

PRESENTATION SNAPSHOT

Telling a new story: Working together to build place-based food systems in the Palouse-Clearwater region of the U.S. inland northwest



Colette DePhelps,^a* Soren Newman,^b and Darin Saul^c
University of Idaho

Presentation Abstract

From early adopters and the first stirrings of cultural change to development of a thriving local foods culture and economy, the Palouse-Clearwater region of southeastern Washington and north central Idaho has seen remarkable place-based food-system development through decades of hard work by a broad variety of players. These place-based food systems have arisen from a combination of individual entrepreneurship, organizational leadership, partnerships, and synergistic relationships across communities and the larger region. Founded on value-based relationships and a shared vision of the future, the local food narratives that have emerged during the development process have framed and shaped the character of these food systems and their expansion over time.

In the Palouse-Clearwater region, University of Idaho Extension faculty and nonprofit staff have been co-leaders in place-based food system development. As co-leaders, they have taken a participatory approach to working with farmers and ranchers, retailers, restaurateurs, community practitioners, and university researchers and staff to understand and overcome barriers and to nurture place-based food systems development. This has led to a rich exchange of ideas and resources between the community members spearheading the local food scene and the university. Multiple research and education projects have been successfully implemented.

^a* *Corresponding author:* Colette DePhelps is a community food systems area extension educator serving Idaho's 10 northern counties. Her current work includes expanding markets for small farms and artisan grain producers, providing education for small acreages and beginning farmers, strengthening local food systems, and providing on-farm food safety education. She can be contacted at Northern District Extension, College of Agricultural and Life Sciences, University of Idaho; 875 Perimeter Drive MS 2338; Moscow, Idaho 83844-2338 USA; +1-208-885-4003; cdephelps@uidaho.edu.

^b Soren Newman is a rural and natural resource sociologist. Her current research focuses on rural food systems, entrepreneurship, and community resilience. She can be contacted at Office of Grant and Project Development, College of Agricultural and Life Sciences, University of Idaho; 875 Perimeter Drive MS 2331; Moscow, Idaho 83844-2331 USA; newman@uidaho.edu.

^c Darin Saul is a researcher and planner working in higher education and as a consultant. Current projects include research on food systems and rural entrepreneurship and development, strategic planning, organizational development and funding, and community assessments and feasibility studies. Darin can be contacted at Office of Grant and Project Development, College of Agricultural and Life Sciences, University of Idaho; 875 Perimeter Drive MS 2331; Moscow, Idaho 83844-2331 USA; dsaul@uidaho.edu.


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Taking a historical look at place-based food system development in the Palouse-Clearwater region provides a framework for understanding how public-private partnerships in research and education have helped address critical barriers identified through ongoing participatory processes. Food systems development takes time, as do participatory processes. Key to the success of these processes is the over 20 years' experience of the leadership team in working on place-based food systems development from both nonprofit and university perspectives in the Palouse-Clearwater region.

The value of taking a participatory approach to place-based food systems development can be seen in the region's ability to sustain partnerships, relationships, and resources supporting on-the-ground change even as the roles of individual leaders in the food system have changed. Another result of the participatory process is the development of a shared narrative—the stories of the food system that bind long-term partners and encourage new collaborations. These stories provide the baseline understanding of priorities that underly current research and education programs. It is this shared knowledge that fosters the relationships and power of the practitioner/activist/university partnerships necessary for overcoming barriers to food system expansion.

While the historical development of local food systems in the Palouse-Clearwater region provides a context for understanding the current research on barriers, opportunities, and strategies for place-based food systems development, authenticity and trust are increasingly important as the rate of this development has accelerated. Each participant in the participatory process comes from a different cultural context—be it organizational, familial, or otherwise—and it is through dialogue and joint programming that understanding, appreciation, and trust have been built. 

Keywords: Place-Based Food Systems Development, Public-Private Partnerships, Palouse-Clearwater Region