living with poverty have access to fresh, local, healthy food in a way that still benefits local producers” (Suriano, 2019, para. 5).

While the group agreed on the benefits of a statewide organization filling the role of a food policy council, the attendees’ scope of interest for this council was too broad to fit within any single organization’s current mission. Christine, guided by the conference facilitator, Carrie Bennett, helped frame a structure that would allow the diverse people, groups, and organizations to pursue their particular goals while still working toward a broader collective vision. Attendees identified key areas of interest for a statewide organization and individuals to serve as leaders in each of those areas. These ultimately became the Coalition’s working groups (WGs): Fairness & Justice, Healthy People, Policy, Strategic Communications & Outreach, Strong Native Communities, Sustainable Ecosystems, and Vibrant Producers. The WG leads and other supporters continued to meet throughout 2020 to finalize a mission, vision, values, general structure, and bylaws for what the group agreed to call the “Wyoming Food Coalition.” In September 2020, the group agreed to incorporate as a 501(c)(3) non-profit organization and elected a board of directors that comprised WG chairs—selected by WG members in the method of the group’s choosing—and at-large members elected by the WFC’s broader membership.

Originally run by volunteers, in 2023 WFC hired a part-time executive director, BJ Edwards. Key WFC activities between 2020 and 2024 included the following:

- Drafting policy briefs to share with the Wyoming Legislature, such as a brief opposing the state’s proposed grocery tax;

- Acting as a liaison between the Wyoming Department of Agriculture’s Consumer Health Services and producers navigating Wyoming’s cottage foods law (the Wyoming Food Freedom Act); and
- Convening annual conferences, including farm-to-school workshops, buyer-grower networking events, and presentations provided by diverse food leaders from across the state.

A 2024 statewide needs assessment supported by the Wyoming Department of Family Services recommended “enabling the growth of the Wyoming Food Coalition to become the organization with the primary responsibility to drive collaboration—and accountability for—improving the Wyoming food system, and to lead the assessment of what is working, and not working, in growing a resilient food system” (Hamann et al., 2024, p. 25). The Department of Family Services subsequently awarded WFC a two-year grant for US\$275,000 plus overhead costs to increase staff capacity (e.g., increasing the director from a 50% to 75% position and hiring a full-time communications director), create a strategic engagement plan to strengthen collaboration across food systems sectors, and host annual conferences and ongoing connection events to sustain stakeholder involvement. However, these were one-time COVID-era funds, so WFC continues to seek paths to financial sustainability.


Dr. Christine Porter’s Foundational Contributions

While motivated individuals who are engaged in all parts of Wyoming’s food system collaboratively built WFC, Dr. Christine Porter played a pivotal role in WFC’s inception and development by providing financial support and structural guidance. As the Wyoming Excellence Chair in Community and Public Health, Christine had access to US\$30,000 each year to support research efforts in her field. Christine, deeply committed to action research and financial equity in partnerships between communities and institutions of higher education (see Porter & Wechsler, 2018), used this money as seed funding to enable early WFC operations, including

staffing, convenings, and a discretionary budget for each WG to advance its goals.

In addition to providing early financial support for WFC, Christine drew on her expertise in public health and community-based research to help develop the governance model for the WFC. The working group structure she and Carrie Bennett envisioned allowed for diverse groups to cooperate under the umbrella of the WFC without giving up their independence to act on projects deemed outside the WFC's scope of work. To ensure robust collaboration between WGs and diverse members, Christine oversaw the development of an initial set of policies and bylaws for WFC that focused on inclusive, equitable, and transparent governance.

Christine's emphasis on shared leadership and transparency helped shape the values and operational ethos that WFC continues to embrace today.

Beyond financial and structural support, Christine served as a mentor to emerging leaders in the WFC, fostering a culture of empowerment and collaboration. Her advocacy for food justice and sovereignty informed WFC's strategic direction and community-engagement efforts. Christine's supportive leadership exemplifies how community-academic partnerships can catalyze systemic and organizational change. Her commitment to equity and sustainability continues to influence WFC's ongoing work and vision for Wyoming's food system. 

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